The Impact of the Evil Side of the English Language on My Life as an Artist

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Abstract: Discussing the English language and its difficult imposition into Kurdish life in Iraqi Kurdistan, Baram positions the Kurdish language as the boundary that marks Kurdish cultural space. He places Kurdish speakers in a precarious interrelationship between globalization and its negative effects, the endangered nature of the Kurdish language and its preservation as key to the cultural survival of the Kurds, and the English language as a problematic tool, necessary for interactions with a global community but laden with imperialistic anti-Middle Eastern and anti-Islamic meanings.

Keywords: Kurdish art, Kurdish language, Sorani, endangered languages, English, Iraqi Kurdistan, intersectionality, conflict

It would not be an exaggeration to claim that the biggest problem I am now confronted with is a problem with the English language.¹ What I mean by “a problem with the English language” is not in my ability to speak, read, or write English. What I mean is that I have experienced that individuals within Kurdish society will question you if it is observed by your people that you speak another language. It means that you were either forced to learn or chose to learn another language—both pose problems. As an Iraqi Kurd, we were subject to the eradication of our culture, forced to speak Arabic, and found ourselves in a shameful state of being forced to speak the Arabic language. In many ways it is a piece of our recent history that represents a time when we were made to be submissive and obedient. Now we realize that the English language has come as an unexpected guest entering our country and Kurdish culture. As with Kurdish experiences with the Arabic language, English also now confronts us with an urgent cultural responsibility to preserve Kurdish identity, and above all, our rich language. As an artist and writer of occasional articles, language has driven much of my artistic concern and has always been one of the main focuses of my art practice.² In other areas of my work, I have been critical of the cultural and political meanings embedded in the visual experience of Kurdish, Arabic, and English languages and the iconic form these written languages take and the ways in which they are visually consumed through the image of the written word.³ My work with the Kurdish and Arabic languages has been based in an interest for the capacity of the written word within the context of art, wherein the words have the ability to extend their potential beyond their literal meaning, as a vehicle to carry meanings through their visual aspects. I use Kurdish, English, Arabic, and Islamic texts and scripts broadly in my practice. Because of this, I find that my artwork is inevitably engaged with politics, because these languages in themselves are highly political representatives of political identities for

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¹ This essay was written in Kurdish and translated into English by the author.
² Sections of this essay appeared previously in Baram 2018: 38–51.
³ Baram 2018: 38.
the nations that possess them.

In this essay, I speak about my experience with the English language. Through my perception, which enters my artwork and my writing, it is my intention to have a critical response to this matter and explain why learning a language other than Kurdish, specifically English, is problematic to a Kurdish citizen.

This table represents the Sorani Kurdish Alphabet.

The Problem of Kurdish Language

Politically speaking, there is no other nation now on Earth that takes language as seriously as the Kurdish nation does. Language is not reducible to a simple tool for communication; language is also home to our existence. Through language someone can feel his or her very existence. Language is one of the most important pieces of cultural material that enables a nation’s identity to survive eradication. For generations, there have been many attempts to obliterate the Kurdish language in the countries where Kurds have lived. Kurdish land has been occupied and divided into four parts. Almost sixty-five percent of all Kurdish people worldwide live in Turkey. There, Kurds were banned from speaking their mother tongue until the early 1990s and were forced to speak Turkish, replacing the Kurdish language with the Turkish language. It was illegal to even speak the word “Kurd.” Restrictions have relaxed since that time, reviving the political fight for Kurdish. However, education in Kurdish and the recognition of Kurdish as an official language in Turkey remains ignored. In Iran, Reza Shah banned all Kurdish cultural traditions, including literature and music, Kurdish dress and even dance. For Kurdish people living in Iran today,

