

# Kurdish Dance: A Living Tapestry of Culture, Resilience, and Identity

## I. Introduction: Kurdish Dance as a Living Heritage

### A. Defining Kurdish Dance: More Than Movement

Kurdish dance, a captivating and deeply rooted tradition, occupies a central and revered position within Kurdish culture. It transcends mere entertainment, functioning as a potent symbol of unity, resilience, and communal joy.<sup>1</sup> This art form is commonly identified by terms such as "Dîlan" or "Govend," with nuanced regional variations in nomenclature.<sup>1</sup> The term "Halparke" (also rendered as Helperkê or Helperîn, meaning "to jump" or "to dance") is also widely prevalent and recognized.<sup>2</sup>

Fundamentally, Kurdish dance is a collective, group-oriented activity, distinct from individualistic displays of virtuosity.<sup>4</sup> This collective ethos is not merely a stylistic preference but a core characteristic that underscores communal consciousness and solidarity, which are deeply embedded in Kurdish societal values.<sup>5</sup> The inherent collectivism is a direct reflection and reinforcement of Kurdish social structures that have historically prioritized communal bonds for survival and cultural preservation, particularly within often challenging geopolitical landscapes. The repeated emphasis across numerous accounts on the group nature, the physical linking of dancers through hand-holding, and synchronized movements points to a profound cultural value.<sup>1</sup> In a stateless nation frequently subjected to external pressures, communal solidarity, visibly enacted and reinforced through dance, becomes an indispensable mechanism for maintaining cultural cohesion and resilience. The dance, therefore, acts as a microcosm of broader societal ethics, where the well-being and identity of the group are paramount.

### B. Overview of Significance: A Multifaceted Cultural Pillar

Kurdish dance is inextricably linked to Kurdish identity. It is an indispensable feature of significant life events and communal gatherings, including weddings, festivals such as Newroz (the Kurdish New Year), and national observances, reflecting a rich historical heritage and an enduring spirit.<sup>1</sup> Beyond its celebratory functions, the dance serves as a powerful and versatile medium for the expression of a wide spectrum of human emotions and experiences, encompassing happiness and sorrow, the commemoration of wars and struggles, the marking of uprisings, and the celebration of successes.<sup>8</sup>

This art form acts as a dynamic carrier of collective memory and cultural identity. It functions to strengthen social solidarity, provide an outlet for emotional expression, and commemorate pivotal historical events.<sup>5</sup> The adaptability of Kurdish dance to articulate both joy and sorrow, celebration and struggle, highlights its role as a comprehensive cultural language. This

language is capable of articulating the full breadth of Kurdish life and history, a characteristic that ensures its continued relevance and vitality across diverse social and emotional contexts.<sup>8</sup> The capacity of the dance to convey such a wide range of experiences—from "freedom, happiness, and even pain"<sup>9</sup> to "wars and struggles, uprisings, and success"<sup>8</sup>—suggests that it is not confined to purely festive functions but serves as a nuanced and sophisticated expressive tool. This versatility has been crucial for a culture that has navigated significant historical vicissitudes, allowing dance to persist as a constant, evolving narrative form.

## **II. Echoes of Antiquity: Historical Origins and Evolution**

### **A. Ancient Roots and Influences**

The historical trajectory of Kurdish dance extends back thousands of years, with discernible influences from ancient Mesopotamian civilizations.<sup>1</sup> Some scholars and cultural experts propose that its origins can be traced to the era of Astiyak, a prominent leader of the Medes, an ancient Iranian people who inhabited the Zagros Mountains and northwestern Iran.<sup>8</sup> This connection situates Kurdish dance within a lineage of ancient Near Eastern cultural practices. Early external observations provide further testament to its antiquity. The Greek historian and military leader Xenophon, in his *Anabasis* (circa 400 BCE), documented encounters with the Kurdish people (referred to as Kardouchoi or Carduchians) and made specific mention of their dancing. One particularly striking account relayed by Xenophon, and cited by later commentators, describes how the Kurds purportedly utilized dance as a strategic maneuver to encircle and capture enemy troops, suggesting not only a long-standing tradition of dance but also its potential application in martial contexts.<sup>8</sup>

The earliest forms of Kurdish dance are believed to have served ritualistic and communal purposes. These included performances as forms of worship, methods of storytelling, and celebrations tied to the natural world, such as marking successful hunts or the changing of seasons.<sup>1</sup> There are indications that certain dances were performed as a type of "dhikr" (a form of remembrance of God in Islamic mysticism, though here referring to pre-Islamic practices) and were sometimes enacted before ancient temples, such as those dedicated to the deity Anahita, to recount significant events, including those of war.<sup>3</sup>

Alternative theories link the origins of specific dance forms, notably the Halay or ring-dance, to the ancient wine-growing cultures of the region. It is posited that these dances developed from the rhythmic trampling of grapes during wine production, thus connecting them to ancient agricultural practices and possibly fertility rites.<sup>6</sup> The pentatonic structure (based on a five-note scale) observed in the music accompanying some Kurdish dances is also cited as evidence of deep-rooted, ancient cultural layers, suggesting a musical and choreographic heritage of considerable antiquity.<sup>6</sup>

The existence of multiple, sometimes overlapping, origin theories—encompassing ritualistic worship, martial applications, agricultural practices, and storytelling—suggests that Kurdish dance likely emerged from a confluence of various ancient societal functions rather than a

singular, monolithic source. This multifaceted genesis contributes significantly to the richness and complexity of its symbolic vocabulary. It is plausible that different dance forms, or distinct aspects within the broader dance tradition, evolved from these varied contexts. Over time, these diverse strands may have merged, influenced one another, or coexisted, ultimately forming the intricate and layered tapestry of Kurdish dance as it is understood today. This complex developmental history helps to explain the simultaneous presence of epic, mystical, and celebratory elements within the tradition.

## **B. Evolution Through History**

Kurdish dance has been meticulously passed down through successive generations, retaining its profound cultural significance despite the numerous historical transformations and political challenges faced by the Kurdish people.<sup>1</sup> Throughout its long history, it has consistently served as a potent symbol of resistance and resilience. In times of hardship and oppression, dance has provided a crucial means for preserving cultural identity and expressing communal unity.<sup>1</sup> This role is particularly evident in the context of Newroz celebrations, which often carry strong political undertones, and even in the simple act of performing the Halay during periods when Kurdish cultural expression was suppressed.<sup>5</sup>

The geographical characteristics of Kurdistan, particularly its mountainous terrain, have played a role in this preservation. The relative isolation afforded by these landscapes has helped to safeguard distinct Kurdish customs and traditions, including dance, from external assimilatory pressures over centuries.<sup>10</sup>

The politicization of Kurdish dance, especially in contexts of cultural or political suppression, has been a significant aspect of its evolution. In such circumstances, dance has often transformed from a purely cultural expression into an active agent of identity assertion and, at times, political mobilization. The performance of traditional dances can become a powerful act of defiance and a public declaration of cultural sovereignty. This is evident in the increased intensity and politicization of Newroz celebrations, with dance at their core, which became a "symbol of the Kurdish resurrection" in Turkey during periods of heightened state pressure.<sup>11</sup> The very act of dancing, in these contexts, transcends entertainment or ritual, becoming a potent statement of cultural persistence and an affirmation of Kurdish identity in the face of adversity.

