

# The Enduring Voices: Famous Dengbêj of Afrin and Their Cultural Legacy

## I. Introduction: The Resonant Echoes of Çiyayê Kurmênc

The Afrin region, known historically and culturally to its Kurdish inhabitants as Çiyayê Kurmênc (Kurdish Mountain), stands as a territory of profound significance in Rojava (Western Kurdistan)/Syria.<sup>1</sup> Described as the most densely Kurdish-populated part of Syria, it is celebrated for its verdant olive groves and fertile lands.<sup>6</sup> The very name "Afrin" is evocative, linked in Kurdish etymology to concepts of creation and life-giving water, reflecting the region's natural abundance.<sup>5</sup> Its history is deep, with a continuous Kurdish presence stretching back for centuries. Historical records refer to the area as "Kurdîka" during the Greek and Roman periods, "Dschebel al-Akrad" (Mountain of the Kurds) by Arab chroniclers, and "Kürd-Dağı" (Kurdish Mountain) under the Ottoman Empire.<sup>4</sup> This enduring historical presence has cultivated a rich and distinctive cultural heritage. The consistent scholarly and cultural reference to the region as "Çiyayê Kurmênc" alongside the more administrative "Afrin" is not merely a geographical distinction. In contexts deeply intertwined with ethnic identity and territorial belonging, the act of naming carries substantial weight. "Çiyayê Kurmênc" explicitly connects the land to the Kurdish people ("Kurmênc" being a term for Kurds), asserting a historical and cultural claim. This nomenclature becomes particularly resonant when discussing indigenous cultural forms like the Dengbêj tradition, embedding these artists and their work directly into a narrative of continuous Kurdish presence, especially poignant given recent conflicts and documented efforts to alter the region's demographic and cultural fabric.<sup>7</sup>

At the heart of Afrin's cultural expression lies the tradition of the Dengbêj. Dengbêj are more than mere folk singers; they are revered as storytellers, poets, and the living repositories of Kurdish collective memory.<sup>9</sup> In a culture that has often faced restrictions on written language and formal historical documentation, the Dengbêj have played an indispensable role in transmitting history, epic narratives, social commentary, and cultural identity across generations through the power of the human voice.<sup>10</sup> Afrin, with its deep-rooted Kurdish identity, is widely recognized as a region that has nurtured a multitude of prominent Dengbêj, whose artistry has echoed through its valleys and mountains.<sup>4</sup> The descriptions of Afrin's natural bounty—its famed olive groves, fertile red soil, and abundant water<sup>5</sup>—often found in cultural accounts, suggest an intrinsic link between the land's unique characteristics and the thematic content or imagery prevalent in the local Dengbêj tradition. This reflects a people whose artistic expression is deeply interwoven with their environment, making the subsequent experiences of displacement and environmental degradation, such as the reported felling of olive trees<sup>16</sup>, not only an attack on livelihood but also a wound to the very source of cultural inspiration.

This report endeavors to explore the lives, works, and enduring legacies of famous Dengbêj from the Afrin region. It will examine their pivotal role in the preservation and articulation of Kurdish cultural identity, situating their contributions within a historical continuum marked by both cultural flourishing and profound contemporary challenges. By synthesizing available information from diverse sources, this study aims to provide a scholarly account of these vital bearers of oral tradition, whose voices continue to resonate from Çiyayê Kurmênc.

## **II. The Dengbêj: Keepers of Kurdish Memory and Identity**

The Dengbêj tradition is a cornerstone of Kurdish cultural heritage, embodying the spirit, history, and artistic expression of the Kurdish people. These figures are central to understanding the transmission and preservation of Kurdish identity, particularly in regions like Afrin.

- **Defining the Dengbêj**

Dengbêj are Kurdish folk singers, storytellers, and bards, whose title itself, derived from the Kurdish words 'deng' (voice) and 'bêj' (from 'gotin' - to tell, or to sing), encapsulates their essence as "voice-tellers" or "voice-singers".<sup>9</sup> They function as living archives, meticulously preserving and passionately narrating Kurdish traditions, foundational myths, local histories, and a vast corpus of oral literary works.<sup>10</sup> A Dengbêj's repertoire is extensive, often involving the memorization of hundreds of tales, epic poems detailing sagas of love, war, and heroism, and they are particularly renowned for their *stran* – songs that frequently convey themes of mourning and lament – and *kilam*, which are often spontaneous, unpaused recitations or chants.<sup>9</sup>

