Kurdish Traditions Before Modern Times

I. Introduction: Setting the Stage for Pre-Modern Kurdish Traditions

A. Defining "Pre-Modern Times" in the Kurdish Context

The examination of Kurdish traditions before modern times necessitates a delineation of the "pre-modern" period. In the context of Kurdish history and culture, this era generally encompasses the centuries preceding the significant socio-political transformations of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.[1] These transformations were marked by the decline and eventual collapse of the Ottoman and Qajar Empires, the subsequent geopolitical restructuring of the Middle East which led to the division of Kurdish-inhabited lands among newly formed nation-states (Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria), and the concomitant rise of modern nationalist ideologies.[3] Scholarly discourse, such as that found in *The Cambridge History of the Kurds*, often frames this pre-modern period through the lens of the Kurdish emirates, which flourished from the 15th to the 19th centuries, and the subsequent erosion of their autonomy under increasing imperial centralization.[6] Historical chronicles, most notably Şerefxan Bidlisi's *Şerefname* (The Book of Honor), completed in 1596-97, offer invaluable contemporary perspectives on the political and social structures of this era, particularly the Kurdish dynasties and ruling houses.[7]

The understanding of Kurdish identity during these pre-modern centuries is complex. Later nationalist discourses have sometimes projected modern conceptions of nationhood onto the past, with "primordialist" viewpoints considering the Kurdish nation a natural and ancient entity, and "ethnicist" approaches attempting to locate a distinct national origin within a uniformly defined ethnicity.[10] This report, however, focuses on the documented traditions, social structures, and cultural expressions as they existed before the widespread dissemination and influence of modern nationalism, acknowledging that identity articulation in the pre-modern period operated under different paradigms. The socio-political landscape was characterized by tribal systems and semi-autonomous emirates rather than the nation-state model that came to dominate the 20th century. Thus, the "pre-modern" is defined not merely by a chronological boundary but by a distinct set of social, political, and cultural realities that shaped Kurdish life before the forces of modernity reshaped the region and its peoples. Turkish historiography, for instance, refers to periods such as the *Orta çağ* (Middle Ages) and *Erken modern dönem* (Early Modern Period) when discussing Kurdish history within Anatolia [11], while Arabic sources speak of *al-ʿUṣūr al-Qadīmah* (Ancient Times) and *Fatarat al-ʿUṣūr al-Wusṭā* (Medieval Period).[12] These classifications underscore the long historical trajectory of Kurdish communities before the advent of the modern era.

B. A Brief Overview of the Historical and Geographical Landscape of

Kurdistan

Kurdistan, literally "Land of the Kurds," is a term that describes a geographically extensive and traditionally Kurdish-inhabited region characterized by rugged mountains and high plateaus. This territory is primarily situated at the convergence of what are now eastern Turkey, northern Iraq, western Iran, with smaller contiguous areas in northern Syria and Armenia.[14] The designation "Kurdistan" is first attested in Seljuk chronicles from the 11th century [15], though the peoples ancestral to the Kurds have inhabited these lands for millennia. Ancient Mesopotamian records refer to mountain tribes like the Guti, and later, groups such as the Hurrians and Mannaeans, in areas that would become known as Kurdistan.[13]

Throughout the medieval period, various Kurdish principalities and dynasties, including the Shaddadids (951–1174), Marwanids (990–1096), Hasanwayhids (c. 959-1015), and most famously, the Ayyubids (1169-1250) founded by Saladin, exerted influence over significant portions of this region.[8] Despite these periods of local Kurdish rule, a unified and independent Kurdish state encompassing the entirety of Kurdistan never materialized in the pre-modern era.[8]

By the early 16th century, following the pivotal Battle of Chaldiran in 1514, Kurdistan became a strategically important and often contested frontier zone between the two dominant regional powers: the Sunni Ottoman Empire to the west and the Shia Safavid Empire (and its successor Persian dynasties) to the east.[4] This division had profound and lasting impacts, subjecting different parts of Kurdistan to distinct imperial administrations, legal systems, and cultural influences, thereby contributing to regional variations within Kurdish society itself.

The formidable mountainous terrain of Kurdistan, particularly the Zagros and eastern Taurus ranges, played a crucial role in shaping Kurdish history and culture.[14] These mountains often served as a sanctuary, allowing Kurdish communities to maintain a degree of autonomy and preserve their distinct cultural traits and languages in the face of external pressures and the ambitions of surrounding empires.[2] The 17th-century Ottoman traveler Evliya Çelebi, for instance, observed considerable linguistic diversity among Kurds, which he partly attributed to the isolating effect of the mountainous landscape.[23] This geographical reality, combined with the political fragmentation under competing empires and the internal dynamics of Kurdish tribal structures, fostered both a resilient and distinct overarching cultural identity and a rich tapestry of local customs and traditions across the diverse regions of pre-modern Kurdistan.

II. The Fabric of Pre-Modern Kurdish Society

A. The Tribal Framework: Structures, Leadership (Aghas, Sheikhs), and Inter-tribal Dynamics

The tribe, known in Kurdish as *aşiret* or *êl*, constituted the fundamental socio-political unit in pre-modern Kurdish society, particularly among the numerous nomadic and semi-nomadic pastoralist groups.[24] Tribal affiliation was a powerful marker of identity and loyalty, and its influence persisted even as Kurdish society experienced gradual urbanization and

sedentarization.[24] The internal organization of these tribes varied, but they generally formed the bedrock upon which larger political entities, such as the Kurdish emirates, were built. Leadership within the tribal structure was typically embodied by figures known as *aghas* and *sheikhs*. The *agha* often represented secular or tribal authority, a chieftain whose position could be hereditary and whose rule was generally firm.[24] Aghas were traditionally responsible for the welfare of their tribe, the administration of customary law, the resolution of internal disputes, and the maintenance of guest houses (*mehmanxane* or *dîwan*) for visitors, a key aspect of Kurdish hospitality.[26] *Sheikhs*, on the other hand, often held religious authority, particularly within the context of Sufi orders which were widespread in Kurdistan.[24] However, the distinction between secular and religious leadership was not always clear-cut; many sheikhs wielded considerable temporal power, commanding the loyalty of tribes and playing significant political roles, especially in regions where direct state control was weak or as mediators in inter-tribal affairs.[19] The historical record shows that the roles of aghas and sheikhs could overlap, with religious charisma often translating into substantial social and political influence.

From the medieval period through to the 19th century, Kurdish society was characterized by the existence of numerous semi-autonomous emirates or principalities. Notable among these were Bohtan, Hakari, Bahdinan, Soran, and Baban in the Ottoman-controlled areas, and Mukri and Ardelan in the Persian sphere.[6] These emirates were often, in essence, tribal confederations, with a ruling family or lineage maintaining authority over a collection of allied or subordinate tribes. The *Sharafnama*, penned by Sharafkhan Bidlisi, the emir of Bitlis, in the late 16th century, remains a primary historical source detailing the genealogies, histories, and political dynamics of these Kurdish ruling houses.[7]

Inter-tribal dynamics in pre-modern Kurdistan were complex and multifaceted, ranging from alliances and confederations to rivalries and open conflict. Sharafkhan Bidlisi himself observed a persistent tendency among Kurdish tribes and their leaders towards disunity and internecine struggle, with each emir or chief often asserting independence and resisting subordination to a higher Kurdish authority.[31] He lamented that this "fratricide" and lack of unified vision prevented the emergence of a single, overarching Kurdish political entity. This inherent political fragmentation, rooted in the decentralized nature of the tribal system and the rivalries between powerful lineages, was a defining characteristic of the pre-modern Kurdish political landscape. Despite these internal divisions, Kurdish tribes also demonstrated a capacity for collective action and unity, particularly when faced with external threats or when rallying behind a charismatic leader.[34] The very structure that provided social cohesion at a local level and fostered a degree of autonomy from imperial centers also contributed to a broader political disunity across Kurdistan.

B. Kinship, Family, and Household: Patrilineal Lineage, Domestic Life, and Gender Roles

The foundations of pre-modern Kurdish social organization were deeply embedded in kinship ties, with the patrilineal lineage forming the primary axis of descent and inheritance.[35] The

household, known as *mal* or *xane*, typically functioned as an extended family unit, often comprising multiple generations living together or in close proximity within a family compound (*zoma* was a term used for the tent compounds of semi-nomadic groups).[35] This extended household was a corporate entity, crucial for mutual support, defense, and economic production, with the male head of the family (*malxî*) traditionally holding primary authority.[35] Marriage was a pivotal social institution, serving not only to form new family units but also to establish and solidify alliances, manage social hierarchies, and consolidate property within and between lineages and tribes.[35] Marriages were frequently arranged by families, sometimes even in childhood, and marked the transition to adulthood for both men and women.[35] A strong preference existed for tribal endogamy (marrying within one's own tribe) and, more specifically, for patrilateral parallel-cousin marriage—that is, a man marrying his father's brother's daughter (FBD).[35] This practice was valued for its role in keeping land and other property within the paternal lineage and reinforcing patriarchal solidarity. Other marital customs included direct exchange marriages (*pê-guhurk*), such as sister exchange, which could obviate the need for a bride-price (*naxt*), and practices like the levirate (a widow marrying her deceased husband's brother) and the sororate (a widower marrying his deceased wife's sister), aimed at ensuring the welfare of children and the continuity of the family line and its assets.[35]

Gender roles in pre-modern Kurdish society, while generally patriarchal, exhibited notable nuances and variations depending on the socio-economic context, particularly between nomadic/pastoralist and settled agricultural communities.

