

# Voicing the Silences: Significant Gaps in the Academic Record of Kurdish Oral History

## I. Introduction: The Landscape of Kurdish Oral History

### A. Defining Kurdish Oral History: Scope and Enduring Significance

Kurdish oral history represents a rich and diverse tapestry of spoken, sung, and performed traditions that have been central to Kurdish culture for centuries. This encompasses a wide array of forms, including epic poems, songs covering various themes such as love (*lawik*), happiness (*dîlok*), and mourning (*şîn*), as well as lullabies, folktales (*çîrok*), proverbs (*gotinên pêşîyan*), historical narratives, personal testimonies, and the extensive repertoires of traditional performers like *dengbêjs* (bards or epic singers) and *çîrokbêjs* (storytellers).<sup>1</sup> These oral expressions are far more than mere entertainment; they function as crucial repositories of cultural memory, historical consciousness, social values, linguistic diversity, and collective identity for the Kurdish people.<sup>4</sup> For a nation often denied a formal, state-sanctioned written historiography, these traditions have served as the primary means of preserving their past and cultural heritage.<sup>5</sup>

The oral tradition has been a fundamental vehicle for cultural transmission and a potent form of resistance against assimilation and linguistic genocide, particularly in the face of political repression across the regions of Kurdistan in Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria.<sup>1</sup> The *dengbêj*, for instance, is often described as a "living, archival repository" and a "historian" for a culture with a limited written historical record, underscoring the vital role of oral tradition in maintaining identity amidst state-led efforts at cultural erasure.<sup>5</sup> A Kurdish perspective emphasizes the primacy of oral culture with the saying "ji berê gotin hebû" – "from the beginning, there was the word" – highlighting the deep historical roots of orality, especially given the historical challenges associated with early forms of writing.<sup>2</sup>

The very concept of "Kurdish oral history" is inherently multifaceted, reflecting the diverse linguistic tapestry (including Kurmanji, Sorani, Zazaki, Gorani, and others) and varied cultural landscapes within Kurdistan.<sup>1</sup> This internal diversity, encompassing distinct dialects and cultural-religious communities such as Yazidis, Alevi, and Yarsan, itself presents a complex challenge for comprehensive academic documentation.<sup>13</sup> If scholarly research does not meticulously delineate and address this heterogeneity, it risks an inadvertent homogenization of these traditions. Consequently, a significant gap may exist not only in *what* aspects of Kurdish oral history are studied but also in *how* this internal diversity is conceptualized and approached within academic discourse.

## **B. The Imperative of Academic Scrutiny: Why Gaps Matter**

Identifying and addressing the lacunae in the academic record of Kurdish oral history is paramount for achieving a more complete, nuanced, and authentic understanding of Kurdish history, culture, and societal dynamics. Such scrutiny allows for a move beyond narratives frequently shaped by external or dominant political forces, which have often sought to marginalize or misrepresent Kurdish experiences.<sup>7</sup> The process of filling these gaps is integral to decolonizing knowledge production within Kurdish studies and to amplifying the voices of those who have been historically marginalized, including women and minority groups within Kurdish society itself.<sup>4</sup> As some analyses suggest, subaltern voices often have to rely on hegemonic forms and discourses to be recognized as "history"<sup>7</sup>; academic approaches are therefore needed that can validate and analyze oral traditions on their own terms, recognizing their intrinsic historical and cultural value.

Furthermore, scholarly attention can significantly bolster preservation efforts, particularly for endangered oral forms, dialects, and the unique knowledge systems they contain, which are increasingly threatened by modernization, displacement, conflict, and persistent assimilationist policies.<sup>1</sup> The impact of "orientalist, imperial, or national interests" on Kurdish studies further underscores the critical need for objective and thorough gap identification to ensure a more balanced and accurate historical record.<sup>16</sup>

The academic validation and systematic study of Kurdish oral history extend beyond mere scholarly interest; they can have tangible impacts on cultural revitalization efforts and may even inform political claims for recognition and rights. Oral traditions are deeply intertwined with cultural survival, the formation and maintenance of identity, and acts of resistance.<sup>4</sup> Academic research lends legitimacy and broader visibility to these traditions, potentially influencing educational materials, cultural programming, and archival priorities.<sup>7</sup> This, in turn, can strengthen cultural identity and provide a documented foundation for historical claims, an aspect of particular relevance for a stateless nation. Therefore, gaps in the academic record are not simply intellectual voids; they can have profound real-world consequences for the cultural and political agency of the Kurdish people.

## **C. Aim and Structure of the Report**

This report aims to systematically identify and analyze significant gaps in the academic documentation and study of Kurdish oral history. Drawing upon a diverse range of research materials, it will first provide an overview of the existing areas of research concentration. Subsequently, the report will delve into specific lacunae concerning thematic content, geographical and dialectal representation, and the various types of oral performers. Finally, it will explore the multifaceted factors contributing to these gaps and suggest potential pathways for future research to foster a more comprehensive and representative academic record.

## **II. The Current Academic Record: Achievements and**

# Focal Areas

## A. Documenting the Keepers: Studies on *Dengbêjs* and Other Storytellers

A considerable volume of scholarly work has focused on the *dengbêjs*, the traditional Kurdish bards or epic singers, particularly within the context of Turkish Kurdistan. Their pivotal role as custodians of memory, history, and language, especially in regions where the Kurdish language and culture have faced severe suppression, is a well-established theme in academic discourse.<sup>1</sup> Research has explored their distinctive performance styles, the rich content of their epics—which often revolve around themes of love, war, heroism, and lament—and their crucial social functions within Kurdish communities.<sup>5</sup> The heritagization of the *dengbêj* tradition and its explicit connection to language revitalization, notably in the works of modern Kurdish writers such as Mehmed Uzun and Mehmet Dicle, has been a subject of detailed analysis.<sup>1</sup>

Beyond the *dengbêjs*, some academic attention has also been directed towards other traditional performers. For instance, studies have touched upon the *Asheqs* (minstrels or bards) of the Khorasani Kurds in Iran, who play a significant role in celebrations and social gatherings, reciting romantic stories and epic events.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, the role of *akhoonds*, storytellers who employ a variety of mediums including prose, poetry, music, and sometimes even puppetry, has been noted in the preservation and transmission of cultural narratives and moral lessons.<sup>8</sup>

While the focus on *dengbêjs* is undeniably crucial given their prominence and historical significance, this concentration might inadvertently lead to the establishment of a "canon" within the study of Kurdish oral traditions. Such a focus risks overshadowing other, perhaps less formalized or less "epic," storytelling roles and genres that exist across the diverse spectrum of Kurdish communities. Although research on modern approaches to "traditional storytellers" in a plural sense is acknowledged as limited<sup>1</sup>, the very existence of distinct performer types like *akhoonds* and *Asheqs* indicates a broader field of oral artistry. If academic inquiry remains predominantly centered on *dengbêjs*, the full diversity of oral performance and the varied mechanisms of knowledge transmission within Kurdish society may not be adequately captured, leading to an incomplete understanding of this rich cultural domain.