A distinctive feature of Dengbêj performances is that they are often, though not always, unaccompanied by musical instruments.<sup>10</sup> This a cappella style grants the Dengbêj considerable improvisational freedom in their storytelling, verse creation, and use of language, allowing for a direct and powerful connection with their audience. Their cultural significance is immense; Dengbêj are often regarded as the "historians of society".<sup>10</sup> Through their songs and narratives, they transmit stories about Kurdish history, articulate collective experiences, and play a crucial role in preserving cultural identity, especially in the face of assimilationist policies and state-sponsored repression that have historically targeted Kurdish language and culture.<sup>9</sup> Their art forms a "powerful connection with the past" and serves as a vital bridge to contemporary struggles for the preservation of Kurdish identity and nationalism.<sup>10</sup> The reliance of the Dengbêj tradition on orality and memory, while a profound strength that enabled its survival through periods when written Kurdish materials could be suppressed or destroyed<sup>10</sup>, concurrently presents a substantial challenge for comprehensive historical documentation and academic study. This inherent characteristic of oral traditions may partly explain why, despite the frequent naming of certain Dengbêj from Afrin (indicating their recognition within the collective memory), extensive documented biographies or systematically recorded repertoires are not uniformly available for all. This underscores a vulnerability: without dedicated and timely archival efforts, the richness of individual contributions can become fragmented or lost over time, existing primarily within localized oral histories.

- **Socio-Historical Context of Dengbêjî in Kurdistan**

The Dengbêj tradition is deeply embedded in the social and historical fabric of Kurdish life. Aspiring Dengbêj traditionally honed their craft through years of rigorous apprenticeship under an established master, a period dedicated to memorizing vast and complex repertoires of songs, epics, and storytelling techniques.<sup>10</sup> Historically, Dengbêj were often patronized by emirs, tribal chiefs, or influential families, and their songs, through contemporary allusions, could sometimes carry significant political connotations.<sup>10</sup> They were central figures at communal gatherings, their performances filling the long winter nights and marking important social occasions.<sup>10</sup>

However, the tradition has also faced profound adversity. Throughout modern history, particularly in Turkey and Syria, Dengbêj and the Kurdish language itself have been subjected to severe repression. Bans on speaking or performing in Kurdish led to periods where Dengbêjî was practiced in secret, with recordings often made clandestinely on cassette tapes and distributed covertly to preserve these vital cultural expressions.<sup>10</sup> Despite such pressures, the inherently oral nature of the Dengbêj tradition endowed it with a unique resilience; stories and songs carried in living memory could not be as easily eradicated as written texts.<sup>10</sup>

In more recent decades, there have been concerted efforts to revive and support the Dengbêj tradition. A significant development has been the establishment of "Mala Dengbêjan" (Dengbêj Houses) in various cities, notably in Diyarbakır and Van in Turkish Kurdistan. These institutions, sometimes supported by cultural initiatives and even the European Union, provide spaces for Dengbêj to perform, teach, and for their work to be archived.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, early scholarly work, such as the studies conducted by Roger Lescot during the French Mandate in Syria and Lebanon, played a role in documenting and bringing wider attention to the tradition.<sup>11</sup> The politicization of Dengbêj music, often emerging as a "sign of Kurdish nationalism" in direct response to state repression<sup>11</sup>, suggests that the Dengbêj of Afrin, a region characterized by a strong Kurdish identity and a history of political and cultural struggle<sup>3</sup>, inevitably played a crucial role in articulating and reinforcing this identity. Their art, whether explicitly political or not, inherently carried significant weight by virtue of being performed in Kurdish and narrating Kurdish experiences. This dual capacity as cultural preservers and potent symbols of identity would have rendered their tradition particularly significant in Afrin, and consequently, particularly vulnerable during periods of intense conflict aimed at suppressing Kurdish self-expression, as exemplified by the documented persecution of figures like Cemîl Horo due to his political affiliations.<sup>19</sup>

- **The Unique Importance of the Dengbêj Tradition in Afrin**

Afrin, or Çiyayê Kurmênc, is consistently cited in cultural and historical accounts as a heartland for Dengbêj and other Kurdish cultural figures.<sup>4</sup> The notable preservation of the Kurdish language and rich folklore in Afrin has historically created a fertile ground for the Dengbêj tradition not only to survive but to flourish with distinctive local characteristics.<sup>4</sup> The cultural expressions of Afrin are also noted to share affinities with

those of the Maraş and Elbistan regions in North Kurdistan (Turkey) <sup>14</sup>, hinting at potential shared folkloric elements, historical connections, or mutual influences that might be discernible in the themes, melodies, or narrative styles of its Dengbêj. The establishment of Dengbêj Houses (Mala Dengbêjan) as a model for revival and preservation, primarily documented in Turkey <sup>10</sup>, naturally raises questions regarding the existence or attempts at similar institutional frameworks in Afrin. This is particularly relevant considering Afrin's status as a significant Kurdish cultural area within Syria, especially during periods of relative autonomy or under the Autonomous Administration. While there are mentions of cultural activities, such as Jwan Hassan teaching Kurdish and working with a Cultural Center in Shahba after displacement from Afrin <sup>20</sup>, specific references to a "Mala Dengbêjan" in Afrin itself are absent in the available materials. The documented destruction of cultural institutions and the systematic suppression of Kurdish identity in Afrin, particularly after 2018 <sup>8</sup>, strongly implies that any such formal structures dedicated to Dengbêj preservation would have been severely impacted, dismantled, or driven underground. This absence or disruption of institutional support would further endanger the continuity and systematic archiving of Afrin's unique Dengbêj heritage, leaving it more reliant on individual efforts and communal memory.