Men were typically responsible for tasks such as heavy agriculture, herding in some contexts, and representing the household in external socio-economic and political affairs.35 They were traditionally viewed as the primary providers and protectors of the family, and held dominant roles in governance and warfare.37

Kurdish women, however, were far from passive figures. They made substantial contributions to the household economy, participating in agricultural work (especially in settled communities), animal husbandry (particularly in nomadic groups), food processing, and the production of handicrafts such as weaving.[27] Within the household, a female head, the *kabanî*, often managed domestic affairs, including production, distribution, and consumption allocations related to the household's internal economy.[35] Child-rearing and maintaining the home were primary responsibilities.[37]

A significant distinction in women's roles and status existed between nomadic and settled communities. Nomadic women, whose labor was indispensable for the pastoral economy (milking, processing dairy products, setting up and dismantling camps), often enjoyed greater freedom of movement, more involvement in decision-making, and a status of nominal equality with their husbands.[35] They were less likely to be veiled and sometimes even participated in tribal defense.[38] Mela Maḥmūd Bayazīdī, a 19th-century Kurdish scholar, noted that nomadic women were involved in all work related to animal husbandry and would fight alongside men when the tribe was attacked.[38] European travelers in the 19th century also remarked on the relative freedom of Kurdish women, including their unveiled appearance and greater ease in social interactions with men, compared to women in some neighboring Arab, Turkish, or

Persian societies.[37]
In settled agricultural villages, women's roles, while still economically vital, were often more circumscribed by patriarchal norms, and they generally held a more subordinate position in household decision-making compared to their nomadic counterparts.[35] Nevertheless, even within these patriarchal structures, women could exercise agency, for instance, through informal networks or by influencing family reputation.[35]
Historically, there are notable examples of Kurdish women achieving prominence in spheres typically dominated by men. Asenath Barzani (1590-1670), a Jewish Kurdish woman, was a renowned Torah scholar and the first recorded female head of a yeshiva (a Jewish religious school).[37] Both Sharafkhan Bidlisi and Evliya Çelebi documented instances of Kurdish women assuming leadership roles within their tribes or emirates, usually as widows acting for their sons or in situations where their authority was recognized by imperial powers like the Ottomans.[38]
Despite these instances of female agency and the relative freedoms observed, especially among nomads, patriarchal values were pervasive. Social customs, such as the expectation for a newly married woman to maintain silence in the presence of her father-in-law and other senior male relatives for a period, underscored the hierarchical nature of the family.[37] Furthermore, strict codes of honor, particularly concerning female chastity, were enforced, and transgressions, or even suspicions thereof, could lead to severe, familially sanctioned punishments.[38] The complex interplay of these factors suggests that pre-modern Kurdish gender roles were not monolithic but were shaped by a combination of economic imperatives, social structures, cultural norms, and regional variations, allowing for a degree of female participation and visibility that was noteworthy in the broader Middle Eastern context of the time.

III. Cultural Expressions in Pre-Modern Kurdistan

A. The Power of Word and Song

1. Kurdish Language and its Dialects

The Kurdish language, a member of the Northwestern Iranian branch of the Indo-European language family, served as a primary marker of identity and a vessel for cultural transmission in pre-modern Kurdistan.[25] It is closely related to Persian and Pashto.[25] Before the 20th century, the Kurdish linguistic landscape was characterized by a rich diversity of dialects, often grouped into several main branches. Among the most prominent were Kurmanji (Northern Kurdish), spoken across a vast area including much of Turkish and Syrian Kurdistan, as well as parts of Iraqi and Iranian Kurdistan; Sorani (Central Kurdish), prevalent in parts of Iraqi and Iranian Kurdistan; and Gorani (also known as Hawrami), which held significance as a literary language, particularly in the Ardalan principality, and is also the sacred language of the Yarsan (Ahl-e Haqq) faith.[12] Other notable dialects or dialect groups included Kalhori, Laki (whose classification as a distinct Kurdish dialect or a separate language has been debated,

with figures like Vladimir Minorsky considering it and Luri more distant from core Kurdish dialects [13]), and Zazaki (Dimli), also sometimes classified separately but spoken by people identifying as Kurds.[12]

The 17th-century Ottoman traveler Evliya Çelebi, in his *Seyahatname* (Book of Travels), vividly described this linguistic variety, noting the existence of what he termed "twelve varieties of Kurdish".[23] He observed that these dialects could differ significantly in pronunciation and vocabulary, to the extent that interpreters were sometimes necessary for communication between speakers of different Kurdish vernaculars.[23] This dialectal fragmentation can be attributed to several factors inherent to the pre-modern Kurdish experience. The mountainous and often inaccessible terrain of Kurdistan naturally fostered the development of isolated communities, allowing dialects to diverge over time.[2] Furthermore, the political division of Kurdistan under the Ottoman and Persian empires, along with the semi-autonomous nature of various Kurdish emirates and tribal territories, limited the impetus for linguistic standardization across the entire Kurdish-speaking area.[4] Consequently, the Kurdish language in the pre-modern era was not a monolithic entity but rather a spectrum of related vernaculars, each reflecting the unique history and local interactions of its speakers. This linguistic diversity, while posing challenges to broader communication, also contributed to the richness and adaptability of Kurdish oral traditions.

2. Rich Oral Traditions: Dengbêj, Epic Poetry (Lawj, Bayt), and Storytelling

In a society where literacy was not widespread, oral tradition was the lifeblood of Kurdish culture, serving as the principal means for preserving and transmitting history, mythology, ethical values, social norms, and entertainment across generations.[45] At the heart of this tradition were the *dengbêj*, highly respected bards, minstrels, or epic singers, renowned for their powerful voices, prodigious memories, and extensive repertoires.[45] The term *dengbêj* itself translates to "voice-singer" or "master of the voice".[46] These performers were, in effect, the living archives of their communities, their songs and narratives encapsulating the collective memory and experiences of the Kurdish people.

The repertoire of the *dengbêj* was vast and varied. They were particularly known for epic poems, often referred to as *lawj* or *lawik*, which recounted tales of heroism, adventure in love and battle, tribal histories, and significant historical events.[46] These epics often featured legendary figures from Kurdish folklore, such as Kawa the Blacksmith, whose myth is central to the Newroz festival, or the tragic lovers Mem and Zîn, immortalized in Ahmed-i Khani's later literary epic but likely rooted in earlier oral narratives.[45] Another important genre was the *stran* or *kilam*, which could encompass songs of mourning, love ballads (*heyrans*), and other lyrical forms.[49] *Dengbêj* performances were typically solo and unaccompanied, relying entirely on the power and expressiveness of the human voice, though sometimes simple stringed instruments like the *tembûr* (a long-necked lute) might have been used.[46]

Beyond the *dengbêj*, other forms of oral literature flourished. The *bayt* was a recognized genre of Kurdish folk art, characterized as an orally transmitted story that could be entirely sung or a blend of sung verse and spoken prose.[49] Storytellers, or *çîrokbêj*, also played a role

in narrating folktales, legends, and didactic stories.[49] These oral traditions were not mere entertainment; they were integral to social cohesion, education, and the reinforcement of cultural identity. They provided a framework for understanding the world, transmitting moral lessons, and celebrating shared heritage, especially in the absence of widespread written records or formal educational institutions accessible to the general populace. The *dengbêj* tradition, in particular, functioned as a vital socio-cultural institution, ensuring the continuity of Kurdish historical consciousness and cultural distinctiveness in the pre-modern era. The skills of a *dengbêj* were often honed through long apprenticeships with master singers, involving the memorization of hundreds of tales and songs.[48]

3. Emergence of Written Kurdish Literature

While oral tradition remained the dominant mode of cultural expression for much of the pre-modern period, a tradition of written Kurdish literature gradually began to take shape, often drawing inspiration from and interacting with the rich literary canons of neighboring Persian and Arabic cultures.[45] The development of written works in Kurdish marked a significant step in the codification of the language and the preservation of distinct Kurdish cultural narratives.

The 12th century is cited by some sources as a particularly rich period for the blossoming of written literature in Kurdish.[8] However, identifying the earliest Kurdish literary figures can be challenging due to the scarcity of surviving manuscripts and the historical focus on oral forms. Ali Hariri (Elî Herîrî), who lived in the 15th century (some sources suggest 1009-1079 or 1425-1495), is often considered one of the earliest known poets to have written in the Kurmanji dialect of Kurdish.[11]

The 16th and 17th centuries witnessed the emergence of several seminal figures whose works became foundational to Kurdish literary heritage. Melayê Cizîrî (Mela Ehmedê Cizîrî, c. 1570–1640) was a prominent Sufi poet from the Bohtan region, celebrated for his mystical and lyrical poetry in Kurmanji, which masterfully blended Islamic mysticism with Kurdish linguistic expression.[8] His *dîwan* (collection of poems) is a classic of Kurdish literature.

Contemporaneously, Sharafkhan Bidlisi (Şerefxanê Bidlîsî, 1543–c. 1603), the emir of Bidlis, composed the monumental historical work, the *Şerefname* (Sharafnama), completed around 1596-97.[7] Although written in Persian, the dominant literary and administrative language of the era in the eastern Islamic world, the *Şerefname* is a work by a Kurd, about Kurds, providing an extensive history of Kurdish dynasties, emirates, tribes, and customs. It remains an indispensable source for understanding the pre-modern Kurdish political and social landscape.

Perhaps the most iconic work of pre-modern Kurdish literature is *Mem û Zîn*, an epic romance penned in Kurmanji by Ahmed-i Khani (Ehmedê Xanî, 1650–1707) in 1692.[7] This tragic love story, often compared to Romeo and Juliet, is more than a simple romance; it is imbued with philosophical reflections and a nascent sense of Kurdish identity and political consciousness, lamenting the lack of Kurdish unity and sovereignty. *Mem û Zîn* is widely regarded as the Kurdish national epic and has profoundly influenced subsequent Kurdish literature and thought.

In addition to Kurmanji, the Gorani dialect (also known as Hawrami) developed as a significant literary language, particularly under the patronage of the Ardalan emirs in what is now Iranian Kurdistan, from the 17th to the 19th centuries.[43] Gorani literature boasts a rich tradition of both oral and written poetry and is also the sacred language of the Yarsan (Ahl-e Haqq) community.[43] Anthologies and *dîwans* of prominent Gorani poets from this period attest to a vibrant literary life in the Ardalan court.[43]

The emergence and development of written Kurdish literature, though perhaps later and less voluminous compared to some neighboring cultures with longer imperial traditions, signify an important cultural evolution. These literary works, often created within the cultural milieus of Kurdish emirates or by learned individuals connected to religious institutions (*medreses*), began to create a distinct textual tradition that complemented and, in some cases, drew upon the rich wellspring of Kurdish oral heritage.

B. Rhythms and Adornment

1. Traditional Music: Instruments, Genres, and Social Functions

Pre-modern Kurdish music was a vibrant and integral part of daily life, religious observance, and communal celebration, possessing a character distinct from the musical traditions of neighboring Arab, Armenian, and Turkish cultures.[49] While early forms were often described as melancholic or elegiac, the repertoire also incorporated more upbeat and joyous melodies over time.[49] Music served diverse social functions, from accompanying epic storytelling and religious rituals to enlivening dances and marking significant life events.