## B. Orality and Textuality: The Interface with Modern Kurdish Literature

A significant and growing area of academic research investigates the profound and multifaceted influence of Kurdish folklore and oral traditions on the development of modern Kurdish written literature, spanning both novels and poetry.<sup>1</sup> Prominent Kurdish writers, most notably Mehmed Uzun, are frequently analyzed for their conscious and deliberate incorporation of oral storytelling techniques, thematic elements, and linguistic features derived from the rich wellspring of Kurdish orality into their literary creations.<sup>1</sup> This

engagement with the oral tradition is often interpreted not merely as an artistic choice but as a deliberate act of cultural resistance and a vital strategy for language revitalization, particularly in contexts where the Kurdish language has been suppressed.<sup>1</sup>

The utilization of oral tradition by modern Kurdish authors is widely seen as a means to bridge the historical past with the contemporary present, assert and reinforce cultural identity, and enrich the expressive capacities of the modern Kurdish literary language.<sup>10</sup> For example, the works of Mehmed Uzun and Mehmet Dicle demonstrate a clear strategy of "heritagization," treating the oral tradition as a valuable cultural inheritance and a dynamic source for linguistic and cultural renewal.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, the connection of writers like Yaşar Kemal to the broader Anatolian *âşık* (bardic) tradition and his use of Homeric epic techniques highlight a wider Turco-Kurdish oral continuum that has shaped literary expression in the region.<sup>22</sup>

While the *influence* of oral tradition on the production of modern Kurdish literature is a relatively well-explored domain, there appears to be comparatively less research focused on the *reception* of these literary works within diverse Kurdish communities. It remains less clear whether and how these literary adaptations, which draw heavily on oral sources, subsequently feed back into or potentially alter contemporary oral storytelling practices or communal interpretations of traditional narratives. The scholarly focus has predominantly been on the writers' utilization of oral tradition for cultural and linguistic revitalization through literary means.<sup>1</sup> However, the extent to which these literary works are consumed by the broader Kurdish populace, and whether they inspire new oral forms or modify existing ones, represents an area where further investigation could illuminate the full circularity of oral-literary interaction—from oral source to literary adaptation and potentially back to communal (oral) engagement and reinterpretation.

## C. Archival Initiatives and Major Collections: Progress and Preservation Efforts

In recent decades, a number of significant archival projects and collections dedicated to Kurdish oral history and cultural materials have emerged, representing crucial strides in the preservation and accessibility of this heritage. These initiatives are vital for safeguarding traditions that are often intangible and vulnerable. Notable examples include:

- **The Vera Beaudin Saeedpour Kurdish Library & Museum Collection:** Housed at Binghamton University, this collection is distinguished by its oral history project focusing on the experiences of Kurdish refugees in Binghamton, New York, documenting their lives, culture, and memories of their homeland and migration.<sup>23</sup>
- **The Jiyān Archives:** This project is specifically dedicated to archiving the histories and contributions of Kurdish women, employing a non-Western feminist perspective and aiming to counter the historical erasure of their narratives.<sup>17</sup>
- **The Kurdistan Memory Programme (KMP):** The KMP focuses on documenting modern Kurdish history, with a particular emphasis on collecting personal testimonies related to persecution, genocide (such as the Anfal campaign), and displacement, utilizing film and multimedia formats.<sup>25</sup>
- **Kashkul (American University of Iraq, Sulaimani):** This collaborative research and

arts initiative is involved in cultural preservation, research, and translation, including oral history projects like "Crux" (exploring devotion and violence) and "Mosul Lives" (collecting interviews about daily life in Mosul).<sup>28</sup>

- **The Iranian Oral History Project (Harvard University):** While broadly focused on modern Iranian history, this extensive collection of personal accounts of political figures and eyewitnesses from the 1920s to the 1980s *may* contain narratives from or pertaining to Kurdish individuals from Iran, though specific Kurdish content requires detailed examination of the archive's finding aids.<sup>29</sup>
- **The Syrian Oral History Archive (SOHA):** This archive aims to construct a comprehensive Syrian narrative from 2011 onwards. While not exclusively Kurdish, its goal of including diverse Syrian voices suggests it *may* house testimonies from the Kurdish population in Syria, particularly concerning recent conflicts and experiences.<sup>31</sup>
- **The Kurdistan Center for Arts and Culture (KCAC) Archive:** This initiative is actively digitizing a wide range of materials, including books, manuscripts, photographs, and historical documents from various collections throughout Kurdistan, aiming to make them globally accessible.<sup>35</sup>

The increasing number and diversity of such initiatives reflect an "archival turn" in Kurdish studies, signifying a growing scholarly and communal recognition of the importance of varied archival sources, including personal and institutional archives, particularly those emerging from diaspora communities.<sup>36</sup> These efforts are crucial for documenting aspects of Kurdish life, culture, and refugee experiences.

The proliferation of diverse archival initiatives, many of which are independent or based in the diaspora, is undoubtedly a positive development for the preservation of Kurdish oral history. However, this decentralized landscape also presents potential challenges. The lack of overarching coordination could lead to a fragmentation of resources, making it difficult for researchers to locate and access comprehensive materials. Furthermore, variations in methodologies, funding levels, and technical standards across different projects might impact the long-term sustainability, interoperability, and overall quality of these archives. Issues such as access restrictions, censorship, and unresolved property rights, especially concerning privately held archives, further complicate the research environment.<sup>36</sup> The historical lack of a unified Kurdish alphabet and standardization in documentation practices also adds another layer of complexity.<sup>38</sup> Consequently, while individual collections are invaluable, the absence of a more integrated archival infrastructure could inadvertently create new "digital divides" or "archival silences," hindering the very goal of comprehensive documentation and accessibility. This points to a systemic gap not just in the content of archives, but in the overarching framework supporting Kurdish oral history research and preservation.

## D. Thematic Focus in Existing Research

Existing academic research on Kurdish oral history demonstrates a concentration on several dominant themes, reflecting both the historical experiences of the Kurdish people and the intellectual currents within Kurdish studies. These focal areas include:

- **National Identity and Nation-Building:** A significant body of work explores how oral

traditions were perceived and utilized as instrumental tools for crafting national selves, fostering a collective Kurdish consciousness, and constructing narratives of nationhood. This was particularly evident in the efforts of Kurdish intellectuals during the early to mid-20th century, who saw folklore and oral literature as vital components in defining and asserting a distinct Kurdish identity.<sup>19</sup>

- **Resistance and Political Consciousness:** Oral poetry, songs, and narratives are frequently analyzed for their role in representing past events in politically charged ways, communicating popular political stances, and functioning as powerful forms of cultural and political resistance against assimilation, oppression, and state violence.<sup>1</sup> For example, the laments performed by figures like Dengbêj Reso for Kurdish leaders of revolts stand in contrast to state-sponsored narratives, highlighting the use of oral tradition to preserve counter-histories.<sup>7</sup>
- **Cultural Memory and Heritage Preservation:** Storytelling, in its various forms, is recognized as a key mechanism for preserving collective memory, transmitting cultural values, and chronicling historical experiences, especially in the absence of, or in opposition to, official written records.<sup>5</sup>
- **Linguicide and Language Revitalization:** The severe impact of state-imposed language suppression on Kurdish dialects has been a critical concern. Consequently, research has examined the crucial role of oral traditions, and their subsequent adaptation into modern literature, in ensuring the survival and promoting the revitalization of the Kurdish language.<sup>1</sup>
- **Trauma and Persecution:** A substantial component of collected oral histories, particularly within archives like the Kurdistan Memory Programme, consists of testimonies related to experiences of genocide, mass displacement, chemical attacks, and other severe human rights abuses.<sup>1</sup> These collections are vital for documenting suffering and seeking justice.