## **III. A Tapestry of Movement: Types, Styles, and Formations**

### **A. Major Categories and Terminology**

Kurdish dance is known by several general terms, with regional preferences influencing their usage. "Dîlan" is a term frequently encountered, particularly in the northern Kurdish regions, while "Govend" is more commonly used in southern areas.<sup>1</sup> "Halparke" (with variations such as Helperkê and Helperîn, meaning "to jump up" or "to dance") is another widely recognized and utilized term across Kurdistan.<sup>2</sup> In the Sorani-speaking regions, "Çopî" is also used to refer to

dance.<sup>7</sup>

Anthropological researchers and cultural scholars have proposed classifications for Kurdish dances, often grouping them into broad categories such as martial dances, lyrical dances (focusing on expressive and emotional content), and mystical or religious dances (associated with spiritual practices).<sup>14</sup> This categorization helps in understanding the diverse functions and aesthetics within the broader tradition. The variety of names for "dance" itself, as well as for specific individual dances, often exhibiting regional specificities, underscores the rich internal diversity of Kurdish culture. This linguistic and terminological variation points to the localized evolution of dance traditions within different Kurdish communities, suggesting distinct, albeit interconnected, dance subcultures across the Kurdish regions.<sup>1</sup>

## B. Prominent Dance Types and Their Characteristics

The repertoire of Kurdish dance is extensive, featuring numerous distinct types, each with its own characteristics, steps, and cultural connotations.

- **Halay/Govend:** This is arguably the most widespread and emblematic form of Kurdish dance. It is typically performed with dancers linked *el ele* (hand-in-hand) or *omuz omuza* (shoulder-to-shoulder), forming a circle or a semi-circle.<sup>5</sup> The specific rhythm, tempo, and steps of the Halay or Govend can vary considerably from one region to another, reflecting local traditions and preferences.<sup>5</sup>
  - **Geryan:** This dance often serves as the introductory sequence in a Halparke session. It is characterized by a relatively slow tempo and a foundational pattern typically consisting of six steps.<sup>3</sup> Musically, Geryan is often performed in a 3/4 time signature.<sup>10</sup>
  - **Çepî (Chapi):** Known for its relatively simple and calm movements, Çepî is a group dance frequently performed at the beginning of a dance event or social gathering.<sup>3</sup> Its name, meaning "left," may refer to the direction of movement or emphasis.
  - **Sêpêyî (Sepayi/Sipayi):** This is a relatively fast-paced and energetic dance. Its origins are often traced to the Mukriyan regions of Iranian Kurdistan, including areas around Mahabad.<sup>3</sup> The name translates to "three steps," likely indicating a core footwork pattern.
  - **Delîlo:** Originating in the Kurdish regions of Turkey, Delîlo is a circular dance where participants hold hands or link shoulders. The basic steps are generally simple, with a strong emphasis on graceful movements of the arms and torso. It is often accompanied by communal singing and hand-clapping, creating a lively and joyous atmosphere.<sup>12</sup>
  - **Sheikhani (Şêxanî):** A prominent dance, particularly in the Kurmanji-speaking areas of Iraqi Kurdistan, Sheikhani is also performed by Kurdish Jewish communities and Assyrians, highlighting historical cultural exchange.<sup>13</sup> It is considered one of the older dance forms, characterized by a laid-back yet bouncy quality and a distinctive two-step movement. Dancers typically interlock hands.<sup>17</sup>

- **Other Named Dances:** The rich tapestry of Kurdish dance includes a multitude of other named forms. Sources identify dances such as *Posht-pa* (Back Step), *Fata Pashayi*, *Fataqichi*, *Leblan*, *Khanemiri* (Khan's Dance), *Sêmalî Sema*, *Rûyîne*, *Zengî*, *Berzî Berzî* (High High) <sup>4</sup>; *Shanga*, *Qambar Yamane*, *Yarpedar*, *Akmali*, *Nare* <sup>19</sup>; *Kurmancî* <sup>9</sup>; *Harrani* (also known as *Esmerim*) <sup>20</sup>; *Tek Ayak* (Single Foot, also *Şuşane*), *Çift Ayak* (Double Foot, also *Du-nîg*) <sup>20</sup>; *Çepik* (Clapping Dance), *Kelek*, *Meryemo*, *Şemmame*, *Xerzani*, *Üçayak* (Three Foot) <sup>20</sup>; *Canary* (*Şêrîn*) <sup>12</sup>; *Shour ve Martaal*, *Tashi ve Biri* <sup>14</sup>; and regional or stylistic variations like *Kirmashaahi*, *Saqzi* (from *Saqqez*), *Se Jar* (Three Times), *Shilan*, *Meriwani* (from *Mariwan*), *Shikaki*, and *Mukri* (from *Mukriyan*).<sup>21</sup>
- **Mystical/Religious Dances:**
  - **Sema:** This term encompasses mystical and religious dances, notably those performed by dervishes and Sufis as a form of spiritual practice.<sup>2</sup> Alevi Kurds perform the *Semah*, a distinct ritual dance imbued with cosmological symbolism, serving as both a form of worship and a means of fostering social solidarity.<sup>22</sup>
  - **Yarsan Dances:** Adherents of the Yarsan (Ahl-e Haqq) faith perform specific dances, often referred to as *Tasawof Dance*, which are accompanied by the sacred *Tanbour* (*Tembûr*) lute.<sup>8</sup>
  - **Ezidi Dances:** During their religious holidays, Ezidi communities engage in collective dances, typically performed in a circular formation. These dances symbolize universal cosmological cycles and are intended to strengthen communal belonging and foster a sense of closeness to the divine.<sup>22</sup>
- **Martial Dances:**
  - **Chûb-bazi (Chob-bazi):** Literally "stick play," this is a martial and demonstrative dance performed by men, utilizing sticks in mock combat or displays of skill.<sup>2</sup>
  - Certain other dances, such as *Qambar Yamane*, *Yarpedar*, *Akmali*, and *Nare*, are described as resembling military training exercises or martial displays, suggesting a historical connection to warrior traditions or preparedness.<sup>19</sup>
- **Solo and Duo Dances:** While the predominant characteristic of Kurdish dance is its collective nature, the culture also encompasses individual (solo) or partnered (duo) dances. These are often, though not exclusively, performed by men and serve as platforms to showcase courage, physical strength, and individual dance skills.<sup>5</sup>

The sheer number and variety of named dances, each with potentially distinct choreographic patterns, rhythmic structures, and regional or communal associations, point to a highly developed and nuanced choreographic vocabulary within Kurdish culture. This complexity is indicative of a long and rich history of dance development and specialization, reflecting diverse local histories, varied social functions, and distinct aesthetic preferences across the Kurdish regions. Such a vast repertoire implies that dance was not a monolithic entity but rather a sophisticated and multifaceted system of cultural expression with numerous sub-genres, each potentially carrying specific meanings and performed in particular contexts. This makes a comprehensive cataloging and in-depth analysis of all Kurdish dance forms a

significant and ongoing scholarly endeavor.<sup>10</sup>

### C. Common Formations, Handholds, and the Role of the Leader

Kurdish dances are structured by specific formations, ways of linking dancers, and the pivotal role of a leader.

