

The Kurdish Dengbêj Tradition: Orality, Collective Memory, and Ethnomusicological Transformations

The preservation of cultural memory, historical continuity, and collective identity in societies subjected to systemic marginalization frequently relies on the resilience of oral traditions. Among the most complex, politically charged, and historically significant of these oral frameworks in the Middle East and the Caucasus is the Kurdish *dengbêjî* tradition. Functioning as the primary historiographical and ethnomusicological archive for the Kurmanji-speaking Kurdish populations, the *dengbêj* (plural: *dengbêjan*) operates simultaneously as a bard, an archivist, and a spokesperson for a historically stateless people¹. For centuries, these highly trained singer-poets have utilized an unaccompanied, melismatic vocal artistry to narrate epics of war, tribal conflict, romance, displacement, and mourning⁴. By doing so, they have effectively encoded the collective memory and moral geography of the Kurdish socio-political landscape into a vast, continuously evolving repertoire of *kilam* (recital songs) and *destan* (epics)³. An exhaustive examination of the *dengbêj* tradition requires a multidisciplinary approach, bridging ethnomusicology, memory studies, linguistic anthropology, gender and affect theory, and political history. As modernization, national assimilation policies, and technological shifts have fundamentally altered the landscape of Kurdish cultural production, the *dengbêj* tradition has undergone profound transformations. It has transitioned from the rural, feudal spaces of the *dîwanxane* (guest house) to the mediated realms of transnational Soviet radio broadcasting, diaspora cassette culture, and modern institutionalized heritage projects within urban centers like Diyarbakır⁹. This report provides a comprehensive analysis of the linguistic and acoustic mechanics of the *dengbêj* art, the spatial and social architecture of its performances, its role in forging a counter-hegemonic historical record, the deeply gendered dynamics of its vocal expressions, its intersections with queer marginality, and its contemporary revitalization within the complex political geography of the region.

The Epistemology of Orality and Collective Memory

To comprehend the existential importance of the *dengbêj* tradition, one must situate it within the theoretical frameworks of memory studies and the epistemology of oral cultures. In modern nation-states, the transmission of history is heavily reliant on literacy and official state archives. However, for the Kurdish populations residing in Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria, access to literacy in their native language was systematically obstructed throughout the twentieth century³. The Republic of Turkey, under its foundational ideology of Kemalism, enacted severe linguistic policies that criminalized the public use of the Kurdish language, thereby effectively barring the creation of a formalized, written Kurdish historiography¹².

Within this environment of forced systemic illiteracy and linguistic prohibition, the lack of a

written tradition did not equate to a lack of history; rather, it catalyzed the development of an extraordinarily robust oral culture². The dengbêj tradition functioned as the preeminent epistemological vehicle for the Kurmanji-speaking Kurds, serving as a vast, decentralized acoustic archive³. Ordinary citizens, many of whom were entirely unaware until the 1990s that Kurmanji could even be written, relied exclusively on the dengbêj to define, recall, and preserve their past across generations³.

The historiographical efficacy of the dengbêj is vividly demonstrated when analyzing the Kurdish collective memory of early twentieth-century geopolitical traumas. A prominent case study within memory studies is the Agirî (Ararat) rebellion against the Turkish state between 1926 and 1930³. When researchers analyze the *kilams* composed about the fighters of this resistance, profound discrepancies emerge between the oral collective memory of the Kurmanj people and both official Turkish military accounts and later written Kurdish nationalist narratives³. While official state archives reduce the rebellion to a localized pacification of primitive bandits, the dengbêj narratives meticulously map the moral geography of the resistance, detailing the specific heroism of local fighters, the betrayals by allied tribes, and the profound communal grief that followed the defeat³.

By maintaining these narratives, the dengbêj ensured that the community retained autonomous control over its historical consciousness, overriding state-imposed amnesia³. Anthropologists and historians, including Martin van Bruinessen, note that all major Kurdish historical traumas—from the Dersim massacres of 1938 to the chemical bombing of Halabja in 1988—have been etched into the collective psyche through the enduring power of elegy and sung poetry¹⁶. The dengbêj, therefore, mediates collective trauma, translating unspeakable violence and loss into a structured acoustic form that enables communal grieving, resilience, and intergenerational transmission¹⁸.

