

The Enduring Echoes: Famous Stories, Epics, and Legends of Afrin Before 2010

I. Introduction: The Narrative Landscape of Afrin Before 2010

The Afrin region, nestled in the Kurd-Dagh (Kurd Mountains) of northwestern Syria, possessed a rich and deeply rooted cultural tapestry prior to the transformative events of 2010. Understanding its famous stories, epics, and legends requires an appreciation of its distinct historical and demographic context, overwhelmingly characterized by its Kurdish heritage. This heritage, sustained over centuries, has nurtured a vibrant oral tradition that served as the primary vessel for its narrative arts.

A. Afrin's Kurdish Cultural Context and the Primacy of Oral Tradition

Before the Syrian Civil War, which began in 2011, the Afrin district was recognized for its significant Kurdish population. Some accounts described the area as "homogeneously Kurdish" ¹, while other sources estimated that at least 97 percent of its pre-war population was Kurdish.² This demographic characteristic was not a recent phenomenon; historical evidence points to Kurdish settlement in the Kurd-Dagh area, which includes Afrin, stretching back to antiquity, possibly as early as the Seleucid Empire. By the time of the Crusades in the late 11th century, the Kurd Mountains were already inhabited by Kurds.¹ Further affirming this long-standing presence, Ottoman administrative documents from the 18th century referred to the Afrin region as the "Sancak of the Kurds".⁴

This enduring and concentrated Kurdish presence is foundational to comprehending the region's folklore. A strong cultural identity, often preserved despite external pressures such as state-led Arabization policies in modern Syria ¹, naturally fostered and safeguarded distinct narrative traditions. Kurdish folklore, in general, is characterized as "almost completely oral" and "incredibly rich and diverse".⁶ This oral nature is vividly illustrated by accounts from Afrin itself, where elders like 86-year-old Zarifa Hanan are noted to have preserved and passed down stories such as

Siyabend û Xecê to their children and grandchildren.⁷ The primacy of oral transmission underscores the dynamism of these traditions and their reliance on community memory and active performance. It also implies that written collections, while valuable, may only represent

a portion of the extant lore. The act of storytelling itself was, and remains, a crucial cultural practice for maintaining identity and facilitating intergenerational knowledge transfer, a particularly vital function in a region that has historically contended with attempts at cultural suppression.⁵

Afrin's specific historical trajectory may have further shaped its folkloric landscape.

Compared to other Kurdish regions in Syria, such as Jazira, Afrin was reportedly "spared the Arabization campaigns that affected other parts of Syrian Kurdistan" to a more significant degree before 2011.² Arabization policies, implemented by successive Syrian governments, aimed to dilute or assimilate non-Arab cultural identities.¹ Regions less impacted by such intensive campaigns would logically have had a greater opportunity to retain their indigenous cultural expressions, including their narrative traditions. Consequently, the folklore of Afrin before 2010 might have exhibited a stronger continuity with older, more distinctly Kurdish forms due to this relative insulation from the more disruptive aspects of Arabization that were experienced elsewhere. This does not imply an absence of external cultural influences, but rather suggests the potential for a more robustly preserved core of indigenous narratives. The following table provides an overview of some of the prominent folkloric narratives that are understood to have been part of Afrin's cultural heritage before 2010, which will be explored in this report:

Table 1: Prominent Folkloric Narratives in Afrin (Pre-2010) and Their Significance

Narrative Title (Kurdish/English)	Genre	Brief Synopsis/Core Theme(s)	Primary Evidence of Presence/Significance in Afrin (Pre-2010)	Key Cultural Resonances for Afrin
<i>Mem û Zîn</i>	Epic Poem / Tragic Love Story	Tragic love between Mem and Zîn, thwarted by the villain Beko; themes of love, fate, betrayal, and Kurdish identity/struggle.	Recognized as the Kurdish national epic ⁹ ; explicitly listed as known and recounted by Afrin residents. ⁷	Symbol of Kurdish identity; exploration of profound love and societal obstacles; allegory for Kurdish national aspirations.
Kawa the Blacksmith (<i>Kawe-y Asinger</i>) / Newroz Legend	Legend / Origin Myth	Blacksmith Kawa leads a revolt against the tyrannical King Zahhak, liberating the people and ushering in spring (Newroz). Themes of resistance, freedom, renewal.	Central Kurdish myth linked to Newroz ¹⁰ ; Newroz widely celebrated in Afrin, implying knowledge of its foundational legend. ¹²	Symbol of liberation and Kurdish resilience; foundational narrative for Newroz, the most important Kurdish cultural celebration.