A wide array of musical instruments was employed in traditional Kurdish music, reflecting the ingenuity of local craftsmanship and the diverse influences on the region. Stringed instruments were prominent, including various forms of the *tembûr* (Kurdish tanbur), a long-necked lute central to the *dengbêj* tradition and also used in Yarsani religious music, and the *bağlama* (related to the Turkish *saz*).[49] Wind instruments included the *duduk* (an ancient double-reed instrument known for its soulful sound, often made of apricot wood), the *kaval* or *şimşal* (types of end-blown flutes, often associated with pastoral life), the *qernête* (a clarinet-like instrument or horn), and the *zirne* (a loud, double-reed oboe), which was almost invariably paired with the *dahol* (a large double-headed drum) for festive occasions and outdoor dances.[46] Percussion instruments were also crucial, with the *daf* (a large frame drum, often used in Sufi rituals and also mentioned in connection with the goddess Ana rituals [56]) and the aforementioned *dahol* providing rhythmic foundations.[49]

Kurdish musical genres were rich and varied, catering to different social and emotional contexts. Religious music, known generally as *lawje*, played a significant role, particularly within Sufi gatherings where music was a means of spiritual expression [8], and in the distinct liturgical traditions of the Yezidis (*qewls* or sacred hymns [57]) and Yarsanis (whose rituals blend music, poetry, and mythology [57]). Seasonal songs, such as *payizok*, were performed in autumn, perhaps reflecting the rhythms of pastoral life and the return from summer pastures.[49]

The *dengbêj* tradition encompassed several vocal genres. *Lawiks* were often epic songs detailing heroic deeds, historical events, or tales of love and war.[51] *Heyrans* were typically love ballads, expressing longing and romantic sentiment.[49] Songs of mourning (*stranên şînê* or *kilamên şînê*) were also a significant part of the repertoire, particularly performed by women *dengbêj* to express grief and loss.[49] Dance music, energetic and rhythmic, was essential for communal dances like *dîlok* or *narînk*.[49] The improvisational aspect of Kurdish music, known as *teqsîm*, allowed for individual expression within traditional frameworks.[49] This diverse range of instruments and genres underscores a sophisticated musical culture deeply woven into the fabric of pre-modern Kurdish society, serving as a powerful medium for storytelling, emotional expression, spiritual devotion, and communal bonding.

2. Dance: Forms (Govend, Halay), Occasions, and Participation

Dance was a highly significant and participatory cultural expression in pre-modern Kurdish society, serving as a focal point for communal gatherings, celebrations, and the affirmation of social bonds.[51] A defining characteristic of many traditional Kurdish dances was their communal nature, frequently involving men and women dancing together.[51] This practice of mixed-gender dancing in public settings distinguished Kurdish traditions from those of some neighboring Middle Eastern cultures where stricter gender segregation was often observed in communal activities.[51]

Kurdish dances were typically performed in specific floor patterns, most commonly a circle, semi-circle, or a straight line.[51] Dancers usually linked themselves by holding hands, standing shoulder to shoulder, interlacing pinky fingers (a hold known as the "Kurdish hand hold"), or by placing hands across the lower back of adjacent dancers.[51] A designated dance leader, known in Kurmanji as the *sergovend* ("head of the dance") or *serçem*, and in Sorani as *serçopî*, would often guide the line or circle, initiating steps and changes in rhythm or movement.[51]

While many dances were performed by both men and women, some distinctions in style existed. Men's dances were often characterized by their energetic pace, athleticism, and vigorous movements, sometimes incorporating leaps and intricate footwork.[51] Women's dances, or female participation within mixed dances, tended to feature more subtle and delicate movements of the feet, shoulders, knees, and neck.[51]

The terminology for dance varied across Kurdish dialects. In Kurmanji-speaking regions, the most common term for folk dance was often the Turkish loanword *Halay*, though the Kurdish equivalent *Govend* was also widely used.[51] In Sorani-speaking areas, terms like *Hełperrkê* and *Çopî* (pronounced chopee) were prevalent.[51] Numerous distinct dances existed, each often with regional variations and specific names. Examples from Kurmanji-speaking areas include *Keçiko* and *Çepikli* (from Gaziantep), *Garzane*, *Papuri*, and *Meyroke* (from Bitlis), *Temilav* (from Van), and *Çeçeno* (from Diyarbakir).[51] The *Sheikhani* dance was common in Behdinan (Kurmanji-speaking Iraqi Kurdistan) and was also danced by Kurdish Jews and Assyrians.[51] Sorani dances included forms like *Gerdûn*, *Çepi*, *Khanim Mirî*, and *Sêpêyî*.[51]

These dances were performed on a variety of festive occasions. Newroz, the Kurdish New

Year, was a prime occasion for communal dancing, often taking place outdoors as part of the celebrations.[55] Weddings were another key event where dancing played a central role in the festivities, often continuing for several days.[35] The vibrant and participatory nature of Kurdish dance, with its distinct regional forms and often mixed-gender participation, underscored its importance not only as a form of entertainment but also as a powerful expression of communal identity, social cohesion, and shared cultural heritage in the pre-modern era.

3. Traditional Attire: Men's and Women's Clothing, Materials, and Symbolic Meanings

Traditional Kurdish clothing in the pre-modern era was a striking visual representation of cultural identity, characterized by its vibrant colors, intricate embroidery, and significant regional and tribal variations.[51] As early as the 13th century, the historian Ibn Khallikan noted that Kurds had a particular way of dressing, including clothing made of cotton and the wearing of a *mandil* (a type of head covering or hat).[59] The attire served not only practical purposes suited to the often rugged terrain and variable climate of Kurdistan but also acted as a powerful symbol of belonging and distinction.

Men's Attire: Generally, pre-modern Kurdish men's clothing featured wide, baggy trousers known as *shalwar* (şal û şapik), which provided ease of movement.[23] These trousers were often gathered at the waist and could be tapered at the ankle or, in some northern styles, feature tight lower legs with a very loose, baggy crotch extending to knee length.[59] Shirts were worn under waistcoats or jackets. A distinctive element was the sash or girdle (*pêştмал* in some contexts, *kamarband* in Persianate areas), often large and elaborately tied around the waist, traditionally used for carrying small personal items.[58] Headwear was an important component and varied regionally, commonly including skullcaps often wrapped with a large, fringed square scarf to form a turban, or various forms of *keffiyeh*.[58]

Regional variations in men's clothing were notable [59]:

- **Northern Kurdish Attire (e.g., resembling rural Turkish/Balkan styles):** Characterized by tight-fitting garments, trousers with tight lower legs and a baggy crotch. Neck scarves and waistcoats over shirts were typical.
- **Central Kurdish Attire:** This style often included a fitted, collarless jacket, open to the waist and tucked into gathered trousers that flared to the ankle. The suit was frequently embroidered, with colors ranging from striped browns and creams to self-colored stripes. A white shirt with distinctive funnel sleeves was often worn, with the sleeves sometimes wound around the outside of the jacket arms.
- **Southern Kurdish Attire (often considered a standard or widely recognized style, worn by Peshmerga in later periods):** This featured baggy trousers gathered at the waist and tapered at the ankle. The jacket was similar to the Central Kurdish style but typically lacked embroidery. Suits were usually in solid colors, sometimes with pinstripes. A sash of varying lengths and widths was worn around the waist, and headwear usually consisted of a skullcap and a large, fringed square scarf worn as a turban.

Women's Attire: Kurdish women's traditional clothing was renowned for its bright colors,

elaborate embroidery (often with gold and silver threads), and layered appearance.[58] Common elements included baggy trousers worn under a dress or tunic. Aprons and multiple layers were also characteristic.

Specific regional styles for women included [59]:

- **Southern/Sorani Dress (predominant costume):** This typically involved trousers and a petticoat worn under a floor-length dress with funnel sleeves. Over this, a short waistcoat, a long coat, and/or a short jacket could be worn. Traditional materials included chiffon voile or cotton for the dress, and velvets and brocades for the waistcoat, coat, and jacket. Sashes were occasionally worn. The traditional headdress for married rural women was elaborate, featuring a velvet skullcap held under the chin with a beaded chain (often decorated with jewelry and ornaments), which anchored a cloth covering the back of the neck, and multiple scarves and tasselled fabrics forming a tall turban.
- **Mukriyani Costume (Mahabad and Saqqez region):** This style was notably different, featuring more voluminous trousers without cotton tops, worn with a short vest top under a sheer, straight-sleeved dress gathered at the hips. A large sash was worn on the hips, along with a waist-length coat. Traditional headgear included a decorated velvet or brocade pillbox hat, topped with a large triangular shawl crossed over the chest, with the ends hanging down the back.
- Another style described involved baggy trousers under a knee-length dress, worn in layers with aprons, all in various colors. A short jacket or sometimes a long coat was worn over this.

Materials used for Kurdish clothing were primarily locally sourced, reflecting the pastoral and agricultural economy. Wool from sheep and goats was abundant and used for weaving fabrics and felt. Cotton was also cultivated and used.[59] Dyes would have traditionally been derived from natural plant and mineral sources, contributing to the rich and varied color palettes observed in Kurdish textiles. The intricate embroidery and diverse designs were a testament to the skilled artisanship, particularly of women, and the clothing served not only as functional attire but also as a powerful visual statement of regional, tribal, and personal identity.

C. Sustenance and Craft

1. Culinary Traditions: Staple Foods, Signature Dishes, and Regional Variations

The culinary traditions of pre-modern Kurdistan were intrinsically linked to the region's geography and the primary economic activities of its inhabitants: pastoralism and agriculture.[28] Archaeological findings, such as preserved sheep bones dating back to 600 BC in Iraqi Kurdistan, attest to the ancient roots of animal husbandry in the Kurdish diet.[60] The cuisine was characterized by the resourceful use of locally available ingredients, varying according to regional microclimates and economic status.

