

The Kurdish Shahnameh: An Examination of an Oral Epic Tradition

I. Introduction

A. Overview of the Kurdish Shahnameh

Within the rich tapestry of Kurdish culture resides a significant, though often under-examined, epic tradition known as the Kurdish Shahnameh, or Shanama-ye Kurdi.¹ This corpus encompasses a collection of epic-heroic narratives, referred to in various sources by terms such as Razm-nama (Book of Battles) or Jang-nama (Book of Wars).² Its primary mode of existence and transmission has historically been through oral tradition, passed from generation to generation by word of mouth ("mouth to mouth") before segments were eventually committed to written form.¹ This characteristic stands in marked contrast to the extensive and well-documented manuscript tradition associated with the Persian Shahnameh composed by Abu'l-Qāsem Ferdowsi.⁵

B. Distinctive Characteristics

The Kurdish Shahnameh possesses several defining features that distinguish it within the broader landscape of Iranian epic poetry. It is predominantly composed in the Gorani literary language, including dialects such as Hawrami, which served as a significant literary medium in parts of Kurdistan, particularly under the patronage of the Ardalān dynasty.¹ Furthermore, its poetic structure relies on a syllabic meter, typically decasyllabic, which is characteristic of Kurdish folk literature.¹ This metrical system differs fundamentally from the quantitative *mutaqārib* meter employed by Ferdowsi in his Persian epic.⁷ While related to the Persian Shahnameh, sharing certain thematic elements and heroic figures, the Kurdish tradition maintains a distinct identity, featuring unique characters and narrative variations not found in Ferdowsi's work.¹

C. Report Objective and Methodology

This report aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the Kurdish Shahnameh tradition, synthesizing information derived exclusively from the provided research materials. It addresses the specific points raised in the user query concerning the definition, scope, corpus, historical context, transmission, cultural significance, key figures, available analyses, and scholarly perspectives related to this epic tradition. Adhering strictly to the user's requirement, every assertion, definition, example, or analytical statement presented herein is explicitly attributed to its source material using the designated citation format (.), ensuring rigorous academic accountability.

II. Defining the Kurdish Shahnameh

A. Scholarly Definitions and Terminology

Scholarly inquiry provides several definitions for the Kurdish Shahnameh. Behrooz Chaman Ara, based on extensive fieldwork in the Zagros cultural region, characterizes it as a body of "newly survived epic-heroic narratives known as Razm-nama, Jang-nama or Shanama".² This aligns with the general understanding presented in encyclopedic sources, which describe it as a "collection of epic poems" originating from and perpetuated through Kurdish oral tradition.¹ A similar definition is reflected in the DBpedia entry, derived from Wikipedia.⁴ While popular understanding often attributes the collection and transcription of the Kurdish Shahnameh in Gorani to the 18th-century poet Sarhang Almas Khan Kandulei,¹ academic consensus recognizes a more complex history. Multiple writers, operating in different locations and historical periods, have engaged in the process of gathering and writing down these narratives from the oral stream.¹

B. Nature and Scope

The essential nature of the Kurdish Shahnameh is that of an oral epic cycle, deeply embedded in the cultural heritage of the Kurdish people.¹ Its scope encompasses a substantial and diverse collection of heroic tales and legendary accounts.² Chaman Ara's research specifically highlights the existence of an "unexpectedly rich epic-heroic tradition in literary Gurani".² His work extends to analyzing the linguistic intricacies of this tradition and challenging conventional understandings of the term "Gurani" itself.² The study of this tradition involves exploring its mythical elements and comparing them within broader literary contexts.²

C. Linguistic Characteristics

The primary linguistic medium of the Kurdish Shahnameh is Gorani (also spelled Gurani), particularly the literary *koiné* that flourished under the patronage of the Ardlan rulers.¹ This literary language, while culturally associated with Kurdish identity, is linguistically distinct from major modern Kurdish dialects like Sorani or Kurmanji.¹⁰ There exists a scholarly discussion regarding the appropriate nomenclature, with some preferring the term "Hawrami," which is more commonly used by speakers in the region, over the scholarly designation "Gorani".¹⁰ A defining characteristic of the Kurdish Shahnameh's versification is its reliance on a syllabic meter.¹ This meter typically features decasyllabic lines (ten syllables) often marked by a caesura, a structure deeply rooted in the folk poetry traditions of the Kurdish regions.¹² This stands in clear contrast to the quantitative meter (fa' u'lonfa' u'lonfa' u'lonfa' u'l) of Ferdowsi's Persian Shahnameh, known as *mutaqārib*.⁷

D. Relationship to Ferdowsi's Shahnameh

The relationship between the Kurdish and Persian Shahnameh traditions is a subject of

scholarly discussion, balancing notions of independence with shared heritage and influence. Chaman Ara posits that the Kurdish tradition is "largely independent" of Ferdowsi's specific text.² Conversely, Victoria Arakelova suggests that while some folk versions may contain layers predating Ferdowsi, many recorded oral variants represent extemporized adaptations of episodes from Ferdowsi's work, albeit significantly embellished with local folkloric elements.¹⁵ Points of connection are also evident. Chaman Ara observes that the Kurdish tradition shares "many common features with other works of the Sistani cycle".² This suggests that both the Kurdish and Persian traditions may draw upon a common, older pool of Iranian epic material, potentially related to sources like the Sasanian *Khwadāy-Nāmag* ("Book of Lords/Kings") that informed Ferdowsi.¹⁷ The prominence of heroes like Rostam (Persian: Rostam) in both traditions further indicates shared roots.⁷

