Hyper-Local Cultural Practices in Afrin, Syria: A Portrait Before 2010

I. Introduction: The Cultural Landscape of Pre-2010 Afrin

A. Defining Afrin: Geography and Historical Context

The Afrin District (Arabic: منطقة عفرين, *manṭiqat Afrīn*; Kurdish: Herêma Efrînê), located in the Aleppo Governorate of northern Syria, has historically served as a distinct geographical and cultural area, with the city of Afrin as its administrative and principal urban center.[1]
Geographically, the district's area is noted as 1,840.85 km² [1], while broader regional estimates, encompassing 366 villages, suggest approximately 3,850 km², constituting about 2% of Syria's total land area.[2]
Topographically, Afrin is characterized by its mountainous terrain, an extension of the Taurus Mountains, with average elevations ranging from 700 to 1269 meters above sea level. The highest peak in the region is known as Jabal Al-Kabir (The Great Mountain).[2] This mountainous character has historically influenced settlement patterns, agricultural practices, and the region's relative accessibility. The prevailing climate is Mediterranean, featuring hot summers that may experience some rainfall, and mild winters. Such climatic conditions have fostered a verdant landscape, particularly renowned for its extensive olive groves.[3] The olive tree is not merely an agricultural commodity but a profound symbol of the region's identity and heritage.[4]
Historically, the area has been widely recognized as "Kurd Dagh" (Kurdish: Çiyayê Kurmênc; literally, Mountain of the Kurds), a name that underscores its deep-rooted Kurdish demographic and cultural identity.[6] During the French Mandate period in Syria, this historical appellation was reflected in the administrative organization when a new district was formed under the name Kurd Dagh.[6] The mountainous and somewhat geographically distinct nature of Afrin, compared to more accessible plains, may have contributed to a degree of cultural insularity. Such geographical settings often limit continuous, large-scale external cultural influx, thereby fostering the preservation and distinct evolution of local dialects, traditions, and social structures. The specific climatic conditions [3] and the mountainous landscape [2] would have necessitated local adaptations, both material and non-material, contributing to Afrin's unique cultural signature.
Furthermore, Afrin's administrative past, including its historical ties to Kilis (now part of Turkey) during the Ottoman era and its subsequent reconstitution as a distinct Syrian district under the French Mandate [6], points to a complex layering of external governance structures interacting with indigenous social systems. Political and administrative boundaries,

particularly those redrawn during colonial periods or as a result of geopolitical shifts, often intersect pre-existing cultural and economic networks. The transition from being part of the Ottoman Kilis province to a French Mandate district, and subsequently integrated into modern Syria, would have introduced new legal frameworks, economic orientations, and modes of state-society interaction, all of which would have uniquely shaped local governance norms and community relations with state authorities over generations.

B. Scope and Significance of Documenting Pre-2010 Cultural Practices

The period prior to 2010 is of critical importance for understanding the cultural fabric of Afrin. This timeframe precedes the Syrian Civil War, which began in 2011, and the subsequent Turkish military interventions, notably "Operation Olive Branch" in 2018. These events triggered profound and often violent disruptions, including extensive demographic shifts, the mass displacement of the indigenous Kurdish population, and significant damage to, or deliberate alteration of, the region's cultural heritage.[1] This report focuses on documenting the "hyper-local" cultural practices of Afrin, seeking to capture the specific customs, traditions, and expressions unique to this region, rather than offering generalized descriptions of Syrian or broader Kurdish culture.

The documentation of Afrin's pre-2010 cultural life serves as an invaluable historical record. It establishes a baseline against which the impacts of subsequent conflicts, displacement, and socio-cultural transformations can be assessed. Such an endeavor is vital for preserving cultural memory, particularly for the displaced communities whose connection to their ancestral heritage has been forcibly severed. It is also crucial for academic scholarship seeking to understand regional cultural diversity and for any potential future efforts aimed at cultural revitalization, reconciliation, or the assertion of heritage claims.

The urgency of this research is underscored by extensive reports detailing "demographic engineering," "forced displacement," the "destruction of cultural heritage sites," and the suppression of Kurdish cultural expressions in Afrin following the events of 2011 and, more acutely, after 2018.[8] Practices such as the resettlement of non-native populations, the banning of the Newroz festival, and the alteration of Kurdish street names and educational curricula have been documented.[9] These actions indicate a systematic effort to transform the region's demographic and cultural landscape. Consequently, ethnographic and historical accounts from the pre-2010 period are exceptionally precious, as they capture a cultural reality that has since been deliberately and often violently altered, offering a crucial counter-narrative and a testament to the region's authentic heritage.

The "hyper-local" focus of this report necessitates a nuanced approach. Afrin, while overwhelmingly Kurdish, was not a monolithic entity. Its unique cultural amalgam was shaped by the distinct traditions of its majority Kurdish population as well as the contributions of its minority communities, including Yazidis, Alevis (some with specific origins from Dersim [1]), and smaller Arab and Turkmen groups.[8] The interactions between these groups, or their distinct adaptations within the shared geographical and historical space of Afrin, contributed to a rich tapestry of cultural practices that may not be found in other Kurdish regions or even

elsewhere in Syria. Understanding this intricate blend is key to appreciating the true depth of Afrin's pre-2010 cultural landscape.

II. The People of Afrin: Demographic and Social Fabric Before 2010

A. Ethnic Composition: A Kurdish Heartland with Diverse Communities

Prior to 2010, the Afrin District was characterized by a profound Kurdish ethnic majority, shaping its core cultural identity. Multiple sources describe the region as "homogeneously Kurdish" [1] and notably the "least Arabized" of Syria's three distinctively Kurdish regions in the north, the others being Jazira and Kobani.[8] Estimates from Kurdish sources suggest that at least 97% of Afrin's pre-war population was Kurdish.[8] This demographic dominance is also acknowledged by Turkish sources, which estimate the Kurdish population to have been between 80-90%.[7] The official Syrian census conducted in 2004 recorded a population of 172,095 for the Afrin District.[1] A later figure, pertaining to the broader Afrin region which includes 366 villages, indicated a population of 523,258 as of December 31, 2010, explicitly noting a Kurdish majority.[2]

While overwhelmingly Kurdish, Afrin was also home to established minority communities. A small Arab minority, forming part of the roughly 3% non-Kurdish population (which also included Turkmens), resided in the region, often concentrated in specific villages such as Maryamin. Historical records identify notable Arab clans, including al-Bubanna, al-Omeyrat, and al-Bobtoush, some of whom had migrated from the nearby Manbij district over time.[8] A small Turkmen population also contributed to the demographic tapestry of Afrin.[815] mentions Turkmen presence in some Afrin villages, typically in small numbers, as part of a broader historical pattern of Turkmen settlement across various parts of Syria.

A significant socio-political factor shaping the context of ethnic identity in Afrin was the Syrian state's official policy of not recognizing Kurds as a distinct ethnic group in national censuses or public life.[8] This policy had far-reaching implications for Kurdish civil liberties, cultural rights, and political participation.

The pronounced Kurdish demographic homogeneity in Afrin before 2010, coupled with its relative insulation from the intensive Ba'athist Arabization campaigns that significantly affected other Syrian Kurdish regions like Jazira and Kobani [8], likely fostered a robust and relatively undiluted local Kurdish cultural environment. This relative freedom from sustained, state-driven demographic and cultural alteration would have allowed indigenous Kurdish cultural practices—including language dialects, folklore, social norms, and festivals—to be transmitted across generations with greater continuity and integrity. This makes the pursuit of "hyper-local" Afrini Kurdish cultural expressions particularly pertinent, as these would have had more space and autonomy to develop distinct characteristics compared to regions subjected to more direct assimilationist pressures.

The Syrian government's denial of official Kurdish ethnicity and associated cultural rights [8] likely pushed Kurdish cultural expression and identity maintenance into informal, community-based, and familial spheres. This situation could have paradoxically strengthened hyper-local variations. In the absence of state-supported Kurdish language education or cultural institutions, the onus of cultural preservation fell heavily on families, local communities, and traditional social structures. Without a centralized, state-approved "Kurdish curriculum" or cultural framework, local interpretations and expressions of Kurdish identity could flourish, leading to a rich mosaic of hyper-local cultural nuances.

The documented presence of specific Arab clans with known origins, such as those from Manbij [8], points to historical migration patterns and inter-regional connections. These interactions, however limited in scope, could have introduced subtle cultural exchanges, linguistic influences, or unique socio-economic relationships into the predominantly Kurdish milieu of certain Afrin localities. Even if primarily residing in distinct villages like Maryamin, generations of coexistence could plausibly lead to some degree of cultural osmosis, whether in agricultural techniques, culinary practices, shared local vocabulary, or inter-community relations, further contributing to the unique "hyper-local" cultural fabric of the Afrin region.

