

# The Unbreakable Voice: Cemîl Horo, Dengbêj of Afrin

## Executive Summary & Disambiguation

Cemîl Horo (1934-1989) stands as an iconic figure in 20th-century Kurdish culture, a master *Dengbêj* (singing storyteller) whose life and art encapsulate the struggles and resilience of the Kurdish people in Syria. Hailing from the Afrin region, his powerful, "mountainous" voice became a vessel for ancient epics, profound personal laments, and potent anthems of national identity. His biography is a chronicle of artistic dedication in the face of political persecution, state-sponsored torture, forced exile, and profound personal tragedy. Yet, his legacy endures not only through his seminal recordings but also through the continuing musical careers of his sons and the cultural institutions established in his name, which actively work to preserve the heritage he embodied.

Research into his life and work is often complicated by the recurrence of his name across different contexts. To ensure clarity, the following table disambiguates the key individuals and entities associated with the name "Cemîl Horo" as they appear in available sources.

**Table 1: Disambiguation of "Cemîl Horo" in Sources**

Entity	Description	Key Sources
<b>Cemîl Horo (The Dengbêj)</b>	The subject of this report; renowned Kurdish <i>Dengbêj</i> from Afrin (1934-1989). Also known as Cemîl Reşîd Elî Horo.	<sup>1</sup>
<b>Elî Cemîl Horo</b>	Son of Cemîl Horo. A contemporary musician who actively performs his father's songs and his own compositions, continuing the family's artistic legacy.	<sup>4</sup>
<b>Ehmed Cemîl Horo</b>	Son of Cemîl Horo. Also a musician who has recorded songs, including tributes to martyrs.	<sup>7</sup>
<b>"Cemîl Horo" (Song)</b>	A tribute song composed and performed by the prominent	<sup>8</sup>

	Kurdish artist Şivan Perwer, featured on his 2012 album <i>Şivanname 2 - Destana Rojava</i> .	
"Cemîl Horo" (TV Program)	A program or segment on the Kurdish-language children's channel Zarok TV, likely featuring his music or story.	<sup>10</sup>
Cemîl Horo Center for Culture and Art	A cultural center ( <i>Navenda Çand û Hunerê ya Cemîl Horo</i> ) in Aleppo's Sheikh Maqsoud neighborhood, dedicated to preserving and teaching Kurdish arts.	<sup>11</sup>

## Introduction: The Voice of a Mountain, The Memory of a People

Cemîl Horo (1934-1989) was a seminal figure whose life was deeply rooted in the soil and soul of Çiyayê Kurmênc (the Kurd Mountains), the historically Kurdish region of Afrin in northern Syria.<sup>13</sup> His story is a microcosm of the modern Kurdish experience: a life spent as a guardian of ancient oral traditions while navigating the violent realities of state suppression, political persecution, and the bitter sting of intra-communal conflict.<sup>1</sup> More than just a singer, Horo was a

*Dengbêj*—a singing storyteller in a tradition that serves as the living archive of a people's history, sorrows, and aspirations.<sup>16</sup> His voice, often described as "mountainous" and "golden," was not merely an aesthetic attribute; it was a force of nature, a metaphor for the enduring strength of a culture that has consistently refused to be silenced.<sup>1</sup>

## Part I: The Making of a Dengbêj - Life and Times in Afrin

### 1.1. Roots in Çiyayê Kurmênc: Birth and Formative Years

Cemîl Reşîd Elî Horo was born on March 10, 1934, in the village of Serîncek, Afrin, to his father, Horo, and his mother, Siltan.<sup>1</sup> His birthplace, the Afrin region, is a distinct cultural heartland for Kurds in Syria, historically known for its vast olive groves and a deeply ingrained tradition of

oral literature and folklore.<sup>18</sup> It was in this environment that Horo's artistic sensibilities were formed.

