

# The Resilient Voice: Kurdish Oral Traditions Before 2010

## Introduction

For centuries, the Kurdish people, dispersed across mountainous regions spanning modern-day Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria, have navigated a complex existence often marked by political marginalization and statelessness.<sup>1</sup> In the absence of enduring state structures or widespread literacy accessible to all, oral traditions have served as the bedrock of Kurdish culture, identity, and historical consciousness.<sup>3</sup> These traditions, encompassing a vast repertoire of sung epics, lyrical poetry, folktales, proverbs, and riddles, functioned not merely as entertainment but as vital repositories of collective memory, linguistic heritage, social norms, and resilience.<sup>6</sup> Transmitted across generations through performance and memory, these verbal arts have been instrumental in preserving a distinct Kurdish identity, particularly in the face of assimilationist policies and outright suppression enacted by the states governing Kurdistan.<sup>5</sup>

This report examines the multifaceted world of Kurdish oral traditions as they existed and were practiced before 2010. It delves into the prominent role of the *dengbêj*, the revered singer-storytellers, explores the diverse genres that constitute this rich heritage, analyzes the methods of transmission and performance contexts, and investigates the core themes and cultural values embedded within these narratives. Furthermore, it addresses the significant challenges—including political persecution, linguicide, modernization, and displacement—that have impacted these traditions, alongside efforts towards their documentation and revitalization.<sup>3</sup> Understanding these oral traditions offers crucial perspectives on Kurdish history, culture, and the enduring spirit of a people who have consistently found strength and continuity in the power of the spoken and sung word.

## The Role and Significance of Dengbêjî

Central to Kurdish oral culture is the tradition of *Dengbêjî*, performed by *dengbêjs*—literally "masters of the voice" (*deng* meaning voice, *bêj* from the verb "to tell").<sup>8</sup> These singer-poets are far more than mere entertainers; they are revered as living archives, historians, and crucial guardians of Kurdish language, culture, and collective memory.<sup>5</sup> In a context where written Kurdish was often suppressed or inaccessible, the *dengbêjs* ensured the transmission of history, epics, social events, love stories, and cultural norms across generations.<sup>6</sup> Their performances, often lengthy and improvised, served to articulate shared experiences, reinforce identity, and provide commentary on contemporary life, effectively functioning as a form of social media in pre-modern times.<sup>11</sup> They are seen as embodying the Kurdish past, recounting tales of village life, local lords, heroism, and conflict.<sup>13</sup>

## Historical Context and Persecution

The *dengbêj* tradition has faced significant challenges throughout history, particularly under modern nation-states. While figures like Roger Lescot documented the tradition during the French Mandate period <sup>6</sup>, the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923 brought severe restrictions. Policies aimed at forging a monolithic Turkish identity led to the denial of Kurdish identity and the outright banning of the Kurdish language, even in private conversation.<sup>3</sup> This "linguicide," or language genocide <sup>11</sup>, directly targeted oral traditions. In the 1930s, fines were imposed for speaking Kurdish, endangering *Dengbêjî* in Turkish Kurdistan.<sup>6</sup> The situation intensified following the 1980 military coup in Turkey, with *dengbêjs* facing persecution for singing in Kurdish.<sup>3</sup> During this era, their performances were often recorded clandestinely on cassette tapes and distributed underground, highlighting the tradition's resilience and its perceived threat to the state.<sup>6</sup> Some *dengbêjs* were forced into exile, while others adapted by singing in Turkish, sometimes gaining fame as "Oriental Nightingales" but often perpetuating state narratives of Kurdish backwardness.<sup>16</sup> The partial lifting of the ban on Kurdish language use (excluding official domains) in Turkey in 1991 under Turgut Özal allowed for a cautious public resurgence of the tradition.<sup>3</sup>

## Performance Styles: Kilam vs. Stran

*Dengbêjs* employ distinct performance styles, primarily the *kilam* and the *stran*.