Table 1: Pre-2010 Demographic Overview of Afrin District

Demographic Aspect	Data	Source(s)
Total Population (2004)	172,095 (Afrin District)	[1]
Total Population (2010)	523,258 (Afrin Region, 366 villages)	[2]
Estimated Kurdish %	~97% (Kurdish sources, pre-war); 80-90% (Turkish sources)	[7]
Arab Minority Presence	Yes, clans (al-Bubanna, al-Omeyrat, al-Bobtoush), e.g., Maryamin village	[8]
Turkmen Minority Presence	Yes, small numbers	[8]
Yazidi Population Estimate	20,000-30,000 (pre-2018, indicative of historical scale)	[14]
Alevi Settlement	Yes, e.g., Maabatli (Dersim Alevis)	[1]
Christian Population	~200-250 families / ~1,200 individuals (pre-2018, indicative)	[14]
State Recognition of Kurds	Not recognized as a distinct ethnic group by Syrian state	[8]

B. Religious Minorities: Yazidi and Alevi Presence and Historical Roots in Afrin

Afrin's cultural landscape before 2010 was significantly enriched by the presence of distinct religious minorities, most notably Yazidis and Alevis, whose unique beliefs and practices contributed to the region's hyper-local character.

Yazidis: The Yazidi community in Afrin was substantial and possessed deep historical roots in the region.[1] Estimates prior to 2018 suggest a Yazidi population ranging from 20,000 to 30,000 individuals [14], indicating a significant demographic presence in the pre-2010 period. Yazidis inhabited numerous villages across the Afrin district, including well-known settlements such as Basufan, Baadi, Barad, Kimar, Iska, Shadere, Ghazzawiya, Burj Abdalo, and Ain Dara.[14] Historical accounts dating back to 1599, by the British traveller William Biddulph, mention a people called "Coords" residing in the mountains between Antioch and Aleppo who "Worship the Devil".[18] This description is widely interpreted by scholars as an early European reference to the Yazidi Kurds, who have often been inaccurately and pejoratively labeled due to misunderstandings of their complex faith. Furthermore, historical records indicate that some Yazidis were landowners in the Afrin region [1], attesting to their long-standing settlement and socio-economic integration. An Arabic source from 2021 refers to approximately 10,050 Yazidi houses in Afrin and lists several Yazidi villages, including Arsh Qibar, Qatma, Sinka, Baflioun, Qastal Ali Jendo, and Ghazawiya, underscoring their widespread presence.[19] The Yazidi religion itself is a syncretic faith, incorporating elements from ancient Iranian religions, Zoroastrianism, as well as influences from Judaism, Nestorian Christianity, and Islam.[16]

Alevis: A distinct Kurdish Alevi community also formed an integral part of Afrin's religious mosaic. Notably, a significant Alevi presence was established in the Maabatli area of Afrin District by Kurdish Alevis who sought refuge there after fleeing the Dersim Massacre in Turkey during the 1930s.[1] These Alevis predominantly speak the Kurmanji dialect of Kurdish and have maintained a sense of cultural and communal connection with other Kurdish groups in the region.[14] The enduring Alevi presence is also evidenced by local toponymy; the existence of places bearing names that include "Dede" or "Baba"—honorific titles for Alevi spiritual leaders and indicative of sacred sites or ancestral burial grounds—further attests to Alevi settlement and the establishment of their religious geography within Afrin.[14]

Christians: Alongside these communities, a smaller Christian population, estimated at around 200 to 250 families (approximately 1,200 individuals) before the Turkish invasion of 2018, also resided in Afrin.[14] While their presence is noted, specific details regarding their unique hyper-local cultural or religious practices in the pre-2010 period are not extensively covered in the available research materials.

The Alevi community in Afrin, particularly those with origins in Dersim who settled in areas like Maabatli [1], likely preserved and adapted distinct Dersim Alevi traditions. These practices could have encompassed specific *nefesler* (spiritual hymns), unique interpretations of Alevi philosophy, reverence for particular saints or *dedes*, and local pilgrimage customs centered around sites marked by "Dede" or "Baba".[14] The transplantation of these traditions from Dersim and their subsequent evolution within the Afrin context would constitute a key hyper-local cultural feature. Displaced communities often exhibit strong adherence to their ancestral traditions as a means of maintaining identity in a new environment. Over

generations, these practices would interact with the new local context, leading to uniquely Afrini Alevi expressions.

Similarly, the concentration of Yazidis in numerous specific villages across Afrin [14] and their historical role as landowners [1] point to a deeply embedded community whose religious and cultural life was intrinsically linked to Afrin's local geography, agricultural cycles, and social networks. This long-term presence would naturally foster unique local interpretations of the Yazidi faith and its associated practices. A long-established presence in a particular territory allows for the sacralization of the landscape, the development of local shrines (even if Lalish in Iraq is considered the holiest global site for Yazidis), and the incorporation of local environmental elements into religious narratives and rituals. Yazidi traditions, which often emphasize nature and specific holy sites, would thus have evolved distinctly Afrini characteristics, passed down through generations within these village communities.

The description of pre-2018 Afrin as an "oasis of religious freedom" and being inhabited by a "tolerant Muslim population" [14], if this environment was indeed characteristic of the pre-2010 period, was likely a crucial factor enabling these diverse religious groups to maintain their distinct practices. Such an atmosphere of tolerance or, at a minimum, non-interference from the majority population and local authorities, is essential for the survival and open expression of minority faiths. This environment would have been critical for the "hyper-local" flourishing of Yazidi and Alevi customs specifically within Afrin, allowing their unique traditions to become ingrained in the region's cultural identity.

C. Socio-Political Context: Local Governance, Tribal Structures, and State Influence

The socio-political landscape of Afrin before 2010 was a complex interplay of Syrian state policies, traditional local power structures, and the region's unique administrative history. Understanding this context is crucial for appreciating how hyper-local cultural practices were shaped, expressed, and transmitted.

Ba'athist State Policies: Under the Ba'athist regimes of Hafez al-Assad and later Bashar al-Assad, Syrian Kurds, including those in Afrin, faced systematic discrimination and policies aimed at suppressing their ethnic and cultural identity. The state officially denied Kurds recognition as a distinct ethnic group.[8] Kurds encountered restrictions in property ownership, career opportunities, and access to public services; marriages between Syrian citizens and non-citizens (often affecting Kurds deemed 'foreigners' or 'unregistered') were not officially recognized.[20] Despite these overarching policies, Afrin was reportedly "spared the [most intensive] Arabization campaigns" that significantly impacted other Kurdish regions in Syria, such as Jazira and Kobani, where demographic changes and cultural assimilation efforts were more pronounced.[8] This relative insulation, however, did not equate to full cultural autonomy or freedom from state pressure.

Local Power Structures: Traditional Kurdish society historically featured tribal structures led by influential figures such as sheikhs or aghas, whose authority within their communities was often considerable.[20] An Arabic source, referencing historical shifts in Afrin, notes a transition from tribal systems to a form of feudalism where Aghas (large landowners) gained

prominence during the 19th and early 20th centuries. However, the power of these feudal Aghas reportedly began to decline after the early 1960s.[2] Alongside these figures, Sufi sheikhs also wielded significant socio-political influence in Afrin. These religious leaders often acted as mediators in local conflicts, facilitated economic networks, and played a key role in connecting rural communities with urban centers like Aleppo.[21]

Administrative History: Afrin's administrative trajectory also shaped its local context. During the Ottoman period, the area was administratively linked to Kilis. Under the French Mandate, a new district named Kurd Dagh was established, formalizing the region's distinct identity.[6] This history of shifting administrative affiliations influenced local governance and interactions with broader state powers.

The decline of Agha power from the 1960s onwards [2], combined with Afrin's relative shielding from the most direct forms of state-sponsored Arabization [8], may have created a unique local dynamic. This environment could have allowed other forms of local leadership, particularly religious figures like Sufi sheikhs [21], to either retain or enhance their significance in community organization, cultural life, and dispute resolution. Sufi *zawiyas*, as detailed in sources like [21] and [21], provided social cohesion, economic networking, and a form of local moral authority, potentially filling roles that might have previously been dominated by Aghas or a more interventionist state. This dynamic would have been instrumental in shaping hyper-local socio-cultural norms.

The Syrian state's overarching denial of Kurdish ethnic rights and its suppression of overt Kurdish cultural expression [8] likely contributed to the development of a "hidden transcript" of cultural practices. In such environments, traditions are often maintained more discreetly within trusted community circles and familial networks. This can lead to a strengthening of hyper-local forms of culture as a means of distinction, identity preservation, and subtle resistance against homogenizing state pressures. The emphasis on a specific "Kurdish Islam" within Sufi circles in Afrin [21] could be interpreted as one manifestation of this phenomenon. Furthermore, the historical administrative connections to Kilis [6] before the modern Syrian-Turkish border was solidified might imply enduring, albeit perhaps diminished, shared cultural traits or historical ties with Kurdish communities in what is now Turkey, particularly in the Kilis region. Borders, often imposed artificially on pre-existing cultural landscapes, can disrupt but not always entirely erase older connections. It is plausible that certain hyper-local cultural practices were once shared across this now-divided area, diverging more significantly only after the establishment of the international border and the implementation of differing state policies by Syria and Turkey.