At the age of ten, he was sent to study with Evdê Eşê in the village of Çolaqa to memorize the Quran.<sup>1</sup> This religious education, common for many traditional musicians in the Islamic world, provided a rigorous foundation for the vocal control, melodic discipline, and powerful breath support that would later define his singing. However, even at this young age, a nascent political consciousness was evident; it is reported that instead of reciting Quranic verses, he would often sing the anthem of Palestine, an early sign of his rebellious spirit and identification with broader regional struggles for self-determination.<sup>3</sup> His linguistic skills were formidable, encompassing fluency in Kurdish (Kurmanji), Turkish, Arabic, and Persian, which enabled him to navigate the complex multi-ethnic landscapes of northern Syria and the wider Middle East.<sup>3</sup>

## **1.2. A Life of Labor and Art: Family and Professions**

Cemîl Horo's life was one of dual burdens: the responsibility to his family and the calling of his art. He married three times and was the father of a large family, with sons Ehmed (Piling), Mihemed Reşîd (Henîf), Horîk, Henan (the first), Henan (the second), and Elî, and daughters Mizgîn, Siltan, Narîn, and Kurdistan.<sup>1</sup> To support them, he engaged in a series of professions alongside his music. He was a skilled carpenter, a trade he would return to until the end of his life.<sup>2</sup> He also ventured into business, opening a popular café in the Kurdish neighborhood of Sheikh Maqsoud in Aleppo and later a small canteen and wedding hall near Jandairis.<sup>1</sup> The stark contrast between his cultural renown as an "icon" with a "golden voice" and his lifelong need to perform manual labor reveals the precarious socioeconomic reality for traditional artists in the 20th century.<sup>1</sup> For Horo, cultural capital did not translate into economic security. His art was revered as a cultural necessity, a vital expression of Kurdish identity, but it could not provide a sustainable livelihood for his family. This demystifies the romanticized image of the celebrated bard, exposing the harsh material conditions under which much of Kurdish oral heritage was preserved. His unwavering dedication was clearly driven by a profound sense of cultural duty rather than any prospect of financial reward, a testament to his commitment to his people's voice.

## **1.3. The Unhealing Wound: The Murder of Henan**

In 1976, a devastating tragedy struck that would forever mark Horo's life and art. His three-year-old son, Henan, was kidnapped and brutally murdered.<sup>3</sup> According to detailed accounts, the perpetrators confessed to abducting the child, starving him for two days, and then killing him with knives before disposing of his body in the Afrin River.<sup>3</sup> The discovery of his remains a month later confirmed the horrific crime.

This personal catastrophe was compounded by a bitter political dimension. The individuals implicated in the crime were allegedly affiliated with the Syrian Communist Party, and the case was reportedly suppressed by influential figures within the Kurdish political scene at the time.<sup>3</sup> An official from the party, Wehîdê Coqê, is said to have callously dismissed the murder's cost as "three Syrian francs" and issued threats against Horo and his eldest son, warning them to cease their pursuit of justice.<sup>3</sup> This event shatters any monolithic narrative of a unified Kurdish resistance against an oppressive Syrian state. It exposes deep, violent internal fractures and factionalism within the Kurdish political landscape of the 1970s, where ideological rivalries between Horo's party, the KDP-S, and leftist groups could manifest in extreme brutality. Horo thus became a victim not only of the Syrian regime but also of the internecine conflicts that plagued his own community.

The trauma of this loss had a profound and lasting impact. In the true tradition of a *Dengbêj*, who transforms both collective and personal history into song, Horo composed two powerful laments for his son, one in collaboration with the artist Elî Tico.<sup>3</sup> He also adopted the name "Dilbirîn," meaning "Wounded Heart," publicly weaving his grief into his very identity.<sup>3</sup>

## Part II: The Art of Resistance - Musical Career and Stylistic Analysis

### 2.1. The Dengbêj Tradition of Çiyayê Kurmênc

Cemîl Horo was a master practitioner of the *Dengbêj* tradition, an ancient art form that serves as the primary vehicle for Kurdish oral history, epic literature, and collective memory.<sup>16</sup> The *Dengbêj* is far more than a singer; they are a chronicler, a historian, a poet, and a living repository of a culture that has often been denied written expression.<sup>15</sup> The tradition in the Afrin region (Çiyayê Kurmênc) has its own distinct lineage, with celebrated masters such as Evdê Şerê and Hesên Nazî, and Horo's contemporaries including the instrumentalist Elî Tico.<sup>14</sup> Horo's vocal style was the cornerstone of his art. Described as a "golden voice" and a "mountainous voice," his delivery was characterized by the powerful, unadorned, and emotionally resonant performance style typical of the *Dengbêj*.<sup>1</sup> This style relies on intricate melismatic ornamentation, a wide dynamic range, and a profound capacity to convey the narrative and emotional weight of the song. The repertoire of a *Dengbêj* typically includes epic tales (*destan*), heroic songs of battle (*şer*), and mournful laments (*stran*), all of which were central to Horo's performances.<sup>22</sup>