Şamaran (Shahmaran)	Legend / Mythical Creature Story	Half-woman, half-snake queen of snakes, possessing great wisdom; betrayed by a human she trusts, leading to her death but the transference of her wisdom. Themes of wisdom, betrayal, sacrifice, protection.	Prominent in general Kurdish folklore, especially Northern Kurdistan ¹¹ ; Afrin's cultural ties make its knowledge probable.	Symbol of wisdom, resilience, and feminine power; connection to broader ancient Kurdish mythology; potential emblem of cultural endurance.
Siyabend û Xecê	Tragic Love Story	Love between Siyabend and Xecê, ending tragically in the mountains. Themes of heroic love, defiance of fate/society, sacrifice.	Explicitly listed as known and recounted by Afrin residents ⁷ ; also a known Kurdish romance. ⁶	Embodiment of romantic ideals, loyalty, and defiance in the face of insurmountable odds; reflection on fate and sacrifice.
Zembîlfiroş (The Basket Seller)	Moral Tale / Love Story	A prince renounces wealth to become a humble, pious basket seller; resists temptation from a powerful woman. Themes of virtue, piety, integrity, rejection of worldly corruption.	Explicitly listed as known and recounted by Afrin residents ⁷ ; a known Kurdish story by Feqiyê Teyran. ¹⁵	Upholding moral and spiritual values; critique of power and materialism; didactic tale of integrity.
Ferhad û Şîrîn (Farhad and Shirin)	Tragic Love Story / Romance	Stonemason Ferhad's immense efforts and tragic love for Princess Şîrîn, thwarted by deception. Themes of	Explicitly listed as known and recounted by Afrin residents ⁷ ; Kurdish version of a classic Persian romance. ¹⁶	Celebration of profound romantic devotion; illustration of perseverance against obstacles; cautionary tale

		enduring love, monumental sacrifice, destructive power of deceit.		about malice.
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B. Significance of Documenting Afrin's Folklore (Pre-2010)

The period leading up to 2010 is particularly critical for understanding Afrin's cultural heritage, as it represents a baseline before the profound societal disruptions caused by the Syrian Civil War (from 2011 onwards) and the subsequent Turkish military operation and occupation of Afrin in 2018.¹ These events precipitated large-scale displacement of the region's Kurdish population and led to allegations of systematic demographic engineering and cultural alteration.² The destruction of historical sites and the seizure of agricultural lands further compounded the threat to the region's cultural fabric.²

Documenting the folklore from the era *before* these significant upheavals is therefore an act of paramount importance. It allows for the capture and preservation of cultural memory as it existed and was transmitted within a relatively stable indigenous milieu. Folklore, being a living tradition, is intrinsically linked to the communities that create and sustain it; displacement and the fragmentation of social structures can severely damage, if not eradicate, these oral arts. The pre-2010 period thus offers a snapshot of these traditions prior to the most acute phase of these disruptions.

Consequently, the study and documentation of Afrin's pre-2010 folklore transcend a purely academic exercise; they become integral to cultural preservation. Such endeavors provide a testament to the region's rich narrative heritage and serve as an invaluable record for future generations, particularly for a community that has experienced significant dispersal and trauma. These stories, epics, and legends encapsulate the collective memory, values, worldview, and artistic expression of the Afrini people, offering a window into their historical consciousness and cultural soul. Safeguarding this heritage is an urgent and vital undertaking.

II. Foundational Epics and Legends in Afrin's Heritage

Central to the narrative traditions of Afrin, as with Kurdish culture more broadly, are foundational epics and legends that articulate core aspects of identity, history, and cosmology. These stories, passed down through generations, have shaped the cultural consciousness of the region.

A. *Mem û Zîn*: The Kurdish National Epic and its Echoes in Afrin

The epic poem *Mem û Zîn*, penned by the esteemed Kurdish scholar and poet Ehmedê Xanî in 1695, holds an unparalleled position in Kurdish literature and is widely acclaimed as the Kurdish national epic.⁹ The narrative is a poignant tragedy centered on the profound love between Mem, of the Alan clan, and Zîn, the sister of the Prince of Botan, Mîr Zeyneddîn. Their union is cruelly thwarted by the machinations of Beko (also referred to as Bekir or Bakr), a malevolent and envious figure in the Mîr's court, whose intrigues lead to Mem's imprisonment and eventual death, followed by Zîn's demise from grief.⁹

As the quintessential Kurdish epic, the presence and resonance of *Mem û Zîn* within the Afrin region would be anticipated, given its strong Kurdish identity. The epic transcends its immediate plot of ill-fated love; it is imbued with deeper allegorical meanings, frequently interpreted as symbolizing the collective suffering of the Kurdish people, their yearning for unity, and their enduring struggle for self-determination and liberation.⁹ Xanî himself, in the introduction to his work, alluded to his motivations, including a desire to give the Kurdish language a literary cornerstone and to articulate the plight of the Kurds.⁹

Direct evidence confirms the active role of *Mem û Zîn* in the oral tradition and cultural consciousness of Afrin prior to 2010. An article from Enab Baladi, based on local testimonies, explicitly lists *Mem û Zîn* (rendered in Arabic as *مهم وزين*) as one of "four Kurdish love stories preserved by the people of Afrin since childhood".⁷ The same source recounts the experience of Fidan Maamo, a 52-year-old woman from Afrin, who grew up with the story and subsequently narrated it to her own children. She reflects on the tragic outcome, attributing it to a societal reality that often discourages true love and the free choice of a life partner.⁷ This personal account powerfully illustrates how

Mem û Zîn was not merely a historical text but a living story, actively transmitted and reflected upon within Afrini families. Its themes of thwarted love, betrayal, and the struggle against oppressive circumstances would undoubtedly have resonated with local experiences and the broader Kurdish narrative of historical adversity.