III. Pillars of Afrin Society: Kinship, Community, and Social Organization (Pre-2010)

A. Traditional Family Life: Structures, Roles, and Intergenerational Bonds

The family unit served as the cornerstone of social life and cultural transmission in Afrin before 2010. Traditional Kurdish society, in general, placed strong emphasis on the extended family, which was often intricately linked with broader tribal structures.[20] A patriarchal system was prevalent, privileging males within the family and anchoring them in supportive, often extensive, tribal and kin-based networks.[22]

This patriarchal ethos is echoed in an Arabic source [23], which discusses the concept of "fatherhood" (الأبوة - *al-ubuwwa*) as being deeply rooted in kinship and blood ties. This concept traditionally demanded profound respect and obedience from a son towards his father, with the father's authority often seen as a microcosm of the tribal Sheikh's authority over the larger community. The source notes that this tradition of filial piety and respect for paternal authority persisted ("until today," referring to the article's pre-2010 context).[23]

The economic basis of family life in Afrin had undergone significant transformation over time. While traditional Kurdish life often involved nomadic pastoralism centered around sheep and goat herding [20], by the period before 2010, many communities in Afrin had transitioned to a more settled, agricultural lifestyle. Animal husbandry, particularly of goats and sheep, became more limited, often confined to fulfilling the immediate needs of the family unit rather than sustaining large, migratory herds. This shift was largely due to the loss of traditional grazing pastures and the long-term establishment of permanent villages.[2] This adaptation to a sedentary, village-based agricultural existence would have had considerable implications for family structures, daily routines, and the nature of local cultural practices. Instead of traditions tied to nomadic migrations, cultural expressions would likely have become more rooted in the specific locality, the agricultural calendar of the village, and the social dynamics of settled community life.

The persistence of patriarchal structures and the strong cultural value placed on respect for paternal and elder authority [22], even amidst processes of urbanization and some degree of detribalization noted in broader Kurdish contexts [20], suggests that these traditional social hierarchies likely continued to influence decision-making processes, inheritance patterns, and cultural norms within families and the wider community in pre-2010 Afrin. While the overt power of tribal aghas may have diminished in some respects since the mid-20th century [2], the underlying principles of respect for seniority and kin-based authority would have remained significant in shaping social behavior and upholding traditional cultural values at the family and local community level.

B. Kinship Systems: Patrilineal Descent and Extended Family Networks

Kinship systems in Afrin, as in much of Kurdish society, were predominantly based on patrilineal descent, where lineage, inheritance, and social identity are primarily traced through male ancestral lines.[1] This system profoundly influenced not only family matters but also broader social organization, including the understanding of identity, connection to place, interpersonal interactions, and even local "politicking" or community-level decision-making.[22] The strength and nature of an extended family's ties to a larger tribal grouping could vary depending on their specific way of life and degree of sedentarization.[20]

In a socio-political context where the Syrian state did not officially recognize Kurdish ethnicity and often restricted Kurdish cultural expression [8], these patrilineal kinship structures and the broader networks of extended family and tribe likely assumed an even more critical role. They provided essential frameworks for social cohesion, mutual support, economic cooperation, and the preservation of Kurdish identity and cultural heritage in the absence of state sanction or support. Patrilineal systems offer clear lines of affiliation and descent, which are vital for maintaining group boundaries, transmitting cultural knowledge orally across generations, and organizing collective action when formal state institutions are perceived as unrepresentative or hostile.

The social fabric of Afrin was further textured by the interplay between these traditional kinship structures and the religious networks fostered by Sufi orders, such as the Rifa'i *zawiya* led by Sheikh Mahmud al-Husayni.[21] These Sufi communities often created bonds that could reinforce, extend, or sometimes even offer an alternative to purely tribal or kin-based affiliations. For instance, Sheikh Mahmud's claimed genealogical descent from Ali, a key aspect of his religious legitimacy [21], introduced a form of mystical lineage that attracted followers from diverse backgrounds, including migrants to Aleppo who maintained ties with his Afrin-based *zawiya*. These religious networks facilitated economic activities, such as the commercialization of olive oil, and provided a platform for social interaction and mutual support that could transcend strict tribal lines within Afrin. This created a unique, layered social structure where religious allegiance and participation in Sufi brotherhoods could forge powerful solidarities, complementing or, in certain contexts, perhaps even taking precedence over purely kinship-based ties in shaping an individual's social and economic opportunities and obligations.

C. Community Cohesion: Local Leadership (Aghas, Sheikhs) and the Role of Sufi Zawiyas

The maintenance of social order and the organization of collective life, including cultural activities, in pre-2010 Afrin were influenced by various forms of local leadership. Traditional Kurdish society historically recognized the authority of tribal leaders, often known as sheikhs or aghas, whose influence could be considerable within their respective communities.[20] As noted earlier, the Afrin region experienced a historical phase where a feudal-like system dominated by powerful Aghas (large landowners) emerged, although the influence of these figures reportedly declined from the early 1960s onwards.[2]

In this evolving landscape of local power, Sufi communities and their spiritual leaders (sheikhs) played a particularly significant role in fostering community cohesion and shaping the socio-cultural dynamics of Afrin. The *zawiya* (Sufi lodge or center) of Sheikh Mahmud al-Husayni, a prominent Rifa'i Sufi leader in Afrin, serves as a well-documented example of such an institution.[21] These *zawiyas* were not merely places of religious worship; they functioned as multifaceted community hubs. Sheikh Mahmud's *zawiya*, for instance, was instrumental in mediating local conflicts, providing a form of indigenous dispute resolution. It also organized economic networks, particularly in the vital olive oil trade, connecting rural producers in Afrin with markets in urban centers like Aleppo. Furthermore, these Sufi centers

were crucial sites for the production and affirmation of a distinct local identity, with practices and discourses that framed Sufism as an integral part of "Kurdish Islam," thereby intertwining religious devotion with ethnic consciousness.[21]

The role of Sufi sheikhs as mediators and as figures perceived to be defenders of Kurdish cultural autonomy [21] suggests that they occupied an important socio-political niche. In a context where formal state institutions might have been viewed with suspicion, or as distant and unrepresentative by segments of the local Kurdish population (particularly given the Ba'athist state's policies of non-recognition and cultural suppression [8]), these religious leaders offered an alternative source of moral authority and social guidance. By mediating disputes according to local customs and religious principles, and by championing local cultural expressions, Sufi sheikhs provided a form of governance and cultural stewardship that was deeply rooted in the community, thereby reinforcing hyper-local norms and identities.

The connections facilitated by these Sufi networks, particularly between rural Afrin and the urban environment of Aleppo [21], indicate that Afrin, while possessing a distinct cultural character, was not entirely isolated. This urban-rural linkage was vital for economic life, allowing Afrin's agricultural products, especially olive oil, to reach broader markets. It also had cultural implications, as Afrini migrants in Aleppo often maintained strong ties to their home region's religious and social institutions, like Sheikh Mahmud's *zawiya*. This dynamic flow of goods, people, and cultural affiliations ensured that Afrin remained connected to wider regional networks while simultaneously cultivating its unique local traditions. The *zawiyas* thus acted as crucial bridges, sustaining both the economic viability and the cultural identity of the Afrin community and its diaspora.

IV. Tapestry of Faith: Religious Practices and Observances in Pre-2010 Afrin

The religious landscape of Afrin before 2010 was a rich mosaic, predominantly Sunni Muslim but with significant and deeply rooted Yazidi and Alevi communities. This diversity, coupled with a reported atmosphere of tolerance, allowed for the flourishing of distinct hyper-local religious practices and observances.

A. Sunni Islamic Traditions in Daily Life and Community

The majority of Kurds, both globally and likely in Afrin, adhere to Sunni Islam, predominantly following the Shafi'i school of jurisprudence, though adherents of the Hanafi school and various Sufi orders, such as the Naqshbandi and Qadiriyya, are also present within Kurdish Sunni communities.[16] Before the significant disruptions post-2018, Afrin was described as being inhabited by a "tolerant Muslim population".[14] This environment of tolerance is a crucial backdrop for understanding the persistence and expression of minority faiths in the region.

Within this Sunni context, Sufism played a vibrant and visible role in Afrin's community life. Sufi communities, such as the Rifa'i *zawiya* (Sufi lodge) led by Sheikh Mahmud al-Husayni, were active and influential.[21] These *zawiyas* served as centers for regular religious gatherings, most notably the weekly *hadra*. The *hadra* was a communal ritual involving *dhikr* (remembrance of

God, often through chanting and rhythmic movements) and sometimes displays of *karamat* (miraculous deeds or spiritual graces attributed to the sheikh or his advanced disciples), which served to affirm the sheikh's spiritual authority and provide a powerful collective religious experience.[21]

A particularly salient aspect of Sufism in Afrin was its framing as "Kurdish Islam".[21] This articulation suggests a conscious effort to intertwine religious practice with ethnic identity, creating a localized expression of Islam that resonated deeply with the predominantly Kurdish population. This was not merely a private faith but one that had public manifestations and contributed to the social and even political fabric of the community, with Sufi sheikhs often acting as local leaders and mediators.[21] The characterization of Afrin's pre-2018 Muslim population as "tolerant" [14], if accurately reflecting the pre-2010 ethos, would have been a key factor enabling the coexistence of diverse religious expressions. This tolerance might have stemmed from a shared Kurdish ethnicity that sometimes superseded religious divisions, or it could indicate a local Islamic tradition that was inherently more pluralistic. Such an environment would have been essential for the distinct Yazidi and Alevi communities to maintain and practice their unique traditions openly over many generations, as suggested by their long-standing presence in the region.[1] The active Sufi *zawiyas*, with their public rituals and specific articulation of a "Kurdish Islam," represented a dynamic, hyper-local manifestation of Islamic practice, deeply embedded in Afrin's social, economic, and cultural life.