Acoustic Architecture, Linguistics, and Ethnomusicology

The term *dengbêj* is a compound derived from the Kurdish words *deng* (voice, sound, or breath) and *bêj* (the present tense stem of the verb *gotin*, meaning to say or to tell)⁶. The practitioner is thus literally a "voice-teller," a designation that underscores the absolute primacy of the human vocal apparatus in this tradition.

The Mechanics of the Kilam and Vocal Ornamentation

Unlike many other regional bardic traditions, the traditional dengbêj performs a *cappella*, relying entirely on the bare voice without instrumental accompaniment². This absence of instrumentation requires extraordinary acoustic discipline, including immense vocal stamina, precise diaphragmatic control, and the mastery of complex laryngeal techniques¹. Ethnomusicological analyses of dengbêj recordings reveal a fundamental reliance on melismatic ornamentations, partial flat microtones, and sustained recitatives delivered on a single note⁶. Performers frequently deploy dramatic, silent pauses of up to eight seconds to

build narrative tension, followed by cascading decrescendos—often characterized as "sobbing drops" or "trills"—that mimic the physical act of weeping, a technique particularly resonant in the *şîn* (lament)⁶.

The primary vehicle of the dengbêj is the *kilam* (recital song or melodized speech), which must be distinguished from the *stran*³. While the *stran* is a more rhythmic, highly melodic folk song often accompanied by instruments and used for dancing or communal celebrations (*govend*), the *kilam* is a specialized narrative form²². The *kilam* utilizes an irregular, flexible meter that is completely subservient to the narrative content²². This allows the dengbêj to spontaneously stretch, compress, or emphasize specific syllables based on the emotional and improvisational demands of the live performance, effectively blurring the boundary between song and spoken-word storytelling⁸. While Kurdish folk music lacks a rigidly formalized modal hierarchy akin to the Ottoman *makam* or the Persian *dastgah*, dengbêj melodies maintain clear affinities with these regional scale systems, adapting heptatonic scales for narrative delivery⁶.

Linguistic Engineering: Split-Ergativity and Formulaic Composition

The linguistic richness of dengbêjî is deeply intertwined with the syntax of the Kurmanji dialect. A defining feature of Kurmanji grammar is split-ergativity in the past tense for transitive verbs. In this system, the subject of a past-tense transitive verb takes the oblique case, while the direct object remains in the nominative/direct case, and the verb agrees with the object rather than the subject (e.g., *Min tu dîtî* — "I saw you", where *min* is the oblique form of "I")²⁸.

This ergative alignment provides the dengbêj with unique narrative leverage. During epic recitations of tribal warfare, blood feuds, or hunting expeditions, the ergative structure allows the bard to seamlessly shift focal agents, heightening the dramatic impact of martial encounters by emphasizing the recipient of an action²⁸. The syntax inherently directs the listener's affective attention toward the target of violence or the victim of tragedy.

Furthermore, the tradition relies heavily on alliteration, complex rhyming patterns, and parallelism, which are utilized to create a highly visual, mesmerizing acoustic experience³⁰.

While a master dengbêj possesses a prodigious memory capable of recalling thousands of verses, the art form is fundamentally improvisational². To achieve this, performers rely on established structural templates and mnemonic formulas—recurring motifs concerning specific mountains, pastures, weapons, or archetypal character traits². The dengbêj dynamically inserts the specific names of local heroes, rival tribes, and contemporary events into these formulas as the performance unfolds². This modular composition technique enables the dengbêj to construct entirely new epics in real-time, responding immediately to unfolding historical events or the specific mood of the audience².

The Archival Legacy of Early Field Recordings

The ethnomusicological study of the Kurdish voice began with the advent of early sound recording technology. The first documented recordings of Kurdish music were made on March 1, 1902, by the archaeologist and anthropologist Felix von Luschan, who recorded five Kurdish songs on wax cylinders during an excavation in Zencirli (near modern Gaziantep)⁶. These

extremely rare acoustic artifacts capture the raw, unaccompanied recitatives and sobbing cadences that continue to define the dengbêj art today⁶.