The transmission of *Mem û Zîn* in Afrin, likely occurring through vibrant oral storytelling as much as, or perhaps more than, through the circulation of manuscripts (which were historically centered in the medreses of Northern Kurdistan⁹), demonstrates the adaptation and internalization of a foundational literary work into the local folkloric repertoire. While *Mem û Zîn* originated as a written epic in the 17th century, its embrace by the oral tradition in Afrin signifies its deep cultural penetration. Oral traditions are not static; they often adapt and reinterpret source material to align with local contexts, concerns, and understandings. The core themes of tragic love, the destructive nature of envy and betrayal (personified by Beko), and the struggle against seemingly insurmountable obstacles are universal, yet they hold particular poignancy for Kurdish communities. Within Afrin, the retelling of *Mem û Zîn* would likely have been an active engagement with these powerful themes, potentially infusing them with local nuances and connecting them to the lived realities and historical memory of the Afrini Kurds. The story thus becomes more than just a narrative; it functions as a shared

cultural touchstone, reinforcing collective identity and memory.

B. Kawa the Blacksmith (*Kawe-y Asinger*): Revolution, Renewal, and the Spirit of Newroz in Afrin

The legend of Kawa the Blacksmith (Kurdish: *Kawe-y Asinger* or *Kawayê Hesinkar*) is a cornerstone of Kurdish mythology, intrinsically linked to the celebration of Newroz, the Kurdish New Year, which marks the spring equinox.¹⁰ This powerful narrative recounts the story of Kawa, a humble blacksmith who rises against the tyrannical rule of an evil king, most commonly identified as Zahhak (Kurdish: Zuhak or Dehak). Zahhak is depicted as a monstrous despot, often with serpents growing from his shoulders, which demanded a daily tribute of the brains of two young men to appease their hunger and alleviate his pain.¹¹ Kawa, having lost many of his own children to this cruel practice (or, in some versions, having saved youths by substituting sheep's brains for one of the daily human sacrifices), galvanizes the oppressed people into revolt. Armed with his blacksmith's hammer or apron as a banner, Kawa confronts and ultimately slays Zahhak. To signal the tyrant's downfall and summon supporters, fires are lit on the hillsides. This event marks the end of oppression, the return of spring to the land, and the dawn of freedom.¹¹

Kawa stands as a potent symbol of resistance against tyranny, courage, and the fight for liberation, making him a revered figure in Kurdish national consciousness and folklore.¹¹

Newroz, the festival born from this legend, is arguably the most significant cultural and national holiday for Kurds across all regions, celebrated with immense joy, communal gatherings, traditional dances, special foods, and the lighting of bonfires.¹⁸

While the provided research on Kawa directly¹⁰ details the general Kurdish legend, other sources attest to the vibrant and deeply rooted celebration of Newroz in Afrin.¹² Although these particular news reports are dated 2025, they refer to the historical significance and the enthusiastic resurgence of Newroz celebrations in Afrin, implying its long-standing importance in the region's cultural calendar. The celebration of Newroz is inextricably tied to the recounting or symbolic reenactment of the Kawa legend. Given Afrin's pronounced Kurdish identity and the profound cultural weight of Newroz, the legend of Kawa would undoubtedly have been a central element of its folkloric and celebratory traditions before 2010. The themes of overcoming oppression, the heroism of ordinary people, and the ushering in of an era of renewal and freedom would have held particular resonance for the community.

For the people of Afrin, the annual celebration of Newroz, animated by the Kawa legend, served as more than just a cultural festival. It functioned as a periodic and powerful reaffirmation of Kurdish identity, historical consciousness, and collective aspirations. This was especially significant in the context of past Syrian state policies, which at times sought to suppress or co-opt Kurdish cultural expressions, including the celebration of Newroz.⁵ In such an environment, the act of celebrating Newroz and invoking the Kawa legend became a form of cultural assertion and a quiet act of defiance. The story of Kawa, therefore, transcends its

mythological origins to become an active, living narrative of resilience, hope, and the unyielding desire for cultural recognition and freedom. Its retelling would have been charged with contemporary meaning, connecting the ancient struggle against Zahhak to more recent experiences and future hopes, thereby reinforcing the enduring spirit of the community.