5 Editor’s Note: Here, our author is referencing the work of the controversial thinker Martin Heidegger. Daniel O. Dahlstrom comments on Heidegger’s work with language and language’s ability to allow us to “access things” in “Heidegger’s Ontological Analysis of Language.” See Dahlstrom 2013.
6 The Sykes-Picot Agreement (1916) and subsequently the Treaty of Sèvres (1920) gerrymandered the Kurds into disconnected and dismembered minorities across four countries.
7 The Kurdish Project. Kurdish Language n.d.
8 Ibid.
9 Bozarslan 2021.
the constitution allows for the use of “regional and tribal languages,” but only recently a Kurdish teacher was sentenced to prison for teaching children the Kurdish alphabet. The Kurdish language is not prohibited in Syria, but it is marginalized in society, with Arabic the only language of education and governance. We must also remember that Kurdish speakers themselves, the vessels of Kurdish language, are in danger for their lives in Syria because of the conflict there. In Iraq, only a few decades ago we Iraqi Kurds survived the trap of Arabization, in which Arabic language almost replaced Kurdish language. Both British and Iraqi Arab officials attempted to prevent the use of Kurdish language and force the use of Arabic so that Kurds would be assimilated into the Iraqi state. Today, both Kurdish and Arabic are recognized as official languages of Iraq. However, with this long history of eradication of the Kurdish language, Kurdish people have a hard time convincing themselves that it is good to import another language without questioning. Kurdish language is a provider of identity, and the Kurdish people have found themselves in complex cultural and political circumstances. Not using it or replacing it with any other language puts you under ethical responsibility, and represents you as someone fleeing from their true identity.


11 Dastbaz 2020.
12 Kurdistan Human Rights Network 2022.
13 Hassanpour 2012: 49–73.
Since the Day the British and the Americans Came to Iraq

Among Iraqis, there is a common saying that, “Since the day the British and the Americans came to Iraq, Iraq has not enjoyed itself.” 14 The English language, learning it, and using it is very problematic for Kurds in Iraq. In recent years, especially in Iraqi Kurdistan, there has been a great interest in learning English. English has become one of the most vibrant languages in the world, and some say it is the language of science and technology. We can see the power of the British and American culture industries at work, making English the language of business and the global economy and creating millions of people as speakers of English. 15 Kurdish people are citizens of the world interacting with a highly global, highly interconnected reality where language becomes a political tool. 16

By coincidence somehow, I became interested in art. One of the very first questions that comes to the mind for a beginning artist might be: “How do I do art?” Sadly, there is not a very rich historical account of Kurdish art, and neither is there a critical or theoretical base from which to thrive. The only gate toward learning about art is reading historical and critical works of art of other cultures and people. To do that, you either have to read the very few works available that have been translated into Kurdish, or you have to learn a living language. English was the living language that I chose for broadening my own artistic worldview. When I began to study art, I thought that art is simply about painting, drawing, sculpting, and ceramics—art for the sake of beauty. As I joined the College of Fine Arts at Sulaimani University, I learned the conventional belief that arts such as painting, sculpture, and ceramics are considered high art, and I learned to create art in this way. I kept producing this type of art until I went to the United Kingdom to finish my master of fine arts degree. While I was there, under a different culture, a new phase began to appear.

I did my degree at Middlesex University, where I focused on art criticism and contemporary art. I remember that first work of art took me two months to finish. The work was a few pieces of ceramics that were made of stoneware and painted with a high-temperature glaze. I situated the ceramic pieces on four black panels to make an effective aesthetic color contrast. All the students hung their works on the university studio wall to get critical feedback from our tutors. I remember one of our group of students got a remarkable response from the tutors. She put just three works on the studio wall, all in black color: “yes,” “no,” and “in-between.” This work only took her about two minutes to create, using a stencil technique. The tutors discussed her work for almost an hour! But they left my work without saying a single critical word about it. One of the tutors casually asked what made me produce this piece of art. I answered, “For the sake of beauty.” After having another quick look at my work, he asked what my work was good for. In response, I said, “I do not know what my work is good for.” He told me that it was good for being broken down with a stone, and left. I did not attend university for more than a week, and stayed at home disappointed. Moreover,

14 Author’s Note: A colloquial saying that references the first and subsequent Gulf Wars. Of course, both the British and the Americans have more deeply rooted, complex, and controversial histories of engagement with Iraq.