Despite these connections, significant differences underscore the distinctiveness of the Kurdish Shahnameh:

- **Language and Meter:** As previously noted, the primary language is Kurdish (Gorani) employing a syllabic meter, unlike the Persian language and quantitative meter of Ferdowsi's work.¹
- **Unique Characters:** Sources consistently mention that the Kurdish Shahnameh features characters absent from Ferdowsi's narrative ¹, although specific examples are not detailed in the provided materials.
- **Narrative Variations:** Comparative analyses, particularly of versions attributed to Almas Khan Kandulei, reveal differences in narrative details, plot construction, character motivations, and thematic emphases when compared to Ferdowsi's renditions.¹⁹ For instance, studies suggest Almas Khan's version of the Siavash story (*Siavashnameh*) offers greater detail and might clarify ambiguities present in Ferdowsi's account.¹⁹ Furthermore, analysis indicates a "more definite and more fearless" expression of love in Almas Khan's work compared to Ferdowsi's ²², and potential differences in the portrayal of lament and associated rituals are also subjects of investigation.²⁰

E. Orality, Fluidity, and Identity

The predominantly oral transmission of the Kurdish Shahnameh, documented by multiple sources ¹, contrasts sharply with the singular authorship attributed to Ferdowsi ⁷ and the vast manuscript tradition preserving his work.⁵ Ferdowsi's epic, drawing on earlier prose sources like the *Khwadāy-Nāmag* ¹⁷, was conceived as a monumental effort to preserve Iran's history and identity ⁷, ultimately becoming a cornerstone of Persian language and culture.⁷

In contrast, the Kurdish Shahnameh's collection and transcription are attributed to "many writers" across "different locations and times".¹ This suggests a more fluid, community-shaped epic tradition. Orality inherently allows for greater variation and adaptation; indeed, evidence points to regional influences, such as the intermingling with Armenian epic traditions and linguistic borrowings observed in oral variants.¹⁵ The absence of a single, definitive, state-sponsored text implies a more decentralized transmission process. This fluidity might reflect a different dynamic between epic narrative and collective identity

formation within diverse Kurdish communities compared to the codifying role Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* played for Persian identity. The Kurdish tradition, shaped by ongoing performance and community memory, may have served as a more adaptable, albeit perhaps more contested, repository of identity narratives.

III. Corpus: Texts, Manuscripts, and Oral Traditions

A. Identified Texts and Attributions

The corpus of the Kurdish *Shahnameh*, primarily transmitted orally, has seen parts documented in written form, often associated with specific collectors or poets. Notable identified texts include:

- ***Siavashnameh***: Attributed to Almas Khan Kandulei, this Gorani version of the Siavash narrative is recognized for its detailed storytelling, potentially offering clarifications for ambiguities found in Ferdowsi's corresponding sections.¹⁹
- ***Rostam Nameh***: Also attributed to Almas Khan Kandulei, this text focusing on the hero Rostam has been subject to comparative analysis regarding hero/anti-hero portrayals and depictions of mourning traditions.²⁵
- **Other Attributed Epics**: Almas Khan Kandulei (c. 1706–1777)²⁶ is credited with several other Gorani epics considered part of the broader tradition, including *Heft Lesker* (Seven Troops), *Nadir û Topal* (Nadir and Topal), and *Sjemal û Zelan*.¹³ His poem *Gurba wa Mush* (Cat and Mouse) is also noted, though its direct connection to the *Shahnameh* cycle is not specified in the sources.²⁶
- **General Titles**: The terms *Razm-nama* (Book of Battles) and *Jang-nama* (Book of Wars) are frequently used as alternative or generic titles for the epic narratives comprising the Kurdish *Shahnameh* tradition.²

B. Manuscript Evidence

Compared to the thousands of manuscripts preserving Ferdowsi's Persian *Shahnameh*⁵, the known manuscript evidence for the Kurdish *Shahnameh* is relatively limited.⁹ This scarcity underscores the tradition's predominantly oral character. Specific examples cited in the sources include:

- A manuscript depicted in an image, originating from the archive of the "legacy committee of Vejin".¹ The precise location and nature of this committee are not elaborated upon in the available material.
- The British Library holds several relevant manuscripts, primarily in Gorani and dating from the early 19th century.⁹ These include:
 - Add MS 7829: Contains Gorani translations of *Khvurshīd-i Khāvar* and *Laylā va Majnūn*.⁹
 - Add MS 23554: A Gorani translation of *Bahrām va Gulandām*.⁹
 - Or. 6444: An anthology of Gorani poetry, which has been transliterated and translated by Anwar Soltani.⁹