C. Şamaran (Shahmaran): The Serpent Queen and Her Place in Afrini Lore

Şamaran, also spelled Shahmaran, is a captivating and enigmatic figure in Kurdish folklore, a mythical being often depicted as half-woman and half-snake.¹¹ She is commonly portrayed as the wise and benevolent queen of an underground realm inhabited by snakes, a goddess of wisdom, a guardian of secrets, and a symbol of protection.¹⁴ The core legend, with variations, typically revolves around a young man—often named Tahmasp, Jamasp, or Cansab—who stumbles upon Şamaran's hidden domain. He is initially feared or held captive but eventually gains Şamaran's trust and is imparted with her profound wisdom and knowledge of herbs and healing. After a period, he is allowed to return to the human world, vowing to keep her existence a secret. However, when the local king falls gravely ill, a malevolent vizier or sorcerer declares that the only cure lies in consuming Şamaran's flesh. The young man, under duress or torture, is forced to betray Şamaran's location. Understanding her fate, Şamaran often instructs her betrayer on how to utilize different parts of her body: one part (e.g., her tail) might grant wisdom, another (her body) healing, and a third (her head) might be poisonous or bring death to the wicked. In most versions, the evil vizier perishes, the king is healed, and the young man inherits Şamaran's wisdom, though he is often left with enduring grief or a mark of his connection to the serpent world.¹⁴

Şamaran embodies a rich tapestry of themes: wisdom, hidden knowledge, trust, betrayal, inevitable sacrifice, healing, and the cyclical nature of life and wisdom. She is a potent feminine symbol in Kurdish culture, representing resilience and the enduring power of knowledge even in death. Her image is often used as a protective talisman in homes.¹⁴

Direct, explicit mentions of Şamaran's legend being specifically prevalent in Afrin, as recounted by Afrini individuals in the provided material, are less prominent than for *Mem û Zîn* or the love stories. The sources discussing Şamaran¹¹ generally refer to her significance in broader Kurdish folklore, with particular emphasis on regions like Mardin in Northern Kurdistan (Turkey). However, Afrin is an integral part of the Kurd-Dagh, a region with ancient Kurdish settlements¹, and historically shares numerous cultural traits and connections with other Kurdish territories. Folklore and myths often diffuse across culturally contiguous areas. Furthermore, the Yarsan faith, whose adherents venerate Şamaran as a sacred being¹⁴, is found among Kurds. While the primary religious demographics of Afrin before 2010 included Sunni Islam, Alevism, and Yazidism⁵, powerful cultural symbols like Şamaran can often transcend specific religious affiliations and become part of a wider cultural heritage. Given Afrin's strong Kurdish cultural fabric and its geographical and historical links to other Kurdish regions where Şamaran is a well-known figure, it is highly probable that the legend of

Şamaran was known and recounted in Afrin before 2010. Her multifaceted symbolism—representing wisdom, offering protection, and embodying resilience in the face of betrayal—would resonate universally, and particularly within Kurdish cultural contexts that have historically valued such attributes. The absence of direct, Afrin-specific testimonies about Şamaran in the current set of research materials might represent a gap in the available information rather than an actual absence of the legend from the local culture.

If, as is likely, the legend of Şamaran was part of Afrin's lore, her figure would represent a significant connection to a wider geography of Kurdish mythology, linking Afrin to ancient narratives shared across the mountainous landscapes of Kurdistan. Her complex character – a powerful, wise, and often benevolent female entity who is ultimately sacrificed but whose essential wisdom endures and is passed on – could offer a rich metaphorical framework for understanding themes of cultural survival and the enduring power of heritage despite adversity and loss. Her story could serve as a powerful local symbol connected to broader Kurdish identity, embodying the idea that true wisdom and cultural essence can persist even when their bearers face persecution or destruction. Further ethnographic research focusing specifically on the presence and interpretation of the Şamaran legend within Afrin's oral traditions would be a valuable endeavor to fully illuminate her place in the region's narrative heritage.

III. Cherished Love Stories of Afrin: Narratives of Passion and Fate

Beyond the foundational epics and myths, a significant portion of Afrin's remembered folkloric repertoire consists of poignant love stories. These narratives, often tinged with tragedy, have been passed down through generations, shaping local understandings of love, sacrifice, and the often-harsh realities of fate.

