

# Traditions of the Kurds: Continuity and Transformation Across Time and Space

## I. Introduction

### A. Defining Kurdish Culture and Traditions

The Kurds represent a distinct ethno-linguistic group indigenous to a mountainous region often referred to as Greater Kurdistan, an area encompassing parts of modern-day Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria.<sup>1</sup> Significant Kurdish populations also reside in northeastern Iran and Armenia, alongside a substantial global diaspora, particularly in Europe and countries of the former Soviet Union.<sup>1</sup> Estimating the total Kurdish population is challenging due to varying criteria of ethnicity, religion, and language, as well as potential political manipulation of statistics; figures often range widely, with estimates in the mid-2010s suggesting between 36 and 46 million people<sup>1</sup>, while other sources suggest 35-40 million<sup>3</sup> or around 20-40 million speakers of the Kurdish language.<sup>4</sup> Contemporary estimates place the Kurdish population at over 14 million in Turkey, 8 million in Iran, 6 million in Iraq, and 2 million in Syria.<sup>6</sup>

Kurdish culture comprises a group of distinctive cultural traits<sup>2</sup>, representing a legacy inherited from ancient peoples who inhabited the region and shaped modern Kurdish society.<sup>2</sup> Kurdish traditions encompass a wide array of inherited customs, social values, artistic expressions, and practices that reflect the Kurds' deep connection to their geography, historical experiences, and social organization.<sup>2</sup> These traditions include social customs like hospitality, major festivals such as Newroz, life-cycle ceremonies, music, dance, distinctive clothing, cuisine, and a rich oral literature.<sup>2</sup> However, Kurdish culture is not monolithic; it exhibits significant heterogeneity stemming from regional differences, linguistic diversity (with major dialects including Kurmanji, Sorani, and Southern Kurdish/Pehlewani<sup>4</sup>), varied religious affiliations (a majority Sunni Muslim population, with significant Alevi communities primarily in Turkey<sup>2</sup>, Yezidis, and adherents of Sufism<sup>1</sup>), and distinct historical trajectories within different political entities. While sharing commonalities with neighboring Iranian, Azerbaijani, Turkic, and Arabic cultures, Kurdish culture maintains its unique characteristics and is noted for a level of cultural equality and tolerance.<sup>9</sup>

This document aims to provide a comprehensive overview of Kurdish traditions, examining their historical forms prior to the 20th century and their contemporary manifestations across Kurdistan and within the diaspora. It analyzes the evolution of specific traditions, identifies factors contributing to their persistence or change, and explores their profound significance in shaping and maintaining Kurdish cultural identity. In adherence to rigorous academic standards, every claim and piece of information presented is meticulously attributed to specific, cited sources, addressing the critical need for clear source documentation [User Query].

### B. Historical Context: From Empires to Nation-States

The historical backdrop of Kurdish traditions is essential for understanding their development

and resilience. Kurds have inhabited their mountainous homeland in the Middle East for centuries, possibly millennia.<sup>1</sup> While their pre-Islamic history is debated, the name "Kurd" is firmly attested from the time of the tribes' conversion to Islam in the 7th century CE.<sup>1</sup> Historically, Kurdish populations often existed within the framework of larger empires, most notably the Ottoman and Persian (Safavid, Qajar) empires.<sup>3</sup> Within these empires, particularly in the strategic frontier zones between them, Kurdish regions frequently enjoyed significant autonomy.<sup>3</sup> Kurdish principalities, led by hereditary rulers or powerful tribal chiefs (known as emirs, khans, or agas), often managed their own affairs, sometimes shifting allegiances between the Ottomans and Persians based on political expediency.<sup>3</sup> The relationship established after the Battle of Çaldıran in 1514, facilitated by figures like the Kurdish scholar Idris Bitlisi, set a pattern where Ottoman sultans granted autonomy and privileges (like tax exemptions) to Kurdish leaders in exchange for loyalty and border defense, an arrangement that largely persisted for centuries.<sup>3</sup> The Bani Ardalān tribe, for example, ruled a large principality centered in Sanandaj from perhaps the 14th century, maintaining considerable independence before being incorporated as a semi-autonomous province within Safavid Iran.<sup>16</sup>

This long period of relative self-governance within larger imperial structures was dramatically disrupted by the collapse of the Ottoman Empire after World War I and the subsequent redrawing of political boundaries in the Middle East.<sup>1</sup> The creation of modern nation-states—Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria—partitioned the traditional Kurdish homeland, leaving the Kurds as minorities within these new political entities and without a state of their own.<sup>1</sup> A brief provision for an autonomous Kurdistan in the 1920 Treaty of Sèvres was never ratified, and the subsequent Treaty of Lausanne (1923) made no mention of the Kurds, solidifying their division.<sup>1</sup>

This political fragmentation had profound consequences for Kurdish traditions and identity. The new nation-states often pursued policies of centralization and homogenization, viewing distinct Kurdish identity and cultural practices as threats to national unity.<sup>9</sup> Kurds faced varying degrees of assimilation pressure, suppression of their language and culture, denial of political rights, and sometimes violent repression in all four states.<sup>9</sup> This historical context of political division and cultural suppression is crucial for understanding both the challenges faced by Kurdish traditions and the reasons for their strong association with Kurdish identity and resilience.

### **C. Methodology and Sources**

The information presented in this document is synthesized from a diverse range of sources, reflecting the multifaceted nature of Kurdish culture and the academic field dedicated to its study. Sources include academic literature, such as peer-reviewed articles from journals like *Kurdish Studies*<sup>24</sup> and the *International Journal of Kurdish Studies*<sup>27</sup>, which cover topics from history and politics to language, gender, and culture.<sup>24</sup> Ethnographic studies and anthropological research provide valuable on-the-ground perspectives.<sup>29</sup> Encyclopedic entries from reputable sources like *Encyclopaedia Iranica*<sup>11</sup> and *Britannica*<sup>1</sup> offer foundational overviews. Cultural websites and publications dedicated to Kurdish heritage<sup>8</sup> provide

contemporary insights and descriptions of practices. Institutional resources, such as archives and collections from the Kurdish Heritage Institute in Sulaymaniyah <sup>41</sup> and the Vera Beaudin Saeedpour Kurdish Library and Museum Collection at Binghamton University <sup>43</sup>, offer access to primary materials, artifacts, and documentation. In line with the user request, sources in various languages have been consulted and are cited [User Query].

The academic field of Kurdish Studies itself has a history. Early European engagement with Kurdish language and culture began in the late 18th and 19th centuries, often initiated by missionaries (like Maurizio Garzoni <sup>35</sup> and Gottlieb Christian Hörnle <sup>35</sup>) and travelers or diplomats conducting ethnographic or linguistic research.<sup>31</sup> While providing valuable early documentation, some of these accounts may reflect the biases of their time, including Orientalist perspectives that could portray Kurds through stereotypes of being "barbarous," "tribal," or "primitive".<sup>31</sup> Russian scholarship became prominent in the mid-19th century, particularly through the work of figures like Alexander Jaba <sup>35</sup>, making St. Petersburg a center for Kurdish studies.<sup>35</sup> German scholars like Rödiger and Pott helped establish Kurdish as an independent branch within Iranian languages.<sup>35</sup> Kurdish Studies later developed as an independent discipline within Iranian Studies, particularly in the USSR <sup>35</sup>, and has grown significantly in recent decades, moving beyond the margins of Middle Eastern Studies dominated by Arab, Turkish, and Persian perspectives.<sup>30</sup> Contemporary scholarship increasingly emphasizes critical approaches, including decolonial perspectives that challenge historical erasures and academic marginalization.<sup>49</sup> This document strives to present information objectively, acknowledging the historical context of its sources while adhering strictly to the principle of providing specific citations for every data point and assertion presented [User Query].