- **Formations:** Dancers typically arrange themselves in lines, circles, or semi-circles.<sup>1</sup> Line formations are often, though not exclusively, adopted by men and are said to symbolize unity and strength.<sup>1</sup> The circle is a particularly potent and frequently utilized formation, considered by some to represent a return to the origin or the cyclical nature of existence and eternity; indeed, it is noted that virtually no Kurdish dance form deviates from a circular or curvilinear pattern.<sup>4</sup>
- **Handholds:** The physical connection between dancers is a defining feature. Participants link by holding hands (*el ele*), interlacing little fingers (*serçe parmaklar*), or connecting arm-to-arm or shoulder-to-shoulder (*omuz omuza*).<sup>1</sup> The specific method of holding hands can vary depending on the particular dance being performed.<sup>3</sup> A common technique, especially in Kurmanji dances, is the "Kurdish hand hold," where hands are held straight down at the sides with the fingers of adjoining dancers interlocked, or a pinky hold; this bears resemblance to handholds found in some Armenian folk dances.<sup>13</sup> The act of holding hands is deeply symbolic, representing unity and, significantly, gender equality when men and women dance together in the same line.<sup>23</sup> In certain dance formations, participants may also place their hands across the lower back of their neighbors.<sup>13</sup>
- **The Leader (Serchopi/Sar Chopy/Sergovend/Serçem):** This individual plays a crucial role in guiding the dance. The leader is typically positioned at the head or one end of the line or circle.<sup>3</sup> Their primary responsibilities include setting and maintaining the tempo of the dance and initiating or guiding the sequence of movements for the rest of the group.<sup>3</sup> A distinctive characteristic of the leader is the manipulation of a handkerchief or a piece of colored cloth, known variously as *Choppy*, *Dasmal*, or *Destmal*.<sup>3</sup> This handkerchief is not merely decorative; it symbolizes leadership, is used to signal changes in rhythm or movement, and enhances the overall energy and visual appeal of the dance.<sup>24</sup> In Rojhalat (Eastern Kurdistan), the leader is specifically called *Sar Chopy*, and the handkerchief is termed *Choppy*.<sup>24</sup> The handkerchief can also be interpreted as a symbol of peace and friendship.<sup>18</sup> There are varying interpretations of the leadership dynamic: some view the *Sarchopi* (leader at the front) and the *Binchopi* or *Gâvanî* (the last person in the line, responsible for maintaining order)<sup>3</sup> as representing equality within the group, as there is no single central figurehead dominating the dance. Others see the *Sarchopi* more as a commander figure, leading and coordinating the group.<sup>23</sup>

The prescribed formations, such as the ubiquitous circle, and the distinct role of the leader with the handkerchief are not simply choreographic conventions. They are deeply imbued with and actively embody core Kurdish cultural values: the circle representing unity, continuity, and

the cyclical nature of life <sup>4</sup>; the act of hand-holding signifying solidarity, mutual support, and social equality <sup>23</sup>; and the leader serving as a focal point for collective action and energy, yet often operating within a framework that emphasizes the equal and synchronized participation of all dancers. These elements consistently point towards a dance structure that reflects and reinforces fundamental social ideals.

**Table: Major Kurdish Dance Types and Characteristics**

Dance Name(s)	Primary Region(s)/Kurdish Group	Key Characteristics (Formation, Steps/Movements, Rhythm/Tempo, Core Symbolism)	Typical Occasions
<b>Govend / Halay / Dîlan</b>	Widespread across Kurdistan	Circle, semi-circle, line; hand-in-hand or shoulder-to-shoulder; synchronized steps; variable rhythm/tempo by region; symbolizes unity, collective spirit.	Weddings, Newroz, festivals, social gatherings <sup>1</sup>
<b>Halparke (Helperkê)</b>	Widespread (often synonymous with Govend/Dîlan)	Group dance, often energetic, "jumping/leaping"; progressive tempo.	Celebrations, festivals <sup>2</sup>
<b>Geryan</b>	Widespread, often starts Halparke	Slow tempo, 3/4 meter, six-step pattern; circular.	Beginning of dance sequences <sup>3</sup>
<b>Çepî (Chapî)</b>	Widespread	Simple, calm group dance; circular or line. Name means "left."	Beginning of dance events, social gatherings <sup>3</sup>
<b>Sêpêyî (Sepayî)</b>	Mukriyan (e.g., Mahabad, Iran)	Relatively fast-paced, "three steps."	Celebrations <sup>3</sup>
<b>Sheikhani (Şêxanî)</b>	Kurmanji areas (esp. Iraqi Kurdistan), also by Assyrians, Kurdish Jews	Older, laid-back, bouncy; two-step movement; interlocked hands.	Social gatherings, weddings <sup>13</sup>
<b>Delîlo</b>	Kurdish regions of Turkey	Circular; hand or shoulder hold; simple steps, graceful arm/torso movements; often with singing/clapping.	Festive occasions, celebrations <sup>12</sup>

<b>Sema (Religious)</b>	Various (Sufi, Alevi, Ezidi contexts)	Mystical, spiritual; circular (Ezidi, Alevi Semah); often involves whirling or specific ritual movements; cosmological symbolism.	Religious ceremonies, dhikr, worship <sup>2</sup>
<b>Chûb-bazi (Chob-bazi)</b>	Widespread	Martial dance for men using sticks; demonstrative.	Festivals, displays of skill <sup>2</sup>
<b>Qambar Yamane</b>	(Shekhani form)	Storytelling dance (lost in snowstorm); movements reflect returning to start.	Cultural performances <sup>19</sup>
<b>Arabana</b>	Historical context	Storytelling dance (Arab attacks); steps symbolize advances/retreats.	Cultural performances <sup>23</sup>
<b>Jandirma (Albak)</b>	Agri, Makou regions	Storytelling dance (Ottoman invasion); depicts resistance.	Cultural performances <sup>23</sup>

## IV. The Rhythmic Soul: Music and Instrumentation in Kurdish Dance

### A. Traditional Musical Instruments

Kurdish dances are inextricably linked with their musical accompaniment; indeed, a dance without music is virtually inconceivable in Kurdish tradition.<sup>18</sup> The vibrant soundscape of these dances is created by a distinct ensemble of traditional instruments:

- **Zurna (Sorna/Zorna):** This double-reed wind instrument, often likened to a rustic oboe, is typically the lead melodic voice in Kurdish dance music. It produces a powerful, loud, high-pitched, sharp, and piercing sound, making it exceptionally well-suited for outdoor performances and large gatherings.<sup>2</sup> The Zurna is believed to have ancient origins, with roots in Anatolia and Central Asia, and its presence is noted in Hittite reliefs.<sup>25</sup>
- **Dahol (Dehol/Davul):** A large, double-headed bass drum, the Dahol provides the foundational rhythm and compelling beat for the dance. It is played with two different types of beaters – the *Toul* (a thicker stick for strong beats) and the *Guchan* (a thinner stick or switch for lighter, faster rhythms) <sup>10</sup> – creating a complex rhythmic texture. The Dahol almost invariably accompanies the Zurna, forming a powerful duo that drives the energy of the dance.<sup>2</sup>
- **Tembûr (Tanbur):** This long-necked fretted lute holds a special significance in Kurdish



musical traditions, particularly its profound association with the Yarsan (Ahl-e Haqq or Ehli Heq) religious community and their sacred rituals.<sup>2</sup> The Tembûr is characterized by a unique playing technique and is venerated as a sacred object within Yarsan spirituality.<sup>26</sup>