Decades later, ethnomusicologist Stephen Blum conducted extensive fieldwork between 1968 and 1972 in the northern Iranian province of Khorasan³². Blum's collections, which focused on the sung poetry of Persian, Khorasani Turkish, and Kurmanji Kurdish speakers, remain vital to the comparative study of the region³². Blum's rhythmic and melodic analyses revealed that the scarcity of organized musical performance in certain rural Iranian-Kurdish communities was not necessarily an inherent cultural trait, but rather a direct privation caused by extreme socioeconomic poverty³³. Furthermore, his recordings of Kurmanji epics and songs from political prisoners in Mashhad (such as the song "Vakilâbâd") highlight how the dengbêj tradition transcends the borders of Turkey, forming a continuous acoustic landscape of resistance across the broader Kurdish diaspora³⁴.

Comparative Analysis: Dengbêjs, Aşiks, and Regional Bards

The distinctiveness of the dengbêj tradition becomes starkly apparent when subjected to a comparative analysis against parallel bardic traditions within the same geographic and cultural sphere, most notably the *âşık* (or *ashugh*) tradition of Turkish, Azerbaijani, and Armenian cultures³¹. While both the dengbêj and the *âşık* are wandering singer-poets who serve as custodians of cultural memory, they diverge fundamentally in their performative, musical, and conceptual methodologies³⁰.

Furthermore, preliminary studies have compared dengbêj to the vernacular Arabic *fann* tradition found in the Antioch/Hatay province of Turkey and neighboring Arab countries²⁶. However, research indicates that the *fann* is heavily reliant on a fixed poetic and rhythmic structure where rhythm dominates the melodic aspects, showing almost no interaction or cross-pollination with the Kurdish dengbêj tradition²⁶.

The fundamental differences between the Kurdish dengbêj and the Turkic/Armenian *âşık* traditions are outlined below:

Feature	The Âşık / Ashugh Tradition	The Dengbêj Tradition
Instrumentation	Performances are almost universally accompanied by musical instruments. The master teaches the apprentice how to play the long-necked saz (<i>bağlama</i>), <i>duduk</i> , <i>kamancheh</i> , or <i>tar</i> , alongside formal melodic	Traditionally performed strictly <i>a cappella</i> . The tradition rejects the reliance on a physical instrument; the performer's sole assets are the larynx, breath control, and memory ² .

	<i>makam</i> systems ³¹ .	
Authorship & Attribution	Highly individualized. Performers utilize a specific pseudonym (<i>mahlas</i>) chosen by their master or the audience. Consequently, historical works are easily identified with and attributed to a specific creator ³¹ .	Fundamentally collective. Pseudonyms are almost never used in the classical tradition. It is exceptionally difficult, if not impossible, to trace a <i>kilam</i> to its original, individual composer ³¹ .
Compositional Style & Improvisation	Highly reliant on strict syllabic meter and end-rhymes. Because of this rigidity, many <i>âşiks</i> write and memorize their compositions in advance, though elite masters can improvise within the meter ³¹ .	Driven by an irregular meter. Total reliance on spontaneous, live improvisation using thematic templates. A performer who only memorizes and cannot improvise is demoted to the title of <i>stranbêj</i> (singer) ³¹ .
Cultural Space & Transmission	Evolved significantly through urban <i>kahvehane</i> (coffee-house) competitions and formal duels. Exists comfortably within both oral and written cultural spheres ³¹ .	Rooted deeply in the rural, agrarian, and feudal spaces of the <i>dîwanxane</i> (guest houses of tribal leaders) and <i>civat</i> (village gatherings). It is an exclusively oral phenomenon ³ .

The Spatiality of Performance and the Apprenticeship System

The social vitality and cultural gravity of *dengbêjî* are historically inseparable from its performative context. Traditionally, these performances were not staged concerts but organic communal events that took place during the long winter nights in pastoral and agrarian communities³. The primary arenas for these recitations were the *civat* (the general community gathering) and the *dîwanxane* (the reception room or guest house of a village leader, *agha*, or *mir*)³.

Within the hierarchical spatial dynamics of the *dîwanxane*, the *dengbêj* commanded immense respect and an elevated social status¹. Emirs and powerful tribal chiefs often maintained one or

more resident bards, acting as patrons who utilized the dengbêj to legitimize their authority, document their genealogies, and celebrate their martial victories¹. Through the act of listening to the bard, the ruling elite codified their own history.