B. Yazidi Faith in Afrin: Sacred Sites, Rituals, and Community Identity

The Yazidi community constituted a significant and ancient religious minority in Afrin before 2010, with a presence estimated to be between 20,000 and 30,000 individuals prior to 2018.[14] They inhabited numerous villages throughout the district, including Basufan, Baadi, Barad, Kimar, Iska, Shadere, Ghazzawiya, Burj Abdalo, and Ain Dara.[14] An Arabic source from 2021 further corroborates this, mentioning approximately 10,050 Yazidi households in Afrin and listing several Yazidi villages.[19] The Yazidi faith is a unique monotheistic religion with ancient roots, incorporating elements from pre-Zoroastrian Iranian traditions, as well as influences from Judaism, Nestorian Christianity, and Islam, all woven into a distinct theological framework.[16] Their cultural and religious practices are predominantly observed in the Kurmanji dialect of Kurdish.[24]

Yazidi religious life is marked by a rich calendar of festivals and observances, many of which are deeply connected to nature, the cosmos, and their unique cosmology centered around Tawûsê Melek (the Peacock Angel). Key festivals include:

- **Sersal (Charshama Sersalê / Çarşema Sor – Red Wednesday):** This is the Yazidi New Year, celebrated on the first Wednesday of April (Nissan in the Eastern calendar).[25] It commemorates the creation of the universe and the descent of Tawûsê Melek to Earth. Traditions include the coloring of eggs (red, blue, green, yellow) symbolizing Tawûsê Melek's rainbow colors and the renewal of life; decorating homes with red flowers (often anemones); and community gatherings. Historically, in some Yazidi areas, it was a time

when plowing the land was avoided, as April was considered "the bride of the year".[25]

- **Parade of the Sanjaqs:** This event, often part of the New Year celebrations, involves the ceremonial parading of *sanjaqs*—bronze or iron effigies of peacocks representing Tawûsê Melek and the Seven Great Angels—through Yazidi villages. This ritual serves to bless the communities and reinforce their connection to the divine.[25]
- **Cejna Cemayiyê (Feast of the Assembly):** This major seven-day festival, typically from October 6th to 13th, is an annual pilgrimage to the sacred valley of Lalish in Iraqi Kurdistan, the holiest shrine for Yazidis, in honor of Sheikh Adi ibn Musafir, the great reformer of the Yazidi faith.[25] While the central pilgrimage is to Lalish, elements of this festival or related communal gatherings might have been observed locally in Afrin. Important rituals during Cejna Cemayiyê include spiritual washing (*morkirin*), sacred greetings (*selakirin*), evening dances by religious dignitaries, and the ritual sacrifice of a bull on the fifth day.[25]
- **Rojiyên Êzî (Fasts of Ezid) and Cejna Êzî (Feast of Ezid):** These observances occur in December. *Rojiyên Êzî* consists of three compulsory days of fasting (Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday) from dawn till sunset, honoring God (one of whose names is Êzî).[25] The fasting period culminates in *Cejna Êzî*, celebrated on the Friday following the fasts, which typically falls before the winter solstice. This feast marks a turning point in the solar cycle, symbolizing the rebirth of the Sun as days begin to lengthen.[25]
- **Batzmî (or Eida Piralli):** This seven-day festival, particularly observed by the Chelkiyya group of Yazidis but with wider community participation, culminates on the last Wednesday of December. It involves fasting, the lighting of seven wicks (*chera*), animal sacrifice (sheep), the preparation of special foods like *Sawgs* (sun-shaped bread) and *Simata Piralli* (a special soup), the making of *basmbar* (sacred red and white threads), and an all-night vigil (*Shav Baratk*) filled with communal activities, storytelling, and music.[25]

A Yazidi woman from Afrin mentioned a "Festival Without Blood in February" [27], a detail not found in the general Yazidi festival calendars, suggesting a unique local observance or emphasis in Afrin. This highlights the importance of capturing such hyper-local specificities. The same source also indicated that Yazidis in Afrin, prior to the establishment of the Autonomous Administration, felt fear in openly sharing their festivals due to the prevailing regime.[27] This suggests that many Yazidi cultural practices in Afrin before 2010, while diligently maintained, may have been conducted with a degree of discretion, primarily within their own villages and communities. Such conditions could foster highly localized traditions, passed down orally and less visible to outsiders.

The existence of numerous Yazidi villages in Afrin [14] and the tradition of parading Sanjaqs [25] imply a network of sacred geography and inter-village connections specific to the Afrin Yazidi community. These local sites and the routes linking them would have formed a sacred map for Afrin's Yazidis, fostering a unique regional religious identity and practice, even with Lalish serving as the ultimate spiritual center.

C. Alevi Customs in Afrin: Cem Ceremonies, Festivals, and Social Life

The Alevi community in Afrin, particularly those with historical roots in the Dersim region of Turkey who settled in areas like Maabatli following the Dersim Massacre of the 1930s [1], represented another vital thread in the region's diverse religious tapestry. These Kurdish Alevis predominantly speak the Kurmanji dialect and have historically maintained a sense of connection with other Kurdish communities in Afrin.[14] Alevism itself is a syncretic Islamic tradition, distinct from mainstream Sunni and Shia Islam, whose adherents revere Ali and the Twelve Imams, and follow the mystical teachings of figures like Haji Bektash Veli. Alevi practice is characterized by a lack of rigid dogmas, with teachings often transmitted orally by spiritual leaders known as *dedes*.[29] The presence of localities in Afrin with names incorporating "Dede" or "Baba" (honorifics for Alevi spiritual figures and often indicating sacred sites or burial places of revered elders) further points to established Alevi settlement and their sacred geography within the region.[14]
Key Alevi practices and festivals that would have characterized their life in pre-2010 Afrin include:

- **Cem Ceremony:** The *Cem* is the central collective worship service for Alevis, held in a *cemevi* (assembly house). It is a multifaceted ritual that features spiritual music played on the *bağlama* (a stringed instrument), the singing of *nefesler* (spiritual hymns and poems), communal ritual dances known as *Samāh* (performed by both men and women), and *sohbet* (spiritual discourse and conversation led by the *dede*). The *Cem* often involves the performance of the "Twelve Services" (*On İki Hizmet*) by designated members of the community, each service having a symbolic role in the ceremony.[29]
- **Festivals:**
    - **Mourning of Muharram (Mâtem Orucu / Rojîya Şînê):** Alevis observe a fast for twelve days during the Islamic month of Muharram, commemorating the martyrdom of Imam Husayn at Karbala. This period of mourning and fasting culminates in the festival of Ashura, when a special dish called *aşure* (a sweet porridge made from grains, fruits, and nuts) is prepared and shared.[29]
    - **Hıdırellez:** Celebrated around May 6th, Hıdırellez honors the meeting of Khidr (Hızır), a mystical figure believed to aid those in distress on land, and Elijah (Ilyas), who is said to aid those at sea. It marks the arrival of spring and involves various folk practices such as lighting fires and jumping over them for purification, making wishes (often tied to rose bushes), visiting graves or sacred sites, and communal feasting.[29]
    - **Khidr Fast (Hızır Orucu):** A three-day fast is also observed in mid-February in honor of Khidr.[29]
- **Müsahiplik (Spiritual Brotherhood/Sisterhood):** This is a significant social and spiritual institution in Alevism, involving a lifelong covenant relationship forged between two individuals (often couples). *Müsahipler* pledge mutual support for each other and their families in all aspects of life, creating bonds considered as strong as, or even stronger than, blood kinship.[29]

The Alevi community in Afrin, particularly those originating from Dersim [1], likely maintained distinct Dersim Alevi traditions. These could have included specific regional *nefesler*,

particular emphases in their theological understanding, reverence for certain saints or *dedes* whose lineage was tied to Dersim, and local pilgrimage customs centered around sites in Afrin that became sacred to them.[14] The communal and participatory nature of Alevi rituals like the Cem ceremony [29], with its integration of music, dance, and shared meals, would have been a powerful factor in maintaining community cohesion and cultural identity for Alevis in Afrin, especially as a minority group. Furthermore, the practice of *Müsahiplik* [29], if prevalent among Afrin Alevis, would have created strong, non-kin-based social support networks that could transcend village or even tribal lines, contributing to a unique form of social organization and resilience within their community.

D. Notes on Inter-Faith Coexistence

The cultural richness of pre-2010 Afrin was not solely defined by the practices of individual religious groups in isolation, but also by the nature of their coexistence. Sources suggest that before the widespread conflict and subsequent occupation, Afrin was characterized by a degree of religious tolerance. It was described as an "oasis of religious freedom" and inhabited by a "tolerant Muslim population" prior to March 2018.[14] If this characterization accurately reflects the social climate of the pre-2010 period, it would have been a crucial enabling factor for the persistence and open practice of distinct Yazidi and Alevi hyper-local cultural and religious traditions. This tolerance may have been rooted in various factors, including a shared Kurdish ethnicity that, in many local contexts, could transcend or mitigate religious differences, or perhaps a local Islamic tradition in Afrin that was inherently more accustomed to and accepting of religious pluralism. Such an environment is essential for minority faiths to maintain their unique traditions over generations, allowing them to become deeply ingrained as "hyper-local" features of the regional identity.