- **Daf (Def/Erbane):** A large frame drum, the Daf is frequently employed in mystical and religious contexts, often accompanying Sufi Sema or Yarsan rituals alongside the Tembûr (though the Daf itself is not considered sacred in Yarsanism).<sup>2</sup> It is regarded as one of the most widely used and characteristic Kurdish percussion instruments.<sup>20</sup>
- **Dozaleh (Dozale):** This instrument is a type of double clarinet or double pipe, consisting of two joined pipes, each with finger holes and a single reed, producing a distinctive, often drone-accompanied melody.<sup>18</sup>
- **Nermenâî (Nerme-nay):** Translating to "soft flute," the Nermenâî is a more mellow-sounding wind instrument compared to the Zurna, used for certain types of melodies or in specific regional ensembles.<sup>18</sup>
- **Shemshal (Şimşal):** A long, end-blown flute, the Shemshal is particularly prominent in the musical traditions of certain Kurdish regions, such as Mariwan in Iranian Kurdistan.<sup>18</sup>
- **Darbuka:** A goblet-shaped hand drum, the Darbuka is also mentioned as one of the instruments providing rhythmic accompaniment for Kurdish dances.<sup>5</sup>

In more contemporary settings, other instruments such as the *Ork* (electronic organ or keyboard) and the *Saz* (a general term for long-necked lutes, of which the Tembûr is a specific type) have also found their way into Kurdish dance music ensembles.<sup>20</sup>

The prominence of loud, powerful, and often outdoor-suited instruments like the Zurna and Dahol strongly suggests that many traditional Kurdish dances historically took place in large, open, communal spaces. This reinforces the public, collective, and celebratory nature of these events. Conversely, the distinct instrumentation associated with mystical and religious dances, such as the Tembûr and Daf in Yarsan rituals, indicates a separation and specialization of musical-dance traditions, with certain instruments and sounds reserved for sacred or more intimate spiritual contexts. This instrumental differentiation points to varied performance contexts and the diverse functions that dance and music fulfill within Kurdish culture.

## B. Rhythmic Patterns, Tempo, and Dynamics

The music accompanying Kurdish dance is defined by its compelling rhythmic drive and its capacity to evoke a wide range of emotions. Kurdish dance itself is characterized by rhythmic steps and meticulously synchronized movements among participants.<sup>1</sup> Rhythm is a paramount element, with the tempo of the music directly influencing the *coşku* (a term conveying enthusiasm, excitement, and fervor) of the dance. The tempo can vary significantly, ranging from slow and *zarîf* (elegant, graceful) to fast and *güçlü* (powerful, strong).<sup>5</sup>

Kurdish dance music generally adheres to specific, defined meters, a characteristic that is essential for maintaining synchronization among a group of dancers.<sup>10</sup> These rhythmic structures can encompass simple meters (e.g., 2/4, 3/4, 4/4), compound meters (e.g., 6/8), and more complex irregular or additive meters, reflecting a sophisticated rhythmic

understanding.<sup>10</sup>

A notable feature of many Kurdish dance suites, particularly in the Halparke tradition, is the progressive increase in tempo. This acceleration can occur both within a single dance piece and across a sequence of dances performed consecutively. A typical Halparke session often commences with dances played at relatively slower rhythms, such as Geryan, and then gradually speeds up as more energetic dances are introduced. Interspersed within these faster sections, or following them, slower and calmer rhythms may be played, providing not only variety to the musical and choreographic flow but also allowing dancers moments of rest and recuperation before the energy builds again.<sup>10</sup>

In terms of dynamics, Kurdish dance music is generally performed loudly, with the volume often fluctuating between moderately loud (mf) and very loud (ff) throughout a performance. There is often a correlation between tempo and dynamics, with faster rhythms typically being performed more loudly to match the heightened energy of the dance.<sup>10</sup>

The musical phrases within Kurdish dance tunes are often characterized by their relative simplicity, limited melodic range, and repetitive nature. Variations on a main melodic or rhythmic phrase are common. Cadences, or concluding musical phrases, are typically short and often feature a descending melodic contour.<sup>10</sup> Despite this structural simplicity, the music is described as being full of emotion and highly conducive to the communal experience of circle dancing.<sup>27</sup> Numerous traditional Kurdish dance songs and instrumental pieces have been documented, with titles such as "Zendan - Chmachu," "Nar Me/Nermane," "Halay Zoorna," and specific rhythmic cycles like "Geryan (Dozaleh, Zarb)," and "Chepi (Sorna, Dehol)" appearing in collections and performance repertoires.<sup>21</sup>

The "rhythmological" approach to ethnomusicology, as discussed by scholars like Ayako Tatsumura, which considers the interplay of natural rhythms (seasonal, environmental), social rhythms (economic, political, linguistic), and artistic rhythms, offers a valuable framework for a deeper understanding of Kurdish dance music.<sup>29</sup> The strong connection observed between language and musical rhythm in many cultures<sup>29</sup> is particularly pertinent for Kurdish culture, with its rich oral traditions and the poetic nature of its song texts. The characteristic progressive increase in tempo found in Halparke sequences mirrors a common structural pattern in many folk dance traditions worldwide. This structure is often designed to build collective energy, foster a sense of communal excitement, and create a shared, escalating experience among participants. The structured tempo changes are not arbitrary but likely serve important social and psychological functions, such as facilitating group cohesion, building collective effervescence, and allowing for periods of rest and renewed focus, all aligning with the concept of an "artistic rhythm" that organizes communal experience.

### **C. The Dengbêj Tradition and Its Connection to Dance Music**

The Dengbêj tradition holds a revered place in Kurdish oral culture. Dengbêjs are essentially singing storytellers, epic singers, or bards who, through their powerful and often unaccompanied vocal performances, transmit Kurdish history, ancient legends, contemporary events, love sagas, and even lullabies.<sup>31</sup> Their extensive repertoire of songs, particularly the narrative epic songs and the *stran* (which can also refer to songs of mourning or general

songs), constitutes a vital corpus of Kurdish oral literature and historical memory.<sup>32</sup> While the primary performance mode of Dengbêjî is typically vocal and focuses on narrative delivery, often without instrumental accompaniment, there are potential connections to the broader musical landscape that includes dance music. The *Stran* style, for instance, is described not only in the context of mourning but also as encompassing melodic and rhythmic songs, including popular and love songs that are performed at weddings.<sup>31</sup> Weddings are quintessential occasions for Kurdish dance. The Dengbêj tradition, much like other forms of Kurdish cultural expression, has faced periods of persecution, particularly when the Kurdish language was suppressed. However, there have been concerted efforts in recent times to revitalize and preserve this unique art form, including the establishment of *Mala Dengbêjan* (Dengbêj Houses) in various cities, which serve as centers for performance, learning, and archiving.<sup>31</sup> Although Dengbêj performance itself is not typically considered dance music in the direct sense of providing a beat for physical movement, the themes, narratives, and rhythmic or melodic structures embedded within their *Strans* (especially those intended for celebrations or with a more upbeat character) may have historically influenced or shared a common cultural wellspring with the music that accompanies certain dance forms. The profound storytelling aspect of Dengbêjî resonates deeply with the narrative elements found in many Kurdish dances, where movements and formations are used to recount historical events or folkloric tales.<sup>1</sup> The shared cultural context of performances—such as weddings and communal gatherings where both Dengbêjs might sing and people would dance—suggests a potential for cross-pollination of musical ideas, rhythmic motifs, and narrative themes, even if the primary performance modes and immediate functions differ.