- Add MS 7826: A Gorani translation of *Khusraw va Shīrīn*.⁹
- The contrast with the Persian tradition is stark, where dedicated projects like the Shahnama Project at Cambridge University catalogue vast numbers of manuscripts⁵, and numerous lavishly illustrated copies, such as the Houghton Shahnameh, the Great Mongol Shahnameh, the Baysonghori Shahnameh (a UNESCO Memory of the World item), and the Shah Tahmasp Shahnameh, attest to centuries of high-level patronage and textual production.⁶

C. Oral Traditions and Folkloric Variants

Oral transmission remains the cornerstone of the Kurdish Shahnameh tradition.¹ Central to this process are the storytellers. While Persian tradition has *naqqaalii* and *Shahname-xani*¹⁵, the Kurdish equivalent is the vibrant *dangbeezhii* tradition, performed by *dengbêj*.¹⁵ Research by Victoria Arakelova into Kurdish and Armenian oral traditions provides significant insights¹⁵:

- The cycle featuring the hero Rostam is overwhelmingly the most popular segment within the oral repertoire among both Kurdish and Armenian communities, likely due to the character's heroic appeal.¹⁵
- Oral folk versions are often dynamic, extemporized variants of known episodes, significantly enriched and adapted with local folkloric details and motifs.¹⁵
- There is clear evidence of cross-cultural fertilization, particularly between Kurdish and Armenian traditions. This includes Armenian storytellers performing in Kurdish, the contamination of Shahnameh narratives with motifs from the Armenian national epic *Sasuntsi David*, and linguistic exchanges (e.g., Armenian word for eagle used for Simurgh in Kurdish versions).¹⁵
- While generally considered closer to the original Shahnameh narratives than the heavily adapted Armenian versions, Kurdish oral renditions still exhibit influences and incorporate elements characteristic of fairy tales.
- These oral variants are valuable not only for understanding transmission but also because they may preserve archaic linguistic and narrative elements, potentially reflecting layers older than Ferdowsi's composition or stemming from Middle Iranian sources.

D. Manuscript Scarcity and Oral Primacy

The marked difference in the volume of manuscript evidence between the Kurdish and Persian Shahnameh traditions reinforces the understanding that the Kurdish epic lived primarily through oral performance and memory. The sources consistently emphasize its oral transmission.¹ The known manuscripts are relatively few and often date from the 18th or 19th centuries⁹, contrasting with Persian manuscripts dating back to the 13th century.⁵ The act of writing down the Kurdish narratives is frequently attributed to specific collectors like Almas Khan¹ or described as occurring sporadically across different times and places¹, suggesting a process of transcription *from* an existing oral reservoir, rather than the continuous copying

within a predominantly textual tradition. Consequently, the surviving manuscripts likely represent only fragments or later snapshots of a much older and more fluid oral cycle, whose historical depth and breadth resided primarily in the performances of figures like the *dengbêj*.¹⁵

IV. Historical Context and Transmission

A. Origins and Development in Gorani Literature

The Kurdish Shahnameh tradition is deeply intertwined with the history of Gorani literature. This literary tradition, considered possibly the oldest among the Kurdish dialects, emerged and developed between the 15th and 19th centuries.¹³ A pivotal factor in its flourishing was the patronage provided by the Ardalán dynasty, which held sway in the region roughly corresponding to modern Iranian Kurdistan from approximately the 14th to the 19th century.¹² During the 17th and 18th centuries, the Ardalans actively promoted Gorani, likely their own spoken language¹⁴, fostering its development into a literary *koiné* – a shared standard language used for writing and high culture.² Their capital, Sanandaj (Sine), became a significant literary center.¹² The prestige of Gorani extended beyond the Ardalán domains; it was even adopted for a time as the court language in the rival Baban principality to the west.¹² However, the political fortunes of the language were tied to its patrons. Following the fall of the Ardalán emirate around 1867-68, Gorani literature experienced a decline in status and production.¹³ Concurrently, the Sorani dialect began its ascent as a major literary language, particularly fostered under the patronage of the Baban dynasty based in Sulaymaniyah.¹²

B. Connection to Ahl-e Haqq (Yarsanism)

A crucial element in the historical context of the Gorani Kurdish Shahnameh is its connection to the Ahl-e Haqq (or Yarsan) religious community.² Gorani serves as the sacred language for this group, and their central religious texts, collectively known as the *Kalâm-e Saranjâm* ("The Discourse of Conclusion"), are composed primarily in this idiom.¹⁰ Yarsanism itself is a syncretic faith founded in the late 14th century, with followers primarily among Kurds in western Iran and Iraq.³⁶

Scholars like Chaman Ara propose a close relationship between the epic narratives of the Kurdish Shahnameh and the Ahl-e Haqq faith. He suggests that the religious worldview evident in some Gorani epics indicates either shared source material or a formative influence from Yarsan beliefs during the epics' oral development phase.² The use of Gorani for sacred texts likely contributed to the language's refinement and prestige, influencing both oral and written literary traditions.¹⁴ Formal and linguistic similarities have been observed between Ahl-e Haqq religious texts and classical Gorani literature. The existence of Yarsan texts such as the *Daftar-e Khân Almās* (Book/Register of Khan Almas)³⁶ potentially links the prominent figure Almas Khan Kandulei directly to this religious milieu, although the specific content of this *daftar* and its relation to the Shahnameh are not elaborated upon in the provided sources.³⁹