- **Kilam:** Often considered the quintessential *dengbêj* form, the *kilam* is a long, narrative, often epic recital song performed without instrumental accompaniment.<sup>6</sup> It is characterized by a powerful vocal delivery, intricate ornamentation, and a focus on storytelling, recounting historical events, heroic deeds, or tragic love sagas. Some definitions emphasize its spontaneous nature, where the *dengbêj* expresses what moves them without strict adherence to rhythmic or melodic structures.<sup>6</sup> In some regions, *kilam* is a broader term for anonymous oral products, while elsewhere it specifically denotes a story told in song, sometimes preceded by a spoken narrative introduction.<sup>17</sup>
- **Stran:** This term generally refers to songs with a more defined melodic and rhythmic structure.<sup>6</sup> *Strans* encompass a wider range of themes, including popular songs, love songs (*stranên dîlan*), wedding songs, and sometimes heroic songs (*stranên mêrxasî*).<sup>6</sup> Unlike the often unaccompanied *kilam*, *strans* may sometimes feature instrumental accompaniment, although the voice remains central.

## Performance Contexts

Historically, *dengbêjs* performed in various social settings, reflecting their integral role in community life.

- **Divan/Dîwan:** These were gatherings, often held in the guest rooms (*dîwanxane*) of local leaders (Mirs, Aghas, Beys) or prominent villagers.<sup>18</sup> Performing in the *divan* was a mark of prestige for a *dengbêj*, offering both patronage and a platform to share epics

and historical narratives.<sup>14</sup> These gatherings had specific etiquette, with attentive, silent listening being the norm.<sup>18</sup>

- **Şevbêrk/Şevbihêrk:** Meaning "spending the night," these were long evening gatherings, particularly common during winter.<sup>14</sup> *Dengbêjs* and *çîrokbêjs* (storytellers) would entertain and educate the community with songs, tales, and epics, making these events crucial for cultural transmission.<sup>14</sup>
- **Weddings:** *Dengbêjs* were highly sought after to perform at weddings, providing entertainment with celebratory songs (*dîlok*), love songs (*lawik*), and potentially heroic narratives.<sup>6</sup> Their presence added prestige and cultural depth to the festivities.
- **Funerals:** While laments (*şîn*) were often performed by women, *dengbêjs* also performed songs appropriate for mourning, reflecting the community's grief and commemorating the deceased.<sup>17</sup> The *kilam* genre itself is sometimes seen as closely related to funeral lamentations.<sup>19</sup>
- **Other Contexts:** Performances could also occur during seasonal migrations, work (e.g., harvest songs like *Bêlîte*), festivals, and more informal village gatherings.<sup>11</sup>

## Transmission and Apprenticeship

The art of *Dengbêjî* was traditionally passed down through an apprenticeship system, often resembling the *ustad-çîrak* (master-apprentice) relationship found in other Middle Eastern traditions.<sup>8</sup> Aspiring *dengbêjs* would spend years learning from a master (*ustad*), memorizing hundreds of songs, epics, and stories, along with the intricate vocal techniques and performance styles.<sup>8</sup> Mastery required not only memorization but also the ability to improvise and potentially create new compositions or variations on existing themes.<sup>8</sup> Traditionally, *dengbêjs* needed to demonstrate knowledge of the ancient repertoire before performing their own songs.<sup>6</sup> Although many *dengbêjs* were illiterate, their memories served as vast libraries of Kurdish culture.<sup>5</sup>

## Notable Dengbêjs (Pre-2010)

Numerous *dengbêjs* achieved renown before 2010, becoming legendary figures whose recordings (often initially clandestine) preserved the art form.