**Table: Traditional Musical Instruments in Kurdish Dance**

Instrument Name (Kurdish/English)	Type	Description (Materials, Sound Quality)	Role in Dance Music	Associated Dance Types/Contexts
Zurna (Sorna)	Aerophone (Double Reed)	Wood (e.g., apricot, plum), conical bore, flared bell; loud, piercing, high-pitched, sharp. <sup>25</sup>	Primary melodic instrument, leads the ensemble.	Halay, Govend, Dîlan, most outdoor festive dances. <sup>5</sup>
Dahol (Dehol/Davul)	Membranophone (Double-headed Drum)	Large wooden frame, animal skin heads; deep, resonant bass beat (Toul), sharper rhythmic	Provides fundamental rhythm and beat, drives the dance. Almost always paired with Zurna.	Halay, Govend, Dîlan, most outdoor festive dances. <sup>5</sup>

		patterns (Guchan). <sup>10</sup>		
<b>Tembûr (Tanbur)</b>	Chordophone (Long-necked Lute)	Mulberry wood resonator, walnut neck, 3 metal strings (first course doubled), 13-14 frets. <sup>26</sup>	Melodic and rhythmic accompaniment, sacred instrument.	Yarsan (Ehli Heq) religious rituals, Tasawof Dance. Not typically for general festive dance. <sup>8</sup>
<b>Daf (Def/Erbane)</b>	Membranophone (Frame Drum)	Large wooden frame, skin head, often with metal rings/jingles on the inside. <sup>20</sup>	Rhythmic accompaniment, provides complex patterns.	Mystical/religious dances (Sufi Sema, Yarsan), some festive contexts. <sup>5</sup>
<b>Dozaleh (Dozale)</b>	Aerophone (Double Clarinet/Pipe)	Two cane pipes bound together, each with reeds and fingerholes. <sup>18</sup>	Melodic, often with a drone effect.	Various Halparke rhythms, regional folk music. <sup>18</sup>
<b>Nermenâî (Nerme-nay)</b>	Aerophone (Flute)	Likely cane or wood; softer, more mellow tone than Zurna. <sup>18</sup>	Melodic accompaniment.	Regional folk music, possibly gentler dance forms. <sup>18</sup>
<b>Shemshal (Şimşal)</b>	Aerophone (Long Flute)	End-blown flute, typically cane or wood. <sup>18</sup>	Melodic accompaniment.	Particularly in Mariwan region, folk music. <sup>18</sup>
<b>Darbuka</b>	Membranophone (Goblet Drum)	Ceramic, metal, or wood body, single head.	Rhythmic accompaniment, provides sharp, distinct beats.	Used in some dance ensembles. <sup>5</sup>

## V. Threads of Identity: Traditional Costumes and Adornments

Traditional Kurdish clothing, with its vibrant colors, intricate designs, and regional diversity, is a powerful visual expression of Kurdish identity and heritage. The attire worn during dances not only enhances the aesthetic appeal of the performance but also carries deep cultural and symbolic meanings.

### A. Men's Traditional Attire

The traditional ensemble for Kurdish men is both functional and symbolic, adapted to the diverse environments and historical lifestyles of the Kurdish people. General components typically include:

- **Trousers (Sharwall/Patol):** These are characteristically baggy, providing freedom of

movement, and often taper towards the ankles.<sup>5</sup> The design of the *Patol*, with its wide upper part and tight ankles, is particularly suited to the cold, mountainous terrain, offering warmth and ease of movement.<sup>37</sup>

- **Shirt (Kras/Kewa):** A shirt is worn as the base layer, often with long sleeves.<sup>34</sup> The *Kras* for men is typically a long, loose-fitting shirt.<sup>35</sup>
- **Vest or Jacket (Mraxani/Pestek/Melki/Chogha/Çoğë):** Over the shirt, a vest or jacket is commonly worn. The *Pestek* is a thick, felt, open-fronted vest.<sup>40</sup> The *Melki* is a type of waistcoat.<sup>41</sup> The *Chogha* or *Çoğë* is a waistcoat often made of cotton or wool.<sup>35</sup>
- **Waist Sash (Pshtwen/Pashtuin/Shal/Qebin):** A wide sash or belt is wrapped around the waist, often made of decorative fabric. This sash, known as *Pshtwen* or *Pashtuin*, not only adds a visual element but also traditionally served practical purposes, such as holding weapons or personal items.<sup>33</sup> The *Shal* for men, a significant cultural symbol, can be a substantial piece of fabric, sometimes up to 25 meters long, intricately wrapped.<sup>43</sup>

Specific regional styles include:

- **Shal û Şapik:** This is a well-known traditional attire from Central Kurdistan (including parts of Iraqi and Turkish Kurdistan). It consists of a fitted, often collarless, jacket (*Şapik*) tucked into gathered trousers (*Shal*, though here *Shal* refers to the trousers) that flare at the ankle. The suit is frequently embroidered.<sup>33</sup>
- **Chokhe û Rânak (Çoğë û Rank):** This distinctive attire is characteristic of the Hawraman region. It is traditionally made from goat or sheep wool. The *Chokhe* (or *Çoğë*) is the waistcoat or short coat, and *Rânak* refers to the trousers.<sup>41</sup> These garments are known for their quality and are considered among the most expensive types of Kurdish men's clothing.<sup>42</sup>
- **Faqiyana and Saq:** These garments have historical military significance. The *Faqiyana* (also known as *Sorani* in this context) was a piece of cloth wrapped around the arms, potentially used as a sling for stones in warfare. The *Saq* (or *Dolaq*) was wrapped around the legs for protection. Some contemporary Kurdish dance groups continue to incorporate these elements into their costumes, preserving a link to this historical martial heritage.<sup>8</sup>

**Headwear** is a prominent feature of men's attire:

- Turbans, known as *Jamana*, *Destar*, or *Sarvin*, are commonly worn. These are typically made from a long piece of cloth wrapped around a skullcap (*Klaw*, *Kelaw*, or *Araghchin*).<sup>33</sup> The style of the skullcap and the way the turban is tied can sometimes indicate the wearer's clan, tribe, or region of origin.<sup>38</sup> A *Pach* is a decorative piece of fabric worn with the *Kêlaw*.<sup>37</sup>

**Footwear:**

- The traditional footwear for men is *Klash* (also *Kêlash*), which are handmade shoes with a woven white fabric upper and a flat sole, often made of compressed fabric or leather. They are lightweight, comfortable, and particularly suitable for warm weather.<sup>35</sup> Historically, red leather boots with iron fittings were noted in the Hakkari region.<sup>44</sup>

**Materials and Colors:** Traditional materials include wool, cotton, and felt. Colors are often muted earth tones (browns, creams), but suits can also be in solid colors, sometimes with pinstripes or striped patterns. Embroidery is a common form of decoration, particularly on jackets and sashes.<sup>33</sup>

The functionality embedded in many elements of men's traditional clothing—such as the *Faqiyana* for its historical combat utility, the *Klash* for its coolness and suitability for mountainous terrain, and the design of the *Pato* trousers for warmth and mobility—points to an attire deeply shaped by the historical lifestyle, environmental adaptations, and even the martial history of the Kurdish people. These design choices extend beyond mere aesthetics, reflecting a practical and resilient cultural heritage.