An article in Enab Baladi, drawing directly from interviews with residents of Afrin, provides crucial insight into this aspect of the region's oral tradition. It explicitly identifies four specific Kurdish love stories as being widely known and recounted by the people of Afrin since their childhood: *Siyabend û Xecê*, *Mem û Zîn* (previously discussed as a national epic but also cherished as a love story), *Zembîlîroş*, and *Ferhad û Şîrîn*.⁷ The article underscores a common thread running through many of these tales: they often feature lovers whose union is ultimately thwarted, leading to tragic ends. These narratives explore themes of profound love, unwavering devotion, immense sacrifice, and the cruel intervention of external forces or societal constraints.⁷ Fatima Khalil, a young woman from Afrin quoted in the article, reflects that these Kurdish tales suggest true love does not die but is often undone by "sick" external characters who sow discord, and that the tragic endings signify a reality that often fails to accommodate such profound love.⁷

The collective memory and active oral transmission of these particular tragic love stories within Afrin point towards a cultural preoccupation with themes of unattainable love, the

formidable power of societal obstacles, and the inescapable hand of fate. These narratives likely served as more than mere entertainment; they may have functioned as cultural mechanisms for processing collective experiences of loss, adversity, or the struggle against seemingly insurmountable challenges. This resonance might not be limited to romantic ideals but could also reflect broader socio-historical realities faced by the community. The act of sharing these "sad" stories, as described by the Afrini residents⁷, could foster a sense of shared emotional landscape, cultural cohesion, and a collective understanding of the complexities of human experience. The recurrent pattern of unfulfilled love and external interference in these widely known Afrini tales suggests that they might be cultural scripts for navigating and making sense of hardship and loss—themes that could have resonated deeply within the historical context of Afrin and the broader Kurdish experience. The shared sorrow evoked by these tales could, paradoxically, strengthen community bonds by affirming shared values and emotional responses.

A. *Siyabend û Xecê*: A Tale of Tragic Love Remembered in Afrin

The story of *Siyabend û Xecê* (Siyabend and Xecê) is explicitly named as one of the four principal love stories cherished by the people of Afrin.⁷ Its deep embedding in the local oral tradition is powerfully illustrated by the testimony of Zarifa Hanan, an 86-year-old woman from Afrin, who recalls the story from her youth and continued to narrate it to her children and grandchildren. She particularly admired the bravery of the hero, Siyabend, who eloped with his beloved, Xecê. The narrative culminates tragically, with Xecê choosing to die alongside Siyabend in the "Valley of Death" near the foot of Mount Sipan (a prominent mountain in historic Kurdistan, located in present-day eastern Turkey), rather than be forced to marry another.⁷ General Kurdish folklore sources also acknowledge

Khej and Siyabend (a common variant spelling) as a significant tragic romance.⁶ A film adaptation of the legend further characterizes Siyabend as an intelligent and brave, yet mischievous, orphan whose love for Xecê is ultimately doomed by a combination of fate and his own impetuosity or lack of confidence.²²

The vivid recollection of this story by an elderly Afrini resident, complete with her personal reflections on its characters, underscores its profound integration into the local cultural fabric. The themes of defiant love, courage in the face of societal opposition, and ultimate, shared tragedy clearly resonated deeply within the community. The geographical setting of the story's climax on Mount Sipan connects it to a broader Kurdish legendary landscape, even as it was retold and cherished locally in Afrin.

The admiration expressed by Zarifa Hanan for Siyabend's "bravery" in "kidnapping" (eloping with) his beloved⁷, when juxtaposed with the film adaptation's note of his "recklessness"²², highlights the potential for multiple interpretations and emphases within the oral tradition. Oral narratives are fluid, allowing for varied portrayals and understandings of characters and their motivations depending on the storyteller and the audience. In the context of Afrin, the emphasis, as suggested by the elder's perspective, might have been placed on the assertion

of passionate love against restrictive societal norms or oppressive forces, even if such defiance led to a tragic end. Xecê's unwavering choice to die with Siyabend elevates her to a figure of ultimate loyalty and profound defiance, a testament to the depth of their bond. Within a community that may have historically experienced constraints on personal choice or faced significant external pressures, the act of defying those constraints, even with devastating consequences, could be valorized as an expression of profound human spirit and commitment. The Afrini interpretation, therefore, might lean towards romantic heroism and the ultimate sacrifice for love, viewing the tragedy as a consequence of harsh external circumstances rather than solely as a result of internal flaws. This framing would serve to reinforce values of loyalty, the intensity of true love, and the courage to pursue it against all odds.

B. *Zembîlfiroş* (The Basket Seller): Virtue and Piety in the Story of the Basket Seller

Zembîlfiroş, meaning "The Basket Seller," is another of the four key love stories identified by Enab Baladi as being preserved in the oral tradition of Afrin.⁷ This narrative is often attributed to the classical Kurdish poet Feqiyê Teyran (circa 1590-1660) and is believed to be based on an older oral tradition.¹⁵ The story centers on Prince Saed (or a similarly named prince), the son of an unjust or evil ruler of a prominent city like Farqîn (ancient Martyropolis, near Amed/Diyarbakır). Disdaining his father's tyrannical ways or the corrupting influence of power, Prince Saed renounces his royal status and wealth. He migrates to a different region, often specified as Zakho or its vicinity, where he chooses a life of humility and honest labor, earning his living by making and selling baskets.¹⁵