Staple Foods: Dairy products formed a cornerstone of the Kurdish diet, a direct result of extensive sheep and goat herding. Yogurt (*mast* in Kurdish), butter, and various types of cheese, such as *lorik* (a cottage cheese) and *jajî* (Van herbed cheese), were widely

consumed.[60] Grains were equally fundamental. Wheat was a primary crop, used for making numerous types of bread (*nan*), which was considered sacred.[60] Varieties included *Nanê Tîrî*, a very thin, unleavened bread often made in large quantities and dried for storage (similar to *yufka*); *Nanê Kulêrê*, a type of bun often with sesame seeds; and *Nanê Tenûrê*, a flatbread cooked by sticking it to the walls of a tandoor oven.[60] Wheat was also processed into *sawar* (bulgur), a staple particularly for those of lesser means, while rice (*birinç*) was more common among the wealthier classes.[60] Legumes such as lentils and chickpeas, along with dry beans, were also important sources of protein.[60] Commonly consumed vegetables included eggplant, onions, radishes, and cucumbers.[60] Fruits and nuts, varying by region, also featured in the diet.

Signature Dishes: Lamb and chicken were the preferred meats, reflecting the pastoral heritage.[60] A variety of dishes showcased these ingredients. *Dolma*, stuffed vegetables, were a common and beloved preparation; fillings typically included rice, minced meat, herbs, and spices, stuffed into onions, peppers, tomatoes, eggplants, or wrapped in vine leaves.[60] Iranian Kurds and Azeris notably added dried currants to their *dolma* fillings.[60] *Kfta* or *kofta* (spiced minced meat, often formed into balls or patties and cooked in stews or grilled) and *şifte* (a type of meat köfte) were popular.[60] *Biryanî* (rice cooked with meat and spices), *kelane* (a savory pancake often filled with herbs), *kube* (bulgur shells stuffed with minced meat, similar to kibbeh), and *parêv tobûlî* (a bulgur salad) were also characteristic.[61] *Qozî*, a dish of roasted lamb often enriched with herbs and tomato sauce, and *Şex Mehşî*, a special stuffed eggplant dish, were considered fare for the wealthy or special occasions.[60] Soups made with wheat and lentils, or beets and meat, were also common.[61]

Regional Variations and Dining Customs: The economic status of a household significantly influenced the composition of meals; meat dishes, particularly those requiring substantial labor and ingredients, were more prevalent among the affluent.[60] The choice between rice and bulgur as the main carbohydrate also often reflected wealth.[60] Traditional Kurdish meals were typically eaten seated on the floor, with food served on a large cloth (*sifre*) spread over a low table or directly on the carpet.[60] It was customary to present hot and cold dishes, main courses, and sweets simultaneously rather than in sequential courses.[60] Hospitality was a cornerstone of Kurdish culture, and offering abundant food to guests was a significant social obligation.[58] The preparation of these traditional meals was a labor-intensive process, largely undertaken by women.[60] These culinary practices, deeply rooted in the local environment and pastoral-agricultural economy, were passed down through generations, forming a vital part of Kurdish cultural heritage.

2. Artisanship: Weaving (notably carpets), Metalwork, Leatherwork, and Pottery

Pre-modern Kurdish artisanship was diverse, reflecting the available natural resources, the necessities of daily life, and a rich aesthetic tradition. Skills were often passed down through families and within communities, leading to distinct regional styles.

Weaving: This was arguably the most prominent and culturally significant Kurdish craft. Kurdish women were renowned for their skill in weaving carpets (*xalîçe*) and kilims (flat-woven

rugs), which were not only utilitarian items for flooring, tent coverings, and saddlebags but also vibrant expressions of cultural identity.[46] Kurdish rugs are characterized by their bold geometric patterns, medallion designs, all-over floral motifs (like the *Mina Khani*), and the distinctive "Jaff" geometric patterns.[46] Specific regional styles were well-known, such as the arabesque carpets of Garrūs and the Seneh (Sanandaj) rugs, often featuring intricate Herati-inspired designs with sharp angles.[62] The color palettes were typically rich and exuberant, utilizing high-chroma blues, greens, saffrons, terracotta, and burnt orange hues, derived from natural dyes.[46] Wool was the primary material, owing to the prevalence of sheep herding, though camel hair was also used by some tribes, particularly for its natural warm brown tones.[62] Weavers often worked *ad-lib*, creating designs from memory or personal inspiration rather than strictly following pre-drawn cartoons, which contributed to the uniqueness of each piece.[64] Other woven textiles included *djadjim* [112] and *Julayi* fabrics, which had a long history and were used for prayer mats, bedspreads, and traditional clothing.[64] The transmission of these intricate weaving skills was largely an informal process, learned through observation and practice within the family or community, from mother to daughter or among female relatives.[63]

Metalwork: Kurds also had a tradition of metalworking, particularly in copper.[46] While extensive documentation specifically on pre-modern Kurdish metalcrafts is somewhat sparse in the provided snippets, the broader region of Mesopotamia and Anatolia, which includes Kurdish territories, has an ancient history of sophisticated metalworking.[66] During the Ayyubid period, a dynasty of Kurdish origin, high-quality inlaid metalwork, especially brass items intricately inlaid with silver and copper, flourished, with craftsmen from Mosul (a city with a significant historical Kurdish population and proximity to Kurdish regions) being particularly renowned.[69] More directly attributable to Kurdish craftsmanship are traditional weapons, such as the 19th-century Kurdish daggers known as *khanjar* or *jambiya*. These typically featured curved, double-edged blades, often with a medial ridge, hilts crafted from horn or other materials, and wooden scabbards covered in leather that was elaborately incised with traditional designs.[70]

Leatherwork: The pastoral lifestyle naturally provided access to animal hides, leading to the development of leather crafts. This is evident in the aforementioned leather scabbards for daggers.[70] A particularly notable traditional Kurdish leather (or more accurately, fabric and hide) craft is the making of *Klash* (also known as *Giveh* in some Persianate contexts), a type of traditional hand-woven footwear.[64] Originating in the Hawraman region, *Klash* making has a history claimed to span over 1,500 years.[72] These shoes are characterized by their cotton upper (woven fabric) and often a durable sole made from compacted fabric or hide, making them light, comfortable, and suitable for the mountainous terrain. The craft of *Klash* making was traditionally passed down through generations, often within families.[72]

Pottery: Archaeological evidence indicates a long history of pottery production in the regions inhabited by Kurds, dating back to the Neolithic period at sites like Kanispan, Shaikh Marif, and Tell Hassuna.[73] In the pre-modern era, domestic industry included the production of unglazed clay storage vessels and other utilitarian earthenware, essential for household needs such as

storing water, grains, and dairy products.[27]
Other crafts practiced by Kurds included intricate embroidery, often adorning clothing and textiles [46], felt-making from wool for items like hats, saddlebags, and warm garments [64], and wicker weaving using natural fibers from plants like the Judas tree to create baskets and sieves.[64] These crafts were deeply intertwined with the local environment, the pastoral-agricultural economy, and the daily needs of the Kurdish people, with skills typically transmitted through familial and communal apprenticeship.

IV. Spiritual Life and Worldviews Before Modernity

A. The Predominance of Islam: Sunni (Shafi'i, Hanafi), Shia Practices, and the Influence of Sufi Orders (Naqshbandi, Qadiri)

The majority of the Kurdish population embraced Islam following the Arab conquests of the 7th century CE, and Islam became the predominant religious framework shaping their spiritual life and worldview in the pre-modern era.[8] Within the Islamic fold, Sunni Islam was the most widespread adherence among Kurds. A distinguishing characteristic of Kurdish Sunni practice was the prevalence of the Shafi'i school of jurisprudence (*madhhab*), which set them apart from many of their Turkish and Arab neighbors who generally followed the Hanafi school.[13] This adherence to the Shafi'i school was often identified by Kurds as a significant element of their distinct ethnic and cultural identity.[29] While Shafi'i was dominant, some Kurdish communities also followed the Hanafi school, and Alevi Islam was present among certain Kurdish groups, particularly in parts of Anatolia.[13]
Shia Islam also had a presence among Kurds, though as a minority. This was most notable among the Feyli Kurds, who reside in the border regions of Iran and Iraq, and in other areas that came under the sustained influence of the Shia Safavid Empire and subsequent Persian dynasties.[2] The political and religious rivalry between the Sunni Ottoman Empire and the Shia Safavid Empire often played out in Kurdish territories, influencing local allegiances and, to some extent, religious affiliations.[19]
A particularly influential dimension of pre-modern Kurdish Islam was the strong presence and societal impact of Sufism (Islamic mysticism). Various Sufi orders (*tariqas*) flourished in Kurdistan, with the Naqshbandi and Qadiri orders being among the most active and deeply rooted.[19] Sufi sheikhs, as spiritual guides and leaders of these orders, often commanded immense respect and loyalty, extending their influence far beyond purely religious matters. They frequently functioned as community leaders, mediators in disputes, and figures of political significance.[19] The social structure of these orders often involved a hierarchical system, with sheikhs at the apex, delegating authority to deputies (*khalifas*) who acted as links to the common people.[29] Historically, prominent Sufi sheikhs played crucial roles in Kurdish society, sometimes leading tribal confederations or even broader socio-political movements. For instance, figures like Sheikh Ubeydullah of Nehri (a Naqshbandi sheikh) and Sheikh Mahmud Barzanji (associated with the Qadiri order) were pivotal leaders in early Kurdish nationalist uprisings in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, demonstrating the

potent fusion of religious authority and political mobilization.[29] The Khalidiyya branch of the Naqshbandi order, in particular, saw significant expansion and influence during the Ottoman Tanzimat period in the 19th century.[19] Thus, the Shafi'i legal tradition and the pervasive influence of Sufi orders, with their charismatic sheikhs, were defining features of pre-modern Kurdish Sunni Islam, profoundly shaping not only religious practice and belief but also social organization, leadership structures, and political dynamics.