## B. Women's Traditional Attire

Kurdish women's traditional clothing is renowned for its vibrancy, elaborate designs, and rich ornamentation, creating a stunning visual spectacle, especially in the context of dance. Key components include:

- **Dress (Kras):** The central garment is the *Kras*, a long dress, often reaching the floor. It is typically made from colorful fabrics, which can include light, sheer materials like chiffon or silk, especially for festive occasions. The *Kras* usually has long sleeves, which often end in distinctive flared, triangular extensions called *Faqiana* or *Sorani*. These sleeve extensions are not merely decorative; they can be knotted together behind the back, wrapped and knotted individually around each arm for practicality during work, or used expressively during dance.<sup>5</sup> Triangular pieces of fabric, known as *Tirinj*, are sometimes sewn into the sides of the *Kras* to add fullness.<sup>37</sup>
- **Undergarments:** Beneath the *Kras*, women typically wear a long, wide-strapped camisole called *Zher Kras* ("under dress") and bloomers or wide trousers known as *Derpey* or *Shalwar*, often made of shimmering or comfortable fabrics like cotton or silk.<sup>38</sup>
- **Outerwear:** Several types of outerwear can be worn over the *Kras*:
  - **Vest (Kalanje/Sukhme/Helik):** A short vest, often made of velvet or other rich fabrics and frequently adorned with intricate embroidery, sequins, or beadwork, is a common addition.<sup>35</sup>
  - **Coat/Robe (Kawa/Salta/Mashta):** A longer coat or robe, known as a *Kawa*, may be worn. This can be with or without sleeves, often made of velvet or other decorative materials, and sometimes features side slits for ease of movement.<sup>35</sup> A *Salta* is a shorter tailored jacket.<sup>38</sup> A *Mashta* refers to a cloak.<sup>51</sup>
- **Waist Embellishment (Pashtuin/Sal/Shal/Pêstend):** A colorful belt or wide waist shawl, known as *Pashtuin*, *Sal*, *Shal*, or *Pêstend*, is often tied around the waist, accentuating the figure and adding another layer of color and texture to the ensemble.<sup>36</sup>
- **Headwear (Klaw û Serwîn):** Women's headwear is diverse and often elaborately decorated:
  - **Skullcap (Klaw/Kelaw):** Decorated skullcaps, such as the *Klawfis* or *Klawz*, form the base of the headwear. These are often adorned with coins (like the *Chapule* or

*Parchene* which are rows of coins), beadwork, sequins, and embroidery.<sup>37</sup>

- **Scarf/Turban (Lechak/Kalke/Desmal/Jamana/Pushin):** Various scarves, shawls, or large turbans made of colored silk handkerchiefs or other fabrics are worn over the skullcap. These can feature elaborate fringes, embroidery, or beadwork.<sup>39</sup> In the Sulaimania region, a distinctive headwear called *Pushin*, resembling a boa-like cord, was historically wound around the head over a handkerchief (*Jamana*).<sup>44</sup> The *Desmal* can also refer to a top shawl portion of the dress.<sup>51</sup>
- **Jewelry:** Jewelry is an integral part of women's traditional attire. Earrings, bracelets, necklaces (often featuring cloves and colored beads), and strings of gold coins worn across the forehead are common adornments, adding to the richness and festive appearance of the outfit.<sup>44</sup>
- **Materials and Adornments:** Traditional fabrics include silk, velvet, chiffon, brocades, and other sheer or richly textured materials. Bright colors are characteristic. Sequins, beadwork, intricate embroidery (often floral or geometric motifs), and metallic threads are extensively used for decoration.<sup>5</sup>

The elaborate and often brilliantly colored nature of women's traditional attire, especially the prevalent use of shimmering fabrics, sequins, extensive jewelry, and flowing elements like the *Faqiana*, suggests that women's clothing in dance contexts serves not only as a marker of cultural identification but also as a key aesthetic component of the performance itself. These garments enhance the visual spectacle, accentuate movements, and contribute to the overall vibrancy and celebratory atmosphere of Kurdish dance. The movement of women's long, colorful dresses, for instance, is noted as an important and visually captivating part of the dance in regions like Iranian Kurdistan.<sup>5</sup>

## C. Symbolism of Colors, Embroidery, and Garments

Kurdish traditional clothing is rich in symbolism, with each element potentially conveying meaning about the wearer's identity, heritage, and social context.

- **Narrative in Stitches and Hues:** It is often said that each embroidered stitch and every vibrant color chosen for Kurdish dresses tells a story, connecting the wearer to their ancestral heritage and the collective memory of their people.<sup>47</sup> The designs and colors are not arbitrary but are part of a visual language.
- **Markers of Identity:** Kurdish clothing is deeply rooted in the history of the Kurdish people and reflects the diverse traditions, geographical influences, and tribal affiliations within Kurdistan. Variations in the design, cut, color, or embellishment of an outfit can often indicate a person's region of origin, their specific tribe or clan, and sometimes even their marital or social status.<sup>52</sup>
- **The Kurdish Shal:** For men, the *Shal* (the wide waist sash or the specific *Shal û Şapik* suit) is a particularly potent symbol of cultural authenticity and masculine identity within Kurdish tradition.<sup>43</sup>
- **Symbolic Colors and Flags:** The handmade *Dilan* flags, sometimes used by the dance leader, are often inspired by the colors of the Kurdish flag (typically red, yellow/gold, and

green) and adorned with sequins and thread. These flags explicitly symbolize craftsmanship, cultural heritage, and national pride.<sup>24</sup> The general preference for vibrant and diverse colors in Kurdish attire is often remarked upon and is seen as reflecting the beauty of the Kurdish landscape and the spirit of the people.<sup>39</sup>

- **Embroidery and Adornments:** Intricate embroidery patterns, beadwork, and the use of coins as decoration are not just for aesthetic appeal; they can carry specific cultural motifs, represent wealth or status, or hold protective or auspicious meanings within local belief systems.

The symbolism embedded in Kurdish clothing, from the choice of colors and fabrics to specific garments like the *Shal* or the design of headwear, transforms attire from mere covering into a dynamic and expressive text. This text communicates complex information about individual and collective identity, history, social standing, and cultural values. This symbolic function is particularly potent in the context of dance, where the moving body becomes a living canvas for these cultural symbols, bringing them to life and amplifying their communicative power.

## D. Regional Variations in Costumes

Kurdish traditional clothing exhibits remarkable diversity across the vast geographical expanse of Kurdistan, with styles varying significantly between different regions and even among various tribes and sub-groups. These variations reflect local histories, environmental conditions, specific cultural practices, and interactions with neighboring cultures.