### **III. Celebrated Dengbêj of Afrin: Profiles and Contributions**

The Afrin region has been a cradle for numerous Dengbêj whose artistry has significantly contributed to the Kurdish oral tradition. While comprehensive biographical data for all is not uniformly available, several figures are consistently recognized for their impact. The interconnectedness of Afrin's Dengbêj community is a striking feature, evident through documented master-apprentice relationships—such as Adîk Necar learning from the esteemed Îbramê Tirko and Hemûş Korik <sup>21</sup>—and frequent artistic collaborations, exemplified by Adîk Necar's work with Cemîl Horo, Reşîdê Memcûcanê, and Omerê Cemlo.<sup>21</sup> This vibrant network suggests a living tradition where skills, extensive repertoires, and stylistic nuances were actively shared and collectively developed, rather than cultivated in isolation. Such artistic exchange is crucial for the vitality and continuity of any oral tradition, fostering a shared artistic lineage that may have contributed to a distinct "Afrin style" of Dengbêjî. Consequently, the disruption of these communities through conflict and displacement <sup>7</sup> would have a profound impact extending beyond individual artists, potentially fragmenting this collective cultural production.

The biographies of prominent figures like Cemîl Horo and Adîk Necar further reveal that Dengbêj often balanced their artistic calling with other professions—carpentry and café ownership in Horo's case <sup>19</sup>, and woodcarving for Necar <sup>21</sup>—while simultaneously navigating significant personal and political hardships. This reality underscores that Dengbêjî was not merely a performance art detached from daily life but was deeply embedded in the fabric of communal existence and struggle, enriching their narratives with authentic, resonant experiences.

The repeated listing of a core group of Dengbêj across multiple sources <sup>1</sup> points to a recognized canon of "greats" from Afrin within Kurdish cultural memory. However, the varying levels of detail available for each individual indicate that while their names are preserved, the

depth of readily accessible knowledge about their specific contributions may be uneven, highlighting the challenges inherent in documenting primarily oral traditions.

- **Cemîl Horo (جەمیل هورو): The Mountainous Voice of Afrin**

Cemîl Horo stands as one of the most emblematic Dengbêj from Afrin. Born in 1934 in the village of Serîncekê, Bilbilê district, he became known as a foundational artist of Çiyayê Kurmênc, his powerful "mountainous voice" gaining recognition across the entirety of Kurdistan.<sup>19</sup> His life was multifaceted; alongside his artistic pursuits, he worked as a carpenter and later established the "Qehweya Cemîl Horo" (Cemîl Horo's Cafe) in the Sheikh Maqsoud neighborhood of Aleppo, a venue that itself became a well-known cultural spot.<sup>19</sup> His personal life was marked by challenges, including marrying three times and the profound tragedy of his 3-year-old son Henan's death in 1973, an event suspected to have been orchestrated by the Communist Party in Afrin.<sup>19</sup> Horo's commitment to Kurdish identity was also evident in his political affiliations. As a member of the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Syria, he faced persecution, including arrests and beatings. A notable incident occurred in 1958 when he was imprisoned for 80 days merely for lighting a Newroz fire, a culturally significant act of Kurdish affirmation.<sup>19</sup> The ensuing hardships eventually compelled him to leave Afrin for a period, during which he resided in Turkey and later in Zaxo, in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, where his interactions with figures like Peshmerga Isa Siwar further solidified his nationalist sentiments. He returned to Syrian Kurdistan following the 1970 peace agreement in Iraq.<sup>19</sup>

Cemîl Horo's artistic career commenced with performances at local ceremonies and events. A significant milestone was the recording of his first cassette in 1965, which featured renowned songs such as "Memê Alan," "Eyşa Îbê," "Cebelî," "Lo Bavo," and "Xemê Zalim".<sup>19</sup> During his time in Turkey, he collaborated with the acclaimed North Kurdish singer Eyşe Şan, with the famed musician Arif Sax providing accompaniment for recordings that included "Bedew Salih beg" and "Teyar Axa." In a later phase of his career, Horo increasingly focused on national themes, composing and performing songs about Kurdish leaders like Mulla Mustafa Barzani, Leyla Qasim, and Sheikh Saîd, alongside anthemic pieces such as "Keça Kurdan Newroz" (Kurdish Girl Newroz) and "Pêşmergeyê Kurd" (Kurdish Peshmerga).<sup>19</sup>