The strong and necessary emphasis on themes of conflict, trauma, and national resistance in much of the collected oral history and subsequent academic analysis is undeniable and serves a critical function in bearing witness and preserving memories of profound historical injustices. However, this predominant focus, particularly evident in archives like the KMP <sup>25</sup>, may inadvertently overshadow the collection and in-depth academic study of oral traditions that reflect the more mundane, everyday aspects of Kurdish life. While sources allude to a grandmother's stories about "how our environment works" or the "early signs of changing seasons" <sup>9</sup>, and others mention genres like love songs, lullabies, and customs related to daily life <sup>3</sup>, the academic interrogation of such "everyday" oral histories appears less prominent compared to narratives centered on political struggle and persecution. This imbalance could lead to a skewed historical narrative derived primarily from oral sources, one that might underrepresent the richness of traditions detailing social norms, local economic practices, indigenous environmental knowledge, and community customs that are not directly tied to major political upheavals. A gap may therefore exist where the full spectrum of Kurdish historical experience, including periods of stability and the fabric of daily social life, is not as systematically captured and analyzed through its oral expressions.

### **III. Significant Gaps in the Academic Record of Kurdish Oral History**

Despite the progress made in documenting and studying certain facets of Kurdish oral tradition, significant gaps persist in the academic record. These lacunae span thematic areas, geographical and dialectal representation, and the diversity of oral performers and genres. Addressing these deficiencies is crucial for a more holistic and representative understanding of Kurdish cultural heritage.

#### **A. Under-explored Thematic Areas**

##### **1. The Oral Histories of Kurdish Women: Beyond Victimhood and Resistance**

A critical gap exists in the comprehensive academic exploration of Kurdish women's oral histories that extends beyond the dominant framings of victimhood in conflict and participation in national resistance. While there is a growing and vital acknowledgment of the need to include women's voices, and initiatives like the Jiyan Archives are actively working to counter their historical erasure<sup>7</sup>, the broader spectrum of their experiences often remains under-documented in scholarly research. College archives and historical records have traditionally centered on "war, the men who went to war, political leaders," frequently marginalizing women's contributions and perspectives.<sup>17</sup> There is a pressing need for research that uncovers and analyzes women's oral narratives reflecting their diverse roles within Kurdish society, their unique knowledge systems (e.g., in healing, agriculture, crafts, child-rearing), their artistic expressions (e.g., specific song genres, storytelling within families), their perspectives on social and cultural change, and their agency in everyday life, distinct from, though often intersecting with, experiences of conflict or political struggle. As noted in some scholarship, documenting the "marginalized voices and lost stories that have not received sufficient attention, especially those of Kurdish women" is essential for a complete historical picture.<sup>4</sup> The affective qualities of women's voice recordings, which have been shown to carve out "specific, gendered subject positions" and contribute to "Kurdish sociality," suggest a depth of experience and cultural contribution that merits far more extensive academic inquiry.<sup>7</sup>

The historical marginalization of Kurdish women's oral histories in academic records is not accidental. It is likely a consequence of combined factors, including patriarchal structures prevalent within some historical Kurdish communities, which may have devalued or confined women's narratives to the private sphere, making them less visible to (often male) external researchers.<sup>47</sup> This has been compounded by the focus of early ethnographers and nationalist movements on male-centric narratives of heroism and political leadership. Furthermore, external political repression has affected all Kurds, but women often face compounded vulnerabilities. This confluence of societal norms and historiographical biases has resulted in an academic record that often fails to capture the full scope of women's contributions, experiences, and perspectives as preserved in their rich and diverse oral traditions.

Consequently, our understanding of the Kurdish social fabric, internal power dynamics, methods of cultural transmission across generations, and the full spectrum of resilience and agency within Kurdish communities remains incomplete and potentially distorted.

## **2. Narratives of Daily Life: Social, Economic, and Environmental Histories**

There is a discernible gap in the academic focus on oral histories that document the everyday, often mundane, aspects of Kurdish life. This includes traditional social structures beyond the oft-studied tribal leadership in contexts of conflict, local economic practices (such as specific agricultural techniques, pastoralist knowledge, craft traditions, local market dynamics, and trade networks), indigenous environmental knowledge (ethnobotany, traditional land and water management, oral narratives about flora and fauna, and community responses to environmental changes), and the myriad local customs, festivals, and rituals not directly linked to major political events or large-scale trauma.

While some sources allude to these dimensions—for example, mentioning love songs (*lawik*), happy songs (*dîlok*), mourning songs (*şîn*), and lullabies as integral to daily existence<sup>3</sup>, or a grandmother's profound knowledge of "how our environment works" and the "early signs of changing seasons"<sup>9</sup>, or discussions of folklore, social customs, food, and clothing<sup>8</sup>—dedicated academic analyses of *oral histories* specifically centered on these themes appear less prevalent than those focusing on conflict, resistance, or national identity. The "archival turn" in Kurdish studies does indicate an increasing attention to "social, economic, and environmental history"<sup>36</sup>, but the extent to which *oral* sources are being systematically tapped and academically analyzed for these specific domains remains an open question. Oral testimonies concerning land ownership, a crucial aspect of socio-economic life, are being collected, but these are often intrinsically tied to narratives of conflict and displacement.<sup>27</sup> The deep connection between Kurds and their mountainous environment, and the preservation of "agricultural teachings" and "important indigenous knowledge" through folklore, suggest the existence of rich oral traditions in these areas that may be currently under-researched from an academic standpoint.<sup>51</sup>

The tendency for oral history projects and academic research to gravitate towards narratives of "high drama"—such as conflict, genocide, and the actions of major political figures—is understandable, often driven by the urgency of documenting human rights abuses, the availability of funding for such topics, or the perceived scholarly and public impact of these narratives. However, this focus, while vital, risks creating an imbalance. It can lead to a comparative neglect of the oral histories that reflect the long-term, slower-moving historical processes, cultural adaptations, and local knowledge systems that have profoundly shaped Kurdish societies at a grassroots level. Without a more concerted effort to collect and analyze these "everyday" oral histories, our understanding of Kurdish resilience, cultural continuity, societal functioning, and human-environment interactions remains incomplete. Such an imbalance may inadvertently over-emphasize conflict and persecution as the sole or primary drivers of Kurdish historical experience, obscuring the rich tapestry of daily life, social organization, and cultural creativity that has persisted often in spite of, or alongside, political turmoil.

### 3. Oral Traditions of Specific Religious and Ethnic Sub-Groups: Beyond Initial Surveys

While foundational scholarly work exists on the oral traditions of distinct Kurdish religious communities—such as the Yezidis<sup>12</sup>, Alevis<sup>14</sup>, and Yarsan (also known as Ahl-e Haqq or Kaka'i)<sup>15</sup>—there remains a significant need for more in-depth, comparative, and contemporary research. Existing studies often provide initial surveys or focus on specific aspects, but comprehensive documentation across the full spectrum of these groups' oral heritage is lacking. Gaps are likely in understanding the internal diversity within these communities, the profound impact of recent conflicts and displacement on their specific oral traditions (for instance, the evolution of Yezidi laments and narratives post-ISIS<sup>54</sup>), and the oral histories of smaller, less-documented Kurdish sub-groups or those communities with syncretic religious beliefs.<sup>48</sup>

Scholarly attention to Yezidi oral tradition, for example, has often centered on religious texts and beliefs, with secular material and everyday narratives being "overdue for academic study".<sup>13</sup> For Alevi Kurds, research has been disproportionately focused on Turkish-speaking Alevis or specific regions like Dersim, leaving the traditions of Kurdish and Zaza-speaking Alevis in other areas, such as Varto, Malatya, and Kahramanmaraş, under-researched.<sup>57</sup> The study of Yarsan traditions faces challenges due to the declining knowledge of Literary Gurani (the language of many sacred texts) and the complex interplay between oral transmission and emerging scripturalization.<sup>59</sup>