However, the relationship between the patron and the poet was complex; the dengbêj was not a mere sycophant. The bard wielded the dual power of panegyric and devastating satire². Because the *kilams* contained thinly veiled contemporary political connotations and social critiques, the threat of being immortalized as a coward, a traitor, or a tyrant in a widely circulated song exerted considerable social and moral pressure on tribal leaders². In many instances, dengbêjs acted as moral guides, teaching the community how to navigate hardships, adjudicate disputes, and confront collective injustice¹.

The dynamic between the performer and the audience in the *civat* was immersive and deeply participatory, though not necessarily interactive in the modern sense. The audience typically already knew the foundational plot of the epic being sung³. Therefore, the aesthetic pleasure derived from the performance was not based on the suspense of plot twists. Rather, listeners anticipated the dengbêj's vocal virtuosity, the introduction of novel episodes, the vividness of the improvisation, and the sheer affective power of the delivery³. "Every performance is new, but every performance presupposes something old; the tale itself"³. Because they could read the audience's reactions in real-time, the dengbêj could dynamically stretch narratives out or cut them short depending on the room's emotional resonance and attention span³¹.

Achieving this level of mastery required a rigorous, quasi-monastic apprenticeship. An aspiring singer was required to attach themselves to an established master dengbêj, essentially serving them in daily life while absorbing the vast mental archive of Kurdish history, geography, etiquette, and genealogy¹. This pedagogical lineage ensured that the intricate acoustic techniques of breath control and narrative structuring were meticulously passed down, while simultaneously inculcating the apprentice into the moral and ethical codes of Kurdish society¹.

Political Geography, Borderlands, and the Micro-Politics of the Destan

While grand national rebellions feature in the repertoire, a massive segment of the classic dengbêj archive is concerned with highly localized, micro-political events: tribal skirmishes, inter-family blood feuds, nomadic migrations, and star-crossed local romances⁵.

A quintessential illustration of this is the famous *destan* "Filite Quto"³⁹. Originating in the late nineteenth century on the Xerzan plain near Batman, this epic details a deadly dispute between the Etmanki and Reshkotan tribes. The conflict began over a seemingly trivial toll demanded from a passing caravan and escalated uncontrollably when a chieftain's rifle was demanded as a penalty⁴⁰. In the deeply patriarchal, honor-bound society of the era, the surrender of a personal weapon represented an absolute, emasculating loss of honor, leading inexorably to a devastating blood feud and the eventual killing of the chieftain Filite Quto⁴⁰. For over a century, this localized tragedy was carried by dengbêjs across the entire Kurdish world, fracturing into distinct regional variants in the Serhad highlands and the Caucasus, transforming a regional

dispute into a universal meditation on honor, pride, and the tragic inevitability of violence⁴⁰. In recent decades, some contemporary Kurdish political activists and modernists have viewed these tribal epics through a self-Orientalizing lens, dismissing them as embarrassing relics of backward feudalism, inter-tribal division, and a primitive lack of national unity⁵. Consequently, the dengbêj art was temporarily deemed unfashionable by certain revolutionary factions who desired a unified, forward-looking nationalist ideology⁵.

However, critical political anthropologists and ethnomusicologists, such as Wendelmoet Hamelink and Hanifi Baris, argue that this perspective fundamentally misreads the political geography embedded in the songs⁵. The dengbêj repertoire reveals a distinct spatial consciousness. The songs consistently juxtapose the *home* (the local, the known, the tribal alliance) against *xerîbî* (the foreign, the state, the unknown)⁵. The borders established by modern nation-states—Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria—are almost never recognized as legitimate in the *kilams*; rather, they are depicted as hostile, arbitrary interferences in the natural Kurdish landscape⁵. From this perspective, the fragmented, highly localized political structure celebrated in the dengbêj epics was not a failure of national unity, but a deliberate, sophisticated survival mechanism⁵. Maintaining localized tribal loyalties allowed Kurdish communities to actively resist total incorporation and assimilation into the centralized, panoptic structures of the Ottoman, Persian, or modern nation-states⁵.

The Pantheon of Dengbêjî: Icons and Custodians

The history of dengbêjî is anchored by monumental figures whose biographies are inextricably linked to the turbulent history of the Middle East and the Caucasus.