- **Broad Regional Styles:** Distinctions are often made between the attire of Northern Kurdistan (parts of Turkey), Central Kurdistan (parts of Iraqi and Turkish Kurdistan), Southern Kurdistan (parts of Iraqi and Iranian Kurdistan), Eastern Kurdistan (Rojhalat, in Iran), and Western Kurdistan (Rojava, in Syria). For example, traditional northern Kurdish clothing for men is described as more tight-fitting, resembling rural Turkish and Balkan attire, while southern Kurdish clothing, often worn by Peshmerga, features baggy trousers and a less embroidered jacket.<sup>33</sup>
- **Specific Localized Styles:**
  - The **Mukriyan** region (encompassing cities like Mahabad, Saqqez, and Bikan in Iranian Kurdistan) is known for a distinct women's costume (*Mûkryani*) featuring voluminous trousers, a short vest top under a sheer dress gathered at the hips, a large sash, and a specific pillbox hat with a triangular shawl.<sup>33</sup> Mukri and Sina women were historically noted for wearing the largest and most elaborate turbans.<sup>44</sup>
  - The **Hawraman** region is known for the men's *Chokhe û Rênak* attire, made from wool.<sup>41</sup>
  - The men's *Shal* has distinct types associated with **Ranya**, **Bahdinan (especially Zakho)**, and **Hawraman**.<sup>43</sup>
  - The **Hakkari** region (Cilemerg) in Turkey has its own variations.<sup>33</sup>
  - Women's attire in **East Anatolia** and the **Badinani/Hakkari** regions also have specific characteristics, differing from the more widespread **Sorani** dress or the



### Mukriyani style.<sup>33</sup>

- **Harmony of Costume and Movement:** There is a significant perceived harmony between regional costume styles and the characteristic dance movements of that area. It is suggested that the style of clothing worn in a particular region can be so indicative of its dance traditions that one might be able to predict the type of dance and its movements simply by observing the local attire.<sup>14</sup> For instance, the cut of the dress, the length of sleeves, or the type of footwear can all influence and be influenced by the typical dance steps and gestures of a region.

These regional costume variations are not arbitrary. They are deeply intertwined with local histories, specific environmental adaptations, dominant socio-economic activities (e.g., pastoralism vs. agriculture), and the unique evolution of dance styles in different communities. This results in distinct sub-cultural identities expressed through both dress and dance within the broader Kurdish cultural sphere. The costume itself, therefore, can be seen as a predictor of, and a complement to, the movement style characteristic of a particular locale.

## E. Kurdish Dress Day

Kurdish Dress Day is an annual observance, typically held on March 10th, dedicated to celebrating and promoting traditional Kurdish clothing. This day serves as a vibrant affirmation of Kurdish identity, pride, and historical continuity.<sup>39</sup> On this occasion, individuals across the Kurdistan Region, including government employees who are often encouraged by local authorities, and ordinary citizens, enthusiastically don their traditional Kurdish attire in workplaces, public spaces, and share images online.<sup>39</sup>

The institutionalization of a "Kurdish Dress Day" signifies a conscious and collective effort to preserve and promote this vital aspect of cultural heritage, particularly in the face of modernization and the pervasive influence of globalized fashion trends. It highlights clothing as a key and visible marker of Kurdish identity and cultural distinctiveness.

### Table: Key Elements of Traditional Kurdish Attire

Garment Name (Kurdish/English)	Gender	Description (Material, Design, Adornments)	Symbolic/Cultural Significance	Common Regions/Variations
Kras	Women's	Long dress, often floor-length, colorful, sheer fabrics (chiffon, silk) for festive wear; long sleeves often with <i>Faqiana</i> (triangular extensions). <sup>37</sup>	Central garment, expresses femininity, regional identity through fabric/design. <i>Faqiana</i> used expressively in dance.	Widespread, variations in fabric, cut (e.g., Sorani, Mukriyani). <sup>33</sup>

<b>Kewa / Chokhe / Şapik</b>	Men's	Shirt or jacket. <i>Kewa</i> (general shirt). <sup>39</sup> <i>Chokhe</i> (wool waistcoat, Hawraman). <sup>42</sup> <i>Şapik</i> (fitted jacket in <i>Shal û Şapik</i> ). <sup>33</sup>	Varies by type; protection, status, regional identity.	Widespread, specific types like <i>Chokhe û Rânak</i> (Hawraman), <i>Shal û Şapik</i> (Central Kurdistan). <sup>33</sup>
<b>Sharwall / Patol</b>	Men's / Women's (under Kras)	Baggy trousers, tapered at ankles (men's <i>Patol</i> <sup>37</sup> ); women's <i>Derpey</i> (bloomers). <sup>38</sup>	Freedom of movement, adaptation to terrain/climate.	Widespread. Men's <i>Patol</i> designed for mountains. <sup>33</sup>
<b>Pshtwen / Pashtuin / Shal (waist)</b>	Men's / Women's	Wide waist sash/belt, often colorful and decorative fabrics. Men's <i>Shal</i> can be very long. <sup>39</sup>	Accentuates waist, practical (holding items), symbolic of status/region. Men's <i>Shal</i> is a key cultural symbol. <sup>43</sup>	Widespread. Variations in material, width, tying style. <sup>33</sup>
<b>Klash (Kêlash)</b>	Men's (primarily)	Handmade white woven upper, flat sole; lightweight, comfortable. <sup>37</sup>	Traditional footwear, suitable for warm weather and terrain.	Widespread, especially in Iran and Iraq. <sup>45</sup>
<b>Sukhme / Kalanje / Helik</b>	Women's	Short vest worn over <i>Kras</i> ; often velvet, richly embroidered/adornd. <sup>38</sup>	Adds layer, decoration, status.	Widespread.
<b>Klaw / Kelaw / Araghchin</b>	Men's / Women's	Skullcap. Men's often base for turban. Women's ( <i>Klawfis</i> , <i>Klawz</i> ) decorated with coins, beads. <sup>37</sup>	Part of headwear complex; can indicate origin/status. Women's highly ornamental.	Widespread. Styles vary. <sup>38</sup>
<b>Lechak / Destmal / Jamana / Sarvin</b>	Women's / Men's (turban cloth)	Scarves, head coverings, turban cloths. Women's <i>Lechak</i> (scarf). <sup>39</sup> Men's <i>Jamana</i> (turban cloth). <sup>40</sup>	Head covering, protection, decoration, identity.	Widespread. Elaborate for women. <sup>44</sup>
<b>Faqiyana / Sorani</b>	Women's	Long, triangular	Decorative,	Common on

(sleeve ext.)		extensions on <i>Kras</i> sleeves. <sup>37</sup>	practical (can be tied), expressive in dance. <sup>50</sup>	women's dresses.
Faqiyana (arm wrap) / Saq (leg wrap)	Men's (historical)	Cloth wrapped around arms/legs for combat. <sup>8</sup>	Historical martial use, protection.	Used by some dance groups today. <sup>8</sup>

## VI. The Dance of Life: Cultural, Social, and Symbolic Significance

Kurdish dance is far more than a sequence of movements set to music; it is a profound expression of life itself, deeply embedded with cultural, social, and symbolic meanings that resonate through every aspect of Kurdish society.