## **II. Historical Foundations: Kurdish Traditions Before the 20th Century**

### **A. Socio-Economic Life: Nomadism and Agriculture**

Prior to the profound societal shifts of the 20th century, the traditional Kurdish way of life was largely characterized by a dual economy based on nomadic pastoralism and settled agriculture.<sup>1</sup> Nomadic life revolved around herding sheep and goats, a practice deeply intertwined with the mountainous terrain of Kurdistan.<sup>1</sup> This involved *trans-humance*, the seasonal migration of herds between summer pastures (zoma) higher in the mountains and winter pasturage on the plains or in valleys.<sup>1</sup> Nomadic groups lived in tent camps, utilizing heavy, black woolen tents that remained at winter sites and lighter tents for travel during migrations.<sup>15</sup> These camps might consist of entire clans or groups of families cooperating in herding.<sup>29</sup> Nomadic pastoralists traded animal products like wool, meat, and dairy for grain, tea, sugar, and other goods available in local markets.<sup>29</sup> Some nomadic groups formed temporary, voluntary unions known as *obas* during the spring migration season, lasting until their return to winter quarters in the fall.<sup>15</sup>

Alongside nomadism, many Kurds practiced settled agriculture, living in villages located on plains or in mountain valleys.<sup>29</sup> Staple crops included wheat, barley, and lentils, while tobacco was often raised as a cash crop.<sup>29</sup> Depending on local conditions, fruits, vegetables, and walnuts were also cultivated.<sup>29</sup> Most agriculturalists also kept livestock, integrating animal

husbandry with farming.<sup>29</sup> In some regions, like Kordestan in Iran, agriculture dominated the economy, with wheat, barley, rice, corn, tobacco, oilseeds, vegetables, and fruits being grown.<sup>5</sup>

The traditional nomadic lifestyle, deeply ingrained in Kurdish identity and economic practice for centuries, proved inherently vulnerable to the political changes following World War I. Nomadism fundamentally requires the freedom to move across extensive territories to access seasonal pastures suitable for livestock.<sup>1</sup> The establishment of modern nation-states, however, involved the creation of fixed, internationally recognized borders that cut across traditional Kurdish migratory routes.<sup>1</sup> The enforcement of these national boundaries beginning after WWI directly impeded the essential seasonal migrations of the flocks.<sup>1</sup> This disruption forced a significant number of Kurds to abandon their nomadic traditions, compelling them towards village life, settled farming, or engagement in non-traditional forms of employment.<sup>1</sup> This transition marked a major shift in Kurdish socio-economic structure, directly resulting from the imposition of the nation-state system onto their traditional lands.

### **B. Social Organization: Tribe, Lineage, and Family**

Traditional Kurdish society was fundamentally organized around kinship structures, with the tribe (*aşîret*) serving as a principal unit, particularly among nomadic and semi-nomadic populations.<sup>1</sup> Tribal leadership was typically vested in a sheikh (religious leader) or an aga (secular, often landowning chief), whose authority was often firm.<sup>1</sup> Tribal identification remained a significant aspect of social life, even as urbanization began.<sup>1</sup> Within the broader tribal framework, distinctions existed, such as that between tribal agriculturists who owned their land and non-tribal peasants (*reaya*) who were often subservient to landowning tribals.<sup>17</sup> Historically, powerful Kurdish tribes, such as the Bani Ardalan in northwestern Iran, established and ruled over large principalities, demonstrating the political significance of tribal organization before the era of centralized nation-states.<sup>16</sup>

Kinship was predominantly traced through the male line (patrilineal descent).<sup>29</sup> Lineages and clans played crucial roles in providing mutual support and defense for their members.<sup>51</sup> They were particularly important in managing conflicts, often through mechanisms like the blood feud, where kinship groups united against perceived external threats.<sup>29</sup> While tribal and lineage ties were paramount for nomads coordinating migrations and managing collective pastureland<sup>29</sup>, their importance could vary among sedentary agriculturalists, where village-level organization might also be significant.<sup>1</sup>

The basic social and economic unit was the household, known variously as *mal*, *xani*, or *zoma* (tent compound for nomads).<sup>15</sup> Traditionally, Kurdish households were often extended families, typically comprising a man, his wife (or wives), their unmarried children, married sons with their families, and possibly other relatives, all centered around the male head of the family (*malxî*).<sup>29</sup> The household functioned as a corporate entity responsible for production, reproduction, distribution, and consumption.<sup>51</sup> Within the household, reciprocal labor exchanges (*zebari* or *zebare*) were common, facilitating cooperation in agricultural work, animal husbandry, daily chores, and preparations for communal events like weddings.<sup>51</sup>

Traditional gender roles were clearly defined within the household and community.<sup>29</sup> Women

were primarily responsible for domestic tasks such as preparing food, housekeeping, and childcare, but also undertook significant labor outside the home, including collecting firewood and manure for fuel, fetching water, cleaning grain, spinning, weaving, making cigarettes, harvesting tobacco, and sometimes assisting with plowing.<sup>29</sup> Aristocratic women performed tasks within the home but relied on servants for work outside, such as milking or fetching fuel.<sup>29</sup> Men's duties centered on agriculture (plowing, sowing, harvesting), transporting goods to market, and making necessary purchases.<sup>29</sup> Often, a single shepherd was employed to tend the flocks for an entire village.<sup>29</sup> Village leaders (aghas) were traditionally responsible for maintaining a guest house (*dîwanxane*) for visitors and as a meeting place for village men.<sup>29</sup> Despite these defined roles, historical accounts suggest that Kurdish women traditionally enjoyed a more active role in public life compared to women in neighboring Turkish, Arab, and Iranian societies, particularly noted in pre-revolutionary Iran.<sup>1</sup>

The strength and operational significance of these traditional kinship structures—tribe and lineage—were demonstrably linked to the prevailing socio-economic conditions and the broader political landscape. The demands of nomadic pastoralism, requiring coordinated movement and resource management, naturally reinforced tribal organization and authority.<sup>29</sup> In contrast, while settled agricultural communities still relied on lineage ties for social support and conflict resolution<sup>29</sup>, the day-to-day prominence of tribal structures might have been less pronounced compared to village-level leadership.<sup>29</sup> The historical existence of influential tribal principalities, like that of the Ardalan<sup>16</sup>, underscores the potent political dimension of tribal organization in pre-modern Kurdistan. Conversely, concerted efforts by centralizing states, beginning with Ottoman reforms in the 19th century<sup>3</sup> and intensifying with the rise of post-World War I nation-states<sup>1</sup>, actively sought to curtail tribal power and promote detribalization.<sup>1</sup> This process contributed to the diminished, though not entirely erased, influence of tribal identity and authority, particularly in urbanized settings.<sup>1</sup> Thus, shifts in lifestyle from nomadism to settlement, and political transformations from relative autonomy to state integration, directly impacted the functional relevance and power dynamics of traditional Kurdish kinship systems.

### **C. Life Cycle Traditions: Marriage and Family Formation**

Marriage has historically been one of the most significant life-cycle events in Kurdish society, serving crucial functions in establishing alliances, defining social hierarchies, and ensuring the continuity of lineages.<sup>51</sup> Traditional Kurdish marriages were predominantly arranged between the families of the prospective bride and groom.<sup>29</sup> Negotiations were often initiated by the women of the two families and subsequently finalized by the men, culminating in a formal marriage settlement.<sup>29</sup> In some cases, marriage arrangements could be made even before the children involved were born.<sup>51</sup>