- **Evdalê Zeynikê:** Often considered one of the greatest *dengbêjs*, Evdalê Zeynikê is a semi-legendary figure whose life and art have inspired modern Kurdish writers like Mehmed Uzun.<sup>14</sup> He is remembered as a master whose voice could move mountains, heal wounds, and connect with all aspects of life and nature.<sup>5</sup> His performances were said to span days and nights, embodying the depth and endurance of the tradition.<sup>5</sup> He represents the quintessential *dengbêj* deeply rooted in the land and its stories.<sup>14</sup>
- **Şakiro (Şakir Deniz, 1936-1996):** A highly influential modern *dengbêj* from the Ağrı region of Turkey, known for his powerful voice and extensive repertoire.<sup>15</sup> His family originated near Mount Aragats in Armenia.<sup>15</sup> Exposed to *Dengbêjî* from a young age, his recordings, often distributed illegally on cassette tapes during periods of suppression, became crucial resources for later generations.<sup>15</sup> He is considered a defining figure of

the tradition in recent times.<sup>6</sup>

- **Karapetê Xaço (c. 1900-2005):** An Armenian *dengbêj* who became one of the most important performers of Kurdish music.<sup>22</sup> A survivor of the Armenian Genocide, his knowledge of Kurmanji and singing talent saved him.<sup>22</sup> He later worked for Yerevan Radio's Kurdish service, popularizing *Dengbêjî* among Kurds in the Caucasus and beyond.<sup>3</sup> His recordings of classic songs like "Ay lo mîro" and "Adullê" are considered invaluable contributions to the preservation of Kurdish musical heritage.<sup>22</sup> His life exemplifies the complex interactions between Kurdish and Armenian cultures in the region.<sup>19</sup>
- **Seyîtxanê Boyaxcî (Seydo Şimşek, b. 1933):** A contemporary *dengbêj* from the Diyarbakir region, known as the "shoeshine man" (*Boyaxcî*) due to his long-time profession.<sup>9</sup> Despite a life of hardship and lack of formal education, he became a celebrated singer, embodying the grassroots nature of the tradition.<sup>9</sup> His life story reflects the struggles and resilience of ordinary Kurds, and he became a prominent voice in the *Mala Dengbêjan* in Diyarbakir.<sup>9</sup>

Other figures mentioned include Mihemed Arif Cizrawî, Apê Qado, Alihan, Rîfatê Darê, and Ehmedê Fermanê Kiki.<sup>14</sup>

## Revitalization Efforts

Despite periods of decline and suppression, the late 20th and early 21st centuries saw conscious efforts to revitalize *Dengbêjî*. Following the partial lifting of the language ban in Turkey in 1991, *dengbêjs* gained more freedom to perform publicly.<sup>6</sup> From the mid-1990s, Kurdish politicians began supporting their participation in festivals and media appearances, albeit often outside Turkey initially.<sup>6</sup> A significant step was the establishment of *Mala Dengbêjan* (Dengbêj Houses) – cultural centers dedicated to preserving and promoting the tradition. The first opened in Van in 2003, followed by a prominent one in Diyarbakir in 2007, supported by the municipality.<sup>6</sup> These houses provided spaces for aging *dengbêjs* to gather, perform, teach, and record their art.<sup>19</sup> International bodies like the European Union also provided support for these revitalization projects, recognizing *Dengbêjî* as an important intangible cultural heritage.<sup>6</sup> This process involved constructing the *dengbêj* as a symbol of Kurdish tradition and heritage, sometimes negotiating complex relationships with both the Turkish state and the Kurdish national movement.<sup>23</sup>

## Key Genres of Kurdish Oral Tradition (Beyond Dengbêjî)

While *Dengbêjî*, particularly the *kilam*, holds a central place, Kurdish oral tradition encompasses a rich tapestry of other genres, reflecting the diverse facets of Kurdish life and expression.

### Epic Romances

Long narrative poems, often recounting tales of tragic love, heroism, and historical events, form a significant part of the oral repertoire.