Furthermore, the oral traditions of Kurdish Jews<sup>60</sup> and Kurdish Christians<sup>12</sup>, particularly concerning their historical interactions with other Kurdish communities, their unique cultural expressions, and their own historical narratives from within the broader Kurdish context, warrant more focused academic attention beyond simply noting their historical presence. The historical record for Kurdish Jews, for instance, has suffered from a "lack of written history and the lack of documents," underscoring the crucial role that oral history could play.<sup>61</sup> Similarly, the oral history of Kurdish Zoroastrians remains an under-explored area, often complicated by nationalist claims that tend to conflate contemporary Yezidism or ancient Iranian religions generally with Zoroastrianism, sometimes without deep historical accuracy or reflection of genuine contemporary devotional practices.<sup>55</sup> This indicates a need for more nuanced oral history research into actual beliefs, practices, and narratives as held by individuals within these communities today.

The persistence of these gaps can be attributed to several factors. The political sensitivities surrounding religious minorities in the Middle East, coupled with the often esoteric, historically secretive, or internally focused nature of some of these groups' traditions (e.g., Yarsan<sup>15</sup>), can make research challenging. Additionally, the general focus within broader Kurdish nationalist discourses on narratives that emphasize a unified, often majority Sunni Muslim, Kurdish identity may have inadvertently marginalized the distinct oral histories of these diverse religious communities. Neglecting these specific oral traditions leads to an incomplete and flattened understanding of Kurdish religious pluralism, cultural syncretism, and historical inter-communal dynamics. It also means missing crucial perspectives on identity formation,

historical experience, and the ways in which these groups have navigated their unique positions within the wider Kurdish and regional contexts.

#### **4. Pre-Twentieth Century Oral Traditions: Methodological and Source Challenges**

The reconstruction and academic analysis of Kurdish oral traditions from periods prior to the 20th century present considerable methodological and source-related challenges, resulting in a significant gap in our understanding of the deeper historical roots of Kurdish orality. While certain classical Kurdish literary texts, such as Ehmedê Xanî's 17th-century epic *Mem û Zîn*, are widely recognized as being deeply rooted in, or having significantly influenced, oral traditions<sup>4</sup>, direct, systematically collected oral historical accounts or detailed performance descriptions from these earlier centuries are inherently scarce. Academic research often has to rely on later collections of folklore, mentions in the writings of external travelers or scholars (which may carry their own biases or offer limited scope), or inferences from much later oral performances.

Early 20th-century Kurdish intellectuals demonstrated a keen interest in oral traditions, primarily for the purpose of nation-building and language development, but their initial engagement was often "largely speculative," with systematic, content-based collections of oral materials becoming more common in the latter half of the century and beyond.<sup>19</sup>

Twentieth-century Kurdish historiography, particularly for its first half, relied more heavily on British, French, and Ottoman-Turkish state archives, with a "recent rise in oral history" as a dedicated field of inquiry.<sup>36</sup> This suggests that the systematic collection and academic study of oral history, as understood today, is a relatively newer phenomenon in the context of Kurdish studies. While Kurdish written literature can be traced back to as early as the 9th century, sources emphasize that oral literature "has always been in vogue and continued as an important element" ("hep revaçta olup önemli bir öge olarak süre gelmiştir")<sup>58</sup>, pointing to a long and rich, but less formally documented, oral past. The historical oral transmission of ancient texts in the broader Iranian and Kurdish cultural sphere, such as the Avestan and Pahlavi Zoroastrian scriptures which were orally preserved for extensive periods before being committed to writing<sup>56</sup>, indicates deep-seated traditions of oral preservation, but specific, detailed examples of Kurdish secular oral narratives from those very early periods are not readily available in existing documented forms.

The inherent lack of direct, contemporaneous documentation of pre-20th-century Kurdish oral traditions necessitates the development and application of innovative and interdisciplinary methodological approaches. To bridge this gap, scholars would need to combine meticulous textual analysis of older manuscripts (which may contain embedded oral formulae, themes, or narrative structures), comparative folklore studies (tracing motifs and tale types across related cultures), historical linguistics (analyzing archaic forms or dialectal evidence within later oral collections), and potentially archaeological findings (which might provide context for ancient practices or storytelling settings). Without such concerted interdisciplinary efforts, our understanding of the deeper historical evolution of Kurdish oral culture, its ancient forms, and its transformations over centuries remains significantly limited. This gap means that the long-term continuities and changes within Kurdish oral traditions are

not fully mapped, and the foundations upon which later, better-documented oral expressions were built are not clearly understood.

## **B. Geographical and Dialectal Imbalances in Research**

Academic research into Kurdish oral history is characterized by notable geographical and dialectal imbalances. Scholarly attention has not been evenly distributed across all regions of Kurdistan—encompassing areas within present-day Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria—nor has it comprehensively covered the rich diversity of Kurdish language dialects, which include Kurmanji, Sorani, Zazaki (Dimili), Gorani (Hawrami), and Southern Kurdish varieties like Kelhuri, Laki, and Feyli. Certain regions, such as parts of Turkish Kurdistan and areas within Iraqi Kurdistan, and specific dialects, notably Kurmanji as spoken in Turkey, appear to have received more extensive academic focus.<sup>1</sup> This uneven distribution can be attributed to a confluence of factors, including geopolitical dynamics, the relative accessibility of different regions for researchers, the presence (or absence) of local academic institutions and research infrastructure, the political prominence of particular Kurdish groups or movements, and the linguistic competencies of international scholars.

For instance, much of the analysis concerning the interplay between oral tradition and modern Kurdish literature has primarily focused on writers and traditions from Turkey, with a strong emphasis on the Kurmanji and, to a lesser extent, Zazaki dialects.<sup>1</sup> While such studies may touch upon Kurdish cultural activities in other areas like the Armenian SSR, Syria, Lebanon, or the Badinan region of Iraqi Kurdistan, the core literary and oral-traditional analysis often remains centered on Turkey.<sup>1</sup> Conversely, specific traditions like those of the *Asheqs* among the Khorasani Kurds in northeastern Iran<sup>7</sup>, or the historical significance of Kurdish Radio Baghdad in Iraq for musical dissemination<sup>7</sup>, point to distinct regional oral cultures that may warrant more dedicated and comparative study.

There is an acknowledgment that Iranian Kurdistan, in terms of its modern history, has been "understudied in comparison to its regions in Syria and Iraq"<sup>64</sup>, a disparity that likely extends to the documentation of its oral histories. Similarly, research on Kurdish nationalism and political movements has predominantly concentrated on Kurdish communities in Turkey and Iraq, with Syria often being neglected due to demographic considerations (a smaller proportion of the total Kurdish population) and persistent difficulties in research access.<sup>65</sup> Even within regions that have received some attention, imbalances persist. For example, research on Alevi Kurds has been largely focused on the Dersim (Tunceli) region, with a comparative lack of studies on the oral traditions and cultural expressions of Kurdish and Zaza-speaking Alevi communities in other areas such as Varto, Malatya, or Kahramanmaraş.<sup>57</sup> The efforts to preserve endangered dialects like Zazaki through the collection of folklore further highlight the vulnerability of less dominant linguistic forms and their associated oral traditions.<sup>52</sup>

The underlying causes for these geographical and dialectal gaps are complex and deeply rooted in the political and social realities of the region. Varying degrees of political stability, state policies regarding minority languages and cultural expression, the availability (or lack) of local research infrastructure and funding, and the specific interests and access capabilities of

diaspora communities and international scholars all play a significant role in shaping the research landscape. This uneven attention results in a fragmented understanding of the broader pan-Kurdish oral heritage. Such imbalances mean that unique regional genres, dialect-specific forms of oral expression, and valuable comparative insights across different parts of Kurdistan may be overlooked or lost. Endangered dialects and the oral traditions intrinsically linked to them are particularly at risk of disappearing undocumented without focused and urgent research efforts. Consequently, the current academic record does not offer a neutral or comprehensive reflection of Kurdish oral history but is, in many ways, a map shaped by these external pressures and internal disparities.