B. Indigenous Faiths: The Beliefs and Practices of Yazidism and Yarsanism (Ahl-e Haqq)

Alongside the predominant Islamic faith, pre-modern Kurdistan was home to distinct indigenous religious traditions, most notably Yazidism and Yarsanism (also known as Ahl-e Haqq or Kaka'i). These faiths, while sometimes existing in complex relationships with their Muslim neighbors, preserved unique theological systems, rituals, and social structures, reflecting ancient spiritual legacies within the Kurdish cultural sphere.[13]

Yazidism: The Yazidi faith is an ancient, monotheistic ethnic religion with deep roots in pre-Zoroastrian Iranian and Mesopotamian beliefs, though it has also incorporated syncretic elements from Judaism, Christianity (particularly Nestorian), and Islam over centuries.[29] Yazidis primarily reside in the Sinjar Mountains and Sheikhan district of northern Iraq, with smaller communities historically present in southeastern Turkey and northern Syria. Central to Yazidi theology is the belief in one supreme God, *Xwedê* (or *Êzdan*), who created the world but entrusted its care to seven Holy Beings or Angels (*Heft Sirr*, the Seven Mysteries).[41] Preeminent among these is Tawûsî Melek, the Peacock Angel, who is a central object of veneration and often misunderstood by outsiders, leading to erroneous accusations of devil worship.[41] Yazidi religious life is rich in ritual and tradition. The holy shrine of Lalish in northern Iraq is their most sacred pilgrimage site.[57] Practices include periodic fasting, daily prayers facing the sun (leading to their sometimes being called "sun worshippers"), and the recitation of sacred hymns known as *qewls*, which encode their religious history, laws, and mythology.[57] Yazidi society is traditionally organized into a strict caste system, comprising sheikhs (religious leaders), pirs (elders/saints), and murids (laypeople), with intermarriage between castes historically forbidden, as is marriage outside the Yazidi community.[57] A core belief is *kirasgorîn* (literally "changing the shirt"), a form of metempsychosis or transmigration of souls, through which spiritual purification is achieved.[78] Yazidism also maintains numerous taboos concerning food, colors (blue clothing is often avoided), and certain words, reflecting a strong emphasis on religious purity and maintaining segregation from non-Yazidis.[78]

Yarsanism (Ahl-e Haqq/Kakai): The Yarsan faith, whose adherents are found primarily among Kurds in western Iran (Kermanshah and Lorestan regions) and parts of Iraqi Kurdistan, is another distinct esoteric religion.[13] Yarsanism, meaning "People of Truth," revolves around the belief in successive manifestations of the Divine Essence, with Sultan Sahak being a central figure in their cosmology. The *Haft Tan* (Seven Persons) are key divine beings, similar to the Yazidi *Heft Sirr*.[80] Their teachings emphasize truthfulness, purity, righteousness, and the mystical journey of the soul. Yarsani religious texts, such as the *Kalam-i Saranjam*, are

primarily composed in the Gorani (Hawrami) dialect of Kurdish, which serves as their sacred liturgical language.[43] Rituals often involve communal gatherings (*jam*), music (particularly the playing of the *tembûr*), the recitation of sacred poetry, and symbolic practices, many of which are accessible only to initiated members.[57] Like Yazidism, Yarsanism exhibits syncretic features, drawing from ancient Iranian traditions, Shi'a Islamic influences (particularly reverence for Ali), and Sufi mysticism.[57]

The endurance and unique characteristics of Yazidism and Yarsanism among Kurdish communities underscore a profound layer of indigenous spiritual heritage. These faiths, with their distinct cosmologies, divine figures, sacred texts, and communal practices, represent a complex religious history in Kurdistan that extends beyond, and often predates, the arrival of Islam, while also interacting with it in various ways. They are testament to the region's historical role as a crucible of diverse religious ideas and the resilience of minority faith traditions within the broader Kurdish cultural landscape.

C. Ancient Echoes: Zoroastrian Influences and Persistent Folk Beliefs, Rituals, and Superstitions

The spiritual tapestry of pre-modern Kurdistan was further enriched by the enduring echoes of ancient faiths, particularly Zoroastrianism, and a vibrant undercurrent of folk beliefs, rituals, and superstitions that permeated daily life. Zoroastrianism, the ancient Iranian religion founded by the prophet Zoroaster (Zarathustra), was a dominant faith in the wider Iranian cultural sphere, including many Kurdish-inhabited regions, prior to the Islamic conquests, especially during the Sasanian Empire (224-650 CE).[29] While mass conversion to Islam occurred over subsequent centuries, elements of Zoroastrian thought and practice, along with even older Iranian and Mesopotamian beliefs, persisted and were often integrated into local customs and the practices of other faiths, including folk Islam and the indigenous religions of Yazidism and Yarsanism. Some modern Kurdish nationalists even posit Zoroastrianism as the original religion of the Kurds, highlighting its historical significance in the region.[80]

The most visible and celebrated continuity of ancient Iranian religious tradition is the festival of **Newroz**, the Kurdish New Year.[55] The central ritual of lighting bonfires on mountaintops during Newroz is deeply symbolic of Zoroastrian reverence for fire as an agent of purity, light, and truth, and is explicitly linked to the myth of Kawa the Blacksmith vanquishing the evil tyrant Zahak, a story with ancient Iranian roots that signifies the triumph of good over evil and the renewal of spring.[55]

Beyond Newroz, reverence for natural forces and elements, a hallmark of ancient Iranian religions, remained prominent in Kurdish folk beliefs. This included the veneration of the sun, water (sacred springs and rivers), mountains, and particularly sacred trees.[56] In the mid-19th century, observers noted Kurdish tribes who worshipped trees and had stone altars.[84] Specific rituals were associated with sacred trees, such as tying rags to their branches for healing, hammering nails into them to transfer pain or illness, or performing rites to bring or stop rain.[84] Belief in tree spirits, *jinns*, and other supernatural entities (*sheyts*) guarding holy sites, including trees and stones, was common.[84]

The cult of a mother goddess figure, known as Ana (associated with water, fertility, safe childbirth, and healing), also persisted in Kurdish folk religion, with roots in ancient Mesopotamian and Iranian goddess worship (like Anahita).[56] Rituals connected to Ana, such as those performed at wells by new mothers or brides, or during the mid-summer harvest festival of *Chiley Hāvīn/Hāwīn* (which included making dolls reminiscent of the goddess and offering thanks to water), demonstrate the continuation of these ancient fertility cults.[56] Pomegranates, as symbols of fertility, also held a special place in these traditions.[56]
Kurdish mythology, transmitted largely through oral tradition, preserved a wealth of ancient legends and figures. Origin myths for the Kurds themselves varied, with some tales linking them to the offspring of King Solomon and *jinns*, or, more heroically, as the descendants of those saved from the serpent-shouldered tyrant Zahak by Kawa the Blacksmith.[53] Mythical creatures like the *Shahmaran*, a wise and benevolent part-woman, part-serpent queen dwelling in the underworld, and the *Simurgh*, the giant mythical bird of Iranian lore, also featured in Kurdish folklore.[53]
Superstitions related to daily life, omens, the evil eye, and the afterlife were widespread. For instance, in the Mukriyan region, specific beliefs governed actions at the time of death, burial procedures, and the interpretation of dreams involving the deceased.[85] The use of amulets, such as blue beads to ward off the evil eye, was a common protective measure.[58] Among Kurdish Jews, specific amulets were used for purposes like easing childbirth.[86] These folk beliefs and practices, often existing alongside or subtly integrated into formal religious observances, formed a rich and complex spiritual worldview for pre-modern Kurds, connecting them to their ancient past and the natural environment. This intricate layering of dominant Islamic traditions, resilient indigenous faiths, and deeply ingrained pre-Islamic folk beliefs and mythologies characterized the unique spiritual landscape of Kurdistan before the modern era.

V. Economic Rhythms and Livelihoods

A. The Nomadic Pulse: Pastoralism, Animal Husbandry, and Seasonal Migrations

For a substantial segment of the Kurdish population in pre-modern times, pastoral nomadism or semi-nomadism was not merely an economic pursuit but a defining way of life, deeply shaping their social structures, cultural practices, and interactions with the wider world.[14] The very ethnonym "Kurd" has been speculatively linked by some scholars to Middle Persian terms like *kwrt-*, meaning "nomad" or "tent-dweller," underscoring the historical association of Kurdish identity with a mobile, pastoral existence.[20]
The core of this lifestyle was animal husbandry, primarily centered on the herding of sheep and goats, which were well-adapted to the mountainous terrain of Kurdistan.[14] These animals provided the mainstays of nomadic life: milk for dairy products (yogurt, cheese, butter/ghee), wool and hair for clothing, tents, and woven goods (like carpets and kilims), and meat for consumption.[27] In addition to sheep and goats, some nomadic groups also raised cattle, and

pack animals such as horses, mules, and camels were essential for transportation of goods, people, and household belongings during migrations and for trade.[65]

A critical feature of Kurdish pastoralism was seasonal migration, known as *koçer* in Kurdish. This involved the movement of entire tribal groups or segments thereof between summer highland pastures, called *zozan* (or *yaylak* in Turkish-influenced areas), and winter lowland quarters, known as *germiyan* or *qishlaq*.[27] These migrations were meticulously planned and followed traditional routes, dictated by the availability of grazing land and water resources, as well as by customary rights to pasturelands. The *zozan* offered lush grazing during the hot summer months, while the more sheltered lowlands provided refuge from harsh winter conditions. This transhumant cycle was fundamental to the nomadic economy and required a sophisticated understanding of the environment and complex social coordination within the tribe.

The nomadic lifestyle fostered a strong sense of tribal cohesion and interdependence. Pasturage was often held collectively by a clan or tribe within its recognized territory, and migrations were typically coordinated at the tribal level.[28] The mobility inherent in nomadism also influenced Kurdish interactions with settled agricultural populations and with state authorities. While often maintaining a degree of autonomy due to their mobility and the challenging terrain they inhabited, nomadic tribes were also subject to pressures from imperial states like the Ottoman and Persian empires, which, particularly from the 16th through the 19th centuries, pursued policies aimed at sedentarizing nomadic groups.[87] These policies were driven by desires to increase central control, facilitate taxation, conscript soldiers, and reduce perceived threats to order and settled agriculture. Despite these pressures, pastoral nomadism remained a vital and characteristic component of the Kurdish socio-economic landscape throughout the pre-modern period, shaping their worldview, material culture, and their dynamic relationship with both the natural environment and the surrounding sedentary societies.

B. The Settled Land: Agricultural Practices and Crop Cultivation

Alongside the prominent tradition of pastoral nomadism, settled agriculture formed a vital and ancient pillar of the pre-modern Kurdish economy and way of life.[89] Archaeological investigations in regions of Kurdistan, such as at sites like Jarmo, Bestansur, and Tell Hassuna, have provided evidence for some of the earliest transitions from hunter-gatherer lifestyles to sedentary farming and animal domestication in the Neolithic period, dating back to as early as 7000 BCE.[75] This long history of cultivation shaped the agricultural practices and crop choices of Kurdish communities in the pre-modern era.