A significant part of the *Zembîlfiroş* legend, and the aspect that often classifies it as a "love story" (albeit one of rejection), involves the basket seller's unwavering piety and moral integrity when faced with temptation. A powerful and beautiful woman—sometimes the wife of the local governor, a princess, or another high-status lady—becomes deeply enamored with the handsome and virtuous *Zembîlfiroş*.⁶ She attempts to seduce him, using her charm, wealth, or status. However, *Zembîlfiroş*, steadfast in his faith and commitment to righteousness, consistently rejects her advances. In some versions, he escapes her pursuit by leaping from a high place (like the palace walls), miraculously surviving through divine intervention, and returns to his simple, virtuous life.⁷ This narrative arc draws comparisons to the story of Yusuf (Joseph) and Züleyha (Potiphar's wife), a well-known tale in Islamic tradition also popular among Kurds.⁶

The inclusion of *Zembîlfiroş* among the cherished stories of Afrin, as attested by its residents, indicates its cultural importance within their narrative repertoire. The story champions enduring themes of piety, humility, moral integrity, the dignity of labor, and the courageous rejection of worldly temptation and corruption in favor of spiritual or ethical rectitude. Unlike the predominantly tragic outcomes of the other love stories highlighted in Afrin, *Zembîlfiroş* (particularly in the versions where he successfully resists temptation and

preserves his virtue) offers a narrative of moral triumph and spiritual steadfastness. Its popularity in Afrin could suggest a strong cultural valuation of inner virtue, self-discipline, and unwavering commitment to principles, even when faced with significant pressure or allure. The figure of a prince who voluntarily chooses a humble, righteous existence over a life of potentially corrupt power could also carry subtle, yet potent, socio-political commentary. It might imply a critique of unjust rule or the emptiness of material wealth when devoid of moral substance. For the Afrini audience, *Zembîlfiroş* likely served as an inspirational and didactic tale, emphasizing that true nobility resides in character and righteous conduct rather than in lineage or worldly status—a message that would resonate deeply across various social conditions and historical contexts, offering a model of principled living.

C. *Ferhad û Şîrîn* (Farhad and Shirin): Enduring Love and Sacrifice in Afrin's Storytelling Repertoire

The tale of *Ferhad û Şîrîn* (Farhad and Shirin) is the fourth love story explicitly mentioned as being part of the folkloric heritage known to the people of Afrin.⁷ This narrative is the Anatolian and Kurdish adaptation of the celebrated Persian romantic epic *Khosrow and Shirin*, most famously penned by the 12th-century Persian poet Nizami Ganjavi. While Nizami's version focuses on the Sasanian king Khosrow II and the Armenian princess Shirin, with Farhad as a tragic rival, the folkloric versions popular among Kurds and Turks often elevate Farhad to the central romantic hero.¹⁶

In these popular versions, Ferhad is typically a highly skilled craftsman, often a stonemason or artist, renowned for his strength and talent. He falls deeply in love with the beautiful princess Şîrîn (Shirin). To win her hand in marriage, or sometimes to gain access to her, Şîrîn's guardian or a rival suitor (sometimes Khosrow himself, or Şîrîn's sister Mehmene Banu, the ruler of Amasya, in some Turkish variants¹⁶) assigns Ferhad an ostensibly impossible task. A common version of this task is to carve a channel through a massive mountain to bring water to the city or to Şîrîn's palace.¹⁶ Driven by his immense love, Ferhad undertakes this Herculean labor with extraordinary determination and makes remarkable progress. As he nears completion, his rival or the person who set the task, fearing Ferhad's success, resorts to deception. An old woman (a hag) is sent to Ferhad with the false news that Şîrîn has died. Devastated by this cruel lie, Ferhad, in his despair, throws his pickaxe or crowbar into the air, and as it falls, it strikes him on the head, killing him. When Şîrîn learns of Ferhad's tragic death and the deceit that caused it, she is overcome with grief and takes her own life, often by throwing herself from a cliff or near Ferhad's body, thus uniting them in death.¹⁶

The presence of *Ferhad û Şîrîn* in Afrin's oral tradition demonstrates the local adoption and adaptation of a classic Perso-Turkic romance, highlighting processes of cultural exchange and the enduring, universal appeal of its core themes. These themes include unwavering and all-consuming love, the undertaking of monumental efforts for the beloved, the tragic consequences of deception and jealousy, and ultimate sacrifice in the name of love.

The story of *Ferhad û Şîrîn*, with its powerful imagery of a lover literally moving mountains for

the sake of his beloved, underscores the romantic ideal of love as an all-powerful, transformative, and motivating force. Ferhad's Herculean efforts serve as a potent metaphor for perseverance in the face of overwhelming odds when fueled by deep affection. Its tragic conclusion, brought about by malicious deception, speaks to the vulnerability of love and happiness to external malice and the destructive potential of envy. For an Afrini audience, this narrative would likely reinforce the cultural value placed on steadfastness and perseverance, even if the ultimate outcome is tragic. It would also serve as a poignant cautionary tale about the devastating impact of deceit and the fragility of human joy when confronted by ill will. The story resonates with the recurrent themes found in other love stories favored in Afrin, such as the profound intensity of romantic devotion and the profound pain of its loss due to external interference, thereby contributing to a shared cultural understanding of the complexities of love and fate.