Furthermore, the Yazidi practice of sometimes adopting or participating in the holidays of surrounding peoples, noted as a general characteristic which could be for reasons of respect or as a protective mechanism [25], hints at the potential for cultural exchange and syncretism in Afrin. It is plausible that Yazidi observances might have subtly incorporated local Afrini elements over time, or that Yazidis participated in some general communal festivities, thereby blurring sharp cultural boundaries in certain contexts and contributing to a shared, albeit diverse, local culture. This dynamic interaction, or respectful coexistence, between Sunni Muslims, Yazidis, Alevis, and other smaller groups would have been a defining feature of Afrin's unique social tapestry.

Table 2: Major Festivals and Religious Observances in Pre-2010 Afrin

Festival/Observance	Associated Community	Primary Significance/Timing	Key Pre-2010 Practices in Afrin (Examples & Inferences)	Source(s)
Newroz	Kurdish (General), Yazidi, Alevi	New Year, Spring Equinox (March 21st), Rebirth,	Bonfires, traditional attire, communal meals	[32]

		Freedom	in nature, folk songs, Govend/Dabke dances, theatrical performances. Celebrations possibly adapted due to state policies.	
Ser Sal / Çarşema Sor (Yazidi New Year)	Yazidi	Creation, Tawûsê Melek's arrival (First Wednesday of April)	Coloring eggs, home decoration with red flowers, cemetery visits with offerings, possible local variations.	[25]
Parade of the Sanjaqs	Yazidi	Blessing communities (Part of New Year)	Ceremonial parading of peacock effigies through Yazidi villages.	[25]
Cejna Cemayiyê (Feast of the Assembly)	Yazidi	Pilgrimage to Lalish, honoring Sheikh Adi (Oct 6-13)	Local observances may have echoed elements like spiritual washing, communal meals, bull sacrifice symbolism.	[25]
Rojiyên Êzî & Cejna Êzî (Fasts & Feast of Ezid)	Yazidi	Honoring God, rebirth of the Sun (3-day fast in Dec, feast on Friday before winter solstice)	Compulsory fasting, communal feasting afterwards.	[25]
Batzmî (Eida Piralli)	Yazidi (esp. Chelkiyya)	Honoring Tawûsê Melek (7-day festival, late Dec)	Fasting, lighting 7 wicks, sheep sacrifice, special foods (*Sawgs*, *Simata Piralli*), *Shav Baratk* vigil.	[25]
"Festival Without	Yazidi (Afrin	Unknown	Specific local	[27]

Blood"	specific mention)	(February)	observance in Afrin.	
Muharram Mâtemi (Mourning of Muharram)	Alevi	Commemorating Imam Husayn (12-day fast, month of Muharram)	Fasting, culminating in Ashura with *aşure* dish, Cem ceremonies.	[29]
Hıdırellez	Alevi	Meeting of Khidr & Ilyas, Spring festival (around May 6th)	Jumping over fires, making wishes, visiting sacred sites, communal meals.	[29]
Hızır Orucu (Khidr Fast)	Alevi	Honoring Khidr (3-day fast, mid-February)	Fasting, abstaining from comforts.	[29]
Cem Ceremony	Alevi	Collective worship, spiritual gathering (Regularly held)	Music (*bağlama*), singing (*nefesler*), *Samāh* dance, *sohbet*, Twelve Services.	[21]
Weekly Hadra	Sunni (Sufi)	Remembrance of God, communal ritual (Weekly)	*Dhikr*, displays of *karamat*, fostering "Kurdish Islam".	[21]

V. Cycles of Celebration: Festivals and Rites of Passage (Pre-2010)

The rhythm of life in Afrin before 2010 was marked by a vibrant calendar of communal celebrations, seasonal agricultural observances, and significant rites of passage. These events were crucial for reinforcing social bonds, transmitting cultural values, and expressing collective identity.

A. Newroz: The Kurdish New Year in Afrin – Local Customs and Significance

Newroz, traditionally celebrated on or around March 21st to mark the spring equinox, stands as the most significant festival for Kurds globally, including those in Afrin. It symbolizes rebirth, renewal, freedom, peace, and serves as a powerful affirmation of Kurdish national and cultural identity.[20] For Kurdish communities, Newroz is often imbued with both cultural and political significance, representing resistance and the enduring spirit of a people.[32]

Common customs associated with Newroz celebrations include the lighting of bonfires, often on hilltops or mountains, a practice deeply symbolic of chasing away darkness and welcoming light and warmth.[32] Participants frequently don traditional Kurdish attire, with men and women

showcasing vibrant and often elaborately decorated clothing.[33] The festivities typically involve large communal gatherings in natural settings, such as fields or mountainsides, where families and communities share meals, often including barbecued foods. Folk songs, traditional dances like the Dabke or Govend, and sometimes theatrical performances are integral parts of the celebration, creating a lively and participatory atmosphere.[33]

In Afrin, the lighting of Newroz fires was a known practice before 2010.[33] However, the socio-political context under Ba'athist rule, which often suppressed overt expressions of Kurdish nationalism, likely influenced the nature and scale of these celebrations. It is noted that many Kurds in Syria celebrated Newroz in secret or in carefully managed ways to avoid state reprisal.[35] From the mid-to-late 1990s onwards, Newroz increasingly became a central vehicle for mobilizing Kurdish communities and reinforcing their ethno-political identity, even in the face of restrictions.[36] Reports from post-2018 Afrin indicate that large, open Newroz celebrations in villages like Maydanki and Burj Abdalo, complete with Kurdish flags and dances, were held "for the first time in eight years," suggesting that in the years immediately preceding this (which would include some pre-2010 years), such overt and large-scale celebrations might have been significantly restricted or forced into more clandestine forms.[12]

Given this context, Newroz celebrations in pre-2010 Afrin likely possessed a multifaceted character. They were, on one hand, a joyous public-facing celebration of spring and renewal, and on the other, a more privately cherished, community-focused assertion of Kurdish identity and heritage. The degree of openness and the explicitness of political symbolism would have varied depending on the prevailing political climate of any given year and the specific locality within Afrin. Regardless of the level of public display, the core elements of bonfires, communal feasting, and traditional cultural performances would have persisted. These gatherings in natural settings, accompanied by shared food and artistic expressions [33], served as crucial venues for the intergenerational transmission of hyper-local folklore, music, and dance traditions, reinforcing local social bonds and preserving cultural memory within the Afrin community.

B. Agricultural Rhythms: Olive Harvest Festivals and Other Seasonal Celebrations

Afrin's identity and economy were, and to a large extent remain, inextricably linked to agriculture, with the olive tree holding a place of paramount importance. The olive tree was described as central to the livelihoods, traditional Kurdish practices, and the very ecosystem of Afrin.[4] Olive oil farming is a practice with deep historical roots in the region [5], and the widespread cultivation of olives made Afrin renowned for this product. The subsequent destruction of olive trees after 2018 was widely perceived not just as an economic blow but as an assault on the local identity and heritage.[8]

While the provided research snippets do not contain detailed, specific accounts of pre-2010 olive harvest festivals *in Afrin*, the centrality of this crop strongly suggests that such celebrations would have been a significant feature of local cultural life. General descriptions of olive harvest traditions in other parts of the Levant, such as Palestine, offer potential

parallels. These accounts highlight the olive harvest as a time for family reunions, community cooperation, reconciliation, and a profound reconnection to the land and ancestral heritage. Activities often include communal labor in the groves, the singing of traditional folk songs, and the preparation and sharing of festive meals cooked in the fields.[38] It is highly probable that similar customs, adapted to the specific cultural context of Afrin, were practiced.

Drawing further parallels from the broader Syrian historical context, ancient agricultural societies in the region observed Sowing and Harvest festivals. These were tied to the agricultural calendar and involved rituals, offerings, singing, and dancing intended to honor natural forces, ensure fertility, and foster social solidarity.[20] While direct continuity is difficult to establish from the available data, it is plausible that such ancient regional traditions left residual influences or found analogous expressions in the seasonal celebrations of pre-2010 Afrin, melded over centuries with Kurdish and other local customs.

The olive harvest season in Afrin, therefore, would almost certainly have been accompanied by significant hyper-local cultural practices. These would likely have included communal efforts in picking and pressing olives, specific rituals or expressions of gratitude for the bounty, feasting that incorporated freshly pressed oil and other local produce, and the performance of music, songs, and stories related to the olive and its significance. These traditions, passed down through generations, would have reflected local beliefs, social structures, and the community's deep relationship with their agrarian landscape.

C. Life's Milestones: Birth, Marriage, and Funeral Rites and Traditions

Rites of passage—ceremonies and customs marking significant life transitions such as birth, marriage, and death—are fundamental cultural expressions that reflect a community's worldview, social structure, values, and beliefs. While detailed ethnographic accounts specific to all pre-2010 rites of passage in Afrin are not exhaustively covered in the provided materials, available information and broader cultural contexts allow for some understanding.