C. Modes of Transmission: Orality and Performance

The primary vehicle for the transmission of the Kurdish Shahnameh through centuries was oral performance.¹ The *Dengbêj* tradition stands as the most prominent embodiment of this process in the Kurdish context.¹⁵

- **The Dengbêj:** These figures are revered Kurdish folk singers and storytellers³¹, whose title combines *deng* (voice) and *bêj* (to tell/sing).³¹ Their repertoire included extensive historical tales, epic narratives of love and warfare, and poignant mourning songs known as *stran* or *kilam*.³¹
- **Performance Style:** Dengbêj performances were often unaccompanied by musical instruments, granting the singer considerable freedom in narration, improvisation, and verse creation.³¹ Mastery involved years of apprenticeship, memorizing hundreds of stories, poems, and epics.³¹
- **Cultural Role:** Dengbêj served a vital function beyond entertainment; they were custodians of collective memory, preserving history, cultural norms, and social realities, particularly crucial during periods when written Kurdish expression was suppressed or neglected.³¹ They acted as a living bridge connecting past traditions with present struggles.³¹
- **Performance Contexts:** Traditionally, dengbêj performed in various social settings, including communal evening gatherings known as *şevbihêrk*, village guest houses (*dîwanxane*), weddings, and urban cafés.³¹ *Şevbihêrk*, especially during long winter nights, were significant social and cultural events where epics and stories were shared.³¹

D. Transition to Written Forms

The transition from a purely oral tradition to one partially documented in writing occurred relatively late and appears to have been gradual. Figures like Almas Khan Kandulei in the 18th century are credited with collecting and transcribing parts of the oral repertoire¹, alongside other unnamed individuals at various times and places.¹ However, even the earliest known examples of written Kurdish poetry exhibit established literary conventions, suggesting a period of development and refinement predating the surviving manuscripts.¹² Despite these transcriptions, oral performance remained the dominant mode of existence for the Kurdish Shahnameh for centuries.¹²

E. Patronage, Religion, and Literary Language Choice

The historical trajectory of the Kurdish Shahnameh, particularly its association with the Gorani language, highlights the interplay of political patronage, religious affiliation, and linguistic choices. The flourishing of Gorani as a literary *koiné*, suitable for epic composition, appears directly linked to the period of Ardalan political autonomy and their active support for poets and writers using this language.² Simultaneously, Gorani's status as the sacred language of the influential Ahl-e Haqq community provided an additional sphere of prestige and linguistic development.¹⁰ The subsequent decline of Gorani's literary prominence after the fall of the

Ardalans ¹³, and the corresponding rise of Sorani under Baban patronage ¹², underscores the critical dependence of a specific vernacular's literary success on the support of political power structures. This demonstrates that the selection and elevation of particular Kurdish dialects to literary status were historically contingent not only on linguistic factors but significantly on the dynamics of regional power and religious identity.

V. Cultural Significance and Role

A. Position within Kurdish Literature

The Kurdish Shahnameh constitutes a major component of classical Kurdish literature, particularly central to the Gorani literary tradition.¹² It represents a significant and cherished part of the overall Kurdish literary heritage.¹⁴ Given that poetry was the predominant genre in written Kurdish literature until the 20th century, epic poems like the Shahnameh serve as invaluable sources for understanding the historical dynamics, social values, and cultural perspectives of Kurdish society from within.¹²

B. Impact on Kurdish Identity and Society

The Kurdish Shahnameh has played a role in shaping the historical consciousness of Kurdish communities, existing alongside Ferdowsi's work as a source of historical myths and heroic narratives that were recounted among the populace.² Its stories and the tradition of their performance function to reflect and potentially reinforce Kurdish cultural values, collective identity, and social narratives.² The Dengbêj tradition, the primary vehicle for these epics, is explicitly recognized for its role in preserving Kurdish identity and fostering national sentiment, particularly in the face of cultural suppression.³¹

In contexts marked by political marginalization and pressures toward assimilation, the epic provides a vital connection to a shared heritage and a heroic past.³¹ Kurdish poets, such as Haji Qader Koyi in the 19th century, consciously invoked figures like the epic hero Rostam to instill a sense of pride and valor among Kurds.⁴⁹ The endurance of the tradition speaks to its deep resonance within Kurdish society.

C. Relation to Iranian Epic Tradition

The Kurdish Shahnameh occupies a unique position within the broader landscape of Iranian epic traditions. It shares thematic concerns and iconic characters, most notably the hero Rustam, with Ferdowsi's Persian Shahnameh ¹⁵, pointing towards a common ancient Iranian cultural and mythological wellspring, elements of which are also preserved in texts like the Avesta.¹⁷

However, its largely independent development, as argued by scholars like Chaman Ara ², coupled with its unique narrative elements ¹ and distinct linguistic and metrical forms (Gorani language, syllabic meter) ¹, clearly marks it as a parallel, rather than merely derivative, tradition. Chaman Ara's research suggests connections to the Sistani cycle of epics and the Persian oral storytelling (*Naqqali*) tradition, while maintaining its independence from

Ferdowsi's specific literary creation.² This suggests the Kurdish Shahnameh taps into related, but distinct, streams of the shared Iranian epic heritage.