- **Mem û Zîn:** Widely considered the Kurdish national epic, *Mem û Zîn* tells the tragic story of two lovers prevented from marrying by societal forces, ultimately leading to their deaths.<sup>24</sup> While the most famous version is the 17th-century written *mathnawî* (mystical romance) by Ehmedê Xanî, the story existed in numerous oral versions, often known as *Memê Alan*.<sup>24</sup> Xanî's literary version, likely inspired by these oral tales, elevates the characters (particularly Mem), significantly reduces elements of folk religion and magic prominent in oral renderings, and imbues the story with mystical Sufi allegory and, arguably, early expressions of Kurdish national consciousness.<sup>24</sup> The oral tradition of *Memê Alan*, however, continued to circulate widely, forming part of a broader Perso-Iranian cultural sphere.<sup>24</sup> The enduring popularity of both oral and written forms underscores its cultural significance.<sup>25</sup>
- **Siyabend û Xecê:** Another popular tragic love story, this legend tells of the orphan Siyabend, brave but reckless, and his love for Xecê.<sup>27</sup> Their fate is sealed by external forces and Siyabend's own flaws.<sup>29</sup> The tale explores themes of fate, human fallibility, and the intertwining of good and evil within individuals.<sup>29</sup> Adaptations, like the 1992 film by Sahin Gök, have used the legend as a framework to explore the broader history and struggles of the Kurdish people, often facing significant political obstacles due to the suppression of Kurdish culture in Turkey.<sup>29</sup>
- **Other Epics:** Oral tradition also includes epics based on historical events, such as *Dimdim*, which recounts the 17th-century Kurdish resistance against Shah Abbas I at the Dimdim fortress.<sup>17</sup> *Zembilfirosh* ("Basket-seller") is a poetic tale echoing the story of Joseph and Zuleikha, exploring themes of temptation and piety.<sup>27</sup>

## Shorter Forms

Alongside lengthy epics, numerous shorter poetic and song forms flourished:

- **Lawje:** This term appears with varied meanings. It is often described as epic poems or songs, particularly about love or battle.<sup>10</sup> Some sources classify it as a specific genre focusing on love, separation, and longing, sometimes intertwined with conflict, similar to *Lawik* or *Stranên Dilan*.<sup>17</sup> Another interpretation links *lawje* specifically to religious-themed songs.<sup>31</sup> This ambiguity highlights regional variations in terminology within the oral tradition.
- **Heyranok:** Primarily love songs expressing affection, heartache, or unrequited love.<sup>17</sup> They are often sung responsively between young men and women, particularly during seasonal migrations to summer pastures (*zozan*).<sup>17</sup> *Heyranoks* typically lack a fixed meter but possess a distinct melodic structure.<sup>17</sup>
- **Payîzok:** Songs performed in autumn (*payîz*) during the return from the highlands.<sup>17</sup> Themes often revolve around the sadness of departure and separation after the summer months spent together.<sup>17</sup>
- **Şeşbendî:** Often performed responsively in *divans* as a concluding piece, characterized

by a main rhyme sustained by performers in turn.<sup>17</sup>

- **Bêlîte/Bêrîte:** Lively, responsorial songs performed in chorus at weddings, *divans*, and during communal work like planting and harvesting.<sup>17</sup> Also known as *Katar* or *Berdolavi*.<sup>18</sup>
- **Şîn:** Laments sung primarily for the dead, but also expressing sorrow over separation, disasters, or a bride leaving home.<sup>17</sup> While often performed by women, *dengbêjs* also included *şîn* in their repertoire.<sup>17</sup>
- **Dîlok:** Measured, rhymed songs, often using a 7-syllable meter, performed at celebrations and weddings for entertainment.<sup>17</sup>
- **Zêmar:** Mentioned as a form performed by Dengbêj Şakiro, *zêmar* covers themes like love, separation, death, and social critique, often featuring dialogue and specific cultural motifs.<sup>17</sup>