### **C. The Uncharted Territory of Non-*Dengbêj* Oral Performers and Genres**

While the figure of the *dengbêj* has, justifiably, attracted significant scholarly attention as a primary carrier of Kurdish epic poetry and historical memory, a notable gap exists in the comprehensive academic research dedicated to other types of traditional storytellers, oral performers, and the vast array of less "epic" or more informal oral genres prevalent within Kurdish communities. The academic valorization of the *dengbêj*, while crucial for understanding a central pillar of Kurdish oral culture, may have inadvertently led to the relative neglect of other, perhaps more common or localized, forms of oral expression and the individuals who perpetuate them.

Research acknowledges that the modern use of the oral tradition beyond certain well-defined areas remains limited, and that "little attention is paid to modern approaches to traditional storytellers, their performances, stories, or language" in a more encompassing sense.<sup>1</sup> This suggests a broader spectrum of oral artistry beyond the *dengbêj*. For instance, the mention of *akhoonds*—storytellers who employ diverse mediums such as prose, poetry, music, and even puppetry to convey narratives ranging from traditional folktales to contemporary moral lessons<sup>8</sup>—points to a distinct category of performer whose role and repertoire may differ significantly from that of the *dengbêj*. Similarly, the existence of *çîrokbêj* (folktale tellers), often mentioned in conjunction with *dengbêjs* in cultural centers like the Dengbêj House in Amed (Diyarbakir), implies a recognized specialization in narrative forms other than epic song.<sup>20</sup>

Furthermore, a wide variety of oral genres that permeate daily Kurdish life may not fall exclusively within the domain of specialized bards or may be performed by non-specialists within families and communities. These include, but are not limited to, local narrators of folktales, tellers of anecdotes and jokes, performers of work songs specific to agricultural or pastoral activities, lullabies sung by mothers and caregivers, children's rhymes and games, the everyday use and transmission of proverbs and riddles, and ritualistic chants or songs associated with specific ceremonies or life-cycle events.<sup>3</sup> While such genres are occasionally listed or alluded to, in-depth academic studies focusing on their performance contexts, social functions, linguistic features, and the roles of their often unheralded transmitters (such as elders, women within families, or community members in informal settings) appear less common than studies on the more formalized and public performances of *dengbêjs*.

This relative lack of focus on non-*dengbêj* performers and more vernacular genres creates a significant gap in understanding the full ecology of oral communication within Kurdish societies. It potentially overlooks the vital role that these diverse forms of orality play in shaping social life, transmitting cultural values and norms, providing entertainment and comfort, educating children, and reflecting the everyday concerns and creativity of the broader population. A research bias towards more "professionalized," male-dominated, or "high-status" oral performers risks missing the vast and vibrant undercurrent of everyday orality that is equally crucial to the sustenance and dynamism of Kurdish cultural heritage. Consequently, a substantial portion of the "academic record" on Kurdish oral history might remain incomplete if it does not more systematically account for these less formalized but deeply embedded oral traditions and their bearers.

**Table 1: Summary of Identified Gaps in Academic Research on Kurdish Oral History**

| Thematic Area / Sub-field of Oral History                         | Specific Gaps Noted in Academic Record                                                                                                                                                                                            | Key Sources Indicating Gap | Potential Research Questions to Address Gap                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Women's Oral Histories</b>                                     | Lack of focus on diverse roles, knowledge systems, everyday experiences, artistic expressions beyond victimhood/resistance; under-documentation of non-Western feminist perspectives and matriarchal elements in oral narratives. | <sup>4</sup>               | How do Kurdish women's oral narratives reflect their agency, social networks, and economic contributions in non-political spheres? What specific oral genres are predominantly maintained and transmitted by women, and what do these reveal about their worldviews? |
| <b>Narratives of Daily Life (Social, Economic, Environmental)</b> | Comparative lack of focus on mundane aspects: traditional social structures (non-elite), local economic practices (agriculture, crafts), indigenous                                                                               | <sup>3</sup>               | What traditional ecological knowledge (ethnobotany, land management) is embedded in the oral traditions of pastoral Kurdish communities in Iran or Iraq? How do                                                                                                      |

|                                                                |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |               |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|----------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                                                | environmental knowledge, local customs/rituals not tied to major political events.                                                                                                                                                      |               | oral histories of Kurdish artisans reflect changes in craft traditions and local economies?                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| <b>Oral Traditions of Specific Religious/Ethnic Sub-Groups</b> | Need for more in-depth, comparative, contemporary research on Yezidi (secular traditions), Alevi (non-Dersim, Zaza-speaking), Yarsan oral traditions; impact of recent conflicts; traditions of Kurdish Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians. | <sup>13</sup> | What are the unique characteristics of Yarsan oral cosmology as expressed by contemporary practitioners, compared to its textual representations? How have the oral traditions of Yezidi communities in Sinjar evolved post-2014 to narrate and process trauma?                    |
| <b>Pre-Twentieth Century Oral Traditions</b>                   | Scarcity of direct, systematically collected oral accounts; reliance on later collections or external mentions; methodological challenges in reconstructing older oral strata.                                                          | <sup>4</sup>  | How can comparative analysis of motifs in classical Kurdish literature (e.g., <i>Mem û Zîn</i> ) and later collected folktales illuminate the nature of 17th-19th century oral narrative traditions? What linguistic evidence of older oral forms can be found in modern dialects? |
| <b>Geographical and Dialectal Imbalances</b>                   | Uneven research distribution across Kurdistan (Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria) and among dialects (Kurmanji, Sorani, Zazaki, Gorani, Southern Kurdish, etc.); under-researched regions (e.g., parts of Iranian Kurdistan,                    | <sup>1</sup>  | What are the distinct oral genres and performance styles prevalent among Southern Kurdish (Kelhuri, Laki, Feyli) speaking communities? How do the oral traditions of Khorasani Kurds reflect their unique history of                                                               |

|                                               |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|-----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                               | Syrian Kurdistan).                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |  | migration and interaction with Turkic cultures?                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| <b>Non-Dengbêj Oral Performers and Genres</b> | Lack of comprehensive <sup>1</sup> research on other storytellers ( <i>çîrokbêj</i> , <i>akhoonds</i> ), and less "epic" genres (folktales, anecdotes, work songs, lullabies, proverbs, children's rhymes, ritual chants by non-specialists). |  | What is the role and repertoire of local <i>çîrokbêjs</i> (folktale tellers) in contemporary Kurdish villages? How are proverbs and idiomatic expressions orally transmitted and what social functions do they serve in different Kurdish communities? |

## IV. Factors Contributing to and Perpetuating Academic Gaps

The significant lacunae in the academic record of Kurdish oral history are not arbitrary but are the result of a complex interplay of deeply entrenched factors. These range from overt political suppression to subtle institutional biases and formidable methodological challenges, all of which have shaped and continue to constrain the landscape of research in this field.