Evdalê Zeynikê: The Homer of the Kurds

Universally recognized as the founding father of the Serhad school of epic singing, Evdalê Zeynikê (born around 1800) is arguably the most mythologized figure in the tradition⁴². Born in the village of Cemalverdi in the Ağrı region, Evdal emerged from profound poverty. Unusually for a patriarchal society, he was named after his mother, Zeyne (Evdal, son of Zeyne)⁴². He eventually became the official court bard of Sürmeli Mehmed Pasha, the lord of Eleşkirt⁴². According to legend, Evdal did not begin singing until he was thirty, following a profound illness and a transformative dream that bestowed upon him a voice of unparalleled, thunderous resonance².

He accompanied his patron into war, documenting battles, victories, and eventually composing the lament for his lord's death⁴². Evdal purportedly lived to be over 110 years old, traveling extensively throughout Kurdistan, Iran, and the Caucasus⁴². He spent his final years in total blindness and poverty, and his heart-wrenching laments regarding his lost sight and physical decline remain masterworks of Kurdish oral literature⁴². The renowned Kurdish novelist Yaşar Kemal famously dubbed him the "Homer of the Kurds," a highly apt comparison that recognizes Evdal's foundational role in standardizing Kurdish oral epic, much like the blind Greek poet's role in antiquity⁴².

Karapetê Xaço: The Armenian Guardian of Kurdish Memory

One of the most extraordinary and beloved figures in the history of dengbêjî was not ethnically Kurdish, but Armenian. Karapetê Xaço (Garabet Haçadruyan) was born in 1900 in the village of Bileyder, near modern-day Batman³⁹. In 1915, during the horror of the Armenian Genocide, he witnessed the annihilation of his village and the murder of his parents³⁹. Karapet, alongside his brother and sisters, was spared by an Ottoman soldier, partially because the orphaned boy possessed a preternatural talent for singing in Kurmanji³⁹.

Saved literally by his voice, Karapet immersed himself deeply in the Kurdish repertoire. Following the defeat of the Kurdish Sheikh Said Rebellion, he fled to French-mandated Syria, where he served as a mercenary in the French Foreign Legion for fifteen years³⁹. In 1946, taking advantage of Soviet repatriation programs, he migrated to the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic, settling in Yerevan⁴⁴. There, he joined the Kurdish language service of Radio Yerevan. Possessing a vast, encyclopedic archival memory, Karapetê Xaço recorded hundreds of traditional songs—including definitive versions of *Filite Quto*, *Ay lo miro*, and *Adullê*⁴⁰. His life stands as a profound testament to the complex, interwoven cultural tapestry of the Armenian Highlands and Northern Mesopotamia, where an Armenian survivor of genocide became one of the greatest and most revered custodians of Kurdish collective memory³⁹.

Seyîtxanê Boyaxcî: The Nightingale of Amed

Representative of the transition into the modern era is Seyîtxanê Boyaxcî (Seydo Şimşek), known colloquially as the "Nightingale of Amed" (Diyarbakır)⁴⁷. A central fixture of the modern Mala Dengbêjan, Boyaxcî lived through the severe linguistic repressions of the 1980s military coup and the violent sieges of the 2010s⁴⁷. Until his death in 2020 at the age of 87, his performances bridged the gap between the clandestine, persecuted singing of the late 20th century and the institutionalized, publicly celebrated heritage practices of the 21st century⁴⁷.

Gender, Affective Technologies, and the Female Voice

The conventional, historical narrative of dengbêjî frequently foregrounds male performers. The structural realities of the apprenticeship system, which required an aspiring bard to live with and serve a male master, effectively precluded women from formal participation¹. Furthermore, strict patriarchal codes deemed the public projection of the female voice to be shameful, sinful, and deeply transgressive⁴⁸. However, to dismiss women's participation is to fundamentally misunderstand the affective and private spheres of Kurdish oral culture. As contemporary female dengbêjs note, mothers and women in the villages were the original, uncredited preservers of collective memory, expressing the grueling hardships of agrarian life, the sorrow of forced marriages, and the pain of patriarchal oppression through lullabies (*lorîk*) and laments (*şîn*)⁶.