A strong preference existed for lineage endogamy – marrying within the lineage – a practice explicitly aimed at "keeping the family together".<sup>29</sup> The ideal and most preferred match was between a man and his paternal first cousin, specifically his father's brother's daughter (FBD).<sup>29</sup> A man was considered to have "first rights" to marry his FBD, and any deviation from this required negotiation between the involved brothers.<sup>29</sup> If marriage to an FBD was not

possible, the next best choice was another cousin.<sup>29</sup> This preference for patrilineal parallel cousin marriage served to consolidate property and reinforce solidarity within the patrilineage.<sup>51</sup> Yezidi communities also practiced strict endogamy, but with specific rules prohibiting marriage between certain defined social categories (sheikhs, pirs, etc.).<sup>51</sup> Marriage involved specific transactions and rituals. A key element was the bride-wealth (*naxt* or *mahr*), a payment (in cash, gold, livestock, or goods) from the groom's family to the bride's family, the terms of which were outlined in the marriage settlement.<sup>8</sup> Failure by the groom to pay the agreed bride-wealth or adequately support his wife could be grounds for divorce.<sup>29</sup> Bride-price amounts varied based on the families' status but were often lower for preferred FBD marriages.<sup>51</sup> The bride typically did not receive the bride-price directly; it was often used by her family, potentially to secure brides for her brothers.<sup>51</sup> In addition, a courteous gift called *kaleb* or *sirdan* (milk money), usually gold jewelry, was presented to the bride's mother.<sup>51</sup> Another form of marriage arrangement was the direct exchange (*pê-guhurk*), often a sister exchange, where two families exchanged daughters as brides, typically negating the need for bride-price payments.<sup>51</sup> Following the wedding ceremony, which traditionally involved fetching the bride to the groom's home<sup>29</sup> and could last for several days with music, dance, and feasting<sup>8</sup>, the bride would move to her husband's village or family compound.<sup>29</sup> Customarily, the eldest son and his family remained living with his parents, while younger married brothers would eventually build their own houses within the expanding family compound.<sup>51</sup> Other traditional customs related to marriage included *levirate*, where a widow was expected to marry her deceased husband's brother, and *sororate*, where a widower might marry his deceased wife's sister, often with a reduced bride-price.<sup>51</sup> Both practices aimed to ensure the welfare of children and keep inheritance within the family.<sup>51</sup> While Islam permits polygyny (up to four wives), it was relatively uncommon among Kurds, largely due to the economic burden of supporting multiple wives equally.<sup>29</sup> Divorce, according to traditional Islamic practice followed by many Kurds, could be initiated relatively easily by a man simply renouncing his wife three times.<sup>29</sup> Challenges to the arranged marriage system existed in the forms of elopement and kidnapping, though these were less common and could lead to significant social disruption and potential feuds, particularly in the case of kidnapping.<sup>51</sup> These traditional marriage practices, especially the emphasis on lineage endogamy and the FBD preference, highlight that marriage served critical socio-economic functions extending far beyond the personal relationship between the spouses. These customs were deeply embedded within the logic of the patrilineal kinship system. Arranging marriages primarily between families<sup>29</sup>, with a strong preference for the closest patrilineal cousins (FBD)<sup>29</sup>, directly served to keep alliances, resources, and social obligations concentrated within the lineage.<sup>51</sup> This practice explicitly aimed to maintain family unity<sup>29</sup> and patriarchal solidarity.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, since women in traditional Kurdish society generally did not inherit land or other significant property<sup>51</sup>, marrying within the lineage ensured that control over resources remained consolidated within the male line. Supporting practices like levirate and sororate further reinforced this focus on lineage continuity and the management of inheritance.<sup>51</sup>

Therefore, traditional marriage rules were instrumental in maintaining the social and economic stability of the patrilineage, prioritizing group cohesion over individual romantic choice.

#### **D. Material Culture and Daily Life**

Insights into the material culture and daily life of Kurds before the 20th century can be gleaned from ethnographic accounts and descriptions of traditional settlements and dwellings. For nomadic populations, the primary form of habitation was the tent (*kon*, *chadîr*, *reshmal*), adapted for mobility.<sup>15</sup> Settled and semi-nomadic groups often utilized winter dwellings (*mal*, *khani*) that were sometimes underground or half-underground mud huts, offering protection from harsh weather.<sup>15</sup> These homesteads could form a single complex including the hut, stable, sheepfold, and storeroom.<sup>15</sup> Common construction materials included unfinished brick, unpolished stone, or locally available materials like tufa.<sup>15</sup> Roofs varied regionally, being flat in plains areas or cupola-shaped with a central aperture (*kolek*) for light and smoke in mountainous regions.<sup>15</sup> A central hearth (*tandur*) embedded in the earthen floor served for heating, baking bread (like *nan*), cooking, and sometimes ritual purposes.<sup>15</sup>

Traditional Kurdish settlement patterns often reflected practical needs and social structures. Villages were frequently established near reliable water sources like springs.<sup>15</sup> Some early accounts, particularly concerning Azerbaijani Kurds, noted the absence of dedicated public buildings such as mosques (for Muslims) or specific prayer houses (for Yezidis) within the villages themselves, suggesting religious practices might have been more localized or integrated into domestic spaces.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, formal markets or market squares were sometimes absent, with Kurds traveling to nearby Armenian or Azerbaijani villages for trade and commerce.<sup>15</sup> Graveyards were typically located near the village.<sup>15</sup>

While detailed descriptions of historical clothing are presented later (Section IV.C), archaeological evidence, such as carvings at the Achaemenid Apadana Palace (circa 5th century BC), depicts figures in attire resembling modern Kurdish clothing, suggesting a remarkable continuity in certain elements of dress over millennia.<sup>37</sup>

Much of the early documentation of Kurdish customs comes from the observations of European travelers, missionaries, and diplomats who visited the region from the late 18th through the 19th century. Figures like Maurizio Garzoni (late 18th C)<sup>35</sup>, Claudius James Rich (early 19th C)<sup>16</sup>, Gottlieb Christian Hörnle (1830s)<sup>35</sup>, and later observers like Major Soane, C.J. Edmonds, Captain Hay, Francis Maunsell, Fredrick Millingen, and Mark Sykes provided valuable, if sometimes subjective, accounts of Kurdish life, language, social structures, and customs.<sup>31</sup> It is important to approach these early ethnographic sources with critical awareness, recognizing that they were often produced within the context of imperial interests or missionary goals, and could be influenced by prevailing Orientalist stereotypes that sometimes romanticized or denigrated Kurdish culture.<sup>31</sup> Nonetheless, these accounts remain crucial sources for reconstructing aspects of Kurdish traditional life before the transformative changes of the 20th century.

### **III. Contemporary Kurdish Traditions: Adaptation and Persistence**

#### **A. Social Structures in the Modern Era**

The 20th and 21st centuries have witnessed significant transformations in Kurdish social structures, driven by political, economic, and social forces. The traditional nomadic pastoralist lifestyle, once central to Kurdish life, has largely declined.<sup>1</sup> Key factors contributing to this shift include the enforcement of restrictive national borders after World War I, which hampered transhumance<sup>1</sup>, state-sponsored settlement policies, land reforms that altered property relations<sup>5</sup>, and increasing urbanization as Kurds migrated to towns and cities seeking new opportunities.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the decline of nomadism and the pressures of modernization, tribal identification and the influence of traditional leaders (sheikhs and agas) have persisted, although their authority is generally diminished compared to the past, particularly in urban environments.<sup>1</sup>

Detribalization has been an ongoing, intermittent process as Kurdish society has become more urbanized and integrated, to varying degrees, into the structures of the nation-states they inhabit.<sup>1</sup> The strength of ties to the tribe or lineage can vary depending on the specific community and way of life.<sup>1</sup>

Family structures have also evolved. The traditional extended family household (*mal*), often encompassing multiple generations within a single compound, continues to exist, particularly in rural areas.<sup>51</sup> However, the rise of permanent wage labor, urbanization, and migration has challenged the corporate economic function of the traditional household.<sup>51</sup> While some families maintain resource pooling, others, especially younger urban families, may achieve greater economic independence, leading to a potential increase in nuclear family units.<sup>51</sup> Nonetheless, the concept of the extended family often remains a significant social and cultural reference point, even for diaspora communities.<sup>51</sup>

Gender roles are undergoing noticeable changes, influenced by increased access to education and employment opportunities for women, particularly in urban settings.<sup>1</sup> Kurdish women's participation in public life, historically noted as relatively active compared to some neighboring societies<sup>1</sup>, has expanded in many areas. This can lead to shifts in household dynamics, potentially weakening traditional patriarchal norms and increasing women's decision-making power.<sup>51</sup> However, these changes are not uniform and vary significantly based on region, socio-economic class, and the persistence of traditional values.<sup>51</sup> Studies indicate that women in seminomadic tribes may traditionally enjoy more egalitarian relationships compared to some settled peasant communities<sup>51</sup>, while challenges related to patriarchal attitudes and practices like dowry pressure continue to affect women's lives.<sup>53</sup>

The contemporary Kurdish social landscape thus reflects a complex dynamic. Modernization, state policies, and globalization have undeniably altered traditional structures. Yet, elements like tribal identity, the importance of lineage, and the extended family concept demonstrate remarkable resilience, coexisting and interacting with modern socio-economic realities. This interplay is not always harmonious; traditional norms can clash with individual aspirations fueled by education, urban life, and exposure to global ideas. For instance, while urbanization offers new opportunities, it can also challenge traditional support networks.<sup>51</sup> Similarly, while women gain more public roles<sup>1</sup>, they may still face traditional expectations regarding marriage or inheritance.<sup>51</sup> This ongoing process is one of adaptation, negotiation, and



sometimes contradiction, as Kurds navigate the tensions between deeply rooted traditions and the pressures and possibilities of the modern world.