## Prose Narratives

- **Çîrok:** The general Kurdish term for folktales or stories.<sup>17</sup> These were traditionally told during long winter nights (*şevreşk*).<sup>17</sup> Kurdish folktales feature a wide range of characters and motifs common in broader Middle Eastern and Iranian folklore, including clever heroes (sometimes revealed as princes), demons (*dêw*), sprites (*perî*), dragons, and treacherous figures like viziers.<sup>34</sup> A popular recurring character is the clever, bald-headed boy known as *Keçelok*, similar to figures in Turkish (*Keloğlan*) and Persian (*Kachal*) traditions.<sup>27</sup> Themes often revolve around quests, overcoming adversity, and the pursuit of justice, which frequently requires supernatural intervention or cleverness rather than formal legal means.<sup>34</sup> Collections like Diane Edgecomb's "A Fire in My Heart" and translations by Wheeler Thackston provide access to these tales in English.<sup>34</sup>

## Didactic and Wisdom Literature

Oral tradition also served didactic purposes through concise forms:

- **Gotinên Pêşîyan:** Kurdish proverbs ("words of the ancestors") encapsulate generations of wisdom, cultural values, and observations about life, nature, and society.<sup>32</sup> They are defined as short, meaningful, stereotyped, and often artistic sayings that reflect experiences and offer guidance or commentary.<sup>36</sup> Examples reveal cultural attitudes towards health ("*Mala ku goşt bikeviyê, derd nakeviyê*" - The house that meat enters, illness does not), the transience of wealth ("*Malê dinyê qirêja destan e*" - Worldly wealth is dirt on the hands), and social roles, though sometimes reflecting patriarchal views ("*Jin, taca zêrîn e*" - Woman is a golden crown vs. "*Jin û derew mirovên (yek)hev in*" - Woman and lies are relatives).<sup>36</sup> Proverbs often employ metaphor, parallelism, and rhyme to be memorable.<sup>32</sup>
- **Mamîk:** Riddles (*mamîk* or *têştānok* - "what-is-ness") are another popular form, often posed during evening gatherings (*şaw nêşîni*) as a way to test wit and knowledge of the world and cultural heritage.<sup>33</sup> They typically have a two-part structure: a descriptive question containing clues (often metaphorical or paradoxical) and a hidden answer.<sup>33</sup> Topics range from nature and animals to household objects and human beings.<sup>33</sup>

Riddles serve not only as entertainment but also as cognitive exercises, encouraging metaphorical thinking and problem-solving within a communal context.<sup>33</sup>

## Transmission, Performance, and Context

The vitality of Kurdish oral traditions before 2010 depended entirely on effective transmission and conducive performance contexts.

### Methods of Transmission

The primary mode of transmission was, by definition, oral performance and memorization.<sup>4</sup> Knowledge, stories, songs, and poems were passed down through generations within families and communities.<sup>32</sup> Master performers, like the *dengbêjs*, played a crucial role, often taking on apprentices (*çîrak*) to whom they imparted their vast repertoire and stylistic techniques.<sup>6</sup> Constant repetition in performance was essential for retention, especially given that many performers were illiterate.<sup>8</sup> The close-knit nature of traditional Kurdish society, whether nomadic or settled agricultural communities, facilitated this person-to-person transmission.<sup>39</sup> Shared cultural practices within multilingual environments, such as those involving Kurdish and Neo-Aramaic speakers in Northern Iraq, also led to the borrowing and adaptation of narrative styles and formulas.<sup>32</sup>

### Narrative Techniques

Kurdish storytellers employed a range of techniques characteristic of oral literature worldwide, but often with specific local inflections.<sup>32</sup>