Voice as Affective Technology and Property

Anthropologist Marlene Schäfers' extensive ethnographic research on Kurdish women

dengbêjs in the city of Wan fundamentally reshapes the understanding of the female voice in this tradition¹⁹. Schäfers argues that the female voice functions as a highly potent "affective technology"¹⁹. In a society marked by continuous state violence, displacement, and systemic poverty, the ability of a woman's voice to articulate collective pain and grief is highly valued. The acoustic form of the female voice—its specific timbre, its resonance, its capacity for expressing raw sorrow—creates new intimacies and social relations among marginalized subjects¹⁹. Kurdish audiences often explicitly state that the mark of a truly great singer is one who "makes you cry"⁵¹.

Schäfers also charts the emergence of the concept of "voice as property" fueled by liberal governance and capitalist markets¹⁹. Historically, a *kilam* belonged to the collective oral genealogy. However, as Kurdish music entered the commercial recording industry, the concept of individual authorship emerged. Women dengbêjs have increasingly sought to claim ownership over their voices and repertoires to prevent them from being stolen by male performers or appropriated by Turkish artists¹⁹.

Yet, as Schäfers illustrates, entering the public sphere does not automatically equate to emancipation. The liberal promise that "finding one's voice" leads to freedom is fraught with disappointment¹⁹. Women performers often face intense pressure from political activists and university administrators to sing about "empowerment," "women's issues," or the national struggle, forcing them to artificially curate their rhythms, tones, and topics to make their performances more "digestible" to modern ideological expectations¹⁹. This disciplining of the voice creates novel vulnerabilities and deep frustrations for female artists who feel their traditional art is being hijacked¹⁹.

Icons of Female Defiance: Ayşe Şan and Gazîn

The immense struggle of female dengbêjs is epitomized by the life of Ayşe Şan (Eyşe Şan). Born in Diyarbakır in 1938 to a traditional dengbêj father, she absorbed the repertoire by secretly listening through the walls of her home when male bards gathered⁴⁸. Despite her undeniable talent, her family and tribe violently opposed her desire to sing publicly. Forced into a marriage at age fifteen, she eventually left her husband, facing severe societal ostracization and threats from her own brother⁴⁸.

Moving to Gaziantep, she worked in a tea house and recorded Turkish songs on local radio to survive, before relocating to Istanbul in 1963 to record her first Kurdish album⁴⁸. Clad in traditional Kurdish attire, her recordings—such as *Ez Xezal im* (I am a gazelle) and *Derdê Hewiyê* (The pain of a co-wife)—shattered societal taboos and gave voice to the specific, intimate plight of Kurdish women⁴⁸. Facing intense state repression for singing in Kurdish, she was forced into exile in Germany in 1976⁴⁸. While in exile, she suffered the tragic loss of her 18-month-old daughter, Shahnaz, an event that birthed her devastatingly sorrowful song *Qederê* (Fate)⁴⁸. Denied the right to return to her family in Diyarbakır even upon her deathbed, she died in Izmir in 1996, and is remembered today as the "uncrowned queen" of Kurdish music and a beacon of feminist resistance⁴⁹.

Another pivotal figure in the modern era was Dengbêj Gazîn (Raziye Kızıl). Born in 1959, she

secretly traveled to Istanbul to record her first cassettes under the pseudonym "Gazîn" (meaning complaint or lament) to hide her identity from her conservative family and husband⁵⁶. Once her identity was discovered, she fought fiercely against her social circle for the right to perform. In 2010, she founded the Association of Women Dengbêjs (*Komela Jinên Dengbêj*) in Wan⁵⁶. This organization created a safe, institutional space where young women and girls could receive musical training, research local female bards, and enter the public sphere without facing the totalizing isolation that earlier generations endured⁵¹. Today, male artists like Saîdê Goyî also explicitly honor this legacy, dedicating albums like *Jinê* (Woman/Life) to the female presence in Kurdish society²¹.

Queer Marginalities and Sonic Futurity

The exploration of marginality within the dengbêj tradition extends beyond gender into the realm of queer identity. Recent ethnographic research by scholar Emrah Karakuş delves into the lives, performances, and sung narratives of young, queer dengbêjs¹⁸. In a society constrained by strict heteronormative codes, ongoing militarized conflict between the Turkish state and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), and the highly visible sex-work economy, queer Kurds face intense surveillance from both the state and their own communities¹⁸.