15 Steger 2020.

16 Cockrell-Abdullah 2018; See also King 2014.
I could not understand why my art did not draw their attention, or why the “yes, no” art had drawn their attention for more than an hour.

After taking a long time to rest and think, I arranged a one-on-one meeting with the same tutor. He talked with me for almost two hours about how I should think about art and how to produce art critically. He encouraged me to read more to better understand the art world. It was at this time that a second phase of my art started to appear. The first piece of art I produced after this was in a gallery that had been rented for students. We worked with a curator as part of Middlesex University’s strategy to prepare us for careers as professional artists. The gallery was too small, and we students had to struggle and compromise over the space needed for our artwork. I was not happy about the space I was given and complained, but suddenly I realized that the university would not want to spend too much money on a gallery for students. I happened to go to the gallery bathroom and a spontaneous idea came to me. I decided to use the toilet space as a gallery, to mock the contemporary art world in general and our university specifically as a part of this world which in all things are about money. I recreated Michael Craig-Martin’s “An Oak Tree” in a day. Instead of water, I used urine, and in the accompanying text I criticized the university’s strategy for educating students. Strangely, I got remarkable feedback from my tutors. I was esteemed as an artist who wisely adapts art to the environment, and as an artist with an astonishing technical ability to produce art. I continued to make art in this way until the end of the course and earned a high-level distinction at the end. The

17 An excerpt from the Tate Museum discusses Michael Craig-Martin's piece. “An Oak Tree consists of an ordinary glass of water placed on a small glass shelf of the type normally found in a bathroom, which is attached to the wall above head height. Craig-Martin composed a series of questions and answers to accompany the objects. In these, the artist claims that the glass of water has been transformed into an oak tree.”
British art educational system and its cultural environment changed me from a conventional and shallow artist to a critical artist with a contemporary view. However, when I returned to Kurdistan, this type of artmaking was neither observed nor accepted by the Kurdish audience. Again, I had to adapt to a new cultural environment and produce art from this new context. Here the third phase of my art started to appear. This third phase is the latest phase of my lifelong art experience, which I call the “political” phase.

After completing my master’s degree, I was skeptical and became critical of my surroundings. As a thoughtful creature I could not dismiss all the questions constantly forming in my mind. I was confronted by questions of what my responsibility was as an artist to my nation, and I thought deeply about what it was that my art should embody. As soon as you realize that you are an artist living in Iraq, you suddenly understand that political issues take priority, and everything else is secondary or tertiary. I had never thought of introducing politics into my art practice. First, that is because of the politicized land I live on, and then the European educational system that trained me to be reflective and critical of my surroundings. Moreover, being a Kurdish citizen is itself politically problematic. Ethically speaking, you must respond to events happening around you and take action to resist oppression and suppression from those neighboring states that seek to dominate inside Iraq and that work to prevent your identity as the Kurdish nation to be fully formed and officially recognized. When you find yourself immersed in such a political equation, you cannot be left untouched by politics. All of a sudden you find that you have become a political artist and a rebel.

English is a source of pleasure and expansion of my relationships abroad, but it is also the source of problems, pain, and shrinking relationships with my own community. By learning English, studying, and writing, I realize that I gradually moved to what could be called the modernist front. The religion I had been following for years, without hesitation or doubt, I now had doubts about. By reading and working with other cultures as I have done, my art will take another form, and one can no longer think like the artists in one’s own culture. I have found that this new state brought me into conflict with those who were still practicing academic painting—art for “beauty’s sake” as I once did. Most of my artist friends who have dedicated their lives to painting hesitate to let go of what they strongly believe in, and they often oppose anyone who tries to prevent them. Through my master’s degree that I got in the UK and all the resources that I read in English, I became influenced by contemporary art. The history and concept of contemporary visual art originated in America, and is known as an art from which questions arise for the artist. Now my art is 100 percent reliant on the theory of contemporary art.