He was a prominent participant in numerous festivals and Newroz celebrations, including a notable 1972 Newroz event in Lebanon alongside Arîf Cezîrî and Seîd Yûsif, and another in Qamishlo where he performed with his Afrin dance troupe and fellow artists Mehmûd Ezîz and Seîd Yûsif.<sup>19</sup> His collaborations extended to the master tembûr player Adîk Nekar, who often accompanied his singing.<sup>21</sup> The legacy of Cemîl Horo is profound; he significantly enriched the Kurdish song archive with both traditional and nationalistic works and is widely regarded as a symbol of Syrian Kurdistan in the realm of Dengbêjî.<sup>19</sup> His son, Eli Cemil Horo, continues to keep his father's musical heritage alive by performing his songs.<sup>24</sup> Cemîl Horo passed away on September 19, 1989, and was laid to rest in the Henan cemetery in Afrin.<sup>19</sup> His status as a preeminent Dengbêj from Afrin is consistently affirmed across various cultural archives and scholarly

mentions.<sup>4</sup>

- **Adîk Nekar (Adîk Bavê Henên, ادیک): Master Tembûrvan and Preserver of Epics**

Adîk Nekar, also respectfully known as Adîk Bavê Henên, was a legendary tembûr (a long-necked lute) virtuoso and Dengbêj who lived a full century, from 1907 to June 1, 2007.<sup>21</sup> Born in the village of Îska in the Şêrewa district of Afrin to an Êzîdî Kurdish family, he later settled in Kora village in the Cindirêşê district.<sup>21</sup> Beyond his musical prowess, Adîk Nekar was a skilled woodcarver, a craft he practiced throughout his life. He was particularly known for making his own unique 16-fret tembûrs, which he played with his fingers, distinguishing his style from the more common 24-fret instruments.<sup>21</sup> His musical education was rooted in tradition; he learned to play the tembûr from Hûsê Xel and absorbed songs and narratives from esteemed Dengbêj such as Hêmuşê Kûrik and Îbramê Tîrko.<sup>21</sup> He also mentored younger artists, including Bavê Selah, whom he taught to play the baglama.<sup>13</sup>

From 1930 onwards, Adîk Nekar was a central figure in the musical life of Çiyayê Kurmênc, organizing and participating in countless musical evenings and Dengbêj performances.<sup>21</sup> He is credited with playing a crucial role in preserving traditional and epic Kurdish songs from obscurity.<sup>23</sup> His skill earned him revered titles such as "Bilbilê Çiyayê Kurmênc" (Nightingale of Mount Kurmênc) and "Mîrê Tembûrê" (Prince of Tembûr).<sup>23</sup>

His collaborative spirit led him to work extensively with many Dengbêj from the region. Most notably, he frequently accompanied Cemîl Horo, providing the intricate tembûr melodies for Horo's powerful vocals, as heard in recordings like "Xwerzî Mehemed".<sup>22</sup> Other collaborators included Reşîdê Mem Çûçanê, Omerê Cemlo, Mihemed Elî Tico, and Bavê Selah.<sup>21</sup> Adîk Nekar's talent gained recognition beyond Afrin; he participated in artistic festivals in Aleppo and, significantly, in Sulaymaniyah in Southern Kurdistan in 2000, where he received an award for his lifelong contributions to Kurdish music. In 2006, he was honored in Afrin by the Armanç cultural group.<sup>21</sup> Adîk Nekar is remembered for his unique instrumental style, his dedication to preserving Kurdish artistic heritage, and his profound influence on the musical landscape of Afrin.<sup>21</sup> He is consistently listed among the most prominent Dengbêj of Afrin.<sup>4</sup>

- **Îbramê Bêsnî (Îbramê Tîrko): A Foundational Figure**

Îbramê Bêsnî, more widely known as Îbramê Tîrko, is regarded as one of the most significant and foundational figures in the Dengbêj school of Afrin.<sup>13</sup> His appellation "Tîrko" (meaning "from Turkey") stemmed from his family's origins: his father, Êsib, migrated from the Besni district of Adıyaman in present-day Turkey to the village of Çeqel in the Cindirêş area of Afrin during the mid-19th century.<sup>13</sup>