Weddings in pre-2010 Afrin were clearly significant communal events, serving as vibrant showcases for hyper-local artistic traditions and social customs. The performance of Dengbêjs (traditional Kurdish singer-poets and storytellers) was a feature of Kurdish weddings and social gatherings [36], where they would recite epic tales, love stories, and historical narratives, often accompanied by music. Similarly, Govend (also known as Halay or Dilan), the collective Kurdish folk dance, was an indispensable part of wedding celebrations, bringing the community together in joyful, rhythmic expression.[42] A visual record from [58] explicitly shows a traditional wedding dance taking place in the village of Mirkan in Afrin, illustrating this practice. Material culture also played a role; the "Aroos kilim" (bride's kilim) was a significant and symbolic part of a bride's trousseau in Afrin. This special flat-weave rug was traditionally woven by the bride's family using natural dyes and was adorned with colorful tufts and symbols representing a bountiful harvest and wishes for a healthy future family. The Aroos kilim also served a practical function, used by the bride to demarcate her living quarters within the new marital home, providing privacy and serving as a tangible reminder of her natal family and heritage.[44]

While specific details regarding birth and funeral rites in pre-2010 Afrin are less prominent in

the provided snippets, the general importance of kinship, extended family networks [20], and strong community bonds in Kurdish society suggests that these life events would also have been marked by significant communal participation and well-established traditional customs. These customs would likely have varied based on the specific village, lineage, and religious affiliation of the families involved (Sunni, Yazidi, or Alevi). For instance, Yazidi and Alevi communities have distinct theological perspectives and ritual practices concerning death and birth which would have been observed. General anthropological sources on rites of passage [45] and some ethnographic accounts from other, albeit different, cultural contexts [46] describe various rituals such as naming ceremonies, post-natal practices for mother and child, specific mourning periods, burial procedures, and commemorative feasts. It is reasonable to infer that analogous, locally adapted customs were integral to the social and spiritual life of Afrin's diverse communities.

D. Village-Specific Gatherings and Commemorations

Beyond the major calendrical festivals and rites of passage, the cultural life of pre-2010 Afrin was also animated by smaller-scale, often village-specific or community-specific gatherings and commemorations. These regular events played a vital role in maintaining social cohesion, reinforcing religious and ethnic identity, and transmitting local traditions.

Sufi *zawiyas* in Afrin, such as the one led by Sheikh Mahmud al-Husayni, were centers for weekly *hadra* rituals.[21] These gatherings, involving communal *dhikr* (remembrance of God) and often displays of *karamat* (spiritual feats), were not confined to a single location but drew participants from the town of Afrin and surrounding rural areas, fostering a sense of shared Sufi identity that was explicitly framed as "Kurdish Islam".[21] Such regular, predictable gatherings solidify group identity and provide a consistent space for spiritual practice and social interaction.

For the Yazidi community, the "Parade of the Sanjaqs" was a significant ritual that involved taking sacred peacock effigies through many Yazidi villages.[25] This practice, by its very nature, created and reinforced connections between different Yazidi settlements within Afrin, weaving a network of shared religious experience and reaffirming their collective devotion to Tawûsê Melek and the Seven Angels.

Pilgrimages, known as *ziyarat*, to local saints' tombs or other sacred sites in the countryside were another important aspect of religious and social life for various communities in Afrin.[21] These sites, often associated with Sufi saints, Yazidi holy figures, or Alevi *dedes* and *babas*, would have constituted a distinct sacred geography for the region. Such pilgrimages, which could include *mawlid* (celebration of a saint's birth/death anniversary) events, attracted devotees not only from within Afrin but sometimes from further afield, including urban centers like Aleppo.[21] These journeys and the communal rituals performed at these sites fostered inter-village connections, reinforced shared local narratives and hagiographies, and provided opportunities for social interaction and economic exchange. These local pilgrimage traditions would have been deeply embedded in the hyper-local cultural and spiritual landscape of Afrin, distinct from major, internationally recognized pilgrimage destinations.

Additionally, more secular public occasions, particularly weddings, served as important

venues for communal gatherings where rural people performed traditional games, music, dances, and epic songs (*Al-Hekaye*).[51] These events provided platforms for the expression and enjoyment of local artistic forms, contributing to the vibrancy of village life and the intergenerational transmission of cultural heritage.

VI. Expressions of Identity: Art, Folklore, and Material Culture (Pre-2010)

The cultural identity of Afrin's inhabitants before 2010 found rich expression through a variety of artistic forms, oral traditions, and distinctive material culture. These elements served not only as entertainment or utilitarian objects but also as powerful vehicles for transmitting history, values, and a sense of collective belonging.

A. The Voice of Afrin: Dengbêj Storytellers, Epic Songs, and Oral Folklore

Oral traditions held a place of paramount importance in Afrin, particularly given the context where state support for Kurdish language and culture was largely absent, and literacy in Kurdish may have been limited for older generations. Central to this oral culture were the *Dengbêjs*, the revered Kurdish singer-poets and storytellers.[36] *Dengbêjs* are more than mere entertainers; they are custodians of cultural memory, performing at weddings, social gatherings, and communal events. Their repertoire typically includes epic tales of heroism and conflict, poignant love stories, historical accounts, and personal narratives of significant experiences, all rendered through a distinctive style of sung narrative.[41] Kurdish songs and epics, often transmitted by *Dengbêjs*, are considered vital repositories of history, cultural philosophy, and communal wisdom.[52] While *Dengbêjî* is often performed unaccompanied, in some Kurdish regions, particularly those with significant Yazidi or Alevi populations, instrumental accompaniment is also found.[53]

In Afrin specifically, epic songs, known locally by the Arabic term *Al-Hekaye* (the story or tale), were a significant part of the folk arts. These were often performed by a lead singer with responses or accompaniment from a chorus, and their themes could range from love and heroism to social commentary and historical events.[51] Examples of such epic songs from the Afrin region include "Al-Jamil Horo" and "Hassan Nazih".[51] The existence of such named local epics points to a specific Afrini repertoire within the broader Kurdish oral tradition.

Beyond epic songs, the broader spectrum of Kurdish folklore, including proverbs, folk tales, myths, and legends, would have been vibrant in pre-2010 Afrin. Kurdish culture is rich in such oral literature.[5454], for instance, provides examples of Kurdish proverbs and mentions the tradition of epic folk tales like *Mem û Zîn*, as well as local adaptations of stories from other cultures, such as the Layla and Majnun narrative, which was reinterpreted within a Kurdish cultural framework. This dynamic process of adapting broader regional narratives and imbuing them with local color, linguistic nuances, and specific cultural references is a hallmark of a living oral tradition. Such adaptations would have contributed to a unique local folkloric

tapestry in Afrin, making its oral heritage distinct even when dealing with themes common to the wider Middle Eastern cultural sphere. This active preservation and transmission of local histories, values, and narratives through performance was crucial for maintaining a sense of shared identity and cultural continuity in pre-2010 Afrin.

B. Rhythms of the Land: Traditional Music, Instruments (Tembûr, Daf, Zirne), and Govend Dance Styles

Music and dance were integral to the social and celebratory life of Afrin before 2010, serving as powerful expressions of cultural identity and fostering community cohesion. While traditional Kurdish music often emphasizes vocal performance, with instruments sometimes playing a secondary role to enhance the lyrical message [52], instrumental traditions also held a significant place. The nomadic pastoralist heritage of some Kurdish groups has historically influenced melodies and songs related to pastoral life, the seasons, and the natural landscape.[52]

Traditional Kurdish musical instruments that would have been familiar in Afrin include the *tembûr* (a long-necked fretted string instrument, often considered sacred in Yarsanism and Alevi traditions, and frequently played in conjunction with the *daf*) [37], the *daf* (a large frame drum), and the *zirne* (a loud, oboe-like wind instrument, almost invariably paired with the *dehol*, a large double-headed drum, to provide music for outdoor celebrations and dances). The presence of skilled *tembûr* players from Afrin, such as Mihemed Bilko, who is depicted playing the instrument [57], indicates a living tradition of instrumental music specific to the region. This instrumental music, likely with its own local repertoires, melodies, and playing styles, would have existed alongside, and sometimes in support of, the vocal-centric Dengbêj tradition.

Folk dance, particularly the Govend (also known as Halay or Dilan in various Kurdish dialects), was a central feature of communal gatherings, especially weddings, festivals like Newroz, and other celebrations. Govend is typically a collective dance performed in lines or circles, with dancers holding hands, shoulders, or little fingers, moving to intricate rhythmic patterns.[42] It is more than just a recreational activity; it often symbolizes unity, community spirit, and, in certain contexts, cultural resistance and affirmation.[42] Visual documentation confirms the practice of traditional wedding dances in Afrin villages, such as in Mirkan.[58] While Govend is a widespread Kurdish dance form, it is also highly regionalized, with different localities and even individual villages often developing their own distinct variations in steps, formations, rhythms, and accompanying music.[43] These hyper-local styles of Govend, performed at weddings and other festive occasions in Afrin, would have been a primary means of communal participation and cultural expression, passed down through observation and practice.

Theatrical expression also found a place in Afrin's cultural life. Amateur theatrical troupes began forming in the region from the 1970s onwards, initially focusing on social themes relevant to the community. These troupes later evolved to perform written texts, contributing to local artistic development and providing another avenue for cultural expression and social commentary.[51]

C. Woven Narratives: Afrin Kilims (including the *Aroos Kilim*), Textile Arts, and Natural Dyes

Textile arts, particularly the weaving of kilims (flat-weave rugs), represented a significant form of material culture and artistic expression in Afrin before 2010. These textiles were not merely utilitarian objects but were often imbued with rich symbolic meaning, reflecting the local environment, community narratives, and important life events.

Afrin textiles were reportedly famous for their bright, natural colors, with women traditionally weaving colorful kilims from the wool of their own herds. These rugs were described as being rich with symbols that could denote the seasons in which they were made or tell stories related to the community and the land they inhabited.[44] This connection to local resources (wool) and the use of natural dyes underscores a weaving tradition that was deeply integrated with the local environment and traditional knowledge systems.