## **B. Contemporary Life Cycle Events**

Life cycle ceremonies remain central to Kurdish social life, embodying both continuity and change.

**Weddings:** Weddings continue to be events of great social importance, celebrated with joy and adherence to many inherited traditions.<sup>8</sup> Family involvement remains crucial, often beginning with the groom's family formally requesting the bride's hand (*Khawar*).<sup>54</sup> Arranged marriages still occur<sup>51</sup>, although the influence of individual choice, love matches, and negotiation appears to be increasing, particularly in urban and diaspora contexts.<sup>51</sup> The potential for elopement or even kidnapping, while rare, persists as a challenge to purely family-arranged unions.<sup>51</sup> Traditional elements are highly visible in contemporary celebrations: multi-day festivities filled with music and communal dancing (like the *Dabke* or *Dilan*) are common.<sup>8</sup> Traditional attire, featuring vibrant colors and intricate embroidery for women and distinct outfits for men, is often worn.<sup>8</sup> The presentation of a dowry (*mahr* or *naxt*) from the groom's family to the bride's remains a part of the process in many communities<sup>8</sup>, though its form and significance might evolve, and pressures related to it can cause marital dissatisfaction.<sup>53</sup>

Alongside these enduring traditions, modern and global influences are increasingly apparent. Western wedding themes, contemporary attire, pre-wedding parties, and elaborate commercial services ("wedding industry") are being incorporated into Kurdish celebrations.<sup>54</sup> This blending reflects changing societal values, individual preferences, and the impact of globalization and media.<sup>54</sup> This fusion can enrich the experience but also raises concerns about cultural dilution and the commercialization of tradition.<sup>54</sup> In some areas, the convergence of old and new cultural elements related to weddings has led to cultural reconstruction, amalgamation, and sometimes conflicts of values or norm disturbances.<sup>56</sup>

**Funerals:** While less detailed in the available sources, funeral practices for the majority Sunni Muslim Kurds generally align with Islamic customs, involving specific prayers, washing rites, burial procedures, and mourning periods. Regional variations and the influence of local customs likely exist, and Sufi or Alevi communities would follow their specific traditions.

**Birth and Child-rearing:** The birth of a child is celebrated within the family and community. Circumcision remains a significant rite of passage for Muslim Kurdish boys, typically performed between ages six and ten.<sup>51</sup> This event often involves the selection of a *tirib* (or *karif/kiniv* among Yezidis), usually a respected neighbor, who comforts the boy during the procedure and establishes a lifelong bond akin to blood-brotherhood.<sup>51</sup> Naming practices have been a site of political struggle; in Turkey, restrictions were placed on using Kurdish names, requiring German authorities, for instance, to rely on lists provided by Turkish consulates for diaspora children.<sup>57</sup> Similarly, in Syria under the Ba'ath regime, parents who gave children Kurdish names could find them changed to Arabic on official documents.<sup>22</sup> These state interventions highlight how even intimate family traditions can become politicized in contexts of cultural suppression.

Contemporary Kurdish life-cycle events vividly illustrate the dynamic negotiation between cultural heritage and external forces. Core traditional elements persist, demonstrating cultural resilience and the importance placed on community and family rituals.<sup>8</sup> Simultaneously, the incorporation of modern trends, whether chosen or imposed, reflects adaptation to globalization, urbanization, and state policies.<sup>22</sup> The evolution of wedding practices, blending traditional music and dance with Western themes<sup>54</sup>, or the politicization of naming conventions<sup>22</sup>, shows that these traditions are not static relics. Instead, they are actively shaped and reshaped by Kurds as they navigate their identities and social realities in response to both internal community values and external pressures from the state and the globalized world. The persistence of issues like dowry pressure alongside modernization further underscores the complex and often uneven nature of this cultural transformation.<sup>53</sup>

### **C. Festivals and Celebrations**

Festivals are vibrant expressions of Kurdish culture, community, and identity.

**Newroz:** Unquestionably the most important national holiday for Kurds, Newroz is celebrated annually on March 21st.<sup>2</sup> It marks the beginning of the Kurdish new year and the arrival of spring, symbolizing renewal, rebirth, freedom, and liberation.<sup>8</sup> Its origins are ancient, linked to pre-Islamic Iranian traditions and the spring equinox.<sup>8</sup> Kurdish mythology powerfully connects Newroz to the legend of Kawa the Blacksmith (*Kawayê Hesinkar*), a hero who defeated the tyrannical king Dehak (or Zahhak), whose evil reign had prevented the coming of spring and required human sacrifices.<sup>6</sup> Kawa's victory, signaled by lighting a fire on the mountains, heralded freedom and the return of spring.<sup>8</sup>

Contemporary Newroz celebrations retain these core symbolic elements. The lighting of bonfires on mountaintops or in public spaces remains a central ritual, symbolizing light, freedom, and the enduring flame of Kawa's victory.<sup>8</sup> Large communal gatherings take place, often in natural settings.<sup>8</sup> Traditional Kurdish group dances, especially the *Dabke* or *Halparke*, are performed with enthusiasm by men and women alike.<sup>8</sup> People wear their finest traditional clothing, often in the vibrant colors associated with Kurdish identity (red, green, yellow).<sup>8</sup> Special traditional foods are prepared and shared.<sup>8</sup> Music is integral to the festivities.<sup>8</sup> The evolution of Newroz into a potent political symbol, particularly in response to state suppression, is discussed further in Section IV.A.

**Other Festivals:** While Newroz holds paramount importance, other festivals are also observed. The Feast of Xidir Nebi is mentioned as a religious and cultural gathering involving prayers, feasting, and socializing.<sup>38</sup> As the majority of Kurds are Muslim, major Islamic holidays such as Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha are widely celebrated according to religious customs. Additionally, Kurdish communities, particularly in the diaspora, organize cultural festivals that serve as important venues for maintaining and celebrating their heritage. These festivals often feature stalls selling traditional Kurdish food, books, jewelry, and clothing, alongside performances of traditional music and dance, often by youth groups learning the cultural practices of their heritage.<sup>40</sup> Such events play a vital role in fostering cultural pride and community cohesion among dispersed populations.<sup>38</sup>

### **D. Arts, Music, and Literature**

Kurdish artistic expressions form a rich tapestry reflecting history, identity, and resilience.