Îbramê Tîrko rose to prominence alongside another contemporary Dengbêj, Şêx Simaq, and together they were considered the two most celebrated Dengbêj of the Afrin region during their era.<sup>13</sup> His influence was profound and far-reaching. Many of the subsequent generations of renowned Afrin Dengbêj, including Hemûş Korik, Cemîlê Kerê, the illustrious Cemîl Horo, and the master tembûr player Adîk Nekar, are said to have

followed his artistic school and lineage. These artists, inspired by his tradition, went on to transform countless Kurdish stories, histories, and legends into enduring *kilam* (sung narratives).<sup>13</sup> Indeed, Adîk Necar is documented as having learned songs directly from Îbramê Tirko.<sup>21</sup> His daughter, Gulo, was also a Dengbêj and was the mother of Bavê Selah, another notable figure in Afrin's musical heritage, further cementing the familial transmission of this art form.<sup>13</sup> Îbramê Bêsnî's name consistently appears in lists of Afrin's most important Dengbêj, underscoring his seminal role in shaping the region's oral traditions.<sup>4</sup>

- **Elî Tico (علي تجو, Abu Ali): A Voice from Afrin**

Elî Tico, also known by the kunya Abu Ali, was a Syrian Kurdish singer from the Afrin region, born in 1930 and passing away on February 17, 2012.<sup>27</sup> While detailed biographical information is less extensive in the provided materials compared to Horo or Necar, his recognition as an important Dengbêj is clear.

His recorded work includes a cassette album titled "Elî 4: Kerkûk," noted as released in Turkey in 1991.<sup>27</sup> The continued presence of his music, as evidenced by its availability on platforms like TikTok<sup>28</sup> and YouTube (e.g., "CEFA ELÎ TÎCO / MÎLO WÊBE"<sup>29</sup>), indicates an enduring listenership and relevance. Elî Tico is consistently included in enumerations of significant Dengbêj hailing from Afrin and Çiyayê Kurmênc, highlighting his respected position within this artistic community.<sup>4</sup> He also collaborated with Adîk Necar.<sup>21</sup>

- **Other Notable Dengbêj of Afrin:**

Beyond the figures detailed above, several other Dengbêj are consistently recognized as significant contributors to Afrin's rich oral traditions. While extensive individual biographies are not available in the current research material, their repeated mention underscores their importance in the collective cultural memory of the region:

- **Hemûş Korik:** Frequently listed as a prominent Dengbêj from Afrin.<sup>1</sup> Adîk Necar is noted to have learned songs from him, indicating his influence and seniority.<sup>21</sup>
- **Cemîlê Kerê:** Recognized as an important Dengbêj from Afrin, often cited as a follower of Îbramê Tirko's school of Dengbêjî.<sup>1</sup> Some song titles or lyrical fragments are loosely associated with his name or style in available materials, though direct attribution requires further confirmation.<sup>30</sup>
- **Omerê Cemlo:** Consistently named among Afrin's notable Dengbêj.<sup>1</sup> He is also documented as a collaborator with Adîk Necar.<sup>21</sup>
- **Evdê Şehrê:** Another Dengbêj frequently included in lists of prominent artists from Afrin.<sup>1</sup>
- **Hesnazî:** Listed as a significant Dengbêj from Afrin.<sup>1</sup> Recordings such as "Hesnazî Efrîn Kurdsat 3-حسنازي عفرين من كوردسات" and "Hesnazî: Delal Mezîn حسنازي دلالة مزین" are available on YouTube, suggesting a preserved auditory legacy.<sup>29</sup>
- **Reşîdê Memcûcanê (also referred to as Reşîdê Mem Çûcanê):** A well-recognized Dengbêj from Afrin.<sup>1</sup> He is noted for his collaborations with Adîk Necar.<sup>21</sup>
- **Beytaz:** Consistently named as one of Afrin's Dengbêj.<sup>1</sup>

- **Eliyê Kabê:** Included in lists of notable Dengbêj from the Afrin region.<sup>1</sup>
- **Table 1: Prominent Dengbêj of Afrin and Key Information**

Name (and known aliases)	Estimated Lifespan/Activity Period	Key Contributions/Known For	Primary Source Mentions (Examples)
Cemîl Horo (1989 – 1934   جميل هورو)	Renowned vocalist, "mountainous voice," national & traditional songs, cafe owner, political activist.	19	
Adîk Necar (Adîk Bavê Henên, 2007 – 1907   ادیک)	Master tembûr player (16-fret), instrument maker, preserver of epics, collaborator.	21	
Îbramê Bêsnî (Îbramê Tirko)	Mid-19th to early 20th C. (est.)	Foundational figure of Afrin Dengbêj school, influential teacher.	13
Elî Tico (علي تجو, Abu Ali)	1930 – 2012	Vocalist, recorded albums (e.g., "Kerkûk").	27
Hemûş Korik	Active 20th C. (est.)	Prominent Dengbêj, teacher of Adîk Necar.	1
Cemîlê Kerê	Active 20th C. (est.)	Prominent Dengbêj, follower of Îbramê Tirko's school.	1
Omerê Cemlo	Active 20th C. (est.)	Prominent Dengbêj, collaborator with Adîk Necar.	1
Evdê Şehrê	Active 20th C. (est.)	Prominent Dengbêj.	1
Hesnazî	Active 20th C. (est.)	Prominent Dengbêj, recordings available (e.g., "Delal Mezin").	1
Reşîdê Memcûcanê (Reşîdê Mem Çûçanê)	Active 20th C. (est.)	Prominent Dengbêj, collaborator with Adîk Necar.	1
Beytaz	Active 20th C. (est.)	Prominent Dengbêj.	1
Eliyê Kabê	Active 20th C. (est.)	Prominent Dengbêj.	1