English As a Contradictive State

Transliteration of English words in some sensitive areas of our Kurdish culture has both negative and positive connotations. Sometimes people use it for showing off, or it is used to show high position or status. Other times it is used to show that someone has crossed over the old ways

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18 Editor’s Note: In his essay, “The Inextricability of Art, Religion, & Politics in Iraq,” Halgurd mentions the American conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth as an important influence, particularly with his own work with language. See Baram 2018: 38–39.
and from now on, they are living in modern times, thinking on the same level of those who are reformed and logical. Other times, it is viewed as an act of submission to the culture of the other and an indication that that person has turned their back on their own culture. If I reflect on my experiences in life, I remember the times that I have used English words in conversations, especially if there was no fitting Kurdish word or if I couldn’t remember the Kurdish. Most of the time this has created an embarrassing moment, where the listener reacted strangely or gave me a look of judgment. The widespread borrowing of English terms is not limited to spoken Kurdish, but has also spread into our writings and other published materials. For example, the name of my previous solo exhibition, Catalyst, was both English in its meaning and also presented in English script on the posters and other promotional materials. I was heavily criticized for this, specifically in the interview I did with Rebin Majid during the documentary that was done on the Catalyst show. Talking with Rebin about the title took a half-hour. Rebin observed that the use of English terms has become a phenomenon throughout Iraq. He talked about how Iraq’s national pavilion at the Venice Biennale was written in English, whereas other countries used their own national languages. He said that key terms were either written in their own language, or if English was used, it was included as a translation. Rebin’s point about the excessive borrowing of foreign words is that it will result in the death of our own language.

![Catalyst poster](image)

Halgurd A. Baram’s Solo Show poster, 2018. All texts related to publications of the show were written in English, even the exhibition title Catalyst.

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19 This documentary can be found at YouTube. Halgurd Selfie-Based Documentary. [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCWOMAk7PpHvVwV87dw/videos](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCWOMAk7PpHvVwV87dw/videos).

20 The Venice Biennale is an international contemporary art exhibition held biennially in Venice, Italy. See Russeth 2019.
Engaging With Language

First and foremost, learning another nation’s language means respecting other nations’ cultural traditions and practices. It means that one person wants to interact fully by learning the other’s language. Learning the other’s language means you want to engage with the one who possesses it. However, it does not seem that English-speaking communities, specifically Americans, have much empathy for Middle Eastern or Islamic societies, of which the Kurds are included. Examples of this lack of empathy, which have a far-reaching impact on the way we see how Americans imagine us, include things like President Donald Trump’s “Muslim Ban,” which banned travel to the United States for ninety days from seven predominantly Muslim countries, including Iraq, and which suspended the resettlement of all Syrian refugees.21 American movies like “12 Strong,” where the mechanics of colonial propaganda are particularly clear, vilify Muslim societies as barbaric, ignorant, and cruel.22 23 Of course, the whole world witnessed the destruction and desperation the Americans left behind in Iraq and more recently in Afghanistan. America wants you to feel good about the strength of American power but demonstrates little concern or respect to the people of these countries. There are many such examples, but what is important here is that if learning another nation’s language demonstrates respect for that nation, in a political context of where mutual respect and understanding is not returned, Middle Eastern and Islamic nations necessarily must have a difficult time being receptive to the English language, which so often stands in as representative of that country. With the dominance of English in the international system, Western countries like the United States are in an easy position to demand that you must learn their language. After that, then you will formally count as a citizen. If language is indeed a carrier of identity, then I and any other individual in Islamic societies must clean our identities from our native language. In this way, we would be giving up the identity that was given by our own native language. For Muslims, of course, the language of the Qur’an is Arabic. As the language of the Qur’an, the Arabic language spreads with the religion, as Islam moves into new lands. Today, Muslim calligraphers, even those in non-Arab, non-Arabic speaking communities, utilize the Arabic alphabet, Arabic religious expressions, and religious names in their art to visualize Quranic content because of this inextricable link between the Arabic language and Islam. In other areas of my work, I have argued that pieces of an Arab identity and culture are reproduced alongside the Islamic text, often without much consideration of this fact. Producing this type of art also reproduces Arab culture, because language, either verbally or visually, is a vehicle to convey culture and national identity.24 It can be easily said that the Kurdish experience with the Islamic script, which is meant to be a visual dimension of Islamic spiritual reality, is absolutely problematic, as it plays a political role in obliterating the Kurdish language and identity. So when Arabic text and calligraphy is seen in my art practice, it does not mean that I am exhibiting a sacred aspect of this art. For me, the art of the text, specifically in Iraq, is in question and it needs to be investigated to reveal meaning. Therefore, my art aims to shed light on the real meanings of Islamic calligraphy