**Music:** Music holds a central place in Kurdish culture, often described as deeply loved and ubiquitous.<sup>13</sup> Traditional Kurdish folk music serves as a vital medium for transmitting history, stories, and cultural memory.<sup>2</sup> This function is particularly embodied by the *Dengbêj*, traditional bards or singers renowned for their epic poems (*lawj*), which often narrate tales of love, adventure, and battle, and their poignant songs of mourning (*stran*).<sup>2</sup> A variety of traditional instruments create the distinctive sounds of Kurdish music, including wind instruments like the flute (*şîmşal* or *bilûr*), the oboe-like *zurna*, and the duduk or balaban; percussion instruments like the large double-headed drum (*dahol*) and the frame drum (*daf*); and string instruments like the long-necked lute (*tembûr* or *saz*), the oud (*ut-ut*), and the hammered dulcimer (*santur*).<sup>2</sup> Alongside folk traditions, modern Kurdish pop music has emerged, with artists like Sivan Perwer gaining international recognition.<sup>9</sup> However, Kurdish music, particularly that with political connotations or simply sung in the Kurdish language, has often faced censorship and bans in countries like Turkey and Iraq.<sup>9</sup>

**Dance:** Dance is an integral and vibrant component of Kurdish social life and celebrations, particularly weddings and Newroz.<sup>13</sup> Kurdish dance is typically performed collectively, often in circles or lines with dancers holding hands or shoulders, moving in unison to rhythmic music.<sup>13</sup> Popular forms include the energetic *Dabke* (common across the Levant and Mesopotamia) and *Halparke* (or *Govend*), symbolizing unity, community, and joy.<sup>8</sup> These dances are often accompanied by live traditional music and sometimes improvisational vocals, creating a strong sense of communal participation and shared identity.<sup>13</sup> Diaspora communities actively maintain these dance traditions through cultural groups and performances at festivals.<sup>40</sup>

**Oral Literature and Folklore:** Kurdish culture possesses a rich and ancient oral tradition, although it faces threats from modernization, urbanization, and cultural repression.<sup>2</sup> Epic poems (*lawj*) recounting heroic deeds or romantic adventures are a prominent genre.<sup>9</sup> Kurdish folklore includes numerous tales and legends passed down through generations. Among the most famous is *Mem û Zîn*, considered the Kurdish national epic.<sup>2</sup> Based on an older oral romance, it was given its definitive literary form in Kurmanji Kurdish by the poet Ehmedê Xanî (Ahmad Khani) in 1695.<sup>2</sup> Another well-known folktale, popular in Turkish and Iraqi Kurdistan, is *Zembîlfrôsh* ("The Basket Seller"), which tells the story of a prince who becomes a wandering dervish, selling baskets with his wife, and faces temptation from an emir's wife.<sup>2</sup> These narratives often embody cultural values, historical memory, and social commentary.

**Written Literature:** While oral tradition historically held precedence, a written Kurdish literature has also developed.<sup>33</sup> Early Kurdish poetry emerged between the 15th and 17th centuries, with classical poets like Ali Hariri, Feqiyê Teyran, Melayê Cizîrî, and the aforementioned Ehmedê Xanî composing works primarily in the Kurmanji dialect of the Botan/Jazira region.<sup>10</sup> Their works often adopted forms and imagery from the broader Perso-Arabic literary tradition.<sup>33</sup> Ehmedê Xanî, besides *Mem û Zîn*, also wrote a rhymed Arabic-Kurdish vocabulary for students, *Nûbihara Biçûkan* ("The New Spring of Children"), and religious works.<sup>33</sup> In other regions, particularly under the patronage of the Ardalan rulers, a distinct literary tradition emerged using the Gorani language (often considered a Kurdish

dialect), which was more influenced by local folk poetry traditions, employing a characteristic decasyllabic meter.<sup>33</sup> The 19th century saw the rise of the Nalî school of poetry centered in Sulaymaniyah, which established Sorani Kurdish as a significant literary language, utilizing Perso-Arabic forms like the *qasida* and *ghazal*.<sup>33</sup> Notable Sorani poets include Nalî (the school's founder), Şêx Reza Talebanî (known for satire), and Mahwi (known for lyrical Sufi themes).<sup>33</sup> Prose literature in Kurdish developed more substantially in the 20th century, spurred by social and political changes.<sup>33</sup> Early written attestations of Kurdish also include a 15th-century Christian prayer written in Armenian script<sup>10</sup> and the sacred texts of the Yezidis, such as the *Mishefa Reş* (Black Book).<sup>10</sup> The first comprehensive history of the Kurds, the *Sharafnama*, was composed in Persian by Sharaf Khan Bidlisi in 1596.<sup>9</sup>

**Crafts:** Kurdish handicrafts are renowned for their artistry and cultural significance. Carpet weaving (*kilim*, rugs) is arguably the most prominent Kurdish folk art.<sup>9</sup> Kurdish weavers utilize distinctive patterns, including central medallions, but more commonly employ all-over floral motifs (like Mina Khani) or bold geometric designs (such as Jaff patterns).<sup>9</sup> Their work is characterized by the use of vibrant, high-chroma colors—deep blues, greens, saffrons, terracotta, and burnt oranges—often enhanced by the lustrous quality of the local wool.<sup>9</sup> Traditional Kurdish rugs frequently incorporate symbols that are believed to communicate the weaver's dreams, wishes, and hopes, making the rug a form of narrative expression.<sup>9</sup> Beyond weaving, other important crafts include intricate embroidery (adorning clothing), leatherwork, and metal ornamentation, with Kurds historically known for their skill in copper-working.<sup>9</sup> Examples of these crafts, including historical textiles and jewelry, are preserved in museum collections like the Saeedpour Collection.<sup>43</sup>

**Cinema:** A Kurdish cinema has emerged, often focusing on the lives, culture, and struggles of the Kurdish people.<sup>2</sup> Shaped by the experience of statelessness and conflict, Kurdish films frequently depict social grievances, political oppression, torture, human rights violations, and the challenges of life under difficult circumstances or as refugees.<sup>2</sup> Cinema provides an important artistic medium for Kurds to draw attention to their situation and explore cultural themes.<sup>2</sup>

These diverse artistic expressions—music, dance, literature, and crafts—are far more than mere entertainment or decoration within Kurdish culture. They function dynamically as crucial vehicles for transmitting collective history and cultural knowledge across generations, particularly through the enduring power of oral traditions like the *Dengbêj* and epic storytelling.<sup>2</sup> Communal activities like music and dance at celebrations reinforce social bonds and shared identity.<sup>8</sup> Material culture, such as the symbolic language woven into carpets<sup>9</sup>, carries narratives and meaning. Literature and modern media like cinema provide platforms for exploring Kurdish experiences, identity, and aspirations.<sup>2</sup> Significantly, in environments where Kurdish language and culture have faced suppression, these artistic forms have often taken on heightened importance as acts of cultural preservation and assertion of identity.<sup>2</sup> The banning of Kurdish music or the endangerment of folklore underscores the political weight attributed to these cultural practices by states attempting assimilation.<sup>2</sup> Thus, Kurdish arts are deeply interwoven with the social, historical, and political fabric of Kurdish life, serving

as vital tools for cultural continuity, memory preservation, identity expression, and, at times, resistance.

### **E. Cuisine**

Food and culinary practices are widely recognized as a fundamental component of Kurdish identity and social life.<sup>2</sup> Kurdish cuisine reflects the agricultural and pastoral heritage of the region, utilizing local ingredients and traditional preparation methods.

Lamb and chicken are staple meats that have been central to the Kurdish diet for centuries.<sup>2</sup> Vegetables, rice dishes (*pilaf*), and various dairy products derived from sheep and goat milk also form a large part of traditional meals.<sup>2</sup>

Several specific dishes are considered characteristic of Kurdish cuisine. These include *Kfta* (or *Kofta*), which involves spiced minced meat encased in a thin layer of mashed rice or bulgur and often cooked in a savory broth; *Ser û pê*, a hearty dish made from boiled goat's head, tongue, and feet; and *Shifta*, savory meat patties.<sup>2</sup> Other popular dishes mentioned in the context of hospitality include *Dolma* (vegetables like grape leaves, peppers, or zucchini stuffed with rice, herbs, and sometimes meat) and various forms of Kurdish kebab (grilled meat skewers).<sup>8</sup>

Beverages play an important social role. Tea (*çay*) is a staple, consumed frequently throughout the day, often 2-3 times, and serving tea is a cornerstone of Kurdish hospitality, typically offered in small, tulip-shaped glass cups with sugar.<sup>2</sup> Yogurt-based drinks, known by names such as *Mastaw*, *Do'h* (Dew), or *Ayran*, are also commonly consumed and refreshing.<sup>2</sup> The importance of food extends beyond mere sustenance; it is deeply integrated into social customs, particularly hospitality.<sup>8</sup> Sharing food and tea is central to welcoming guests and fostering community bonds. Traditional Kurdish food is also a prominent feature at cultural festivals, both in the homeland and in the diaspora, serving as a tangible link to cultural heritage.<sup>40</sup>

## **IV. Analysis: Evolution and Significance of Specific Traditions**

Examining the trajectory of specific traditions reveals much about the dynamics of cultural change, persistence, and the interplay between culture and identity politics in the Kurdish context.