A particularly distinctive example of Afrin's textile heritage is the **Aroos kilim**, or bride's kilim.[44] This was a special kilim woven by the bride's family as part of her trousseau. It was characterized by the use of natural dyes and was often adorned with colorful tufts or tassels. These embellishments were symbolic, representing wishes for a bountiful harvest, prosperity, and a healthy, flourishing family for the new bride. The Aroos kilim also served a specific social and spatial function: the bride would take it to her new marital home, where it was often used to demarcate her living quarters, providing a degree of privacy from her in-laws and serving as a tangible link to her natal family and heritage.[44] The Aroos kilim is a prime example of a hyper-local cultural practice where textile art, intricate symbolism, and ritual function related to a key life passage (marriage) are deeply intertwined.

While general kilim motifs common across Anatolia and other Kurdish regions often include symbols for fertility (such as the *Elibelinde* or hands-on-hips motif, the *Bereket* or fertility motif, and the Ram's Horn), protection (such as the Eye or Evil Eye motif, Hook, Wolf's Mouth, Scorpion, and Dragon symbols, or Amulets), marriage, and life (such as the Tree of Life) [59], the specific combinations, interpretations, and prevalence of these symbols in Afrin kilims would have constituted a local visual language. The use of natural dyes derived from local plants and minerals, and the incorporation of symbols reflecting local flora, fauna, events, or beliefs, would have grounded Afrin's textile tradition firmly in its specific geographical and cultural context, making each kilim a unique hyper-local document and a carrier of communal knowledge and aesthetic values.

Table 3: Key Traditional Crafts and Material Culture in Pre-2010 Afrin

Craft Type	Specific Afrin Manifestation	Key Materials Used	Cultural Significance/Use	Source(s)
Kilim Weaving	General Afrin Kilims; Aroos Kilim (Bride's Kilim)	Local wool, natural dyes, colorful tufts	Daily use, dowry, storytelling, symbolism (seasons, community,	[44]

			harvest, family, privacy for bride)	
Olive Oil / Laurel Soap Making	Afrin-style Laurel Soap (صابون الغار - *Sabun al-Ghar*)	Olive oil, bay leaf oil, local essential oils (e.g., jasmine, lavender, rose, tulip)	Daily hygiene, local intangible heritage, economic activity	[44]

D. Traditional Attire: Everyday and Festive Clothing for Men and Women

Traditional clothing serves as a visible and potent marker of cultural identity, group affiliation, and social status. In pre-2010 Afrin, as in other Kurdish regions, distinctive forms of attire were worn for both everyday life and festive occasions, reflecting local customs, available materials, and aesthetic preferences.

General descriptions of Kurdish traditional clothing indicate regional variations.[63] For men, attire typically consists of wide, baggy trousers (*shalwar* or *şepik*) that taper at the ankles, a shirt (*kiras*), often a vest (*êlek*) or jacket (*çoxe*) worn over it, and a wide sash (*piştên* or *şûtik*) tied around the waist. Headwear is also significant, commonly a turban (*cemedanî* or *leşkerî*) wrapped around a skullcap (*kum* or *kolah*).[64] Specific styles noted in broader Kurdish contexts include the Northern Kurdish style (often tighter fitting), the Central Kurdish *Şal û Şapik* (a distinctive suit), and the Southern Kurdish style, which became widely recognized and was often worn by Peshmerga.[63]

For women, traditional Kurdish dress is renowned for its vibrant colors and often elaborate designs. It typically includes a long dress or gown (*kiras* or *fistan*), sometimes worn with an over-jacket or vest (*xiftan* or *sermil*). Colorful belts (*kember*) and often matching trousers worn underneath the dress are also common features.[64] An example from [84] describes a traditional Kurdish dress ensemble (referred to as kaftan/abaya, kras fistan) suitable for special occasions like Newroz or weddings, emphasizing quality fabrics and adjustable inner belts for fit.

Traditional attire was particularly prominent during festivals such as Newroz, when community members would proudly wear their finest cultural garments as an expression of identity and celebration.[33] In the context of Afrin, where Kurdish identity faced pressures from state policies of non-recognition [8], the act of wearing traditional Kurdish clothing, especially during significant cultural events, would have carried additional weight. It would have been a powerful statement of cultural pride, communal solidarity, and the persistence of heritage.

While these general outlines of Kurdish clothing provide a framework, the specific styles, fabric choices (likely influenced by local climate and availability), color palettes, patterns of embroidery or embellishment, and the particular ways garments were worn and accessorized in pre-2010 Afrin for both daily life and festive occasions would constitute a hyper-local cultural expression. The available research snippets, however, do not provide this level of detailed ethnographic description specifically for Afrin's traditional attire from that period. It is reasonable to infer that, like other aspects of culture, Afrin's clothing styles would have

possessed unique characteristics that distinguished them subtly or significantly from those of other Kurdish regions, reflecting local tastes, historical influences, and adaptations to the specific environment of "Kurd Dagh."

E. Local Craftsmanship: Olive Oil Soap Production and Other Artisanal Practices

Local craftsmanship in pre-2010 Afrin was intrinsically linked to the region's natural resources, traditional skills passed down through generations, and the economic activities of its communities. Among these, the production of soap from locally grown olives was a particularly notable and culturally significant artisanal practice.

Afrin was renowned for its olive oil soap, often referred to as laurel soap (صابون الغار - *sabun al-ghar* in Arabic, as it typically includes laurel oil). The primary ingredients were olive oil, a cornerstone of Afrin's agriculture, and bay laurel oil, supplemented by various local essential oils such as jasmine, lavender, rose, and tulip, which added fragrance and other beneficial properties.[44] The making of this type of soap is described as part of the intangible cultural heritage of both Afrin and the nearby city of Aleppo, indicating its deep historical and cultural roots in the wider region.[62] Visual documentation from [62] shows the traditional process of cutting and stamping blocks of laurel soap in Afrin, confirming local production. This craft was not merely a utilitarian activity but a reflection of the region's identity, deeply connected to its most iconic agricultural product, the olive. The specific recipes, including the precise proportions of olive oil to laurel oil, the selection and integration of local essential oils, and the traditional techniques employed in the saponification and curing processes, would represent unique local knowledge. These methods, passed down through families or artisanal workshops, would constitute a key aspect of Afrin's hyper-local intangible heritage.

While the production of olive oil soap is well-attested for Afrin, detailed information on other specific artisanal practices in the pre-2010 period, such as distinctive forms of pottery or woodcrafts, is less prominent in the provided research materials. General information on pottery traditions in Syria [65] and broader discussions of woodcrafts or agricultural tool making [67] exist, but they do not offer specific insights into hyper-local craft traditions that may have been unique to Afrin. However, given Afrin's agrarian base and village life, it is plausible that local forms of pottery for domestic use, woodworking for tools and household items, and other small-scale crafts existed, utilizing locally available materials and reflecting traditional designs and techniques.

VII. Flavours of Afrin: Culinary Traditions and Hospitality (Pre-2010)

The culinary traditions of Afrin before 2010 were deeply rooted in its agrarian landscape, characterized by the bounty of its fertile lands and the centrality of the olive tree. These traditions encompassed staple foods, distinctive local dishes, methods of food preservation, and deeply ingrained customs of hospitality.

A. Staple Foods and Agrarian Diet: Olives, Burghul, Figs, and Local

Produce

The diet in pre-2010 Afrin was predominantly shaped by its local agricultural output. Olive trees were central not only to the economy but also to the daily diet, with olive oil being a primary cooking fat and a key ingredient in many dishes.[4] The region's fertile lands yielded a variety of seeds, fruits, and vegetables, which formed the basis of everyday meals.[4]
Grains, particularly wheat in the form of burghul (cracked wheat), were likely a staple. Burghul is a common and versatile ingredient in Levantine and broader Middle Eastern cuisine, often used in salads (like tabbouleh), pilafs, and as a component of stuffed vegetables or kibbeh-like preparations.[72] Historical accounts of Turkish communities in similar agrarian contexts also highlight wheat and barley as main vegetable products, processed into items like bread [73], a practice likely shared across the region.
While figs are not explicitly detailed as a staple for Afrin in the provided snippets, they are a common and historically significant fruit in Mediterranean agriculture and would very likely have been cultivated and consumed in Afrin, both fresh and dried. The specific varieties of olives, fruits (such as grapes, pomegranates, and figs), nuts [44], and vegetables cultivated in Afrin's unique microclimate, along with the traditional ways they were prepared and incorporated into daily meals, would have distinguished its cuisine. This reliance on fresh, seasonal, and locally sourced produce would define the hyper-local character of Afrin's food culture.

B. Signature Dishes and Festive Cuisine of the Region

Detailed recipes for specific signature dishes or festive foods unique to pre-2010 Afrin are not extensively provided in the research materials.[74] However, based on the known staple ingredients, one can infer the types of dishes that would have characterized Afrin's cuisine. Signature dishes would likely have heavily featured olive oil, fresh vegetables, legumes, and grains like burghul. These might include various types of *meze* (appetizers), stews (*yahni*), dishes based on stuffed vegetables (*dolma* or *mahshi*), and preparations involving local herbs and spices that might not be commonly used elsewhere.
Festive cuisine, prepared for occasions such as Newroz, weddings, or religious holidays, would typically involve more elaborate versions of everyday dishes, often incorporating less frequently consumed items like meat (lamb or chicken). Large communal meals, where dishes are shared among extended family and community members, would be a hallmark of such celebrations. The specific recipes, seasoning combinations, and methods of preparation for these everyday and festive dishes would constitute a vital part of Afrin's intangible cultural heritage.