### A. The Shadow of Political Repression, Assimilation, and Linguicide

One of the most formidable factors contributing to gaps in the academic record of Kurdish oral history is the long and painful history of political repression, forced assimilation, and linguicide experienced by Kurdish communities across Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. Systematic state policies in these nations have frequently aimed at suppressing the Kurdish language, culture, and distinct identity, thereby severely hindering the natural transmission, performance, and documentation of oral traditions, which are the lifeblood of Kurdish cultural expression.<sup>1</sup>

The concept of linguicide, defined as "the extermination of languages" <sup>1</sup>, is particularly pertinent. The prohibition of the Kurdish language in public life, education, and media, as documented in Turkey for a significant period (1925-1991) <sup>1</sup>, and similar restrictions in Syria, including bans on Kurdish names, private schools, and publications <sup>11</sup>, have directly led to the erosion and loss of oral genres, specialized vocabularies, and dialectal diversity, many of which existed primarily, if not exclusively, in oral form. This has resulted in what one source describes as a "significant loss of culture, as Kurdish culture had primarily been passed orally for many centuries".<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, the pervasive climate of fear engendered by such repression has often driven oral traditions underground or led to widespread self-censorship among tradition bearers.<sup>5</sup>

When individuals and communities live under the constant threat of persecution for expressing their cultural identity, the open performance and intergenerational transmission of potentially "subversive" oral narratives—those that assert Kurdish identity, recount historical grievances, or critique state policies—become fraught with danger. This, in turn, makes these traditions far less accessible to researchers, both local and international, who may also face risks or be denied access to relevant communities. Human rights reports from organizations like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch continue to document discrimination and the suppression of cultural rights in countries like Iran and Syria, indicating that these pressures are ongoing.<sup>67</sup>

The causal chain is stark: political repression creates a climate of fear and insecurity. This inhibits the open performance, transmission, and evolution of oral traditions. Simultaneously, it deters researchers due to safety concerns, ethical dilemmas, and practical restrictions on access. The inevitable outcome is a dearth of comprehensive documentation. Oral traditions that do not align with state-approved narratives, or those preserved in suppressed dialects or by marginalized communities, become particularly vulnerable to being undocumented and ultimately lost. The "silences" observed in the academic record are, therefore, not merely accidental omissions but are often the direct and tragic consequences of political violence and deliberate cultural suppression. Understanding this causality is fundamental for interpreting the existing academic record critically and for strategizing future research in a way that acknowledges and, where possible, counteracts these historical and ongoing pressures.

## **B. Archival Challenges: Access, Dispersal, Digitization, and Ownership**

The challenges associated with archives containing Kurdish oral history and related cultural materials significantly contribute to the gaps in the academic record. These materials, including invaluable audio and video recordings of oral performances, transcriptions, and ethnographic notes, are often widely dispersed across various countries and institutions, held in private hands with limited accessibility, or suffer from a lack of systematic cataloging, preservation, and digitization.<sup>2</sup> Kurdish archival heritage has been described as having been "dispersed, destroyed, or hidden underground due to conflict and persecution" for generations.<sup>35</sup>

Restrictions on access to existing archives, whether state-controlled or private, along with issues of censorship and unresolved property rights over cultural materials, pose substantial political and ethical challenges for researchers.<sup>36</sup> In some instances, state intelligence agencies have even confiscated significant archival collections from Kurdish cultural institutions, further limiting access and control over their own heritage.<sup>36</sup> The historical lack of standardized orthographies for various Kurdish dialects also complicated early efforts at written documentation and transcription, adding another layer of difficulty to the creation and organization of textual archives derived from oral sources.<sup>1</sup>

While digitization efforts are underway in some quarters—such as the initiatives by the KCAC Archive<sup>35</sup> and the Vera Beaudin Saeedpour Collection<sup>23</sup>—these projects often face considerable challenges in terms of securing adequate funding, accessing technical

expertise, and reaching remote or privately held collections. The "digital divide" also remains a concern, potentially limiting access to digitized resources for researchers and communities within Kurdistan or those with fewer technological resources. Practical difficulties, such as the initial disorganization of collected materials, the cost of preservation, and the need for culturally correct metadata, further compound these archival challenges, as detailed in the experience of the Saeedpour Collection.<sup>23</sup>

A particularly contentious issue revolves around the question of who "owns" Kurdish cultural heritage and archives, especially when significant materials are housed in non-Kurdish institutions or located in states that have historically been hostile to Kurdish cultural expression. This raises concerns that "Kurds may not be in control of their own heritage".<sup>36</sup>

A fundamental contradiction thus emerges: while there is an "archival turn" in Kurdish studies, signifying increased scholarly recognition of the value and diversity of Kurdish archives<sup>36</sup>, the very historical and political factors that make these archives so precious—namely, legacies of conflict, displacement, and suppression—also create immense barriers to their systematic collection, comprehensive preservation, and open accessibility. This means that even as academic and community awareness of the importance of these archives grows, the ability to comprehensively fill academic gaps through archival research remains severely hampered by systemic issues related to infrastructure, political will, resource allocation, and unresolved questions of ownership and control. The gap, therefore, is not solely in uncollected material but also significantly in the usability, accessibility, and sovereign control over what *has* been collected or identified.

### **C. Methodological Hurdles in a Politicized and Conflict-Affected Research Landscape**

Conducting oral history fieldwork in many Kurdish regions is an endeavor fraught with complex methodological, ethical, and practical challenges, largely stemming from the highly politicized environment, ongoing or recent conflicts, inherent security risks for both researchers and informants, and pervasive atmospheres of distrust.<sup>13</sup> These conditions necessitate a departure from standard research protocols and demand a high degree of adaptability and sensitivity.

Critical considerations for researchers include navigating their own positionality—whether they are perceived as an insider or outsider, their gender, perceived political affiliations, and ethnic background—all of which can significantly impact trust-building, access to communities, and the nature of the information shared.<sup>16</sup> Ensuring the safety and anonymity of informants is paramount, especially when dealing with sensitive topics or in regions where expressing certain views can lead to repercussions.<sup>13</sup> The pervasive trauma experienced by many Kurdish communities due to conflict, displacement, and persecution can profoundly affect memory, narration, and the willingness to share experiences, requiring researchers to employ highly sensitive, trauma-informed, and specialized interview techniques.<sup>16</sup>

A further methodological challenge lies in the dynamic where subaltern voices, in order to be recognized or legitimized as "history" within dominant academic or public spheres, may feel compelled to narrate their experiences through "hegemonic forms, genres, and discourses".<sup>7</sup>

This can complicate the oral historian's task of capturing authentic, unmediated narratives that truly reflect the informant's own framework of understanding and expression. The unreliability of human memory, a standard challenge in all oral history work, is often exacerbated in contexts of trauma, political pressure, and the passage of time, necessitating careful cross-verification of oral accounts with other sources where possible, while also recognizing the unique value of subjective experience.<sup>73</sup> The difficulties of documentation in active conflict zones like Syria, amidst information wars and systematic misinformation campaigns, add yet another layer of complexity to verifying and interpreting oral testimonies.<sup>33</sup>

These methodological challenges are not merely isolated technical problems; they are deeply intertwined with the overarching political context and the aforementioned archival issues. For instance, politically motivated restrictions on access to certain regions directly limit the diversity of potential informants, which is a significant methodological constraint. Similarly, the fear of reprisal, a political factor, can lead to incomplete, guarded, or self-censored testimonies, impacting the depth and reliability of the data collected—a critical methodological and ethical concern. This complex interplay necessitates a highly reflexive, adaptive, and ethically grounded approach to oral history research in Kurdish contexts, where the safety, agency, and well-being of the narrators must always take precedence. A significant gap may exist within the broader academic literature on Kurdish oral history concerning explicit, detailed discussions and theorizations of these unique methodological adaptations and ethical frameworks that are specifically developed for and required by these challenging research environments. While some works are dedicated to methodological reflections<sup>16</sup>, a more widespread integration of such discussions into individual oral history publications would enrich the field.

