



## LAK TRIBE

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**LAK** (or Lakk), an ethnic term used for a large number of people residing in a vast part of present-day Iran. The original meaning of the word in Persian, “hundred thousands,” apparently refers to the original number of families that constituted a nomadic tribal confederation (Širvāni, p. 522; Marduk, I, p. 109).

The first reference to the Lak is found in the *Šaraf-nāma*, the first history of Kurdistan, by Amir [Šaraf-al-Din Khan Bedlisi](#) (d. 1012/1603-04), in which the name Lak is the first one wherever are mentioned the names of the Kurds of Iran (e.g., Bedlisi, pp. 418, 424). It is cited together with the Zand, which is regarded as one of the most important Lak tribes. According to Vladimir Minorsky, the historical evidences show that the Lak tribes had emigrated to their present settlements from lands further north (Minorsky, “Lak,” p. 616), in which case it could be assumed that the emergence of “Lak” as an ethnic term followed a process of cultural and ethnological amalgamations between the migrant Lak tribes and other peoples of the region.

From a cultural point of view, the Lak are very close to their neighbors and have sometimes been confused with them, especially with the Lors in their southern and eastern environs. The main ‘ethnic marker’ of the Lak, however, is their language, which is quite different from that of the Lors. Several European travelers, as well as native observers, have spoken also about the difference in physiognomy of these two ethnic groups. The Lak are generally known for their beauty and attractiveness. [C. J. Edmonds](#) even tried to specify the physical differences by claiming that the Lak “are taller, have purer features, and aquiline noses. Their women are more beautiful than those of



the Lors” (Minorsky, “Lur,” p. 822). [Freya Stark](#) repeatedly praised the beauty of the Lak women she met in her journey (e.g., Stark, p. 19). Whether such physiological differences could be of any significance in the immigration question of the Lak is a point lacking any reliable evidence. The term “Lak,” which originally was used in reference to certain nomadic tribes, has already developed into an ethnic term used for a quite a large number of people, both settled and nomadic.

*Geographical distribution.* The main habitat of the Lak, unofficially called Lakestān, is a region spread over a large area of the Zagros mountain chains. It starts from the city of [Hamadan](#) and extends as far as the northern parts of Khuzestan Province. Previously, the whole of this region was included in the fifth Iranian province (*ostān-e panjom*) with the city of [Kermanshah](#) as its provincial capital. According to the present administrative distribution, the main habitat of the Lak is constituted of large portions of several provinces: southern and western parts of Hamadan, eastern parts of Kermanshah, eastern and northern parts of [Lorestan](#), and eastern parts of [Ilam](#). It continues eastward as far as the city of Šahr-e Kord in the province of [Čahār Mahāl](#) (Hamzehee, 2006, p. 36). According to Marduḳ, the Laks are also to be found in Eḡandābād and Leylāḳ near Sanandaj (Marduḳ, I, p. 109).

There exist several important colonies of the Laks elsewhere in Iran and in Iraq and Turkey. They live in several places between Hamadan and Tehran, in areas such as Qazvin, Haštgerd, and [Damāvand](#). Several main colonies of the Laks live in [Caspian](#) provinces, in places such as Manjil in [Gilan](#) and Kalārdašt in Mazandaran (Behtu’i, pp. 99, 106), or in [Daragaz](#) and Kalāt in Khorasan (Mirniā, p. 182). They are colonies and still speak Laki, indicating their relatively recent voluntary or forced immigration to these regions. There are also other migrants in different regions that no longer speak Laki, but have kept other aspects of their original culture. A large part of citizens of the city of Salmās in [Azarbaijan](#) are said to have their roots in Lakestān (Shiel, p. 55). Moreover, after the fall of the [Zand dynasty](#), many of their supporters were absorbed into greater nomadic confederations of Central Iran. Many sub-branches (*tira*) of the [Baḳtiāri](#), [Boir Aḡmadi](#), and especially [Qašqā’i](#) tribal confederations still remember their origins among the Laks or carry a related names (Hamzehee, 2006, pp. 80 ff.). According to Raḡimi ‘Oṡmāni (p. 51), thirteen Qašqā’i subtribes are of Laki origin.