- **Opening and Closing Formulas:** Narratives were typically framed by specific formulas. Openings often used existential phrases like "*Hebu tunebu*" ("There was, there was not") or "*Carek ji caran*" ("Once upon a time"), sometimes combined with blessings for the listeners or impersonal reporting verbs ("They said...") to situate the story in a traditional continuum.<sup>32</sup> Closings frequently employed phrases like "*Xelas*" ("It is finished") or involved the narrator inserting themselves back into the present, often humorously stating they received no reward from the story's protagonists, alongside blessings.<sup>32</sup>
- **Repetition:** Repetition was a key device used for various functions: aiding memory, creating rhythm and emphasis, linking narrative segments (tail-head linkage), highlighting thematic elements, and providing stylistic variation.<sup>20</sup> This included repeating words, phrases, sounds (lengthening), or entire structures (parallelism).<sup>32</sup> Reduplication was common, especially for intensification or onomatopoeia.<sup>32</sup>
- **Figurative Language:** Storytelling was enriched by the use of metaphors, similes, proverbs, idioms, and sound symbolism (onomatopoeia, ideophones).<sup>32</sup>
- **Discourse Markers:** Specific linguistic features like conjunctions, particles (e.g., the additive *jî* or *-îş*), temporal adverbs, and the use of verbs like "to rise" helped structure the narrative flow, signal transitions, and manage information focus.<sup>32</sup>

## Performance Contexts

Performances were woven into the fabric of social life. As previously noted, *divans* (formal gatherings) and *şevbêrks* (long winter evening sessions) were crucial contexts for epics and storytelling.<sup>14</sup> Weddings and funerals occasioned specific genres like *dîlok* and *şîn*.<sup>17</sup> Seasonal events, like the migration to and from summer pastures (*zozan*), prompted specific songs like *heyranok* and *payîzok*.<sup>17</sup> Communal work, such as harvesting, might be accompanied by rhythmic songs like *Bêlîte*.<sup>17</sup> Even everyday life provided opportunities for sharing proverbs, riddles, and shorter tales within the family or village setting.<sup>33</sup> The performance was often a communal experience, fostering social cohesion and shared cultural understanding.<sup>20</sup>

## Role of Gender

While male *dengbêjs* are often the most prominent figures discussed, women played significant roles in Kurdish oral traditions. Women were, and often still are, the primary performers of laments (*şîn*) at funerals.<sup>17</sup> They were active participants in responsive singing like *heyranok*.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, women have been crucial in the domestic sphere for transmitting lullabies, folktales (*çîrok*), and proverbs to children, acting as the first educators in cultural heritage.<sup>39</sup> In more recent times, Kurdish women have also become active collectors and archivists of folklore, recognizing its importance for language revitalization and challenging dominant narratives, sometimes carving out specific gendered subject positions through this work.<sup>11</sup> Some research specifically focuses on female figures within Kurdish mythology and folklore.<sup>40</sup> However, it's also noted that even when women originated melodies or laments, it was often men who performed them in formal settings like the *divan*.<sup>7</sup>

## Themes and Cultural Values in Kurdish Oral Tradition

Kurdish oral traditions are deeply imbued with recurring themes and cultural values that reflect the historical experiences, social structures, and worldview of the Kurdish people.

- **Love and Romance:** Tales of passionate, often tragic, love are central, as seen in epics like *Mem û Zîn* and *Siyabend û Xecê*, as well as in shorter forms like *lawje/lawik* and *heyranok*.<sup>17</sup> These stories explore the complexities of human relationships, societal constraints, and the profound impact of love and loss.
- **Heroism, Resistance, and Struggle:** Given the Kurds' history, themes of heroism, resistance against oppressors, and tribal conflicts are pervasive, particularly in *dengbêj* epics (*şer* or *kilamên mêrxasî*) and historical narratives like *Dimdim*.<sup>5</sup> These narratives often celebrate bravery, lament losses, and recount struggles for survival and autonomy, reflecting a collective experience of marginalization and the necessity of resilience ("Barxodan Jîana": Resistance is life).<sup>5</sup> This resistance is foundational to much of Kurdish literature, both oral and written.<sup>37</sup>
- **History and Collective Memory:** Oral traditions, especially *Dengbêjî*, function as a crucial vehicle for preserving and transmitting historical events, genealogies, and social memory in the absence of state-sanctioned or widely accessible written histories.<sup>5</sup> They



provide a Kurdish perspective on the past, often contrasting with official state narratives.<sup>11</sup>