21 Immigration & Ethnic History Society n.d.

22 Shaheen 2014.

23 Berlatsky 2018.

and the possible meanings concealed behind the religious aspects.\textsuperscript{25} As Muslims and followers of the Islamic religion, the Arabic language that is used in the Holy Book, known as Qur’\textsuperscript{an}, is sanctified. Therefore, if a language deserves to be learned, it is Arabic. However, when you use another language, it means that you have granted another a revered place in your world. As you can see, language is a highly political and problematic topic for the Kurdish people.

Duah, 2013, Halgurd A. Baram. This artwork was exhibited to English audiences in London. Even though the script is Kurdish, the artist stresses his identity through his national text, which could be the only material to represent his identity.

**Kurdish Language and the Kurdish Nation**

The question is this: If the existence of Kurds as a nation is reliant on the existence of their language—and being aware of the fact that, right now more than any other time, the dominating powers are trying to erase the language and force their own languages on the Kurdish individual—why is it that today, Kurds like me are eagerly trying to learn English? The answer is that ongoing political plans are focused on spreading English through culture as a postcolonial project that will dominate the world. Even though there is a plan behind spreading this language, it is not through direct force. English is the language of global economics and technology, of business, and being understood across countries. This makes it not only Kurds who want to learn English, but also most of the peoples of the world. More than that, this language is known as the language of the elite of the world, who through a process of thinking with this language have obtained that level of privileged life. Thus, with learning English you also are trying to bring yourself up to their level

\textsuperscript{25} Baram 2018: 45.
and obtain a good life of your own, because in the end, it is language that indicates your level of cognizance. And also, as was mentioned above, if it is language that gives identity, then by learning this language, you gain a sense of superiority and feel equal with others. So it is often this feeling that drives you to want to go live in countries where it’s spoken. I remember how much I spent on fees associated with my master’s degree and living costs in London, I would show Kurdish texts to the British to say that I also exist. But before deciding to fight the war of language and identity, keep in mind that you have already lost before starting. When you fight for your language and identity, you have to know beforehand its strong political and cultural standing. You have to spend large sums of money to study and go to great lengths to be accepted as a student. In the field of art, for instance, if you do not do these things and are not able to show your art in the way that is expected, and if they don’t accept you, you are not considered to be an artist. Mladen Stilinovic, a Croatian artist, has a poignant word of irony in his artwork where he writes “An artist who cannot speak English is no artist.”

**About the Artist**

Language can be seen either as a controversial material for making art or as a visual device that embodies philosophical positions. This idea drives Halgurd Baram’s concerns. Generally, Halgurd’s text-based art can be understood as a conceptual practice that questions the use of written language within the context of conceptualism. He provokes this discourse through multiple languages such as Kurdish, Arabic, and English text to also include Islamic texts. Wider political issues are embedded within the conceptual nature of his practice. Arguably, the illustration of political concepts can be seen to take precedence over conceptual art’s aesthetics, and this tussle between the political and the aesthetic is utilized as a productive tension. Commonly, the written word is considered a vehicle that carries meanings. Halgurd’s practice transcends this function to become something additional—to become an image and a set of coded representations that convey the complex tensions across national identities.
References