[Isabella Bird](#), who was traveling in the last quarter of the 19th century, records some important information regarding the existence of Lak tribes in



**Kerman.** According to her, at that time about 1,000 Lak families were living there. She mentions also the names of 16 such sub-tribes. She writes: “The Lak came to Kerman from Fars, one hundred fifty years ago or more” (Bird, p. 428). We know about the last struggle of the Zand prince, Loṭf-‘Ali Khan, and the support given to him by inhabitants of Kerman. The reaction of **Āgā Moḥammad Khan Qājār**, after invading the city of Kerman was brutal. Because of their support of the Zand prince, he had the eyes of the citizens removed (Sykes, II, p. 288; Širāzi, p. 114). The time of immigration given by Bird coincides with the reign of **Karim Khan**. It is yet to be found out whether the migration of such a large number of Lak from **Fars** had to do with the events after the death of Karim Khan or the last years of Loṭf-‘Ali Khan in Kerman. Several 19th-century scholars have reported the existence of several Lak tribes in Turkey, who apparently spoke dialects other than North Kurdish. Mehrdad Izady, a contemporary scholar, also speaks of “many Kurdish tribes named Lak who now speak other Kurdish dialects (or other languages altogether) and are found from Adana to Central Anatolia” (Izady, p. 175). The same author speaks also about those Laks who live in the region between Adiyaman and the Ceyhan River in far Western Kurdistan in Anatolia (ibid.).

*Language.* The main ethnic marker of the Lak is their language called “Laki.” On the basis of the linguistic fieldwork made by the German linguist Oskar Mann, **Vladimir Minorsky** mentioned the Lak as “the most southern group of Kurd tribes of Persia” (Minorsky, “Lak,” p. 616). After field research made by Oskar Mann, there remained until recently no doubt about the nature of the Laki language. After the death of Oskar Mann, Karl Hadank continued to work on the material collected by him. Both of these linguists declared that Laki was related to Kurdish and different from Lori. Since then, all linguists and other scholars consider Laki to be included in the Northwest group of Iranian language and include Lori among the Southwest group of Iranian languages. It has been only recently that some linguists, on the basis of a new scientific approach, have begun to have doubt about this kind of classifications in general. Moreover, Oskar Mann had rightly found that the difference between Laki and other southern Kurdish dialects to be only minor (“nur unwesentlich”; Mann, p. xxiii). Therefore, he puts Laki along with other south Kurdish dialects under the general rubric “Laki” (Mann, p. xxvii). What is more, in a list compiled by J. L. Rousseau at Kermanshah in 1807, several south Kurdish tribes like the Kalhor, Māfi, Şufiwand, Karku’i, Jalilvand, and Kolyā’i have been classified among the Laki tribes (Rousseau, pp. 85-98).



*Religion.* The majority of the Laks consider themselves followers of the Shi'ite branch of Islam. A considerable number of others, mainly residing around the cities of Şahna and Nurābād, follow a mystic cult called Yāresān, which is also known as the [Ahl-e Haqq](#). Minorsky observed that “the great majority of the Lak are Ahl-e Haqq” (Minorsky, “Lur,” p. 823). The significant point of their dogma from a scholarly, religious point of view lies in the conviction that the first main native theophany of the Yāresān rose from among the Lak. He is also believed to have disappeared in the Gāmāsiāb River in north Lakestān (Hamzehee, 1990, p. 49 ff.). The rituals still performed by the Laks often belong to an unknown past. Until recently, some Laks used to perform rituals around a dagger struck into the earth on the source of the Gāmāsiāb (Hamzeh'ee, forthcoming). The same type of ritual used to be performed by some Alevi tribes of northern Kurdistan (Mark Sykes, p. 479).

*History.* The excavation carried out in Ganj Dara near Harsin shows that the homeland of the Lak belongs to one of the cradles of agricultural and settled civilizations. This settlement with well-developed architecture was constructed more than 10,500 years ago (Smith, pp. 11 ff.; Huff, p. 17). Lakestān was also included in the core land of the ancient [Elam](#). The [Kassites](#), who led the second phase of Babylonian civilization in Mesopotamia, are supposed to have gone from here. The wonderful artifacts known as “[Luristan Bronzes](#),” whether belonging to the same Kassites or any other civilization, were all found in northern Lakestān (Calmeyer, p. 227). According to Dietrich Huff, this area is of outstanding importance for the understanding of several ancient Iranian civilizations (Huff, p. 16). From the Islamic period, there exist ruins of the castle of Sarmāj near Harsin in a village of the same name. It was here that the Kurdish principality of Ḥasanwayh was founded in the 4th/10th century. This principality was maintained in western Iran and Upper Mesopotamia as more or less autonomous until 439/1047 (Cahen). [Ebn al-Aṭir](#) “praises the noble character of Ḥasanwayh, his prudent policy and the purity of his moral” (Minorsky, “Kurds, Kurdistan,” p. 452). The most distinguished point in the history of the Laks is the fact that the Zand dynasty rose from among them. Its founder, Karim Khan (r. 1750-79), could be compared only to the best rulers during ancient history of Iran (see Navā'i, chap. 9).