The diverse geography and climate of Kurdistan, ranging from fertile plains and river valleys to mountain slopes and plateaus, supported the cultivation of a variety of crops.[89] Staple crops, forming the basis of the agricultural diet, primarily included grains such as wheat and barley, which were well-suited to the region's conditions.[27] Lentils, peas, and other legumes were also widely grown, providing important sources of protein.[28]

Beyond these staples, Kurdish farmers cultivated a range of other plants for sustenance, cash income, and local use. Tobacco was a significant cash crop in many areas.[27] Fruits were

extensively grown, with grapes being particularly important for viticulture (winemaking) and for consumption as fresh fruit or raisins.[60] Other fruits included figs, dates (in warmer, irrigated areas), and olives, from which valuable oil was extracted.[60] Nuts, especially walnuts, were also cultivated and harvested.[27] A variety of vegetables, adapted to local microclimates, were grown in gardens and fields.[60]

Pre-modern Kurdish agricultural practices demonstrated a sophisticated adaptation to local environmental conditions, including strategies to cope with summer droughts and utilize winter growing seasons.[89] Irrigation techniques, ranging from simple water diversion to more complex canal systems, were employed where necessary and feasible, particularly in river valleys and plains, to enhance crop yields.[89] Historically, communal farming practices and land use systems existed in some areas, though these were increasingly impacted by changes in land tenure, the penetration of market economies, and state policies, particularly in the later pre-modern period.[89] The combination of diverse crop cultivation and localized agricultural knowledge allowed settled Kurdish communities to sustain themselves and contribute to the broader regional economy through surpluses and specialized products. This agricultural base complemented the pastoral economy, creating a complex and often interdependent economic landscape across Kurdistan.

C. Commerce and Exchange: Local Markets, Caravan Trade, and Inter-regional Economic Links

Contrary to any notion of isolation imposed by its often rugged and mountainous terrain, pre-modern Kurdistan was an active participant in a complex network of local, regional, and even inter-imperial commerce and exchange.[88] Kurdish communities engaged in trade as producers of various goods, consumers of external products, and, in some instances, as facilitators of transit trade.

Local Markets and Nomad-Settled Exchange: At the local level, markets and informal exchange networks were crucial for the economic interaction between nomadic pastoralists and settled agricultural communities.[27] Nomadic Kurds would bring their surplus animal products—such as wool, hides, live animals (sheep, goats), meat, and dairy products like cheese and ghee (clarified butter)—to village or town markets. In return, they would acquire agricultural staples like grain (wheat, barley), as well as other necessities and consumer goods such as tea, sugar, salt, textiles, and metal tools that were not produced within their mobile encampments.[27] This symbiotic exchange was a fundamental feature of the Kurdish economy, linking the pastoral and agricultural sectors.

Caravan Trade and Regional Entrepôts: Historically, Kurdistan was strategically positioned across or adjacent to major long-distance caravan trade routes that connected Persia, Mesopotamia, Anatolia, and the Levant, including branches of the famed Silk Road.[88] Several Kurdish cities and towns developed as important *entrepôts* and commercial centers. Diyarbakir, for example, was a significant hub on the Silk Road from the 15th century onwards and remained an important stop for merchants traveling between Aleppo, Samsun, Baghdad, and Erzurum even as trade routes shifted in later centuries.[88] Erbil (ancient Arbela) also had a

long history as a trade center.[93] These urban centers facilitated the movement of goods, provided services for merchants, and served as collection points for local products destined for wider markets.

Kurdish Products in Wider Trade: Kurdish regions contributed a variety of goods to these broader trade networks. Animal products were prominent exports, including live animals like sheep, camels, mules, and horses, which were valued for transport and military purposes.[87] Wool and mohair were significant raw materials exported for textile production, with some Kurdish wool even reaching European markets like France in the 19th century.[87] Other pastoral products like ghee and cheese were also traded regionally.[88] Agricultural goods such as wheat, barley, rice, and tobacco were traded.[88] Natural resources gathered from the wild, like gallnuts (used in dyeing and tanning) and gum tragacanth (a plant-based gum with various uses), were also important export commodities.[88] Furthermore, Kurdish crafts, notably carpets and kilims, and sometimes silk and footwear, found their way into regional and inter-regional markets.[88]

Role of Kurdish Groups in Trade: Certain Kurdish groups played specialized roles in commerce. The Feyli Kurds, for instance, were known for their significant involvement in the trade routes connecting Iran and Iraq, particularly in the commercial life of Baghdad, where they established themselves as traders and craftsmen.[44] Nomadic Kurdish tribes often played a crucial role in the caravan trade itself by providing essential pack animals (camels and mules were indispensable for traversing difficult terrains) and sometimes offering security or escort services for caravans passing through their territories.[87] This involvement highlights that pre-modern Kurdistan was not a passive periphery but an active component of the wider economic systems of the Ottoman and Persian empires and beyond. The flow of goods, people, and ideas through these trade networks also contributed to the cultural exchange and the dynamic nature of Kurdish society.

VI. Communal Life: Celebrations, Rites, and Social Cohesion

A. Marking Time: The Centrality of Newroz and Other Communal Festivals

Communal festivals were pivotal in the social and cultural life of pre-modern Kurdish society, serving not only as occasions for celebration and entertainment but also as powerful affirmations of collective identity, historical consciousness, and connection to the natural world. Among these, Newroz held a place of paramount importance.

Newroz: Celebrated annually at the spring equinox, typically around March 20th or 21st, Newroz (meaning "New Day") marked the Kurdish New Year and the arrival of spring.[55] It was, and remains, the most significant cultural festival for Kurds, embodying themes of rebirth, renewal, liberation, and hope.[55] The origins of Newroz are deeply rooted in ancient Iranian traditions, particularly Zoroastrianism, where it symbolized the victory of light over darkness

and the rejuvenation of nature.[55]

A central and dramatic element of Newroz celebrations was the lighting of large bonfires, often on mountaintops or prominent hills, as evening approached.[55] This practice is directly linked to the Kurdish national myth of Kawa the Blacksmith (*Kawayê Hesinkar*). According to legend, Kawa led a rebellion against a tyrannical king named Zahak (or Zuhak), who had serpents growing from his shoulders that demanded a daily sacrifice of young men's brains.[53] Kawa's victory, culminating in the slaying of Zahak, was signaled by lighting fires on the mountains, proclaiming freedom and a new day for the oppressed people.[53] Jumping over these bonfires was a common tradition, perhaps symbolizing purification or defiance.[55]

Pre-20th century Newroz celebrations were vibrant communal affairs. As described by historical sources, including the 17th-century Kurdish poet Ehmedê Xanî and later by Melayê Cizîrî, people of all ages would leave their homes and gather in the countryside or open spaces to celebrate.[55] Festivities included feasting, with special foods prepared for the occasion. Picnics were common, featuring dishes such as *dolma*, *köfte* (meatballs), and *şifte* (a type of meat patty).[58] Communal dancing, particularly the energetic Kurdish line dances like *Dabke* or *Govend*, was a key component, often with men and women participating together.[58] People would wear their traditional festive clothing, adding to the colorful spectacle.[55] The reading or recitation of poetry, likely including epics and traditional songs, also formed part of the celebrations.[55] Newroz, therefore, was far more than a simple New Year's celebration; it was a deeply symbolic event that reaffirmed Kurdish cultural identity, commemorated foundational myths, celebrated the cyclical renewal of nature, and embodied aspirations for freedom and community.

Chiley Hāvīn/Hāwīn: Another significant, though perhaps less universally documented, pre-modern Kurdish festival was *Chiley Hāvīn* or *Hāwīn*, a mid-summer celebration.[56] This festival typically occurred on the 40th day of summer and coincided with the beginning of the fruit harvest.[56] It appears to have been closely linked to ancient beliefs concerning nature and fertility, particularly the veneration of water and the mother goddess figure Ana. Traditions associated with *Chiley Hāvīn* included visits to springs, rivers, or lakes where people would offer thanks and prayers to the life-giving waters.[56] Music, featuring instruments like the *daf* (frame drum) and *tambūr* (lute), was played, and harvested fruits were offered to the community.[56] A particularly interesting custom mentioned is the making of dolls, possibly recalling the goddess Ana, suggesting the festival's connection to ancient fertility rites and gratitude for nature's bounty.[56]

These communal festivals, with their blend of feasting, music, dance, storytelling, and deeply embedded symbolism, played a crucial role in the social and cultural life of pre-modern Kurds. They provided regular occasions for communities to come together, reinforce social bonds, transmit cultural knowledge and values across generations, and celebrate their shared heritage and connection to their ancestral lands.

B. Rites of Passage: Marking Life's Milestones (Birth, Marriage, Death)

Rites of passage—ceremonies and customs marking significant transitions in an individual's

life—were integral to the social and spiritual fabric of pre-modern Kurdish society. These rituals surrounded birth, marriage, and death, providing communal recognition, reinforcing social norms, and offering frameworks for understanding life's major stages.