### 2.2. Repertoire: From Ancient Epics to Modern Anthems

Cemîl Horo's repertoire spanned the full breadth of the *Dengbêj*'s domain, from ancient folklore to contemporary political commentary. His work can be broadly categorized into three thematic areas:

1. **Folklore and Epic Heritage:** Horo was a crucial link in the chain of transmission for classic Kurdish epics. His renditions of tales like *Memê Alan*, *Feteh beg*, *Ûsib Şer*, and *Mem û Zîn* ensured that these foundational stories of Kurdish culture were preserved and passed on.<sup>1</sup> His collaboration with the legendary female *Dengbêj* Ayşe Şan on a recording of *Memê Alan* was a particularly momentous event, uniting two of the most powerful Kurdish voices of their generation.<sup>20</sup>
2. **Songs of Personal Experience and Lament:** Reflecting the *Dengbêj*'s role in articulating grief, this category includes the deeply personal songs about the murder of his son Henan, as well as other poignant laments like *Lo bavo* (Oh father).<sup>1</sup> These works transform his private sorrow into a universal expression of suffering, a hallmark of the tradition.
3. **Nationalist and Political Songs:** In the later stages of his career, Horo's music became an explicit tool of political expression. Influenced by his own experiences of persecution and his contact with revolutionary movements, he composed and performed songs that glorified the modern Kurdish struggle. Anthems such as *Leyla Qasim* (honoring an activist executed by the Iraqi Ba'athist regime), *Şêx Seîd* (about the 1925 Kurdish rebellion leader), *Pêşmergê Kurd* (Kurdish Peshmerga), and *Newroz* (the Kurdish new year and symbol of resistance) became part of his repertoire.<sup>1</sup>

This evolution in his repertoire marks a critical adaptation of the *Dengbêj* tradition. While the traditional role was to preserve the past—singing of feudal battles and ancient heroes—Horo repurposed this ancient and highly respected art form to serve the needs of modern Kurdish nationalism. By using the epic style to sing about contemporary political figures and events, he transformed the *Dengbêj* from a passive preserver of history into an active participant in shaping the political consciousness of his time. He was, in effect, creating a new, modern epic of the national liberation struggle, ensuring the tradition remained relevant and politically potent for a new generation.

## 2.3. Recording Career and Collaborations

Cemîl Horo's recording career began in Aleppo in the mid-1960s, where he laid down his first tracks of traditional folklore songs.<sup>1</sup> His work was later released on several albums and 45 RPM vinyl records, particularly during his time in Turkey.<sup>1</sup> These recordings were vital in disseminating his music beyond live performances, allowing his voice to cross the heavily guarded borders that divided Kurdistan.

His most significant collaboration was with Ayşe Şan, one of the most revered female singers in Kurdish history. Their joint recordings in Turkey, facilitated by the musician Arif Sağ, are considered landmarks of Kurdish music.<sup>1</sup> Their duet on the epic

*Memê Alan* is particularly iconic and remains a definitive version of the tale.<sup>26</sup> This partnership not only produced timeless art but also symbolized a powerful unity between Kurdish artists from different regions (Syria and Turkey), defying the political fragmentation of their homeland.