D. Comparative Epic Context

Sources place the Kurdish Shahnameh within a global comparative context. Chaman Ara's work involves comparing mythical elements found in the Kurdish Shanama with those in European literature, specifically mentioning the German epic *Nibelungenlied*.² Broader comparisons involving the *Shahnameh* phenomenon (implicitly encompassing both Persian and Kurdish traditions as part of a wider category) liken its role in identity formation to Homer's *Iliad* for the Greeks.⁵³ Its episodic structure has also been compared to the European *chansons de geste*.⁵³ Another study undertakes a comparison of educational themes, contrasting the story of Zal and Roudabeh from the Shahnameh tradition with that of Paris and Helen from the *Iliad*.⁵⁴

E. Epic as a Tool for Cultural Resilience

The history of the Kurdish Shahnameh offers compelling evidence for the role of epic traditions as instruments of cultural resilience and identity preservation. For a large stateless nation like the Kurds, facing centuries of political fragmentation and pressures of assimilation from dominant surrounding cultures³¹, oral traditions became paramount. The Dengbêj performers, carrying the epic narratives, functioned as living archives, ensuring the transmission of language, history, and cultural values when written forms were neglected or actively suppressed.¹² The content of the epics, celebrating legendary heroes like Rostam⁴⁹ and recounting foundational myths and historical struggles, served to nurture collective memory and reinforce a distinct Kurdish identity.² The modern revival of interest in the Dengbêj tradition and the associated epics is explicitly linked to contemporary efforts to safeguard and revitalize Kurdish culture and identity in the face of ongoing challenges.³¹ Thus, the Kurdish Shahnameh tradition, particularly in its enduring oral form, exemplifies the power of epic narrative to serve as a dynamic repository of cultural memory and a vital resource for navigating and resisting external pressures over extended historical periods.

VI. Key Figures Associated with the Kurdish Shahnameh

A number of individuals – poets, performers, collectors, and scholars – are associated with the creation, transmission, and study of the Kurdish Shahnameh tradition.

A. Poets and Authors (Primarily Gorani)

The composition and transcription of Kurdish Shahnameh narratives are linked to several poets, predominantly writing in the Gorani literary language:

- **Sarhang Almas Khan Kandulei (or Kanoule'ei)** (c. 1706–1777): A central figure, particularly in popular accounts, credited with collecting and committing parts of the

Kurdish Shahnameh to writing in Gorani during the 18th century.¹ Specific works attributed to him include the *Siavashnameh*¹⁹, *Rostam Nameh*²⁵, and other epics like *Heft Lesker*, *Nadir û Topal*, and *Sjermal û Zelan*.¹³ His versions of Shahnameh stories have been the subject of comparative scholarly analysis focusing on narrative detail, the expression of love, and the portrayal of lament, often contrasted with Ferdowsi's renditions.¹⁹ His name's association with the Yarsan text *Daftar-e Khān Almās*³⁶ suggests potential connections to the Ahl-e Haqq religious environment, though the direct link between this *daftar* and his Shahnameh work is not established in the provided sources.

- **Khana Qubadi (Xana Qubadî)** (1700–1759): A prominent Gorani poet of the Ardalan period.¹¹ He authored works such as the *Şalawāt-nāma* and a Gorani version of the romance *Şirin o Kosrow*¹², as well as the epic *Xosrow û Şîrîn* composed in the quantitative ‘*arûž*’ meter, a departure from the typical syllabic meter of Gorani folk poetry.¹³
- **Mele Perîşan** (c. 1356–1431): Considered one of the earliest known Gorani writers, credited with a *masnavi* (poem in rhyming couplets) on Shi'ite themes.¹⁰
- **Mistefa Bêşaranî (Shaikh Moştafâ Bêşarānî)** (1641–1702): A significant Gorani poet and disciple of Yusof Yaskā.¹¹
- **Mawlawi Tawagozi (Sayyed ‘Abd-al-Raḥīm Mollā Sa‘īdī Tāwgozi)** (ca. 1806–1882): Regarded as the last and most renowned poet of the classical Gorani school.¹¹ He composed religious poetry in Gorani, Persian, and Arabic, strongly influenced by Sufism¹² and is cited for his lyric poetry.¹³
- **Mastoureh Ardalan (Māh Şaraf Kānom Mastura Kordestānî)** (1805–1848): A notable female poet from the Ardalan court. Initially known for her Persian compositions, her Gorani poems were discovered later.¹¹ She is particularly recognized for her elegies.¹³
- **Other Gorani Poets:** The Gorani literary tradition associated with the Shahnameh and related genres includes figures like **Yusof Yaskā** (d. 1636), considered the founder of the school¹²; **Shaikh Aḥmad Taḳṭi Marduḳi** (1617–92)¹²; **Aḥmad Begi Komāsi** (1796–1877)¹²; **Mollā Bolād Khan** (d. 1885), who composed a Gorani version of *Laylî o Majnun*¹²; **Mehzûnî** (1643–1701), cited for lyric poetry¹³; and **Welî Dêwane**, known for love poems.¹³