IV. Exploring Other Folk Narratives and Storytelling Traditions in Afrin

While the grand epics and widely cherished love stories form significant pillars of Afrin's narrative heritage, the folkloric landscape would have also been populated by a diverse array of other tales and storytelling practices, reflecting the daily life, humor, wisdom, and social customs of the community.

A. Identifying Other Folk Tales or Narrative Genres

The provided research offers glimpses into the broader spectrum of Kurdish folk tales, which would likely have had parallels or direct expressions in Afrin. A digital document titled "Çîrokên Gelêrî" (Kurdish Folk Tales), prepared by Metîn Kewê, includes a variety of short stories such as "Heso Kupo" (a tale seemingly about a character who gains a nickname related to a jar), "DIMS, MIŞK û FIRAQÊ MÎZA PÎRÊ" (The Molasses, the Mouse, and the Old Woman's Urine Pot - a humorous and somewhat scatological story about a series of mishaps involving a guest, molasses contaminated by a mouse, and a broken pot), and others.²⁵ While this specific collection does not explicitly link these particular tales to Afrin (some stories mention locations like Muş and the village of Qop, which are in Turkey²⁵), the types of narratives presented are indicative of the wider pool of Kurdish folklore. These often include humorous anecdotes, didactic stories imparting moral lessons, tales revolving around everyday life, and narratives emphasizing social customs such as hospitality (*mêvanî*).²⁵ It is highly probable that Afrini storytellers drew from, and contributed to, this broader reservoir of narrative forms.

Another source mentions the Kurdish writer Zîlan Hemo, who underscores the importance of collecting folkloric stories that forge a connection between contemporary life and historical

memory. Hemo has contributed to works such as "Çirûskeke Ji Berxwedaniya Kobanê" (A Spark from the Kobanê Resistance) and a book titled "Rodî û Perwîn".²⁶ Again, a direct, explicit link of these specific titles or collections to pre-2010 Afrin is not established in the available snippets. However, the general nature of Kurdish folklore—rich in animal fables, stories of local heroes or tricksters (like the "bald-headed boy" figure Keçelok, who has analogues in Turkish, Persian, and Azerbaijani traditions ⁶), moral exempla, and humorous accounts of human foibles—would almost certainly have been a vibrant part of Afrin's oral culture. Proverbs and riddles also form a popular component of this oral heritage.⁶

The prevalence of stories centered on hospitality (*mêvanî*), as seen in the "Çîrokên Gelêrî" collection ²⁵, likely reflects a deeply ingrained cultural value that would have been equally prominent in Afrin's local narratives. Hospitality is a widely recognized and highly esteemed social virtue in many Middle Eastern cultures, including Kurdish society. Folk tales are a primary medium through which such cultural values are taught, reinforced, and transmitted across generations. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that Afrin's local stock of folk tales before 2010 included numerous stories that illustrated, celebrated, or humorously tested the principles of hospitality. These narratives would have provided social scripts, moral guidance, and a shared understanding of expected conduct within the community, reinforcing the social fabric through shared laughter and lessons.

B. The Role of the Storyteller (*Dengbêj*) and Oral Transmission

The primary mode of transmission for this rich folkloric heritage in Afrin, as in Kurdish culture generally, was oral. Central to this process is the figure of the *dengbêj* (literally "voice-singer" or "story-singer," pronounced roughly "deng-beige"). The *dengbêj* is a traditional Kurdish oral storyteller, bard, and singer, often a semi-professional performer, who memorizes and recites lengthy epic poems, historical accounts, love ballads (*lawuk*), and other narrative songs.⁶ They traditionally performed unaccompanied or sometimes accompanied themselves on a stringed instrument like the

tembûr (a long-necked lute).⁶ Epics such as

Mem û Zîn and *Dimdim* (an epic about a historical Kurdish uprising against Shah Abbas I ⁶) would typically be recited by

dengbêjs. The story of *Zembîlfiroş*, too, is noted to have widespread versions in the repertoire of *dengbêjs* and wandering dervishes, who are masters of voice and word.²⁴

While the provided research snippets do not explicitly state that formally recognized *dengbêjs* were active and documented under that specific title in Afrin before 2010, the confirmed oral transmission of lengthy and complex epics and stories, such as *Mem û Zîn* and the various cherished love tales ⁷, strongly suggests the presence of skilled and respected storytellers within the community. These individuals, whether formally known as

dengbêjs or simply as knowledgeable elders and accomplished narrators like Zarifa Hanan ⁷, fulfilled the vital role of preserving and disseminating this oral literature. The demanding nature of memorizing and artfully performing these extensive narratives necessitates

dedicated practitioners.