Birth Rituals: The birth of a child was a joyous event in Kurdish families, met with specific customs aimed at welcoming the newborn and protecting both mother and child.[35] Historically, births often took place at home, attended by experienced midwives.[99] Upon hearing the baby's first cry, relatives might shower the severed umbilical cord with *baksheesh* (gifts of money), the amount sometimes varying based on the baby's sex.[99] The midwife would perform the first bath and swaddle the baby, sometimes with specific head wrapping (*şübara*) to shape the head.[99]

Several rituals focused on protection and well-being. The postpartum mother (*nefse*) was given special care; she might wear blue clothing or a blue headscarf to ward off the evil eye, and her diet could be restricted to avoid "cold" foods.[99] The saying, "The new mother's grave remains open for forty days," highlighted the perceived vulnerability of this period.[99] The baby's face would often be covered with an embroidered silk cloth, and a golden 'Maşallah' coin might be pinned to its dress for protection against ill fortune or envy.[99] Naming the baby was a significant event. Traditionally, the *adhan* (Islamic call to prayer) would be recited three times into the baby's ear, after which a grandfather or uncle would whisper the chosen name.[99] A softly spoken person might rub honey on the baby's lips, a symbolic act believed to ensure the child would grow to be mild-natured and to help with its first stool.[99]

A "seventh-night" ritual was often held, involving close relatives and neighbors, a *mevlit* (recital of religious poetry), and communal entertainment with music and dance to celebrate the birth.[99] This also served as an occasion for presenting gifts. Some traditions involved dyeing the new mother's hands and feet with henna.[99] Echoes of ancient fertility beliefs connected to water and the goddess Ana also appeared in some birth-related customs. For instance, a ceremony where a newborn, at forty days old, was washed with water containing forty seeds of wheat, or rituals involving taking the new mother or a new bride to the village well, suggest deep-rooted traditions linked to purification and life-giving forces.[56]

Marriage Customs: Marriage was a cornerstone of social life, establishing alliances, defining social hierarchies, and ensuring the continuity of lineages and property.[35] Marriages were typically arranged by families, sometimes long in advance, and marked the transition to adulthood.[35] Tribal endogamy (marrying within the tribe) and patrilateral parallel-cousin marriage (a man marrying his father's brother's daughter) were preferred forms, aimed at consolidating kinship ties and keeping property within the patrilineage.[35] Direct exchange marriages (*pê-guhurk*), such as the exchange of sisters between two families, were also practiced and could eliminate the payment of a bride-price (*naxt* or *qelen*).[35]

The bride-price, paid by the groom's family to the bride's family, was a significant component of marriage arrangements and could include cash, gold, livestock, jewelry, household goods, and even weapons.[35] The amount varied based on social status and the type of marriage (e.g., it was often lower for FBD marriages).[36] The bride's family, in turn, was expected to provide a trousseau (* جهاز çeyiz*) and dowry for their daughter.[36]

Kurdish weddings were elaborate and festive events, often lasting several days and involving the entire village of the groom.[35] They were characterized by music, dancing, feasting, and specific rituals. The bride would traditionally wear ornate attire adorned with gold jewelry, and the groom would also wear traditional clothing.[58] After the wedding, a newly married couple might observe a period of avoidance with the groom's father, even while living in the same household, before the bride could visit her own parents to receive their blessings.[36] Practices like levirate (a widow marrying her deceased husband's brother) and sororate (a widower marrying his deceased wife's sister) were also part of the customary framework, primarily to ensure the care of children and the retention of inheritance within the family.[35]

Death Rituals and Mourning Customs: Death was met with specific rituals and extended periods of mourning, largely conforming to Islamic practice but with local Kurdish expressions of grief. Upon a death, the body was typically washed (*ghusl*), shrouded in simple white cloth (*kafan*), and buried as soon as possible, ideally within 24 hours, with the head facing Mecca.[100] Cremation was forbidden.[100] While Islamic tradition emphasizes simplicity in burial, regional customs could influence grave markings and cemetery practices.

Mourning (*şîn*) was a communal affair. Weeping was acceptable, though excessive displays of grief were sometimes discouraged in orthodox Islamic contexts.[100] However, Kurdish traditions often included powerful expressions of sorrow. Women, in particular, played a central role in mourning, often through lamentations (*stranên şînê* or *xerîbî*), which were sung at wakes and gravesites.[49] These laments were often improvised, expressing deep personal and collective grief. A distinctive mourning custom among some Kurds, particularly women, was cutting their hair and sometimes hanging it on the tomb of a deceased husband or eminent person as a sign of profound sorrow and devotion.[102] Another custom involved tying a yellow piece of cloth to the clothes of a deceased eminent person, which were then placed on a horseback during the funeral procession.[102]

In the Mukriyan region, numerous folk beliefs and superstitions surrounded death and burial.[85] These included specific ways of handling the burial shroud, interpretations of actions of the deceased in dreams, beliefs about the deceased's spirit (e.g., a butterfly in the house on a Friday night), and rituals at the graveside, such as hitting the gravestone with a small stone to greet the deceased, and specific days for visiting graves (Thursdays for family, Wednesdays for Sheikhs and Seyeds).[85] Wearing black clothing for a period (e.g., forty days) became a common sign of mourning, sometimes replacing older customs like hair-cutting.[102]

Archaeological discoveries, like the Neanderthal burials with flowers at Shanidar Cave in Iraqi Kurdistan, suggest that funerary rituals have an exceptionally long history in the region, predating modern humans by tens of thousands of years.[103] These rites of passage, from birth through marriage to death, provided structure, meaning, and communal support during life's critical junctures, reinforcing social bonds and transmitting cultural values in pre-modern Kurdish society.

C. Mechanisms of Social Control and Conflict Resolution

In pre-modern Kurdish society, where state institutions often had limited reach, particularly in

remote mountainous and tribal areas, mechanisms of social control and conflict resolution were largely rooted in customary law, tribal authority, and communal norms.

Role of Tribal Leaders (Aghas and Sheikhs): Tribal leaders, both secular aghas and religious sheikhs, played a central role in maintaining order and resolving disputes within their communities and sometimes between different tribes.[24] The position of an agha was often hereditary, and their authority in mediating conflicts was a traditional responsibility, with skills often passed down through generations by accompanying their fathers or grandfathers in these processes.[26] Aghas would hold councils or gatherings (*dîwan*) in their guest houses to hear grievances, arbitrate disputes over land, livestock, inheritance, or personal honor, and impose settlements based on tribal customs and precedents.[26] Their decisions were generally respected due to their established authority and the social pressure to maintain communal harmony. Sheikhs, with their religious standing, also acted as influential mediators, their pronouncements often carrying moral weight.[19] Historically, both Ottoman and Persian authorities, as well as later colonial powers, often relied on these tribal leaders to maintain stability and resolve local conflicts in areas where direct state control was weak.[26]

Customary Law and Blood Feuds: Unwritten customary law (*urf* or local traditions) heavily influenced social conduct and the resolution of disputes. For serious offenses, particularly those involving honor or homicide, the system of blood feuds (*xwîndarî*) was a significant and often devastating mechanism of justice and retribution between families or lineages.[35] A killing could trigger a cycle of retaliatory violence that might last for generations, unless resolved through mediation by tribal leaders or respected elders. Such mediation often involved the payment of blood money (*xwîn* بها بها) or the arrangement of compensatory marriages (e.g., a girl from the offender's family given in marriage to the victim's family) to restore peace.[35] Sharafkhan Bidlisi, in the 16th century, noted the prevalence of internal conflict and "fratricide" among Kurds, suggesting the challenges posed by such disputes to broader social order.[31]

Hospitality and Guest Protection: The strong tradition of Kurdish hospitality (*mêvanperwerî*) also played a role in social regulation. Offering sanctuary and protection to a guest, even an enemy under certain circumstances, was a deeply ingrained customary obligation. This could sometimes provide a temporary reprieve or an avenue for mediation in conflicts. The guest house of the agha was a recognized space for such interactions.[27]

Modern Influences and Traditional Persistence: While the establishment of more formal state legal systems in the 20th century gradually overlaid these traditional mechanisms, the influence of aghas and customary practices in conflict resolution persisted, particularly in rural and tribal areas, sometimes operating in parallel or in conjunction with state law.[26] The traditional methods, emphasizing reconciliation and the restoration of communal harmony, often proved effective in resolving disputes that formal legal systems might struggle with, especially those deeply rooted in tribal honor and social relationships.

D. The Bonds of Welcome: Kurdish Hospitality

Hospitality (*mêvanperwerî* or *mêvandari*) stands as one of the most defining and consistently praised traditions of pre-modern Kurdish society, deeply embedded in their cultural ethos and

social practices.[58] Numerous historical accounts from travelers and observers, as well as contemporary ethnographic work reflecting long-standing customs, attest to the profound importance Kurds placed on welcoming and caring for guests, whether they were kinsmen, strangers, or even, in some traditional contexts, those seeking refuge.

The reception of a guest typically involved a series of established rituals. Upon arrival, a guest would be warmly greeted before any other business was discussed or any refreshment offered.[58] Offering food and drink was paramount. Kurdish tea, often served in small glass cups with sugar, was a ubiquitous symbol of welcome.[58] A refusal of hospitality, particularly of food, was considered highly inappropriate and could cause offense.[58] Hosts would go to great lengths to provide for their guests, often offering the best of what they had, even if their own means were modest. This could involve preparing a feast of traditional dishes, such as *dolma*, Kurdish kebab, or sacrificing a prized animal for the occasion.[58] E.B. Soane, traveling in disguise in the early 20th century, recounted how Kurdish villagers, upon recognizing him as a (perceived) fellow Kurd, sacrificed their best fowl and offered an abundance of food, making him comfortable in the best room available.[106]

The guest house (*dîwan* or *mehmanxane*), often maintained by the tribal chief (*agha*) or a prominent village figure, was a central institution for formal hospitality.[27] It served not only as lodging for travelers but also as a communal space where men of the village would gather to socialize, discuss news, and entertain visitors.[27] The upkeep of such a guest house was a significant responsibility, and in return, the agha might receive a portion of the villagers' harvest.[27]

The principles of hospitality extended beyond mere provision of food and shelter; they encompassed protection and respect for the guest. Once under a Kurd's roof, a guest was considered to be under their host's protection. This deep-seated tradition reflects a strong communal ethic where generosity, honor, and the well-being of the visitor were held in high regard. Even in modern contexts, the legacy of this profound hospitality is often noted by those who interact with Kurdish communities.[104] The emphasis on small talk, inquiries about family and well-being before engaging in business or other matters, as observed in more contemporary settings, likely has roots in these older traditions of establishing rapport and showing respect to the guest.[104] This enduring tradition of hospitality was a cornerstone of pre-modern Kurdish social relations, fostering connections, facilitating travel and communication across often difficult terrain, and reinforcing a collective sense of honor and community.

VII. The Transmission of Traditions

The continuity of Kurdish traditions in the pre-modern era, a period characterized by limited literacy among the general populace and the absence of centralized state-sponsored cultural institutions, relied heavily on informal yet powerful mechanisms of transmission. These processes ensured that knowledge, customs, beliefs, and skills were passed down through generations, maintaining cultural cohesion and identity.