**Table 2: Cemîl Horo (1934-1989): Known Discography and Repertoire**

Title	Type	Release/Recording Info	Notes
<i>Memê Alan</i>	Traditional Epic	7" Single, CD Compilation	Often performed, famously recorded with Ayşe Şan. <sup>1</sup>
<i>Mem û Zîn</i>	Traditional Epic	Album (Turkey)	A foundational Kurdish epic. <sup>1</sup>
<i>Feteh beg</i>	Traditional Epic	7" Single, Early Recording (Aleppo)	<sup>1</sup>
<i>Ûsib Şer</i>	Traditional Epic	7" Single, Early Recording (Aleppo)	<sup>1</sup>
<i>Ley Le Can</i>	Folk Song	7" Single (Urfanın Sesi Plâk, U.S.P. 49)	<sup>2</sup>
<i>Lo bavo / Wey lawo</i>	Lament	Early Recording (Aleppo)	Deeply personal and mournful songs. <sup>1</sup>
<i>Lo lavo</i>	Folk Song	Album (Turkey)	<sup>1</sup>
<i>Teyar axa</i>	Folk Song	Album (Turkey)	<sup>1</sup>
<i>Bedew / Bedevcan</i>	Folk Song	Album (Turkey)	<sup>1</sup>
<i>Leyla Qasim</i>	Political Song	Later Recording	Glorifies a modern Kurdish martyr. <sup>1</sup>
<i>Şêx Seîd</i>	Political Song	Later Recording	Commemorates the 1925 rebellion leader. <sup>1</sup>
<i>Pêşmerge Kurd</i>	Political Song	Later Recording	Anthem for the Kurdish fighters. <sup>1</sup>
<i>Newroz</i>	Political Song	Later Recording	Celebrates the Kurdish new year as an act of resistance. <sup>1</sup>
<i>Memo Zin</i>	Traditional Epic	7" Single (Urfanın Sesi Plâk, U.S.P. 24)	<sup>31</sup>
<i>Memêalan</i> (with Ayşe Şan)	Compilation	CD (Çağdaş Müzik, 2006)	Posthumous compilation of his iconic collaboration. <sup>26</sup>

## Part III: A Life of Persecution, Exile, and Return

### **3.1. The Price of Identity: Political Activism and State Repression**

Cemil Horo's art was inseparable from his political identity, a fact that made him a target of the Syrian state. He was an active member of the Kurdistan Democratic Party – Syria (KDP-S).<sup>1</sup> His commitment to his Kurdish identity came at a great personal cost. During the period of unity between Syria and Egypt (1958-1961), he was arrested for lighting the Nowruz torch—a potent symbol of Kurdish cultural defiance. He endured 80 days of severe torture but refused to provide any information to his captors.<sup>1</sup>

Upon his release, he was so physically broken that he was transferred to Al-Razi Hospital in Aleppo. In an incident that serves as a stark allegory for the ethnic tensions within Syrian society, the Arab doctor on duty, upon learning Horo was a Kurdish political activist, refused to treat him. He was subsequently cared for in secret at the home of a fellow Kurdish doctor.<sup>1</sup> This experience of state brutality followed by communal solidarity would become a recurring pattern in his life.

### **3.2. Flight and Refuge: Exile in Turkey and Iraqi Kurdistan**

By 1970, the relentless persecution by Syrian security forces became unbearable, forcing Horo to flee the country with his family.<sup>1</sup> His first stop was Turkey, where he lived for about a year and a half under the pseudonym "Abd al-Qahraman" to avoid detection.<sup>2</sup> Even in exile, he continued his artistic mission, recording some of his most famous works during this period. From Turkey, he made a perilous journey to Iraqi Kurdistan, finding refuge among the Peshmerga forces led by Îsê Siwar in the city of Zaxo.<sup>1</sup> This period was transformative, as it brought him into direct contact with the heart of the Barzanî-led revolutionary movement. This experience deeply influenced his later work, leading to the creation of songs that directly addressed the Kurdish national struggle and its heroes.<sup>1</sup>

This forced journey across the borders of Syria, Turkey, and Iraq effectively transformed Horo from a regional Afrini artist into a figure with a lived, pan-Kurdish experience. His life physically traced the map of a "Greater Kurdistan" that existed in the Kurdish imagination but was denied by state boundaries. This migration broadened his consciousness, and his music evolved to reflect a wider national identity, serving as a powerful medium for sharing these cross-border experiences with a fragmented people. He became a living link between the divided parts of the Kurdish nation.