#### IV. Thematic Exploration in the Songs of Afrin's Dengbêj

The songs and narratives of Dengbêj are rich tapestries woven from the threads of Kurdish life, history, and emotion. Generally, Dengbêj repertoires encompass a wide array of themes, including the geography and history of Kurdistan, contemporary events, poignant lullabies,



and passionate love songs.<sup>11</sup> Their most renowned performances often feature *stran*, or songs of mourning, which articulate collective and personal grief.<sup>9</sup> They are master narrators of lengthy tales and epics centered on themes of love and warfare, and their songs frequently express the natural beauty of their regions, recount famous love stories, and voice sorrow over loss and hardship.<sup>10</sup> The thematic repertoire of Afrin's Dengbêj, as discernible through figures like Cemîl Horo and Adîk Nekar, vividly illustrates a dynamic interplay between pan-Kurdish epic narratives, localized stories reflecting regional experiences, and politically charged songs that comment on contemporary struggles. This demonstrates the Dengbêj's crucial dual function: they are not only custodians of ancient, foundational heritage but also active commentators on the evolving realities of their time, ensuring the tradition remains a living, relevant force.

- **Themes in Cemîl Horo's Work**

The artistic output of Cemîl Horo exemplifies this thematic breadth. His repertoire included classic Kurdish epics such as "Memê Alan," a cornerstone of Kurdish oral literature. Alongside these, he performed songs of love and lament like "Eyşa Îbê," regional narratives such as "Cebelî" (likely referencing mountainous terrains or events), and expressions of deep sorrow like "Xemê Zalim" (Sorrow of the Oppressor/Cruel One).<sup>19</sup>

Significantly, Cemîl Horo's work was also deeply imbued with a national consciousness, reflecting the political currents and identity struggles of his era. He composed and sang numerous national and revolutionary songs, including tributes to Kurdish leaders such as Mulla Mustafa Barzani, Leyla Qasim, and Sheikh Saîd. Anthemic songs like "Keça Kurdan Newroz" (Kurdish Girl Newroz) and "Pêşmergeyê Kurd" (Kurdish Peshmerga) further highlight his engagement with themes of Kurdish identity, resistance, and aspiration.<sup>19</sup> The strong presence of such "national" and "revolutionary" themes in the work of a prominent Afrin Dengbêj like Cemîl Horo is not incidental; it directly correlates with Afrin's historical position as a significant Kurdish region frequently at the forefront of identity assertion and political mobilization. His songs, in this context, would have served as a powerful medium for fostering collective identity, historical awareness, and resilience among the Kurdish population of Afrin and beyond.

- **Themes in Adîk Nekar's Repertoire**

As a master tembûr player and collaborator with many Dengbêj, Adîk Nekar played a vital role in preserving and performing a rich array of traditional and epic Kurdish songs. His known repertoire included significant pieces such as "Eyşa Îbê" (also performed by Horo, indicating its importance in the regional canon), "Xarzî Mihemed" (Nephew Mihemed), "Tayîr beg," "Siyamendê Silêvî," and the epic "Derwîşê Ebdî".<sup>21</sup> The song "Xwerzî Mehemed," notably performed by Cemîl Horo with Adîk Nekar's tembûr accompaniment, is described as a poignant lament for a nephew and close friend who passed away in his youth, on the cusp of marriage.<sup>22</sup> This illustrates the Dengbêj's role in articulating personal grief in a way that resonates with communal experiences of loss.

- **Reflection of Afrin's Specifics**

The very name "Çiyayê Kurmênc" (Kurdish Mountain), intrinsically linked with these

Dengbêj and their art, grounds their narratives in the specific mountainous landscape and cultural milieu of Afrin. While direct thematic analyses of older Dengbêj songs specifically focusing on Afrin's unique characteristics are limited in the provided sources, the work of more contemporary artists from the region offers valuable parallels. Jwan Hassan, a modern musician from Afrin whose work, while not strictly Dengbêj, echoed similar thematic concerns, was known as the "Voice of Jiayê Kurmênc." His music poignantly blended traditional Kurdish folklore with themes of resistance against oppression, nostalgia for the homeland, and an unyielding longing for freedom, powerfully reflecting the pain and trauma of displacement from Afrin.<sup>20</sup> This suggests a continuity of themes deeply connected to the land, identity, and the experience of loss.