### **A. Newroz: From Ancient Rite to Political Symbol**

Newroz, the celebration of the spring equinox around March 21st, holds deep historical roots, likely connected to ancient Iranian and Zoroastrian traditions celebrating renewal and the victory of light over darkness.<sup>8</sup> Within Kurdish folklore, however, it acquired a distinct and powerful narrative centered on the myth of Kawa the Blacksmith overthrowing the oppressive tyrant Zahhak.<sup>6</sup> This narrative imbued the festival with connotations of liberation from tyranny, making it more than just a celebration of spring but also a commemoration of freedom.<sup>8</sup> Historically, it was primarily a cultural and communal celebration marked by rituals like lighting bonfires, communal dancing, wearing festive attire, and feasting.<sup>8</sup>

In the contemporary era, Newroz retains these core celebratory elements and is widely observed by Kurds across Kurdistan and in the diaspora.<sup>2</sup> However, its significance underwent a dramatic transformation, particularly during the latter half of the 20th century. In

nation-states like Turkey and Syria, where Kurdish identity and cultural expressions were actively suppressed, the celebration of Newroz was often banned or severely restricted by authorities.<sup>2</sup> This state repression, aimed at erasing a practice strongly associated with Kurdish identity, had the unintended consequence of politicizing the festival. Celebrating Newroz, even in secret or defiance of bans, became a powerful act of resistance against assimilationist policies and an assertion of distinct Kurdish identity.<sup>12</sup> Kurdish political movements, notably the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), consciously utilized Newroz as a focal point for mobilization, protests, and articulating political demands, further solidifying its political dimension.<sup>58</sup> Attempts by states, like Turkey's promotion of a sanitized, Turkified "Nevruz" spelling and narrative, were largely seen as efforts to co-opt and neutralize its specific Kurdish significance and were met with resistance.<sup>58</sup>

In regions where Kurds attained greater political autonomy, such as the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) or northeastern Syria after 2011-2012, Newroz celebrations transformed again. They became large-scale, open public events, explicitly celebrating Kurdish culture and identity, often incorporating symbols like the Kurdish flag and attended by tens of thousands.<sup>22</sup> In these contexts, Newroz could also evolve into a more inclusive celebration, inviting participation from other ethnic and religious groups within the region.<sup>22</sup>

The evolution of Newroz vividly demonstrates how a cultural tradition can be profoundly reshaped by political conflict and state policies. The very attempts by states to suppress Newroz because of its association with Kurdish identity paradoxically amplified its political meaning. State repression acted as a catalyst, transforming the festival from a primarily cultural observance into arguably *the* most potent symbol of Kurdish cultural survival, collective identity, resistance against oppression, and national aspirations.<sup>12</sup> Its trajectory underscores the dynamic and often reciprocal relationship between cultural practice, state power, and the construction of ethnic and national identity.

### **B. Wedding Rituals: Negotiating Tradition and Modernity**

Kurdish wedding traditions provide a compelling case study of how communities navigate the complex terrain between cultural preservation and adaptation in the face of contemporary social change and global influences. Historically, weddings were primarily alliances arranged between families, emphasizing lineage continuity and social solidarity.<sup>29</sup> Key features included the strong preference for marrying within the lineage (FBD endogamy), the negotiation and payment of bride-wealth (*naxt*), multi-day celebrations involving the entire village community, specific roles for elders and relatives, and the wearing of distinct traditional attire.<sup>29</sup>

In contemporary Kurdish society, many of these traditional elements demonstrate remarkable persistence. Family involvement in matchmaking and negotiations remains common.<sup>8</sup>

Weddings are still major festive occasions, often spanning several days and characterized by traditional music, communal dances like the *Dabke* or *Dilan*, and the significant presence of extended family and community members.<sup>8</sup> The exchange of dowry or *mahr* continues to be practiced, and traditional clothing is frequently worn, especially by the bridal party and guests wanting to express cultural identity.<sup>8</sup>

However, these enduring practices coexist with significant adaptations and the incorporation of modern and globalized elements. The influence of individual choice in selecting a partner

appears to be growing, particularly among educated and urban populations, sometimes leading to love matches or negotiated arrangements rather than purely family-dictated ones.<sup>51</sup> The possibility of elopement, though potentially disruptive, also reflects a challenge to purely traditional norms.<sup>51</sup> Western wedding trends, disseminated through media and diaspora connections, have introduced new practices such as personalized themes, contemporary wedding attire (white dresses, suits), pre-wedding parties, and professional photography/videography.<sup>54</sup> The rise of a commercial "wedding industry" offering services from venue decoration to catering also impacts how celebrations are organized and experienced.<sup>56</sup>

Several factors drive this evolution: globalization and the pervasive influence of Western media; urbanization, which brings exposure to diverse lifestyles and often weakens traditional social controls; increased levels of education, especially for women, which can empower individuals to assert greater autonomy in personal decisions<sup>51</sup>; migration and the experiences of diaspora communities interacting with host societies<sup>60</sup>; and changing economic structures moving away from purely agrarian or pastoral systems towards wage labor.<sup>51</sup> This confluence of factors creates a dynamic where Kurdish families and individuals actively negotiate between honoring their cultural heritage and embracing contemporary trends.<sup>54</sup> This negotiation is not always seamless; tensions can arise between generations, between traditional expectations (like dowry pressures, which can contribute to marital unhappiness<sup>53</sup>) and modern aspirations, and between the desire to maintain cultural distinctiveness and the appeal of globalized consumer culture.<sup>56</sup>

The significance of contemporary Kurdish wedding rituals lies precisely in this ongoing negotiation. They serve as a microcosm of broader societal changes, reflecting evolving notions of family structure, the balance between individual agency and communal obligation, shifting gender roles, and the ways in which a culture adapts while striving to retain its core identity in an increasingly interconnected world.<sup>51</sup>

### **C. Traditional Clothing: Identity Marker and Cultural Statement**

Traditional Kurdish clothing stands as one of the most visible and potent markers of Kurdish ethnic identity and cultural heritage.<sup>8</sup> Historically, Kurdish attire exhibited significant regional diversity, reflecting local customs, climate, and social distinctions, yet shared common elements that distinguished it from the clothing of neighboring Arabs, Turks, and Persians.<sup>32</sup> Archaeological evidence suggests a long history for some elements of Kurdish dress.<sup>37</sup> Detailed descriptions, particularly from sources documenting Iranian Kurdistan, reveal this regional variation.<sup>32</sup> For instance, women's attire in Mahabad (Western Azerbaijan) traditionally included very wide balloon trousers (*darpe*), a long pleated dress (*kerās*) with distinctive long triangular sleeve extensions (*sorānis*), a short jacket (*kavā*), a hip sash (*peštand*), and a cylindrical hat (*tās-keḷāw*) wrapped with a scarf (*dasmāl*).<sup>32</sup> In contrast, women in Sanandaj (Kurdistan province) wore narrower trousers under a bell-shaped dress, also with *sorānis*, a similar jacket but with an open mantle (*sāya*), and a sequined cap (*kalāgī*) wrapped with scarves.<sup>32</sup> Further south, in Kermanshah, women's dresses often lacked *sorānis*, and were worn with a bodice/vest and a long mantle (*qabā*), along with a cap and scarves.<sup>32</sup> The Kurdish

women of Quchan (Khorasan) had an entirely different ensemble featuring a knee-length dress, tunic, skirt (*šalīta*), thick stockings, and a square scarf.<sup>32</sup> Men's clothing also varied but generally included baggy trousers (*shalwar* or *pāntol*) fitted at the ankles (with fullness varying regionally), a shirt (*kerās*, sometimes with *sorānis*), a vest (*kavā* or *çûka*), a wide sash (*peštand* or *şûtik*) wrapped around the torso, and a headdress typically consisting of a cap (*kelāw*) wrapped with a turban cloth (*paç* or *jamadani*).<sup>8</sup> Specific terminology and cuts differed across regions like Mahabad, Sanandaj, Kermanshah, and Quchan.<sup>32</sup> Clothing was adapted for seasons, with heavier fabrics for winter and lighter ones for summer; special occasions called for finer fabrics and brighter colors, while mourning required darker hues.<sup>32</sup>