### **3.3. The Final Years: Return, Hardship, and Death**

Following a general amnesty issued in Syria, Horo and his family were able to return. They

settled first in Aleppo and finally in the town of Jandairis in his home region of Afrin.<sup>3</sup> However, his final years were marked by immense hardship. He returned to his old trade of carpentry to support his family, his body weakened by chronic illnesses, including diabetes and liver problems.<sup>3</sup> In a poignant and powerful metaphor for his unending suffering, it is reported that he would often continue to work even after a recent surgery, with his unhealed wound reopening and staining his clothes with blood as he strained against the wood.<sup>3</sup>

Cemîl Horo died on the evening of September 19, 1989, in Ibn Rushd Hospital in Aleppo.<sup>1</sup> The indignities he faced in life followed him in death. The local imam in Jandairis reportedly refused to perform the ritual washing of his body, declaring him a sinner because he was a singer and had consumed alcohol.<sup>3</sup> His family was so impoverished that they could not afford the costs of his burial, which was ultimately paid for by friends and supporters.<sup>3</sup> He was laid to rest in the Henên cemetery, near Afrin, the same resting place as another revered Kurdish nationalist figure, Nûrî Dêsimî.<sup>1</sup>

## **Part IV: The Enduring Echo - Legacy and Influence**

### **4.1. Familial Transmission: The Music of Elî and Ehmed Cemîl Horo**

Cemîl Horo's artistic flame was not extinguished with his death; it was passed down to his children. Several of his sons have become notable musicians, ensuring his voice continues to resonate. His son Elî Cemîl Horo, in particular, has established a significant musical career, actively performing his father's repertoire at concerts and in recordings, alongside his own compositions.<sup>4</sup> Another son, Ehmed Cemîl Horo, is also a singer who has recorded music, including a song dedicated to a martyr, continuing his father's tradition of politically conscious art.<sup>7</sup> Through their work, available on platforms like YouTube and Apple Music, they serve as direct conduits of their father's legacy, consciously keeping his songs and his style alive for a new generation of Kurds.<sup>4</sup>

### **4.2. Institutionalization of Memory: The Cemîl Horo Center for Culture and Art**

Perhaps the most powerful testament to Horo's enduring influence is the *Navenda Çand û Hunerê ya Cemîl Horo* (Cemîl Horo Center for Culture and Art) in Aleppo.<sup>11</sup> Established in the Kurdish neighborhood of Sheikh Maqsoud after the Rojava Revolution of 2012, the center is a profound act of cultural reclamation.<sup>12</sup> For decades, the Syrian Ba'athist regime actively suppressed Kurdish language and culture. The founding of this center in Horo's name



symbolizes a direct reversal of those assimilationist policies.

The center's mission is to actively preserve and propagate Kurdish heritage by offering training courses in music, traditional dance (*govend*), theater, and painting, with a particular focus on educating children, youth, and women.<sup>35</sup> It is not a passive museum but a vibrant, living institution. It organizes public cultural events and has even produced and released new artistic works, such as a music video for a song titled "Welat" (Homeland), which promotes themes of national unity and solidarity.<sup>11</sup>

The trajectory of Horo's legacy exemplifies a complete and successful cycle of cultural resistance under extreme duress. It began with the individual embodiment of tradition in the person of Cemîl Horo himself. Upon his death, it passed into the phase of familial transmission through the artistic work of his sons. Finally, it achieved broad societal institutionalization with the establishment of the cultural center. This progression takes his legacy from the private, familial sphere and firmly plants it in the public, educational domain, ensuring its survival and vitality far beyond the lifespan of any single individual. It is a model for how intangible cultural heritage can be sustained and revitalized against overwhelming odds.

### 4.3. Conclusion: The Unfulfilled Wish and the Unbroken Voice

Before he died, Cemîl Horo shared a final wish with his eldest son. He asked that if a free and independent Kurdistan were ever established, artists, poets, and dancers should come to his grave with celebration and ululations to tell him to rise, for the dream had been realized.<sup>1</sup> This poignant final request frames his entire life's work. It confirms that for him, art was never for art's sake; it was inextricably bound to the struggle for national liberation. His personal legacy was ultimately subsumed into this larger political dream.

Today, that wish remains unfulfilled. The Kurdish people continue to face division, conflict, and occupation. Yet, while the political dream has not been achieved, Cemîl Horo's voice remains unbroken. Preserved in his timeless recordings, carried forward by the devotion of his sons, and amplified by the vital work of the cultural center that bears his name, his music continues to serve as a powerful symbol of Kurdish identity, resilience, and the unyielding quest for cultural freedom. His mountainous voice still echoes from Çiyayê Kurmênc, a testament to a spirit that could not be silenced.

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