The health and vitality of the storytelling tradition in Afrin before 2010, embodied by figures akin to *dengbêjs* or other respected community story-keepers, was therefore critical for the continuity of its unique cultural heritage. These storytellers were not mere entertainers; they were living archives, educators, and custodians of collective memory and cultural values. The erosion of such traditions due to displacement, conflict, and the breakdown of communal life, as has occurred in Afrin post-2010, represents a profound and potentially irreversible cultural loss. The dispersal of the community directly threatens this intimate mode of transmission, severing the links between storytellers and their audiences, and between generations. This makes the record of Afrin's narrative traditions as they existed before these disruptions all the more vital for any future efforts at cultural revitalization and for the historical memory of the Afrini people.

V. Conclusion: The Enduring Legacy and Preservation of Afrin's Stories

The folkloric landscape of Afrin before 2010 was rich and multifaceted, deeply interwoven with its Kurdish cultural identity and sustained primarily through vibrant oral traditions. The narratives cherished by its people served as more than entertainment; they were repositories of history, mirrors of societal values, and expressions of collective aspirations and anxieties.

A. Synthesis of Afrin's Key Narrative Traditions

The core of Afrin's folkloric repertoire, as illuminated by available evidence, included foundational pan-Kurdish narratives alongside stories that, while part of a broader Kurdish heritage, held specific resonance and were actively recounted within the local community. The Kurdish national epic, *Mem û Zîn*, stood as a testament to profound love and a symbolic articulation of Kurdish identity and struggle.⁷ The legend of Kawa the Blacksmith, inextricably linked to the celebration of Newroz, embodied the spirit of resistance against tyranny and the promise of renewal, a narrative of immense cultural importance in Afrin.¹¹ The enigmatic figure of Şamaran, the serpent queen, likely also found a place in Afrini lore, connecting the region to ancient myths of wisdom, sacrifice, and feminine power shared across Kurdistan.¹¹

A distinct feature of Afrin's remembered narrative heritage was the prominence of specific tragic love stories. Tales such as *Siyabend û Xecê*, *Zembîlîfiroş* (with its unique emphasis on moral virtue), and *Ferhad û Şîrîn* were actively transmitted, reflecting a cultural engagement with themes of passionate devotion, societal obstacles, the cruelty of fate, and the enduring power of love even in the face of death.⁷ These stories, alongside a wider array of shorter folk tales likely encompassing humorous anecdotes, moral fables, and stories reinforcing social customs like hospitality²⁵, painted a vivid picture of Afrin's cultural concerns and imaginative

world. Dominant themes emerging from this corpus include the profoundness of tragic love, the imperative of resistance against oppression, the valorization of moral virtue and integrity, the deep significance of cultural identity, and an overarching spirit of resilience.

B. The Cultural Importance and Future of Afrin's Folklore

These stories, epics, and legends were not static relics of the past but dynamic cultural assets that played a crucial role in shaping and reflecting the identity of the Afrini Kurdish community. They served as vehicles for transmitting historical consciousness, social norms, ethical codes, and a shared understanding of the world. Through the act of storytelling, particularly by respected elders and skilled narrators, cultural memory was kept alive, values were inculcated in younger generations, and a sense of communal belonging was reinforced. The events that unfolded in Afrin after 2010, particularly the conflict and large-scale displacement of its indigenous population, have posed a severe threat to these invaluable oral traditions.² The disruption of communities, the loss of elders who were the primary repositories of this knowledge, and the challenges of maintaining cultural practices in exile or under altered demographic conditions all contribute to the potential erosion and loss of this narrative heritage.

The narrative heritage of Afrin, as it existed before 2010, represents a unique regional articulation of Kurdish culture. Its detailed study offers insights that extend beyond Afrin itself, illuminating broader processes of cultural adaptation, the remarkable resilience of oral traditions, and the complex ways in which identity is constructed and maintained within the larger Kurdish context. The specific constellation of stories that were popular in Afrin, and the local interpretations and emotional weight attached to them, can reveal much about the historical consciousness, the socio-cultural priorities, and the distinct worldview of this particular community. For instance, the marked preference for certain tragic love stories⁷ may speak to a shared historical experience of struggle and loss, transformed into art that fosters empathy and collective identity. Analyzing Afrin's pre-2010 folklore thus provides a window into the unique cultural identity of this region, demonstrating how a community utilizes shared cultural resources (such as pan-Kurdish myths like Kawa) and develops local preferences (like the specific quartet of love stories) to articulate its own sense of self and its place in the world. This makes the documentation, preservation, and continued study of Afrin's specific folkloric traditions a crucial endeavor, not only for the Afrini people themselves but also for a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of Kurdish culture as a whole. Ongoing efforts to document and revitalize this heritage are therefore of immense importance, ensuring that these enduring echoes from Afrin's past continue to resonate for future generations.

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