To survive, many develop a "chameleon subjectivity," constantly adapting to evade detection¹⁸. However, within the sonic realm of dengbêjî, queer performers find a medium to express alternative futurities, desires, and difference¹⁸. By adapting traditional acoustic expressions to convey their specific feelings and fantasies, queer dengbêjs mold the tradition into a deeply intimate exploration of identity, challenging both the conservative elements of Kurdish society and the heteronormative assumptions of the broader political struggle¹⁸.

State Suppression, Diaspora, and Radio Yerevan

The trajectory of dengbêjî in the 20th century was fundamentally dictated by the assimilationist policies of the states encompassing the Kurdish regions. In Turkey, the public use of the Kurdish language, including the singing of dengbêj kilams, was strictly prohibited and severely punished¹². Ethnomusicological campaigns were launched by the state to appropriate traditional Kurdish melodies, stripping them of their Kurmanji lyrics and re-recording them as "Turkish Folk Music" to serve the homogenizing nation-building project¹.

The Lifeline of Radio Yerevan

As the tradition was driven underground in Turkey, its survival was largely ensured by a geopolitical anomaly across the heavily guarded borders: the Soviet Union. In 1955, Radio Yerevan, the public broadcaster of the Armenian SSR, launched a Kurdish-language broadcasting service¹¹. Though initially conceived by the Central Administration of the Soviet Union as a brief, 15-minute propaganda tool designed to disseminate communist ideology to Kurds across the border, the service was radically transformed by its head, an Ezidi Kurd named Casimê Celîl⁵⁷.

A survivor of the "orphan generation" who fled the Kars region to the Gyumri orphanage during

the turbulent early 20th century, Celil possessed a profound appreciation for literature and recognized the existential threat facing Kurdish culture⁵⁷. He successfully lobbied Soviet authorities to include Kurdish folk music in the broadcasts⁵⁷. Celil invited local Yazidi and Muslim Kurds from Armenian villages into the studio, making them comfortable with the intimidating recording equipment and preserving their repertoires⁵⁷. Because these Kurds were integrated into the Soviet system, many materials, including children's books and cultural texts, were even published in the Cyrillic alphabet, a unique historical artifact of Kurdish adaptation⁵⁸.

This initiative, subsequently expanded by Xelîlê Çaçan Mûradov, resulted in the first massive Kurdish audio archive in history, containing over 10,000 recordings of Kurdish folk songs⁵⁷. The station also elevated female dengbêjs, most notably Aslîka Qadir, whose powerful renditions earned her the title "the voice of Radio Yerevan"⁶¹.

The impact of Radio Yerevan cannot be overstated. For millions of Kurds in Turkey, Iraq, and Syria, tuning their portable radios to Yerevan was an act of profound cultural resistance¹¹. It was the only medium through which they could hear their mother tongue and historical epics publicly celebrated. Despite the fact that producers often had to translate song lyrics into Russian or Armenian for state censors to approve their content, the radio broadcasts effectively standardized certain repertoires, canonized master dengbêjs, and forged a transnational acoustic community that bypassed the heavily policed borders of the Middle Eastern nation-states¹.

The Cassette Culture and Alevi Transnationalism

Following the brutal military coup in Turkey in 1980, the repression of Kurdish identity reached its zenith¹. In response, a robust, clandestine "cassette culture" emerged⁷. Dengbêjs recorded their kilams in private homes on rudimentary tape recorders³. These cassettes were reproduced en masse and smuggled across borders, particularly by Kurdish exiles residing in Europe³.

Listening to a dengbêj cassette became a highly charged, subversive act that sustained the community's emotional and political morale³. The very acoustic grain of the cassette tape—its hiss, its analog imperfections, its degradation over multiple dubs—became inextricably linked with the aesthetics of exile, intimacy, and survival¹⁹. Simultaneously, in the diaspora (particularly in Germany), intersections between Kurdish ethnic identity and Alevi religious identity flourished. Transnational networks allowed Kurdish Alevis to utilize music and ritual (which later gained UNESCO intangible heritage recognition) to articulate complex, multiple loyalties and collective histories, running parallel to and intersecting with the secular dengbêj revival⁶².