## **D. Institutional and Funding Disparities in Kurdish Studies**

The persistence of academic gaps in Kurdish oral history is also significantly influenced by institutional and funding disparities that affect Kurdish studies as a whole. Compared to more established academic fields or research agendas that align with state-sponsored narratives, Kurdish studies, including the specialized area of oral history, often faces institutional neglect and insufficient, inconsistent funding.<sup>16</sup> This systemic under-resourcing has profound implications for the scope, depth, and sustainability of research endeavors.

The absence of a sovereign Kurdish state means there is no central national body analogous to those in many other countries that can consistently fund, coordinate, and standardize large-scale oral history projects, develop national archives, or support comprehensive linguistic and cultural research programs. This reality is poignantly captured in the observation that "Only a small part of the Kurdish language has been researched. In order to research Kurdish, we need to establish an Institute for Kurdological Studies".<sup>38</sup> Consequently, many research and preservation efforts are left to the initiative of individual scholars, often working with limited resources, diaspora community organizations, or under-funded local initiatives.

Furthermore, academic institutions located within the nation-states that encompass parts of

Kurdistan may themselves be subject to political pressures that discourage, limit, or censor research on Kurdish topics, particularly those deemed sensitive or challenging to official state ideologies.<sup>16</sup> This can affect curriculum development, faculty hiring, research funding allocation, and the overall academic environment for scholars wishing to pursue Kurdish oral history.

While there is an increasing scientific interest in Kurdish issues, often linked to their political mobilizations and geostrategic importance<sup>16</sup>, this attention can be reactive and politically contingent rather than indicative of sustained, deeply embedded institutional support. The emergence of specific initiatives like the "Global Kurdish Initiative for Peace" at American University, which includes fellowships<sup>74</sup>, and the British Academy-funded workshop series "Empowering Emerging Voices: Building Research and Publication Skills in Kurdish Studies"<sup>75</sup>, are positive developments. However, their very existence highlights a recognized deficit and the ongoing need for more substantial and widespread support to address the scale of the research and preservation tasks at hand.

The systemic under-resourcing and potential institutional marginalization of Kurdish studies directly contribute to the perpetuation of gaps in the academic record of oral history. Without dedicated, long-term institutional backing, it is exceedingly difficult to sustain comprehensive research projects, develop robust and accessible archives, translate and analyze vast amounts of oral material, and train new generations of researchers, especially those from within Kurdish communities who possess invaluable linguistic and cultural competencies. This creates a challenging cycle: a lack of resources leads to limited research output and visibility, which can, in turn, reinforce the perception of Kurdish oral history as a niche or underdeveloped field, further hindering the attraction of significant funding and long-term institutional commitment. Breaking this cycle requires a concerted effort to build capacity, secure sustainable funding, and foster supportive academic environments free from political interference.

## **V. Bridging the Divide: The Imperative and Pathways for Future Research**

Addressing the identified gaps in the academic record of Kurdish oral history is not merely a scholarly desideratum but a critical imperative for a more complete understanding of Kurdish historiography, the preservation of invaluable cultural heritage, and the acknowledgment of diverse human experiences. The pathways to bridging this divide require concerted effort, methodological innovation, and a commitment to collaborative and ethical research practices.

### **A. The Critical Role of Filling These Gaps for Kurdish Historiography and Cultural Heritage**

Filling the lacunae in the academic study of Kurdish oral history is essential for constructing a more authentic, comprehensive, and polyvocal Kurdish historiography. Such an endeavor moves beyond elite or dominant narratives, often shaped by political expediency or external perspectives, to incorporate the experiences, perspectives, and memories of all segments of

Kurdish society.<sup>4</sup> As emphasized, "It is the right of the Kurdish children to know this [their history and common social memory]"<sup>9</sup>, and storytelling, in its myriad oral forms, "plays an invaluable role in preserving Kurdish culture and heritage, allowing knowledge to be shared between generations".<sup>8</sup> The act of documenting and analyzing these traditions contributes directly to the preservation of endangered cultural heritage, including linguistic diversity (especially at-risk dialects), unique artistic expressions, and invaluable indigenous knowledge systems embedded in oral narratives, such as those pertaining to traditional medicine, agriculture, and environmental understanding.<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, focused academic engagement with previously overlooked oral histories can empower marginalized communities—including women, religious minorities, and geographically remote groups—by validating their historical experiences and providing platforms for their voices to be heard, respected, and integrated into the broader scholarly and public consciousness.<sup>7</sup> Given that state-sanctioned archives and official histories often omit or distort the narratives of colonized or stateless peoples<sup>42</sup>, the rigorous academic study of community-rooted oral histories serves as a vital corrective. This process is not merely an academic exercise; it constitutes an act of historiographical rectification and cultural justice. For a people whose history has frequently been written by others or actively suppressed by dominant states, the academic study and validation of their own oral narratives can be a powerful instrument for reclaiming historical agency, challenging biased historical accounts, and fostering a more just and accurate understanding of their past and present.

## **B. Recommendations for Future Research Agendas and Methodological Innovations**

To effectively address the existing gaps, future research agendas should be strategically oriented and methodologically innovative:

1. **Targeted Research Priorities:** Scholars and funding bodies should prioritize research focusing on the identified under-documented areas. This includes comprehensive studies of Kurdish women's oral histories beyond conventional frames, in-depth exploration of everyday life narratives (social, economic, environmental), dedicated research on the oral traditions of specific religious and ethnic sub-groups (Yezidis, Alevis, Yarsan, Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians, Khorasani Kurds, etc.) with attention to their internal diversity and contemporary transformations, concerted efforts to reconstruct pre-20th-century oral traditions using interdisciplinary methods, and systematic documentation of oral literature in under-researched geographical regions and endangered dialects.
2. **Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR):** Employing CBPR methods is crucial. This involves actively partnering with local Kurdish communities in all stages of the research process—from design and data collection to interpretation, archiving, and dissemination.<sup>33</sup> Such approaches can enhance trust, ensure cultural sensitivity and ethical conduct, promote local ownership of cultural heritage, and build sustainable research capacity within communities. As highlighted in the Syrian context, "knowledge production and memory preservation should be locally-owned".<sup>33</sup>