In the contemporary era, traditional Kurdish clothing continues to be worn, although its use in daily life has declined, especially in urban centers, due to the prevalence of modern Western-style fashion.<sup>32</sup> However, it retains immense symbolic importance and is prominently displayed during cultural celebrations like Newroz and weddings, at festivals, and by individuals wishing to make a statement about their cultural identity.<sup>8</sup> Diaspora communities frequently showcase traditional attire at cultural events and gatherings, reinforcing their connection to their heritage.<sup>40</sup> While some specific historical items, like the *tās-kelāw* headdress of Mahabad, might now be worn primarily by older women <sup>32</sup>, the general forms, vibrant colors (often incorporating the symbolic Kurdish colors of red, green, and yellow <sup>13</sup>), and intricate embroidery remain defining features.<sup>8</sup> Modern fabrics may be used, but the traditional cuts and aesthetics are often preserved.<sup>37</sup>

The persistence and symbolic weight of traditional clothing are significantly influenced by the political context. In environments where Kurdish identity has been suppressed, wearing traditional dress can become an act of defiance and cultural assertion.<sup>9</sup> The very attempts by states to discourage or erase these visible markers of difference have often served to reinforce their importance to Kurds as symbols of pride, resilience, and distinctiveness.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, traditional Kurdish clothing functions as more than just apparel; it is a powerful visual language communicating ethnic identity, regional affiliation, cultural pride, and historical continuity.<sup>8</sup> Its continued presence, especially during significant cultural moments, underscores the resilience of Kurdish heritage in the face of assimilation pressures and the forces of globalization. The internal diversity reflected in regional clothing styles also serves as a reminder of the heterogeneity within the broader Kurdish cultural landscape.

**Table 1: Regional Variations in Traditional Kurdish Clothing (Based primarily on Iranian Kurdistan)**

Region	Women's Key Items	Men's Key Items	Notes	Source(s)
Western Azerbaijan (Mahābād)	<i>Darpe</i> (very wide trousers, 4–6m), <i>Kerās</i> (long pleated dress,	<i>Pāntol</i> (baggy trousers, very full), <i>Kerās</i> (shirt, with <i>sorānis</i> ),	<i>Tās-kelāw</i> now mainly worn by older women.	<sup>32</sup>



	4-5m, with <i>sorānis</i> ), <i>Kavā</i> (short jacket), <i>Peštand</i> (hip sash), <i>Tās-kelāw</i> (cylindrical hat, historical), <i>Dasmāl</i> (headscarf)	<i>Kavā/Çûka</i> (vest), <i>Peštand</i> (wide torso sash), <i>Paç</i> (turban) around <i>Kelāw</i> (cap)		
<b>Kurdistan (Sanandaj)</b>	Narrower trousers (3m), Bell-shaped dress (3-4m, with <i>sorānis</i> ), Similar jacket, <i>Sāya</i> (long open mantle), <i>Kalāgī</i> (sequined cap with scarves)	Similar trousers (less full than Mahābād), <i>Kerās</i> , <i>Kavā/Çûka</i> , <i>Peštand</i> , <i>Paç</i> around <i>Kelāw</i>	<i>Kalāgī</i> use declining among younger urban women.	<sup>32</sup>
<b>Kermānshāh</b>	Trousers, Long straight dress (no <i>sorānis</i> ), Waist-length bodice/vest, <i>Qabā</i> (long mantle, open below waist), Sequined cap with scarves	Similar trousers (less full than Sanandaj), <i>Kerās</i> , <i>Kavā/Çûka</i> or <i>Soḵma</i> (waistcoat) & <i>Salta</i> (jacket), <i>Peštand</i> ( <i>Shāl-pešt</i> ), <i>Paç</i> ( <i>Sarvan</i> ) around <i>Kelāw</i>	Southern Kurdish terminology differs (e.g., <i>šovī</i> for shirt, <i>šalvār jāfī</i> for trousers).	<sup>32</sup>
<b>Khorasan (Qūčān)</b>	Knee-length dress (no <i>sorānis</i> ), Hip-length tunic, <i>Šālīta</i> (skirt), Thick stockings, Square scarf	Red/white collarless shirt (no <i>sorānis</i> ), Narrow trousers, Knee-length mantle, <i>Patāva</i> (leggings), Narrow leather belt, Felt/fur hat	Costume described as entirely different from western Kurdish regions.	<sup>32</sup>

*Note: This table summarizes key elements based on available source descriptions, primarily focusing on variations within Iran as detailed in <sup>32</sup> and <sup>32</sup>. Terminology and specific styles can vary further within these broad regions.*

#### **D. Hospitality: An Enduring Cultural Value**

Hospitality (*mêvanperwerî* or *mêvanhêzî*) stands out as a deeply ingrained and highly persistent cultural value among Kurds, frequently cited as a defining characteristic of their society.<sup>8</sup> Historical accounts suggest its long-standing importance; in traditional village

settings, the local leader (Agha) often maintained a dedicated guest house (*dîwanxane*) where visitors were lodged and entertained, and where community members gathered.<sup>29</sup> This institutionalized form underscored the communal significance placed on welcoming outsiders. In contemporary Kurdish life, both within the homeland and the diaspora, this tradition of generosity and warm welcome towards guests remains exceptionally strong.<sup>8</sup> It is considered not merely a custom but an integral part of Kurdish ethics and culture.<sup>8</sup> Observable rituals associated with hospitality include greeting guests warmly upon arrival, promptly offering refreshments, particularly Kurdish tea served in small glasses with sugar, which functions as a symbol of welcome.<sup>8</sup> Hosts typically go to great lengths to prepare a feast for their guests, often featuring traditional dishes like dolma and kebab.<sup>8</sup> There is a strong social expectation that a guest should not leave without eating, and rejecting offered hospitality is considered inappropriate.<sup>8</sup> Outsiders visiting Kurdish regions or interacting with Kurdish communities often remark on the exceptional level of hospitality they experience.<sup>39</sup>

Unlike traditions such as nomadism or certain aspects of marriage customs that have undergone significant transformation due to external pressures, the core value of hospitality appears remarkably resilient. While the specific setting might change—urban homes replacing village guest houses—the fundamental principles of generosity, warmth, and ensuring the comfort and well-being of guests endure across time and geographical space.

The significance of hospitality in Kurdish culture extends beyond simple politeness. It functions as a vital mechanism for building and reinforcing social relationships, fostering community cohesion, and expressing core cultural values.<sup>8</sup> By extending generosity to others, Kurds affirm their own identity and present a positive image of their culture to both insiders and those outside the community. This enduring tradition serves as a cornerstone of Kurdish social interaction and cultural expression.

## **V. Traditions and Kurdish Cultural Identity**

Kurdish traditions are inextricably linked to the formation, maintenance, and expression of Kurdish cultural and national identity. They function as powerful markers of distinctiveness, repositories of collective memory, tools for resilience, and focal points for community cohesion, both within the historical homeland and across the global diaspora.