- **Social Commentary and Justice:** Folktales (*çîrok*) and proverbs (*gotinên pêşîyan*) often contain social commentary, critiquing injustice, folly, or greed.<sup>34</sup> Tales frequently explore themes of justice, though often achieved through cleverness or supernatural aid rather than formal systems.<sup>34</sup>
- **Connection to Land and Geography:** The mountainous landscape of Kurdistan is not just a backdrop but an active element in many oral narratives.<sup>2</sup> The mountains are often portrayed as refuges and symbols of Kurdish identity ("Our only friends are the mountains").<sup>2</sup> *Dengbêj* songs, in particular, create a sense of place, defining the homeland (*welat*) in contrast to foreign lands (*xerîbî*) and anchoring identity in specific local geographies.<sup>6</sup>
- **Cultural Values:** Oral traditions reinforce core Kurdish cultural values. Hospitality is paramount, traditionally embodied in the village guest house maintained by the leader (*agha*).<sup>39</sup> Honor, family loyalty (often patrilineal), generosity, integrity, and community solidarity are frequently emphasized themes.<sup>17</sup> Proverbs encapsulate practical wisdom and shared ethical understandings.<sup>36</sup>

## Challenges and Transformations (Pre-2010)

Kurdish oral traditions, while resilient, faced profound challenges in the period leading up to 2010, stemming from political, social, and technological changes.

- **Political Suppression and Linguicide:** This was arguably the most significant threat. State policies, particularly in Turkey but also in Iraq, Iran, and Syria, actively sought to suppress Kurdish identity and language.<sup>3</sup> Bans on the Kurdish language, punishment for its use, denial of Kurdish history, and the forced assimilation of Kurds directly undermined the foundations of oral tradition.<sup>3</sup> Performers faced persecution, imprisonment, or exile.<sup>6</sup> This created an environment of fear and self-censorship, even after official bans were partially lifted.<sup>16</sup> The very act of performing in Kurdish became an act of resistance.<sup>42</sup>
- **Modernization and Urbanization:** The shift from predominantly rural, agrarian, and nomadic lifestyles towards urbanization impacted the traditional contexts where oral traditions thrived.<sup>12</sup> The decline of communal village life, the move to cities, and the influence of modern education (often exclusively in the state language) weakened intergenerational transmission and reduced opportunities for traditional performances like *şevbêrk*.<sup>3</sup> State-sponsored "modernization projects" in Iraq, involving village destruction and resettlement in collective towns, were particularly disruptive, severing ties to ancestral lands and traditional social structures, even while introducing some modern amenities.<sup>12</sup>
- **Displacement and Forced Resettlement:** Large-scale forced displacement due to conflict and state policies (like the Anfal campaign in Iraq or village destruction in Turkey and Iraq) shattered communities and disrupted the social fabric necessary for

sustaining oral traditions.<sup>12</sup> Refugees and internally displaced persons often lost connection with their specific local traditions and performance contexts.<sup>12</sup>

- **Decline of Traditional Performance Contexts:** The social and economic changes associated with modernization led to the decline of traditional patronage systems (e.g., Aghas supporting *dengbêjs* in *divans*) and communal gatherings like *şevbêrk*.<sup>13</sup> The rise of mass media offered alternative forms of entertainment, further marginalizing traditional performers.<sup>16</sup>
- **Influence of Media and Recording Technology:** While often facilitating suppression (e.g., state control of broadcast media), technology also offered new avenues for preservation and dissemination. Clandestine cassette recordings kept *Dengbêjî* alive during periods of intense repression.<sup>6</sup> Later, the advent of Kurdish satellite television and the internet provided new platforms, albeit ones that could also standardize or decontextualize performances.<sup>6</sup> Archiving efforts, sometimes undertaken by individuals or communities, used recording technology to preserve voices and performances perceived as endangered.<sup>11</sup>

## Early Collection and Study

The documentation of Kurdish oral traditions owes much to the efforts of both external scholars and Kurdish intellectuals, particularly from the late 19th century onwards.