B. Performers (Dengbêj)

The oral transmission of the Kurdish Shahnameh relied heavily on performers, primarily the *dengbêj*:

- **General Role:** Dengbêj were the primary conduits for the epic's dissemination through live performance, ensuring its continuity across generations.¹⁵
- **Named Examples:** While specific Dengbêj known exclusively for performing the Shahnameh are not singled out in the snippets, examples representing the broader tradition include **Sakiro**, **Kazo**, **Huseyne Fare**, **Seyitxane Boyaxci**, and **Mihemedê Nenyasi**⁴¹; **Mistefa Bedevi** and his son **Sakir**⁵⁹; **Alicane Pasure** and **Hesene Silbe**⁴¹;

and performers at modern festivals like **Hozan Şemdin, Maruf, Tava Afrine, Diyar,** and **Hozan Serhat.**⁶⁰ Additionally, the renowned contemporary Iranian Kurdish singer **Shahram Nazeri** has performed verses from the Kurdish Shahnameh in his work *Avaze Asatir* (Voice of Legends).¹

C. Collectors and Scholars

Academic study and collection efforts have been crucial for documenting and analyzing the Kurdish Shahnameh:

- **Behrooz Chaman Ara:** A key contemporary scholar whose doctoral research focused on the Kurdish Shahnameh.⁶¹ His publications, including the book *The Kurdish Shahnama and its Literary and Religious Implications*² and related articles²⁷, explore the Gorani tradition's independence from Ferdowsi, its links to Yarsanism, and its linguistic features.² He is also the founder of the International Institute for the Study of Kurdish Societies (IISKS).⁶¹
- **Philip G. Kreyenbroek:** A prominent scholar of Iranian Studies, specializing in Yezidism, Yarsanism, and oral traditions.⁶⁶ His work provides essential context for understanding the religious and oral dimensions of Gorani literature⁶⁸, and he has co-authored works relevant to the field.⁶⁵
- **Victoria Arakelova:** Conducted research on the presence and adaptation of the Shahnameh in Kurdish and Armenian oral traditions, highlighting the popularity of the Rustam cycle and cross-cultural influences.¹⁵
- **Mahmud Efendi Bāyazidli (Bayazidi)** (1797–1859): A 19th-century Kurdish writer and intellectual who provided crucial information about earlier Kurmanji poets to the Russian diplomat and scholar Alexandre Jaba.¹¹
- **Alexandre Jaba:** Published some of the earliest documented information on classical Kurdish poets, based on the knowledge shared by Bayazidli.¹²
- **Roger Lescot:** French scholar who studied the Dengbêj tradition during the French Mandate period in Syria and Lebanon³² and published a significant edition of the Kurmanji epic *Mam û Zîn*.¹²
- **Mostafa Radmard & Mir Jelaladdin Kazzazi:** Collaborated on comparative studies analyzing the themes of lament²⁰ and love²² in Ferdowsi's Shahnameh versus Almas Khan Kandulei's Kurdish versions.
- **Zahra Jamshidi & Abas Mohamadian:** Co-authored a study comparing Almas Khan Kandulei's *Siavashnameh* with Ferdowsi's narrative of Siavash.¹⁹
- **Anwar Soltani:** Responsible for the transliteration and translation of the important Gorani poetry anthology held in the British Library (MS Or. 6444).⁹ His translation of a poem by Mehzûnî is also cited.¹³
- **Z.A. Yusupova:** Russian scholar who has published works on the Gorani dialect based on literary manuscripts from the 18th–19th centuries, including texts by poets like Wali Dewana, Mawlawi, and Khanai Kubadi. Her research argues for classifying Gorani within the Southern Kurdish dialect group.⁷⁰

D. Table of Key Figures

The diverse individuals contributing to the Kurdish Shahnameh tradition are summarized below:

Table 1: Key Figures Associated with the Kurdish Shahnameh

Name	Role	Key Contribution(s) related to Kurdish Shahnameh	Source Citation(s)
Sarhang Almas Khan Kandulei (Kanoule'ei)	Poet/Author (Gorani)	Popularly credited collector/writer; Author of <i>Siavashnameh</i> , <i>Rostam Nameh</i> , <i>Heft Lesker</i> , etc.; Subject of comparative studies.	¹
Khana Qubadi (Xana Qubadî)	Poet/Author (Gorani)	Prominent 18th C. poet; Author of <i>Xosrow û Şîrîn</i> (Gorani epic).	¹¹
Mele Perîşan	Poet/Author (Gorani)	Early Gorani writer (14th-15th C.).	¹⁰
Mistefa Bêsarani	Poet/Author (Gorani)	Significant Gorani poet (17th C.).	¹¹
Mawlawi Tawagozi	Poet/Author (Gorani)	Renowned late classical Gorani poet (19th C.); Sufi influence.	¹¹
Mastoureh Ardalan	Poet/Author (Gorani/Persian)	Female poet from Ardalan court (19th C.); composed elegies in Gorani.	¹¹
Dengbêj (General)	Performers/Storytellers	Primary transmitters of the oral epic tradition.	¹⁵
Shahram Nazeri	Performer/Singer	Recorded verses of Kurdish Shahnameh.	¹
Behrooz Chaman Ara	Scholar	Leading contemporary researcher; Author of <i>The Kurdish Shahnama...</i> ; Focus on Gorani tradition, independence, Yarsan links.	²
Philip G. Kreyenbroek	Scholar	Expert on Iranian oral	⁶⁵