Similarly, the Afrin-born poet Nawzad Jaadan, though working in a different literary form, articulates a sentiment that likely resonates with the thematic preoccupations of the region's traditional Dengbêj. He states, "Afrin lives in every text I write," emphasizing an indelible connection to his city and its "green memory," highlighting how the land and its collective experiences serve as profound and enduring sources of artistic inspiration.<sup>32</sup> The recurring themes of "longing for homeland" and "displacement" articulated by these Afrin artists likely have deep historical roots in the collective experiences of the region's Kurdish population, who have faced numerous cycles of conflict, persecution, and displacement. Such themes would undoubtedly be powerful, resonant elements within the traditional Dengbêj narratives as well, serving to voice and validate these profound communal sentiments. The large-scale displacement from Afrin since 2018 would only amplify the contemporary relevance and emotional weight of such themes in any remembered or ongoing Dengbêj performances related to the region.

## **V. The Dengbêj Tradition in Afrin: Resilience Amidst Adversity**

The Dengbêj tradition in Afrin, a vibrant expression of Kurdish cultural identity, has faced profound challenges in recent times, particularly due to conflict, displacement, and systematic cultural suppression. These adversities have tested the resilience of this ancient oral art form and its practitioners.

- **Impact of Conflict and Displacement**

The Turkish-led military offensive in January 2018, codenamed "Operation Olive Branch," marked a devastating turning point for Afrin. The invasion resulted in the occupation of the region and the forced displacement of a significant portion of its predominantly Kurdish population, with estimates suggesting up to 300,000 people were uprooted from their homes.<sup>6</sup> Following the occupation, Afrin came under the de facto control of Turkey and allied Syrian National Army (SNA) militias. Reports from human rights organizations and local sources indicate that the remaining and returning Kurdish population faced systematic atrocities, including arbitrary arrests, torture, enforced disappearances, looting of property, and killings.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, policies aimed at demographic change were implemented, with non-Kurdish Syrian populations, including some illegally deported from Turkey, being

settled in the homes and lands of displaced Kurds.<sup>7</sup> Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan publicly stated an intention to "return" Afrin to its "original owners," while concurrently making the false claim that Afrin was not a Kurdish-majority region.<sup>7</sup> Such conditions of violence, displacement, and demographic engineering create an environment antithetical to the flourishing of cultural traditions like Dengbêjî, which rely on communal stability, freedom of expression, and intergenerational transmission. The displacement of Afrin's population to areas like Shahba, Aleppo, or even further afield into the diaspora<sup>7</sup> has likely led to a transformation of the Dengbêj tradition itself. What was once geographically rooted in the specific landscape and communities of Afrin may now be evolving into a diasporic expression, characterized by themes of longing for return, remembrance of the homeland, and articulation of the trauma of exile. The context of performance and reception shifts, potentially imbuing established songs with new layers of meaning and possibly inspiring the creation of new narratives reflecting these profound dislocations.

- **Cultural Suppression**

The assault on Afrin's population was accompanied by a systematic effort to suppress Kurdish cultural identity. There are documented instances of the destruction of Kurdish cultural heritage sites.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, Kurdish street names were changed to Arabic or Turkish, the Kurdish language was marginalized in school curricula, and the celebration of Newroz, the Kurdish New Year and a cornerstone of Kurdish cultural identity, was banned.<sup>8</sup> This suppression has historical precedents; Dengbêj Cemîl Horo, for instance, was imprisoned back in 1958 for the act of lighting a Newroz fire in Afrin, demonstrating a long-standing pattern of targeting Kurdish cultural expression.<sup>19</sup>

The ability to practice and transmit cultural traditions like Dengbêjî, which often involves public gatherings and the use of the Kurdish language to narrate Kurdish history and folklore, would be severely hampered in such an environment of pervasive fear, displacement, and active cultural erasure. The tragic death of the contemporary Afrin artist Jwan Hassan, known as the "Voice of Jiayê Kurmênc," after his displacement, serves as a poignant symbol of the silencing of cultural voices from the region.<sup>20</sup> The systematic nature of this cultural suppression—targeting tangible symbols like heritage sites and street names, as well as intangible practices like language use in education and communal celebrations—indicates a deliberate strategy to alter the cultural landscape and diminish Kurdish identity in Afrin. This makes the preservation of intangible heritage forms like the Dengbêj tradition, which are primarily memory-based and orally transmitted, simultaneously more critical for identity maintenance and significantly more challenging to sustain.