- **European Orientalists:** Scholars primarily from Germany and France played a pioneering role. Figures like Albert Socin and Eugen Prym published significant collections of Kurdish tales and songs (*Kurdische Sammlungen*, 1887, 1890), providing valuable linguistic and folkloric data, though often reflecting the methodologies and potential biases of 19th-century folklore studies.<sup>4</sup> Oskar Mann conducted extensive linguistic and ethnographic research, publishing works like *Die Mundart der Mukri-Kurden* (1906) and the multi-volume *Kurdisch-Persische Forschungen*, which included folklore texts alongside linguistic analysis.<sup>51</sup> Roger Lescot, working during the French Mandate in Syria, also studied and documented *dengbêjs*.<sup>6</sup> These early collections, while invaluable, were shaped by the academic paradigms of their time, sometimes focusing on perceived "primitive" origins or fitting Kurdish material into pre-existing European frameworks.<sup>4</sup>
- **Soviet Kurdology:** Scholars in the Soviet Union, particularly in the Armenian SSR where a significant Kurdish (often Yezidi) population resided, also made important contributions.<sup>3</sup> Figures like Heciyê Cindî, Emînê Evdal, and Qanatê Kurdo collected and published folklore, often influenced by Soviet nationality policies and linguistic theories (like those of Nikolaj Marr, which emphasized subaltern vernaculars).<sup>55</sup> Yerevan Radio's Kurdish service, featuring performers like Karapetê Xaço, became a vital center for preserving and broadcasting Kurdish music and oral literature.<sup>22</sup>
- **Motivations and Biases:** The motivations behind collection varied. Early European scholars were often driven by linguistic and comparative folkloristic interests, sometimes intertwined with Orientalist perspectives or the search for Indo-European origins.<sup>4</sup>

Soviet efforts were linked to nationality policies and anti-imperialist ideology, though sometimes reproducing their own forms of hegemony.<sup>55</sup> Later Kurdish collectors were often motivated by national consciousness, a desire to preserve heritage threatened by assimilation, and a belief in the intrinsic value of their culture for future generations and universal human understanding.<sup>5</sup> However, early nationalist projects sometimes prioritized certain dialects (like Sorani in Iraq) over linguistic diversity.<sup>47</sup>

## Conclusion

Kurdish oral traditions, as documented and practiced before 2010, represent an extraordinarily rich and resilient corpus of cultural expression. In the face of persistent political adversity, including systematic attempts at linguicide and the violent disruption of traditional life through displacement and forced modernization, these traditions served as indispensable anchors for Kurdish identity, history, and language.<sup>3</sup> The *dengbêj*, alongside tellers of tales (*çîrokbêj*) and bearers of wisdom (*gotinên pêşîyan*, *mamîk*), maintained a vibrant connection to the past and provided commentary on the present, embodying the spirit of resistance and cultural continuity.<sup>6</sup>

The diverse genres, from epic romances like *Mem û Zîn* to poignant laments (*şîn*) and witty riddles (*mamîk*), reflect the multifaceted nature of Kurdish experience, encompassing love, loss, heroism, spirituality, and everyday life.<sup>17</sup> Transmitted through intimate communal settings like the *divan* and *şevbêrk*, these traditions reinforced core cultural values—honor, hospitality, connection to the land, and collective solidarity—while adapting to changing circumstances, even utilizing clandestine recordings during times of severe repression.<sup>6</sup>

The interplay between the oral and the written, as seen in the relationship between *Memê Alan* and Ehmedê Xanî's *Mem û Zîn*, or the influence of *dengbêjs* on modern Kurdish novelists like Mehmed Uzun, highlights a dynamic process of adaptation and "heritageization".<sup>3</sup> Efforts to collect, archive, and revitalize these traditions, undertaken by both Kurds and external scholars, underscore their perceived value not only for Kurdish self-definition but also as part of a shared human heritage.<sup>11</sup> Despite the profound challenges faced before 2010, the enduring power of the Kurdish voice, carried through its oral traditions, remains a testament to the deep human need for storytelling, memory, and cultural belonging.

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