3. **Interdisciplinary Collaboration:** The multifaceted nature of Kurdish oral traditions—spanning history, language, music, performance, religion, and social life—necessitates robust interdisciplinary collaboration. Teams comprising oral historians, anthropologists, linguists, folklorists, sociologists, ethnomusicologists, literary scholars, and digital humanists can bring diverse perspectives and methodologies to bear, leading to richer and more nuanced analyses.<sup>7</sup>
4. **Leveraging Digital Humanities:** Digital tools offer powerful avenues for recording, transcribing (potentially using AI-assisted technologies for initial drafts, followed by human verification), analyzing large corpora of oral texts, archiving, and disseminating oral histories through accessible online platforms.<sup>23</sup> However, these technological applications must be accompanied by careful consideration of ethical implications, including data security, informant privacy, intellectual property, and equitable access for communities.
5. **Attention to the "Acoustic Register" and Performance:** Research should extend beyond textual content to analyze the "acoustic register" of voice recordings—the sonic qualities, emotional nuances, and performative aspects of oral delivery. As suggested by some scholars, the way stories and songs *sound* can reveal crucial information about gendered subjectivities, affective experiences, and the forging of sociality, elements often lost in simple transcription.<sup>7</sup>
6. **Developing Context-Specific Ethical Frameworks:** Robust ethical guidelines, specifically tailored to the unique political, social, and cultural contexts of various Kurdish regions, must be developed and rigorously adhered to. These frameworks should prioritize informant safety, genuine informed consent (an ongoing process, not a one-time event), data sovereignty (community control over their data), and a critical awareness of the potential political ramifications of the research for the individuals and communities involved.<sup>16</sup>

The specific political and cultural landscape of Kurdistan, marked by statelessness, conflict, and repression, demands more than the mere application of existing oral history methodologies. It calls for the *innovation* of new, adaptive, and decolonizing approaches. Such methodologies should actively seek to counter historical power imbalances in knowledge production, prioritize local perspectives, needs, and interpretations, and critically examine the role and impact of the researcher. This involves a conscious effort to shift power dynamics within the research process, ensuring that Kurdish communities are not just subjects of study but active partners and primary beneficiaries in the documentation and interpretation of their own invaluable oral heritage. Victim-centered, gender-sensitive, and community-based oral history projects, as advocated for in contexts like Syria, can serve as powerful avenues for achieving justice and empowerment through narrative.<sup>33</sup>

## C. Promoting Collaborative and Interdisciplinary Approaches

Bridging the significant gaps in the academic record of Kurdish oral history necessitates a concerted move towards more collaborative and interdisciplinary research models. The complexity and breadth of the subject matter, coupled with the challenging research

environments, mean that isolated efforts by individual scholars or single disciplines are unlikely to achieve the comprehensive coverage required.

Fostering partnerships between international scholars and local Kurdish researchers, academic institutions, cultural organizations, and community groups is paramount. Such collaborations can build local research capacity, ensure that research questions and outcomes are relevant and beneficial to the Kurdish communities themselves, facilitate access, and enrich the research with invaluable local knowledge and linguistic expertise.<sup>75</sup> Initiatives like the workshop series "Empowering Emerging Voices: Building Research and Publication Skills in Kurdish Studies," which aims to connect scholars from the Global North and South and provide mentorship<sup>75</sup>, and the collaborative model of research and arts projects undertaken by Kashkul at the American University of Iraq, Sulaimani<sup>28</sup>, offer promising examples of such collaborative endeavors.

There is a clear need for establishing and supporting networks and accessible platforms dedicated to the sharing of research findings, innovative methodologies, ethical best practices, and archival resources related to Kurdish oral history. These could take the form of dedicated academic journals, regular conferences and workshops, shared digital repositories (with appropriate access controls and community ownership protocols), and collaborative research grants that incentivize inter-institutional and international cooperation.

Furthermore, the findings from oral history research must be more systematically integrated into broader Kurdish studies. This means using oral narratives to enrich and challenge existing historical accounts, inform literary analysis, deepen socio-cultural understanding, and provide nuanced perspectives on political dynamics. An interdisciplinary approach, where insights from oral history are brought into dialogue with findings from archaeology, linguistics, political science, and other relevant fields, can lead to a more holistic and robust understanding of the Kurdish past and present.

Collaborative and interdisciplinary strategies are not merely beneficial; they are essential for tackling the multifaceted challenges inherent in documenting and analyzing Kurdish oral traditions. No single discipline or institution possesses all the necessary expertise, resources, or access to address the full scope of existing gaps. Sustainable and meaningful progress will depend on building a resilient, networked community of practice—comprising scholars, archivists, cultural activists, and community members—that shares knowledge, resources, ethical commitments, and a collective vision for the future of Kurdish oral history research and preservation. Such an ecosystem is key to making significant and lasting inroads in creating a more complete and representative academic record.

## **VI. Conclusion: Towards a More Comprehensive Understanding**

### **A. Recapitulation of Major Gaps**

This report has systematically examined the academic record of Kurdish oral history, revealing both significant achievements and substantial lacunae. While scholarly attention has

illuminated aspects such as the role of *dengbêjs*, the interplay between orality and modern literature, and narratives of political resistance and trauma, critical gaps persist. These include: the under-representation of Kurdish women's diverse oral histories beyond narratives of victimhood or overt resistance; a relative neglect of oral traditions detailing everyday social, economic, and environmental life; pronounced geographical and dialectal imbalances in research coverage across the regions of Kurdistan and its linguistic diversity; insufficient academic focus on non-*dengbêj* oral performers and more vernacular genres; and formidable methodological and source-related challenges in accessing and analyzing pre-20th-century oral traditions. These gaps are compounded by political repression, archival difficulties, methodological hurdles in conflict-affected zones, and institutional and funding disparities.

## **B. A Call for Sustained Scholarly Engagement**

The profound value of Kurdish oral traditions as a cornerstone of cultural identity, a repository of historical memory, and a testament to human resilience in the face of adversity is undeniable, as underscored by a wealth of research.<sup>2</sup> Kurdish oral history is not merely a subject of academic curiosity but a vital component of global cultural heritage that demands sustained, rigorous, and ethical scholarly engagement.

Filling the identified gaps requires more than sporadic projects; it calls for long-term commitment from researchers, academic institutions, and funding bodies. This commitment must be coupled with the development and application of innovative, context-sensitive methodologies that prioritize the agency, safety, and perspectives of the Kurdish communities whose memories and traditions are being documented. The challenges are significant, ranging from navigating political sensitivities to ensuring the ethical stewardship of collected materials.<sup>1</sup>

Ultimately, a more comprehensive understanding of Kurdish history, society, and culture is intrinsically linked to a deeper and more inclusive engagement with its rich and varied oral traditions. By acknowledging the existing silences in the academic record and by fostering collaborative, interdisciplinary, and ethically grounded research, the scholarly community can contribute significantly to the preservation, revitalization, and global appreciation of this invaluable human heritage. The path forward lies in listening attentively to the diverse voices of Kurdistan, ensuring that their stories are not only heard but also contribute to a more accurate, nuanced, and just historical narrative for generations to come.

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- 108. <sup>1</sup>
- 109. <sup>45</sup>
- 110. <sup>23</sup>
- 111. <sup>2</sup>
- 112. <sup>2</sup>
- 113. <sup>17</sup>
- 114. <sup>46</sup>
- 115. <sup>57</sup>
- 116. <sup>59</sup>
- 117. <sup>36</sup>
- 118. <sup>16</sup>
- 119. <sup>35</sup>
- 120. <sup>25</sup>
- 121. <sup>37</sup>
- 122. <sup>30</sup>
- 123. <sup>31</sup>
- 124. <sup>60</sup>

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| 125. | 61   |
| 126. | 62   |
| 127. | 26   |
| 128. | 5    |
| 129. | 84   |
| 130. | 27   |
| 131. | 49   |
| 132. | 7777 |
| 133. | 51   |

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