Heritagization, the "Invention of Tradition," and Literary Remediation

In 1991, following a slight relaxation of linguistic bans by President Turgut Özal, and accelerating in the late 1990s and 2000s, Kurdish cultural expressions began to re-emerge in the Turkish public sphere¹². This period marked a profound paradigm shift for the dengbêj: a transition

from an organic, decentralized, and persecuted rural practice into an institutionalized, highly politicized emblem of "Authentic Kurdish National Heritage"⁹.

The Mala Dengbêjan Project

The apotheosis of this institutionalization occurred in Diyarbakır (Amed). Beginning in the mid-2000s, the pro-Kurdish municipality, in a complex negotiation with European Union cultural grant programs and various state actors, established the Dengbêj Project¹³. In May 2007, the *Mala Dengbêjan* (House of Dengbêj) was inaugurated in the historic Sur district of Diyarbakır¹³. Scholar Clémence Scalbert-Yücel frames this development through the anthropological lens of the "invention of tradition"¹². The creation of the Mala Dengbêjan was a deliberate act of heritagization, designed to construct a visible, unassailable cultural capital for the Kurdish political movement¹³. The dengbêjs, who just decades earlier were marginalized as backward relics of tribal feudalism by progressive, Marxist-leaning Kurdish activists, were rapidly repositioned as the authentic, pristine carriers of the Kurdish essence⁵.

This institutionalization profoundly altered the context, spatial dynamics, and performance of the art. In the Mala Dengbêjan, the singers sit in a staged, semi-theatrical setting. The intimate, interactive dynamic of the traditional *civat* is replaced by a spectator-performer dynamic, often catering to tourists, journalists, and urban academics⁹. The repertoire is inevitably curated and sanitized; whereas historical dengbêjs routinely sang of religious themes, inter-tribal warfare, or praised local feudal lords, the institutionalized dengbêj is subtly expected to project a unified, secular nationalist narrative that aligns with the ideological goals of the modern political movement⁵.

Influence on Modern Kurdish Literature

As the physical performance space of the dengbêj was institutionalized, the conceptual space of their art profoundly influenced the revival of written Kurdish literature¹⁴. Through what Gregory Ashcroft terms the "heritage language," prominent Kurdish novelists—most notably Mehmed Uzun and Mehmet Dicle—have explicitly drawn upon the structural, thematic, and linguistic reservoirs of dengbêjî to forge a modern Kurdish literary aesthetic¹⁴.

By translating the oral rhythms, the modular character archetypes, the split-ergative dramatic focus, and the tragic historical consciousness of the *kilam* into the format of the modern novel, these authors have executed a masterful process of cultural revitalization¹⁴. Following Doreen Massey's concept of a "progressive sense of place," these writers link the hyper-local geography of the dengbêj to universal literary themes, transitioning Kurdish heritage from an endangered oral archive into a dynamic, universally legible format¹⁴.

Conclusion

The Kurdish dengbêj tradition stands as one of the most resilient, acoustically sophisticated, and politically charged frameworks of oral historiography in the global record. Spanning from the agrarian feudal courts of 19th-century tribal emirs to the soundproofed studios of Soviet Yerevan, and finally to the institutionalized heritage centers of contemporary Diyarbakır, the

dengbêj has remained the unbroken, vibrating thread of Kurdish historical consciousness. Through unparalleled feats of memory, modular improvisational genius, and rigorous vocal mastery, these bards compensated for the structural absence of a Kurdish state and the deliberate linguicide enacted by assimilative regimes. They transformed localized grief, tribal conflict, and national trauma into epic poetry, providing the Kurdish people with a continuous, autonomous narrative of their own existence. Furthermore, the increasing visibility of women and queer dengbêjs highlights the complex intersection of patriarchal constraints, state surveillance, and affective power, proving that the marginalized voice remains a central technology for articulating resilience and alternative futurities. Ultimately, the evolution of dengbêji from a persecuted rural practice to a celebrated transnational heritage underscores a profound ethnomusicological truth: when a society is systematically denied the right to write its history, it will engineer a way to sing it into permanence.

This is for informational purposes only. For medical advice or diagnosis, consult a professional.

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