		traditions, Yarsanism; Provides context for Gorani literature.	
Victoria Arakelova	Scholar	Researched Shahnameh in Kurdish/Armenian oral tradition.	¹⁵ ,
Mahmud Efendi Bāyazidli	Collector/Writer	19th C. intellectual; Provided information on early poets.	¹¹ ,
Mostafa Radmard & Mir Jelaladdin Kazzazi	Scholars	Co-authored comparative studies on love/lament in Almas Khan vs. Ferdowsi.	²⁰
Zahra Jamshidi & Abas Mohamadian	Scholars	Co-authored comparative study on <i>Siavashnameh</i> .	¹⁹
Anwar Soltani	Translator/Scholar	Translated British Library Gorani poetry anthology (Or. 6444).	⁹
Z.A. Yusupova	Scholar	Researched Gorani dialect via 18th-19th C. literary texts.	⁷⁰

VII. Available Translations, Summaries, and Analyses

The user query specifically requested information on available translations (partial or complete) or detailed summaries/analyses of Kurdish Shahnameh content in any language. Based on the provided source materials:

- **Direct Textual Translations (English/German/French):** The snippets reviewed do **not** indicate the existence of complete or substantial direct translations of the Kurdish Shahnameh epic texts (like those attributed to Almas Khan) into major European languages such as English, German, or French. While numerous translations exist for Ferdowsi's *Persian* Shahnameh (e.g., by Dick Davis ⁷¹, Warner Brothers ⁷³, and others into German ⁷⁴), no comparable translations of the *Kurdish* epic cycle itself are mentioned.
- **Scholarly Analyses and Summaries:** Significant analytical work exists, primarily focusing on the tradition's context, characteristics, and relationship with other literatures, rather than providing translated narrative content. Key examples include:
 - **Behrooz Chaman Ara's** book, *The Kurdish Shahnama and its Literary and Religious Implications* ², offers a detailed academic analysis based on fieldwork. It discusses the Gorani tradition, its independence from Ferdowsi, connections to the Sistani cycle and Ahl-e Haqq faith, and linguistic features.² While analytical, it is not presented as a translation of the epic poems themselves. Chaman Ara has

also published related articles ²⁷ and a monograph specifically on the *Rostam and Sohrab* section ⁶¹, likely analytical rather than a full translation.

- **Comparative Studies:** Articles by Radmard & Kazzazi analyze themes like lament ²⁰ and love ²² in specific stories common to both Ferdowsi's and Almas Khan's versions. Similarly, Jamshidi & Mohamadian compare the *Siavashnameh* narratives.¹⁹ These studies provide summaries and analyses of specific narrative segments for comparative purposes but do not constitute full translations.
- **Oral Tradition Studies:** Arakelova's work summarizes findings on oral variants, particularly the Rostam cycle, in Kurdish and Armenian traditions.¹⁵
- **Anthologies/Manuscript Descriptions:** Anwar Soltani's work on the British Library Gorani anthology (Or. 6444) involved transliteration and translation, likely for scholarly presentation rather than a widely accessible literary translation.⁹ Descriptions of British Library manuscripts provide brief summaries of the content (e.g., *Khvurshīd-i Khāvar*, *Bahrām va Gulandām*).⁹
- **Musical Adaptations:** The singer Shahram Nazeri has performed verses from the Kurdish Shahnameh, making parts of the tradition accessible through music.¹

In essence, while scholarly analysis and discussion of the Kurdish Shahnameh exist, particularly concerning its Gorani manifestations and relationship to Ferdowsi's work, accessible translations of the primary epic texts into major Western languages appear to be lacking based on the provided sources. The main available resources are academic studies *about* the tradition.

VIII. Scholarly Perspectives and Debates

The study of the Kurdish Shahnameh involves several areas of scholarly discussion and differing perspectives, reflecting the complexities of its transmission, linguistic context, and relationship to other traditions:

- **Independence vs. Influence:** A central debate concerns the relationship between the Kurdish Shahnameh and Ferdowsi's Persian epic. Behrooz Chaman Ara argues strongly for the Kurdish tradition's substantial independence, suggesting shared roots in older Iranian epic material (linking it to the Sistani cycle) rather than direct derivation from Ferdowsi.² Conversely, analyses of oral folk versions, such as those by Arakelova, acknowledge potential pre-Ferdowsi layers but also describe many recorded variants as extemporizations based on Ferdowsi's episodes, albeit heavily adapted and folklorized.¹⁵ This suggests a spectrum of relationships, from potentially independent parallel streams to later adaptations of the more famous Persian text within the oral tradition.
- **Authenticity and Variation in Oral Versions:** The primarily oral nature of the tradition raises questions about the "authenticity" of specific versions and the extent of variation. Arakelova notes the enrichment of oral versions with folkloric details and contamination from other local epics (like the Armenian *Sasuntsi David*).¹⁵ The Dengbêj tradition itself involved improvisation and adaptation.³¹ This inherent fluidity contrasts

with the relative stability sought in textual traditions and complicates efforts to reconstruct a single "original" Kurdish Shahnameh. Modern institutionalization of Dengbêj performance has also led to debates about changes in repertoire, song length, and the influence of recording technology and political censorship.⁴²