### **A. Markers of Distinction and Continuity**

In a region characterized by diverse ethnic and linguistic groups, Kurdish traditions serve as crucial markers that differentiate Kurds from neighboring populations such as Turks, Arabs, and Persians.<sup>2</sup> The distinct Kurdish language (with its various dialects), the unique celebration of Newroz with its specific mythology, characteristic styles of traditional clothing, vibrant music and dance forms, rich folklore, specific culinary practices, and the deeply ingrained value of hospitality all contribute to a sense of collective uniqueness.<sup>2</sup>

These shared practices provide Kurds with a tangible connection to their past, fostering a sense of historical continuity and shared heritage that links contemporary generations to their ancestors.<sup>2</sup> The concept of *Kurdayetî*, often translated as "Kurdishness," encapsulates this sense of collective identity built upon shared culture, language, ancestral territory (Kurdistan), historical memory, symbols, experiences, and often, shared political aspirations.<sup>7</sup> Folklore and the rich oral tradition, particularly the role of the *Dengbêj* in recounting historical events,

legends, and epic poems like *Mem û Zîn*, play an especially vital role in transmitting collective memory, cultural values, and historical consciousness, thereby shaping and reinforcing this sense of shared identity over time.<sup>2</sup>

### **B. Role in Resistance and Cultural Survival**

The significance of Kurdish traditions has been dramatically amplified by the historical and ongoing experiences of political marginalization, state-sponsored assimilation policies, and cultural suppression faced by Kurds in Turkey, Syria, Iran, and under regimes like Ba'athist Iraq.<sup>9</sup> In contexts where the Kurdish language was banned in public, Kurdish names were forbidden, traditional clothing was discouraged, music was censored, and festivals like Newroz were outlawed, the very act of practicing these traditions became imbued with political meaning.<sup>9</sup> Speaking Kurdish, celebrating Newroz openly, wearing traditional attire, or playing traditional music transformed from simple cultural expressions into acts of resistance, defiance, and the assertion of an identity that states sought to erase.<sup>22</sup>

This dynamic paradoxically strengthened the bond between traditions and Kurdish identity. Cultural suppression, rather than eliminating Kurdishness, often served to highlight its importance and galvanize Kurds to cling more tightly to their heritage as a means of survival and self-affirmation.<sup>22</sup> Consequently, the struggle for cultural rights—the right to speak and be educated in Kurdish, to celebrate traditions freely, and to express cultural identity without fear of reprisal—became a central component of Kurdish political movements and demands for recognition or autonomy.<sup>20</sup> Cultural institutions and memory sites also play a role in this process. For example, the transformation of the Amna Suraka prison in Sulaymaniyah, a former Ba'athist site of torture, into a national museum serves to preserve Kurdish history and culture while memorializing past victimization, thereby reinforcing a narrative of national suffering and resilience that legitimizes claims for rights and self-determination.<sup>61</sup>

### **C. Diaspora and Identity Maintenance**

The Kurdish diaspora, formed largely through labor migration and flight from conflict and persecution, plays an exceptionally crucial role in the preservation, transmission, and evolution of Kurdish traditions and identity.<sup>40</sup> For many Kurds, the experience of migration and living as a minority in a new country can lead to a heightened awareness or rediscovery of their ethnic consciousness.<sup>57</sup> The relative freedom and political space available in many host countries, particularly in Europe, allow for cultural activities that might be restricted in the homeland.<sup>57</sup>

Kurdish diaspora communities actively engage in maintaining their cultural heritage through various means. Kurdish associations organize language classes (ironically, many Kurds learned to read and write Kurdish in the diaspora<sup>57</sup>), cultural festivals featuring traditional food, music, dance, and clothing, and political advocacy groups.<sup>38</sup> Kurdish media, including satellite television and online platforms, broadcast from the diaspora, connecting communities across borders and disseminating cultural content.<sup>7</sup> These activities are vital not only for preserving traditions but also for building community cohesion and maintaining a sense of collective identity among dispersed populations.<sup>40</sup>

Collective memory is a particularly powerful force in shaping diaspora identity.<sup>65</sup> Memories of

the homeland, shared history, cultural heritage, and particularly experiences of persecution, violence, and displacement (such as the Anfal genocide in Iraq <sup>68</sup>) are actively constructed, commemorated, and transmitted across generations.<sup>65</sup> Commemoration events, storytelling, rituals, and cultural practices serve as vehicles for this intergenerational transmission of memory, often referred to as "postmemory" for younger generations who did not directly experience the events but inherit their legacy.<sup>66</sup> This shared memory, often centered on narratives of suffering and resilience ("chosen trauma" <sup>65</sup>), fosters a strong sense of belonging and solidarity within the diaspora community and can fuel political mobilization aimed at addressing past injustices or supporting homeland causes.<sup>65</sup> Importantly, this process is not merely passive reception; younger generations actively engage with, reinterpret, and reshape these collective memories, asserting their own agency within the diasporic context.<sup>66</sup> Furthermore, diasporic identity formation is often shaped by the experience of living in the host society. Feelings of exclusion, marginalization, or being categorized under an imposed "immigrant" identity can lead Kurds to embrace their Kurdish identity more strongly as a source of belonging and resistance against othering.<sup>60</sup> The Kurdish diasporic movement and community space can thus become a form of "home" for those feeling alienated in their country of residence.<sup>60</sup>

The Kurdish diaspora, therefore, functions as more than just a passive reservoir of traditions carried from the homeland. It is a dynamic environment where cultural practices are actively maintained, adapted, and sometimes politicized in response to both the legacies of the past and the realities of the present in host countries.<sup>57</sup> Processes of collective memory transmission, the negotiation of identity in relation to both homeland narratives and host society experiences, and political mobilization are deeply interwoven with the practice and performance of cultural traditions, making the diaspora a critical site for the ongoing construction and assertion of Kurdishness.<sup>60</sup>

## **VI. Conclusion**

### **A. Synthesis of Findings**

Kurdish traditions constitute a rich, diverse, and remarkably resilient cultural heritage, shaped over centuries by the unique history, geography, and social organization of the Kurdish people. Rooted historically in practices associated with nomadic pastoralism, settled agriculture, strong tribal and lineage structures, and distinct life-cycle customs and artistic expressions, these traditions have faced profound challenges and undergone significant transformations, particularly over the last century. The imposition of modern nation-state borders across Kurdistan, subsequent policies of cultural suppression and assimilation in Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria, alongside forces of modernization, urbanization, and globalization, have fundamentally altered the context in which these traditions are practiced. Despite these pressures, Kurdish traditions demonstrate a powerful capacity for both persistence and adaptation. Core cultural values like hospitality remain strong markers of identity. Foundational celebrations like Newroz, while retaining ancient rituals, have evolved into potent symbols of national identity and political resistance. Life-cycle events such as weddings blend enduring customs with modern influences, reflecting ongoing negotiations between heritage and contemporary life. Artistic expressions, from the ancient melodies of

the *Dengbêj* to modern Kurdish cinema, continue to serve as vital mediums for transmitting history, preserving memory, and articulating identity. The diaspora has emerged as a crucial space for cultural maintenance, transmission, and even revitalization, where traditions are actively practiced, debated, and linked to collective memory and political consciousness.

### **B. Enduring Significance of Tradition**

The enduring significance of these traditions lies in their fundamental role in defining, sustaining, and expressing Kurdish cultural identity. In the absence of a unified state, shared cultural practices—language, festivals, music, dance, folklore, clothing, cuisine, social customs—provide the essential connective tissue that binds Kurds together across political borders and geographical distances. They offer a sense of continuity with the past and a shared framework for understanding the present.

Furthermore, the persistence of these traditions is a testament to Kurdish resilience in the face of considerable adversity, including decades of conflict, displacement, and concerted efforts to erase their distinct cultural identity. The act of maintaining traditions, often against state opposition, has become synonymous with cultural survival and the assertion of the right to exist as a distinct people. Traditions are therefore not merely passive relics of a bygone era; they are actively employed, performed, and reinterpreted by Kurds as vital resources for navigating contemporary challenges, asserting identity, fostering community, and articulating aspirations for the future.

### **C. Final Reflections**

The study of Kurdish traditions reveals the intricate ways in which culture, identity, history, and politics are interwoven. Ongoing efforts by communities, cultural institutions like the Kurdish Heritage Institute <sup>41</sup>, and academic researchers <sup>24</sup> are crucial for documenting, preserving, and understanding this rich heritage, particularly aspects like oral folklore that are vulnerable to loss.<sup>2</sup> Appreciating the depth, diversity, and dynamism of Kurdish traditions is essential not only for understanding the Kurdish people themselves but also for comprehending the broader cultural tapestry of the Middle East and the complex dynamics of identity, statehood, and cultural rights in the region and globally. The story of Kurdish traditions is ultimately a story of cultural endurance and the enduring human need for identity, community, and connection to heritage.

## **VII. Bibliography / Works Cited**

*(Note: A full bibliography listing all cited sources <sup>29</sup> with complete details based on their URLs or provided metadata would be included here in a standard academic format, e.g., Chicago or APA style. For brevity in this generated output, the list is omitted but implied by the in-text citations.)*

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