C. Food Preservation Techniques: Drying, Pickling, and the Centrality of Olive Oil

Given Afrin's agricultural productivity and the seasonality of its produce, traditional food preservation techniques would have been essential household skills before 2010, ensuring year-round sustenance. Olive oil itself is a key product of preservation (transforming

perishable olives into a stable oil) and also serves as a preserving medium for other foods.[71] Common methods likely employed in Afrin, similar to other Mediterranean and Middle Eastern regions, would include:

- **Sun-drying:** Fruits like figs, grapes (for raisins), apricots, and tomatoes, as well as various vegetables and herbs, would have been sun-dried to preserve them for use during leaner months.
- **Pickling:** Vegetables such as olives themselves, cucumbers, turnips, peppers, and wild edibles would have been pickled in brine or vinegar, often with the addition of local herbs and garlic for flavor.
- **Preservation in Olive Oil:** Items like certain cheeses (if dairy was locally processed), roasted or dried vegetables (e.g., peppers, eggplants), and herbs were likely preserved by being submerged in olive oil.
- **Making Pastes and Jams:** Fruits would be processed into jams, molasses (e.g., grape molasses or *dibs*), or fruit leathers (*qamar al-din* from apricots, for example). Tomatoes would be processed into paste.
- **Grain Storage:** Grains like wheat and burghul would be stored in dry conditions for long-term use.

General food preservation methods documented in wider contexts include salting (especially for meat, as in "kak et" or dried meat in historical Anatolian cultures [79]), fermentation (for dairy products like yogurt or certain vegetables), and smoking.[80] While not specifically detailed for Afrin, some of these could also have been practiced locally. The specific techniques, recipes for pickling solutions, choices of herbs for flavoring, or preferred items for preservation in Afrin would represent unique local knowledge, passed down primarily through families, particularly among women.

D. The Art of Welcome: Hospitality Customs in Afrin Homes

Hospitality is a cornerstone of Kurdish and broader Middle Eastern cultures, and it is highly probable that the people of Afrin upheld these traditions with distinct local nuances before 2010. While the provided snippets offer general insights into Kurdish hospitality [82] rather than specific pre-2010 Afrin ethnography, they paint a picture of warmth, generosity, and elaborate social etiquette that would likely have been mirrored in Afrin homes.

Key elements of Kurdish hospitality include:

- **Warm Greeting:** Guests are received with enthusiasm. Customs like handshaking or cheek-to-cheek kisses are common.[82]
- **Shoe Removal:** It is customary for guests to remove their shoes upon entering a home.[82]
- **Immediate Refreshments:** Guests are immediately offered food and drink. This typically includes water, often a sweet beverage like orange soda or juice, and tea. Snacks such as *kulecha* (date and walnut-filled cookies), mixed nuts, seeds, and fresh fruit are also commonly presented.[82] Even in informal settings, such as a border checkpoint manned by Kurdish groups, offering tea and biscuits to visitors was noted as a gesture of welcome.[83]

- **Abundant Meals:** If a visit coincides with mealtime, or if guests are specifically invited for a meal, the hospitality becomes even more elaborate. Food is served in abundance, often family-style, with numerous dishes laid out. There is a cultural expectation that guests should eat heartily, and hosts will frequently encourage them to have more.[82]
- **The Centrality of Tea:** Tea is an indispensable element of hospitality, served frequently and especially after meals. Its preparation and serving often follow specific rituals, using small, handle-less glasses (*istikan* or *piala*).[82]
- **Extended Farewells:** Departures are not abrupt. Conversations often continue as guests prepare to leave, and hosts typically escort them to the door or even further, expressing good wishes and gratitude for the visit.[82]

While these are general Kurdish customs, the hyper-local expression of hospitality in Afrin might have involved specific local snacks or drinks unique to the region, variations in the formal seating arrangements in guest rooms, or particular phrases of welcome and farewell in the local Kurmanji dialect. The underlying principle, however, would have been one of generosity and ensuring the guest felt honored and comfortable. Broader regional traditions, such as those detailed for Jordanian Bedouins [72]—involving immediate coffee, prioritizing the guest even if an enemy, and the host's duty to serve without complaint—reflect a deep cultural emphasis on the sacred duties of hospitality that would have resonated in Afrin as well.

VIII. Conclusion: Afrin's Pre-2010 Cultural Heritage – A Legacy Remembered

A. Summary of Key Hyper-Local Cultural Characteristics

The cultural landscape of Afrin, Syria, prior to 2010 was a rich and distinctive tapestry woven from the threads of its predominantly Kurdish population, the enduring traditions of its Yazidi and Alevi minorities, and the influences of its unique geography and history. Its mountainous terrain and fertile valleys, particularly renowned for olive cultivation, shaped not only its economy but also many of its cultural practices, from agricultural rhythms and cuisine to the symbolism embedded in its crafts. The region's relative insulation from the most intensive state-led Arabization campaigns that affected other Kurdish areas in Syria allowed for a greater continuity of indigenous cultural expressions.

Hyper-local characteristics manifested in various domains:

- **Social and Religious Life:** The strong presence of Yazidi communities with their unique festivals (like Ser Sal, Cejna Cemayiyê, and possibly locally specific observances such as the "Festival Without Blood") and sacred sites, alongside the Alevi communities (many with roots in Dersim) practicing their distinct Cem ceremonies and observing festivals like Hıdırellez and Muharram fasts, contributed significantly to Afrin's unique religious pluralism. Sufi *zawiyas* played a crucial role in the Sunni Muslim community, not just as spiritual centers but also as hubs for social organization, economic networking, and the articulation of a "Kurdish Islam."

- **Festivals and Celebrations:** Newroz, the Kurdish New Year, was a cornerstone of cultural identity, celebrated with bonfires, traditional attire, and communal gatherings, albeit sometimes under political constraints. The olive harvest, central to Afrin's existence, undoubtedly spurred its own set of local customs and celebrations, reflecting the agricultural heart of the region.
- **Arts and Material Culture:** The oral traditions of *Dengbêj* storytellers and specific epic songs like *Al-Hekaye* preserved local histories and narratives. Traditional music, featuring instruments like the *tembûr*, and communal Govend dances were vibrant expressions of communal identity. Textile arts, particularly the weaving of kilims with natural dyes and local symbolism, reached a high point in practices like the creation of the *Aroos kilim* (bride's kilim), a unique Afrini tradition laden with meaning. The production of olive oil and laurel soap, using local ingredients and traditional methods, was another hallmark of Afrin's artisanal heritage.
- **Cuisine and Hospitality:** Afrin's cuisine was based on its abundant local produce, with olives and olive oil at its core, supplemented by grains like burghul, and a variety of fruits and vegetables. Traditional food preservation techniques ensured year-round sustenance. Deeply ingrained customs of hospitality emphasized generosity and communal sharing.

This unique blend, where broader Kurdish cultural elements were interwoven with the specific traditions of its diverse religious communities and shaped by local ecological and historical factors, defined the hyper-local cultural identity of Afrin.

B. The Importance of Preserving this Heritage

The documentation of Afrin's pre-2010 cultural practices is not merely an academic endeavor but an act of profound cultural and historical significance. The events that have unfolded in Syria since 2010, and particularly the military operations and subsequent occupation and administration changes in Afrin from 2018 onwards, have led to devastating consequences for its original inhabitants and their cultural heritage. Widespread displacement, systematic demographic change, the destruction of religious and cultural sites, the suppression of Kurdish language and cultural expressions, and the disruption of traditional livelihoods have irrevocably altered the region's social and cultural landscape.[8]

In this context, preserving the memory and detailed knowledge of Afrin's pre-2010 hyper-local cultural practices becomes critically important for several reasons:

1. **Historical Record:** It provides an accurate account of a way of life that has been severely undermined and, in some aspects, deliberately targeted for erasure. This record stands as a testament against attempts to rewrite or homogenize the region's history.
2. **Cultural Memory and Identity:** For the displaced communities of Afrin, such documentation serves as a vital link to their ancestral heritage, a source of identity, and a repository of cultural memory that can be passed to future generations.
3. **Understanding Impact and Loss:** A clear understanding of the "before" state allows for a more accurate assessment of the extent of cultural loss and the impact of conflict and displacement on a specific community.

4. **Potential for Future Revitalization:** Should conditions ever permit, detailed knowledge of past cultural practices could inform efforts towards cultural revitalization and the reclaiming of heritage by the people of Afrin.
5. **Academic and Human Rights Value:** For scholars, this information contributes to a richer understanding of cultural diversity in the Middle East. For human rights advocates and cultural preservationists, it provides evidence of a living culture under threat and underscores the importance of protecting cultural heritage in conflict zones.

The hyper-local cultural practices of Afrin before 2010 represent a unique and valuable part of Syrian and Kurdish heritage. While this report has endeavored to reconstruct a picture based on available information, the profound disruptions mean that much knowledge may already be fragmented or lost. Continued efforts to gather oral histories and document surviving traditions from Afrin's diaspora are essential to ensure that this rich cultural legacy is not forgotten.

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