Two revolutionaries of later periods also rose from among the Lak, namely Yār-Moḥammad Khan Kermānšāhi and Kālu Qorbān Harsini. The former fought alongside the [Constitutionalists](#) in Tabriz. He was killed in a battle against Qajar prince Farmānfarmā in Kermanshah in October 1912 (Kešāvarz,



pp. 209 ff.). The latter was the commander of partisan units of Mirzā Kuček Khan in the [Jangali movement](#) before the rise of the Pahlavi dynasty in 1920 (Fakrā'i, p. 397).

*Economics.* As mentioned above, the term “Lak” was originally used for a number of nomadic tribes (see [NOMADISM](#), [HERDS AND FLOCKS](#)), later on developing into an ethnic term. The original nomadic groups were small-cattle breeders living a half nomadic life. They used to make horizontal migrations between the valleys and their pastures in high mountains. Their main livestock was fat-tailed [sheep](#) and a small number of [goats](#). All half nomadic tribes of western Iran were practicing a limited amount of agriculture in both their winter and summer quarters (Hamzehee, 1991, pp. 33, 76). According to Hyacinth Rabino, up to the 20th century, one of the main sources of income for the Lak nomads was the cultivation of [opium](#). He wrote in 1904: “The Luristan opium, being *daimi* (dry farming), is said to be a better quality than the opium cultivated in the usual way. It is sown by the Kakavan (Kākāvand) and other Lekk (Lak) tribes whose territory border that of Kirmanshah” (Rabino, p. 23). Their political organization was a mixed one, but a great part of it was based on soil rather than tribe (Bois, “Kurds, Kurdistan,” p. 471). The social organization of most southern Kurdish tribes, like the Jāf, used to be endogamous preferring marriages within their own clans (Barth, p. 139).

The great decrease of the nomadic population of Iran in the last few decades promotes the idea that, in a near future, nomadic life would completely disappear. In the past, some nomads would settle down to start agricultural activities, while now they directly migrate to the big cities. At the present time, the Laks are engaged in all economic activities in large cities, and they have also managed to control certain economic niches. They have been successful in some trades such as wholesale construction material. At the same time, their home industry has been drastically reduced. Therefore, in the near future, even the famous Harsin carpets (i.e., *kelim/gelim*) may cease to be woven in the homes.

We have no reliable census regarding the number of the Lak population at the present time. In a study published in 1992, their number was estimated to be around one and a half million (Izady, p. 175), which seems reasonable for that year. Since they constitute about 30 to 40 percent of the population of four provinces, their number for the year 2009 could very well be over two million. Raḥimi ‘Otmāni states that Laki speakers make up over 65 percent of the



Lorestan population (Raḥimi 'Otmāni, p. 51). In addition, there are also numerous islands of the Laks in different neighboring countries (see above).

The Lak tribes have always been known for their warlike qualities. Like all other nomadic tribes, war has also been a part of their economic activities in various forms. Javānmir of Hamāvand and his small number of fighters, who were terrifying both the Qajar and Ottoman rulers, was the last legendary rebel and bandit of the Lak nomads (e.g., Behtu'i). Freya Stark, who was traveling among the Laks during the rule of the first Pahlavi, writes about the high position of the women in the society. She tells the story of several warlike women who were very much praised by the people. The Lak women had the tradition of joining their men in war (Stark, p. 133-34; Ḥājj Sayyāḥ, p. 324). This is apparently an old tradition among these people. It is said that the inclusion of women in the military was an interesting trait of the Zand tribe. The first bride of Karim Khan is said to have fought the Afghan forces alongside her husband (Izady, p. 54).

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