Oral Tradition as a Primary Vehicle: The most significant medium for the transmission of a

vast array of traditions—including history, mythology, epic poetry, folktales, music, social norms, and religious knowledge—was oral tradition.[45]

- **Role of Dengbêj and Storytellers:** Specialized oral performers, particularly the *dengbêj* (bards), were central to this process. They served as living repositories of cultural memory, their extensive repertoires learned and performed from memory.[45] The transmission of their art often occurred through a master-apprentice system, where a *dengbêj* master would choose and train young disciples over many years, passing on not only the stories and songs but also the vocal techniques and performance styles.[48] This ensured the continuity of epic tales (*lawj*), songs of mourning (*stran*), and historical narratives. Storytellers (*çîrokbêj*) also contributed to the dissemination of folktales and legends.[49]
- **Religious Orality:** In faiths like Yarsanism, religious knowledge, including sacred texts (*kalam*), musical repertoires (*nazm*), rituals, and historical narratives, was transmitted orally, often described by the Kurdish phrase *sina wa sina* (literally "chest to chest"), emphasizing direct, embodied learning from teacher to disciple.[107] Similarly, Yezidi *qewls* (sacred hymns) and religious lore were preserved and passed down orally by religious figures and within families.[57]

Family and Kinship Networks: The family and the extended kin group were fundamental units for the transmission of domestic traditions, social customs, and practical skills.[35]

- **Gendered Transmission:** Mothers and other female relatives typically passed down domestic skills (cooking, weaving, embroidery, childcare practices) and certain types of folklore (lullabies, some stories) to daughters and younger female kin.[35] Fathers and male relatives would transmit skills related to agriculture, animal husbandry, specific crafts, and knowledge pertinent to men's roles in society to sons and younger male kin.
- **Rites of Passage:** Customs surrounding birth, marriage, and death were learned and perpetuated through participation in these family and community-centered events.[35] Elders played a crucial role in guiding these rituals and ensuring adherence to tradition.

Apprenticeship in Crafts: Skills in specialized crafts such as weaving (particularly carpet making), metalwork, leatherwork (e.g., *Klash* making), and pottery were often transmitted through informal apprenticeships, typically within families or small community workshops.[63] Young individuals would learn by observing and assisting master craftspeople, gradually acquiring the necessary techniques and knowledge. The ad-lib nature of some craft designs, like in carpet weaving, suggests a deeply ingrained, experientially learned tradition rather than formal, text-based instruction.[64]

Communal Gatherings and Rituals: Festivals like Newroz, religious ceremonies, weddings, and even daily social interactions in places like guest houses or village squares served as occasions for the collective performance and reinforcement of traditions.[27] Music, dance, storytelling, and the enactment of rituals during these events provided opportunities for younger generations to observe, participate in, and internalize cultural practices.

Role of Religious Institutions and Figures: While literacy was limited, religious institutions like *medreses* (Islamic schools) and the households of sheikhs or other learned individuals served as centers for the transmission of religious knowledge, classical languages (Arabic and

Persian), and sometimes written Kurdish literature.[19] Sufi sheikhs and their deputies (*khalifas*) were instrumental in disseminating the teachings and practices of their respective orders.[29] The resilience of Kurdish traditions in the pre-modern era, despite political fragmentation and external pressures, is a testament to the efficacy of these diverse and deeply embedded modes of transmission, which relied more on lived experience, communal participation, and direct interpersonal instruction than on formalized or textual methods.

VIII. Regional Variations in Pre-Modern Kurdish Traditions

The vast and geographically diverse expanse of Kurdistan, coupled with its historical position as a borderland between major empires—primarily the Ottoman and Safavid (Persian) domains—fostered significant regional variations in Kurdish traditions before the 20th century.[3] While a shared sense of Kurdish identity and certain overarching cultural traits existed, local customs, dialects, social structures, and even religious expressions often differed from one area to another.

Linguistic Diversity: As noted by Evliya Çelebi in the 17th century, the Kurdish language itself comprised numerous dialects, sometimes mutually unintelligible, reflecting the isolating effects of mountainous terrain and distinct historical trajectories.[23] The major dialect groups—Kurmanji, Sorani, Gorani/Hawrami, Zazaki, and Laki/Southern Kurdish—had their own areas of prevalence and distinct linguistic features.[12] For instance, Gorani served as a literary *koinè* in the Ardalan principality (Persian sphere), while Kurmanji was the vehicle for much of the early poetry in the Ottoman sphere.[43]

Social and Political Structures: The nature and autonomy of Kurdish emirates and tribal confederations varied considerably depending on their location and relationship with the ruling imperial power.[4] Emirates in more remote or strategically vital border regions might have enjoyed greater de facto independence than those closer to imperial centers or on major communication routes. The Ottoman Tanzimat reforms of the 19th century, aimed at centralization, impacted Kurdish regions differently, with some tribal leaders losing power while others adapted or resisted.[4] Sharafkhan Bidlisi's *Sharafnama* provides detailed accounts of the distinct histories and ruling families of various Kurdish principalities across both Ottoman and Persian territories in the 16th century.[9]

Religious Practices: While Sunni Islam of the Shafi'i school was predominant among many Kurds, regional variations in religious life were notable.[19] Shia Islam was more prevalent in areas under direct or prolonged Persian influence, such as among the Feyli Kurds and in parts of Kermanshah and Ilam.[40] The influence and specific practices of Sufi orders like the Naqshbandi and Qadiri also likely varied regionally. Indigenous faiths like Yazidism were concentrated in specific geographic pockets (e.g., Sinjar, Sheikhan) [78], while Yarsanism was primarily found in western Iranian Kurdistan.[57] Even within Sunni Islam, the intensity of adherence or the prevalence of folk religious practices could differ. Evliya Çelebi noted the presence of various heterodox sects during his travels.[23]

Material Culture (Clothing, Crafts): Traditional Kurdish clothing exhibited marked regional diversity in terms of styles, materials, colors, and embellishments, often serving as clear indicators of tribal or local affiliation.[51] For example, the attire of northern Kurds differed from that of central or southern Kurds, and specific styles like the Mukriyani costume were associated with particular areas.[59] Carpet weaving traditions also showed regional specificity in designs, motifs, and techniques, such as the Seneh rugs from Sanandaj or the Garrus arabesque carpets.[62]

Culinary Traditions: Local agricultural products and pastoral practices naturally led to regional variations in cuisine. While staples like dairy products, grains, and lamb were common, specific dishes, ingredients (e.g., the use of currants in *dolma* by Iranian Kurds [60]), and food preparation methods could differ based on local availability and cultural exchange with neighboring non-Kurdish groups.[60]

Customs and Folklore: Specific customs related to festivals, rites of passage, and social interactions also likely varied. For instance, while Newroz was a pan-Kurdish festival, the specific rituals or emphasis might have differed locally. Folk beliefs and superstitions, though sharing common underlying themes, would have had local expressions and narratives.

The Ottoman-Persian imperial divide was a major factor shaping these regional variations. Areas under Ottoman rule were more exposed to Anatolian Turkish and Arab influences, while those under Persian rule experienced greater interaction with Persian culture and Shia Islam.[4] The degree of state control, local economic conditions, interactions with neighboring ethnic and religious groups, and the specific historical trajectories of different tribes and emirates all contributed to the rich mosaic of pre-modern Kurdish traditions. Understanding these regional nuances is crucial for a comprehensive appreciation of the complexity and dynamism of Kurdish culture before the homogenizing pressures of modern nation-states and globalization.

IX. Conclusion

The traditions of the Kurdish people before the advent of modern times present a rich and multifaceted tapestry woven from threads of ancient heritage, resilient social structures, vibrant cultural expressions, diverse spiritual beliefs, and resourceful economic practices. Situated in a strategically significant and often rugged mountainous homeland, pre-modern Kurdish society was predominantly organized around tribal frameworks and semi-autonomous emirates. Leadership, embodied by aghas and sheikhs, navigated complex internal dynamics and relationships with the overarching Ottoman and Persian empires. Kinship and patrilineal lineage formed the bedrock of family and household life, where gender roles, while generally patriarchal, exhibited notable flexibility, particularly among nomadic pastoralist communities where women played crucial economic and sometimes even martial roles.

Cultural expression was powerfully articulated through the Kurdish language, with its array of distinct dialects reflecting both historical depth and geographical dispersion. Oral traditions, championed by the revered *dengbêj*, were paramount in preserving history, epic narratives, and collective memory. This oral heritage was complemented by an emerging written literature, with figures like Ehmedê Xanî and Melayê Cizîrî producing seminal works that

encoded Kurdish language and cultural consciousness. Music and dance were integral to communal life, with a variety of indigenous instruments, musical genres, and participatory dance forms like *Govend* marking celebrations and social gatherings. Traditional attire, with its regional and tribal variations in color and design, served as a potent visual marker of identity, while Kurdish cuisine reflected the pastoral and agricultural bounty of the land. Artisanship, especially weaving, but also metalwork, leatherwork, and pottery, showcased local skills and resources.

The spiritual landscape of pre-modern Kurdistan was complex. While Sunni Islam, predominantly of the Shafi'i school and with a strong Sufi influence, was the majority faith, indigenous religions like Yazidism and Yarsanism maintained their unique beliefs and practices, often reflecting ancient Iranian and Mesopotamian traditions. Echoes of Zoroastrianism and older folk beliefs, particularly reverence for nature and cyclical festivals like Newroz, remained deeply embedded in the cultural psyche.

Economic life was characterized by a dynamic interplay between pastoral nomadism, with its seasonal migrations and reliance on animal husbandry, and settled agriculture, which produced a diverse range of crops. These two sectors were interconnected through local markets and exchange networks. Furthermore, Kurdistan was not isolated but participated in broader regional and inter-imperial trade routes, contributing goods and facilitating commerce.

The transmission of these multifaceted traditions was largely achieved through oral instruction, familial upbringing, communal participation in rituals and festivals, and informal apprenticeships in crafts. This system ensured the continuity of Kurdish cultural heritage across generations despite the lack of centralized state support for cultural preservation.

In essence, pre-modern Kurdish traditions demonstrate a remarkable adaptability and resilience. Shaped by their mountainous environment, their position at the crossroads of empires, and their own internal social dynamics, Kurds developed a distinctive and enduring cultural heritage. While the forces of modernity in the late 19th and 20th centuries would bring profound changes, including the division of their homeland and new forms of political and cultural struggle, the traditions forged in the preceding centuries provided a deep wellspring of identity and continuity for the Kurdish people. Understanding these pre-modern foundations is crucial for appreciating the historical trajectory and contemporary complexities of Kurdish society and culture.

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