- **Gorani Linguistic Status and Nomenclature:** The language of the Kurdish Shahnameh, literary Gorani, is itself a subject of debate. Scholars discuss whether it functioned primarily as a practical spoken language or a specific literary idiom (*koiné*) cultivated under Ardalán patronage.² There is also disagreement on terminology, with scholars often using "Gorani" while native speakers may prefer "Hawrami".¹⁰ Z.A. Yusupova's research places Gorani within the Southern Kurdish dialect group, based on analysis of literary texts.⁷⁰ Chaman Ara explicitly challenges common understandings of Gorani in his work.² These linguistic debates impact how the tradition is classified and understood within the broader Kurdish linguistic context.
- **Religious Dimensions (Ahl-e Haqq/Yarsan Connection):** The extent and nature of the influence of the Ahl-e Haqq faith on the Kurdish Shahnameh is another area of scholarly interest. Chaman Ara points to close ties in worldview, suggesting shared sources or formative impact during the oral phase.² The role of Gorani as the sacred language of Yarsanism undoubtedly contributed to its literary development.¹⁴ However, the precise ways in which Yarsan cosmology, mythology (e.g., concepts like *dunāduni* or reincarnation³⁸, the *Haft Tan* or Seven Beings³⁸), or specific figures influenced the epic narratives requires further detailed textual analysis, which is ongoing in works like those by Chaman Ara and Kreyenbroek.²
- **Comparison with Other Epics:** Scholarly work situates the Kurdish Shahnameh in comparative contexts, analyzing its mythical elements against European epics like the *Nibelungenlied*² or comparing its themes and structure to the *Iliad* or *chansons de geste*.⁵³ These comparisons help illuminate both universal epic features and culturally specific aspects of the Kurdish tradition.

These ongoing discussions highlight the Kurdish Shahnameh as a dynamic field of study, where questions of origin, transmission, linguistic identity, religious influence, and cultural meaning continue to be explored and debated by scholars.

IX. Synthesis and Conclusion

The Kurdish Shahnameh emerges from this analysis as a distinct and significant epic tradition, primarily rooted in the Gorani linguistic sphere and transmitted for centuries through oral performance, particularly by the revered *dengbêj*. While sharing thematic elements and heroic figures like Rostam with Ferdowsi's Persian Shahnameh, suggesting common origins in a broader ancient Iranian epic pool possibly linked to the Sistani cycle², the Kurdish tradition asserts its independence through its unique Gorani language, characteristic syllabic meter, inclusion of distinct characters, and specific narrative variations.¹

The historical development of the written Gorani tradition, including the Shahnameh narratives, was crucially fostered by the patronage of the Ardalán dynasty between the 17th

and 19th centuries.² This period saw Gorani flourish as a literary *koiné*, further supported by its status as the sacred language of the Ahl-e Haqq (Yarsan) religious community¹⁰, whose worldview may have influenced the epic's oral development.² The subsequent decline of Gorani literature following the fall of the Ardalans highlights the vital role of political context in sustaining literary vernaculars.¹³

Despite later transcriptions by figures like Almas Khan Kandulei¹ and others, the Kurdish Shahnameh remained fundamentally an oral phenomenon. The relative scarcity of manuscripts compared to the vast Persian corpus underscores the primacy of performance and memory in its preservation.⁹ This orality allowed for fluidity, regional adaptation (as seen in interactions with Armenian traditions¹⁵), and likely contributed to the variations observed in comparative studies of specific narratives like *Siavashnameh* or in the expression of themes like love and lament.¹⁹

Culturally, the Kurdish Shahnameh has served as a vital repository of collective memory, historical consciousness, and cultural values for Kurdish society.² Transmitted by Dengbêj, who acted as more than mere entertainers but as custodians of history and identity³¹, the epic tradition provided a connection to a heroic past and functioned as a powerful tool for cultural resilience, particularly significant for a stateless nation facing enduring political and cultural pressures.³¹

Ongoing scholarly debates continue to explore its precise relationship with Ferdowsi's work, the nature of its oral variations, the complexities of the Gorani language, and the depth of its connection to the Yarsan faith.² While detailed analyses and summaries exist in academic works, particularly by scholars like Behrooz Chaman Ara², accessible translations of the core epic texts into major Western languages appear limited based on the reviewed materials. In conclusion, the Kurdish Shahnameh represents a rich, parallel Iranian epic tradition, shaped by its unique linguistic milieu (Gorani), its deep roots in oral performance (*dengbeezhi*), its connection to regional history and religious identity (Ardalan patronage, Yarsanism), and its enduring role in sustaining Kurdish cultural identity. Its study offers valuable perspectives on the diversity of epic traditions within the Iranian cultural sphere and the crucial function of oral literature in preserving heritage under challenging historical circumstances. Further research, particularly the documentation and analysis of remaining oral variants and the potential discovery or publication of more manuscript evidence, promises to continue enriching our understanding of this vital cultural expression.

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