- **Current State and Efforts Towards Preservation**

Despite these immense hardships, the spirit of Afrin's cultural heritage endures. As of early 2025, reports indicate an increase in the return of displaced Kurds to Afrin, following agreements between the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and Damascus. However, these returnees face substantial challenges, including difficulties in reclaiming property, ongoing security concerns, and the complexities of navigating differing

educational curricula for their children.<sup>16</sup>

Efforts to maintain cultural continuity persist, often driven by individuals and the diaspora. For example, the Afrin-born poet Nawzad Jaadan, though living and working outside Syria, consciously keeps Afrin and its "green memory" alive in his literary works.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, the sons of revered Dengbêj, such as Eli Cemil Horo (son of Cemîl Horo), continue to perform their fathers' songs, ensuring that this musical heritage is passed to new generations.<sup>24</sup> The very act of documenting the names of Afrin's Dengbêj and their association with the region in various Kurdish cultural archives, online encyclopedias like Kurdipedia<sup>14</sup>, and community-run websites such as Art-izan.org<sup>12</sup> and Rupelanu.org<sup>13</sup> constitutes an important form of preservation in the digital age. The return of some segments of the Kurdish population to Afrin<sup>16</sup> presents a complex scenario: it offers a potential opportunity for cultural revival while simultaneously posing significant challenges. The re-establishment of communal life and familiar social structures is essential for oral traditions like Dengbêjî to thrive. However, the altered demographics, the lingering presence of armed groups, the deep psychological trauma of conflict and displacement, and the pervasive atmosphere of insecurity could significantly transform the cultural landscape and the ways in which these traditions are received, practiced, and transmitted in contemporary Afrin.

- **Role of Dengbêj in Contemporary Afrini Identity**

In a context marked by displacement, loss, and a direct assault on their cultural identity, the memory and songs of Afrin's Dengbêj can assume even greater significance. Their narratives, recounting shared histories, articulating collective joys and sorrows, and embodying the spirit of resilience, can become powerful symbols of Afrini Kurdish identity. For displaced communities, these songs can foster solidarity, reinforce a connection to the homeland, and serve as a testament to their enduring cultural heritage. The Dengbêj tradition, therefore, transitions from being solely a historical art form to becoming an active component of contemporary identity assertion and cultural resistance.

## **VI. Conclusion: The Living Heritage of Afrin's Dengbêj**

The Dengbêj of Afrin, the resonant voices of Çiyayê Kurmênc, are far more than historical performers; they are indispensable carriers of Kurdish history, culture, and collective identity. Through their intricate *stran* and *kilam*, they have meticulously narrated the joys, sorrows, triumphs, and tribulations of their people, weaving a rich tapestry of oral literature that defines the cultural landscape of their mountainous homeland. Their artistry has served as a vital conduit for intergenerational knowledge transfer, preserving linguistic nuances, historical accounts, and social customs that might otherwise have been lost to the vicissitudes of time and political turmoil.

Despite facing immense adversity, including periods of severe repression, conflict, and large-scale displacement, the names and, in some instances, the recorded works of Afrin's Dengbêj persist with remarkable tenacity in Kurdish cultural memory and through ongoing archival efforts. This endurance is a profound testament to the inherent power and resilience of oral tradition. The legacy of figures such as Cemîl Horo, Adîk Nekar, Îbramê Bêsnî, and Elî

Tico, among many others, continues to inspire and inform. However, the very act of researching and documenting the Dengbêj of Afrin, particularly within the current socio-political climate where Kurdish heritage in the region has been systematically targeted<sup>8</sup>, transcends mere academic inquiry. It becomes an act of cultural preservation and a crucial counter-narrative against attempts to erase or diminish the deep-rooted Kurdish presence and cultural contributions in Afrin.

This report, by synthesizing currently available information, has endeavored to illuminate the significance of these artists. Yet, it is also clear that many of Afrin's Dengbêj, even those whose names are frequently invoked, warrant more extensive and in-depth research to fully document their individual life stories, complete repertoires, unique stylistic contributions, and the specific socio-historical contexts in which their art was created and received. The existing sources provide a valuable foundation, but deeper, perhaps field-specific ethnographic and archival research—wherever and whenever feasible—would be invaluable in painting a more comprehensive picture of this rich facet of Kurdish oral literature.

The future of the Dengbêj tradition in Afrin is inextricably linked to the broader political, social, and human rights situation of the Kurdish people in Syria. While the tradition has demonstrated remarkable resilience throughout history, its genuine revitalization and continued flourishing as a living, evolving art form in its ancestral homeland depend on more than just the cessation of conflict. It necessitates an environment where Kurdish language, culture, and identity are not merely tolerated but actively respected and supported; where displaced communities can return safely and with dignity to rebuild their social and cultural fabric; and where artists, including the inheritors of the Dengbêj mantle, can create, perform, and transmit their heritage freely and without fear.

In their songs, the spirit of Çiyayê Kurmênc continues to resonate, offering profound insights into a rich cultural past and a testament to a resilient present. The Dengbêj of Afrin represent an unbroken connection to a land and its stories, a living heritage that demands recognition, preservation, and continued scholarly attention.

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