### A. Cornerstone of Communal Expression

At its heart, Kurdish dance is a powerful embodiment of communal values. It serves as a vibrant symbol of unity, a conduit for collective celebration, a reflection of shared heritage, a testament to resilience in the face of adversity, and an expression of communal joy.<sup>1</sup> Unlike many individualistic dance forms, Kurdish dance thrives on collective participation, bringing people of all ages and backgrounds together in a potent demonstration of solidarity and shared identity.<sup>1</sup>

Specific movements and formations within the dance carry layers of meaning. The act of foot-stamping, a common feature, is often interpreted as an expression of love and connection to the land, a vital element in a culture historically tied to its ancestral territories.<sup>4</sup> When men and women dance together holding hands, this physical linkage is widely understood as a symbol of equality between the sexes, a notable characteristic of Kurdish social norms.<sup>23</sup> The line formation, particularly when adopted by men, is seen to represent unity and strength, a visual metaphor for communal cohesion and fortitude.<sup>1</sup>

The circular movement, especially prominent in *Halparkê* and other group dances, is rich with symbolism. It can signify ascent towards a higher spiritual plane, a connection to the origin or source of life, and the overarching unity of the group.<sup>18</sup> In agricultural societies, the rhythmic stomping of feet upon the earth has also been interpreted as an act of "waking the earth," a ritualistic gesture to ensure fertility and abundance.<sup>4</sup> These interpretations demonstrate how basic dance movements are not arbitrary but are deeply imbued with meanings that connect the physical act of dancing to core Kurdish values: an intimate bond with the land, principles of social equality, and the paramount importance of communal cohesion. These are not abstract symbols but principles made manifest and reinforced through embodied practice.

### B. Integral Role in Ceremonies, Festivals, and Social Gatherings

Kurdish dance is an indispensable component of a wide array of ceremonies, festivals, and social gatherings, marking significant life events and communal celebrations. It is prominently featured during weddings, the Kurdish New Year (Newroz), national celebrations, and other

joyous occasions where people come together.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Kurdish weddings are renowned for their extensive festivities, which can involve at least three continuous days of dancing, underscoring the centrality of dance in these rites of passage.<sup>15</sup>

**Newroz** stands out as a particularly significant event where dance plays a pivotal role. Celebrated at the spring equinox, Newroz marks the Kurdish New Year and is rich with symbolism. Dance, often performed around large bonfires, is a central element of these festivities, symbolizing unity, rebirth, the triumph of light over darkness, freedom, and the assertion of Kurdish identity.<sup>1</sup> The traditions of lighting fires and collectively jumping over them are key rituals of Newroz, with dance weaving through these symbolic acts.<sup>11</sup> Historically, especially in regions like Turkey and Syria where Kurdish cultural expression has faced oppression, Newroz celebrations, with their inherent dance component, have become a potent symbol of Kurdish resilience, cultural resurrection, and political aspiration.<sup>11</sup> The prominent role of dance in Newroz, a festival deeply intertwined with ancient myths of liberation (such as the legend of Kawa the Blacksmith defeating the tyrant Zahak <sup>11</sup>) and the renewal of nature, elevates Kurdish dance beyond mere social celebration. It becomes a ritualistic reaffirmation of cultural continuity, a recounting of historical narratives of freedom, and a collective expression of hope and aspiration for the future. The convergence of myth, ritual (particularly the symbolic use of fire), and collective dance during Newroz creates a powerful annual event that recharges cultural identity and reinforces historical consciousness. Beyond joyous celebrations, Kurdish dance also finds its place in other contexts. It is traditionally performed during harvest time, linking it to agricultural cycles and communal labor.<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, in some regions, specific forms of Kurdish dance are also performed during mourning ceremonies, demonstrating the dance's capacity to express a wide spectrum of human emotions, including grief and remembrance.<sup>2</sup>

### C. Dance as a Medium for Storytelling and Oral History

Kurdish dance serves as a vital repository and dynamic medium for storytelling and the transmission of oral history. In a culture where written historical records have often been suppressed, lost, or were simply not the primary mode of chronicling, dance has functioned as an embodied archive, preserving and communicating historical narratives, social memory, cultural knowledge, and accounts of daily life across generations.<sup>1</sup> The dance itself becomes a historical text, read and understood through movement and music.

Several specific Kurdish dances are explicitly narrative in nature, recounting particular events or legends:

- The **Arabana Dance** is said to recount historical confrontations between Kurds and Arab forces, with the choreographic patterns symbolizing Kurdish advances, strategic retreats, and ultimate resistance.<sup>23</sup>
- The **Jandrma Dance** (also known as Albak Dance) originates from the period of Ottoman incursions into Kurdistan. Its movements and accompanying song depict the Kurdish people's resistance against Ottoman soldiers, referred to as "Jandrma" (gendarmerie).<sup>23</sup>
- The **Shanga Dance**, popular in parts of Eastern and Northern Kurdistan, is often

performed on or near the tombs of deceased leaders or heroes. Its associated song and movements tell the story of a *Mir* (leader) who was killed by a character named Shang, and the community's reaction to this event.<sup>19</sup>

- The **Qambar Yamane Dance**, often a form of the Shekhani style, narrates the tale of a group of friends who become lost in a snowstorm during a picnic. The dance's movements, which involve the dancers repeatedly returning to their starting point, mirror the friends' disoriented journey and eventual return.<sup>19</sup>
- One historical account even describes a Kurdish commander reporting on a military victory to a Median King through the medium of dance, using a red handkerchief instead of a sword and employing specific movements to depict battle tactics, including gentle beginnings, swift attacks, retreats, advances, resilience after injury, and the enemy's surrender.<sup>61</sup>

These examples illustrate how, in a culture where access to formal historical documentation has often been limited or controlled by dominant powers, dance has served as a crucial, living archive. It has allowed for the preservation and transmission of historical narratives, social memory, and cultural knowledge in an embodied and communally accessible form. The dance, in this sense, was not merely reflective of history but an active agent in its construction and perpetuation.

## **D. Symbol of Resistance and Cultural Perseverance**

Throughout Kurdish history, dance has consistently emerged as a powerful symbol of resistance, resilience, and the unwavering struggle for freedom and cultural identity.<sup>1</sup> In contexts where Kurdish language, culture, and political aspirations have been suppressed, the public performance of traditional dances like Halay or Govend—especially during culturally significant occasions like Newroz or in direct defiance of governmental bans—has transformed into a profound act of cultural affirmation and political resistance.<sup>5</sup> It is not uncommon to see images or accounts of Kurdish fighters performing these dances, even on the front lines, as an expression of their spirit and their connection to their heritage.<sup>9</sup> The efforts by states like Iran to suppress Newroz celebrations, which invariably feature dance, including measures such as arresting individuals for wearing traditional Kurdish attire or for participating in public dances, underscore the perceived potency of these cultural expressions as symbols of Kurdish identity and potential dissent.<sup>60</sup> The very act of dancing, particularly traditional forms performed collectively and in public spaces, can thus transform into a potent political statement. In situations where overt political expression is restricted or dangerous, the dance floor can become a site of contestation, a space where cultural sovereignty is asserted, and a collective voice is given to unspoken aspirations. The poignant observation, "Kürtler dans edebildikleri sürece direnebilirler" (As long as Kurds can dance, they can resist)<sup>9</sup>, encapsulates this profound connection between dance and the Kurdish spirit of perseverance. This demonstrates that both the Kurdish people and authorities who have sought to control them recognize the dance's potent symbolism, which extends far beyond mere festivity or entertainment.

## E. Religious and Mystical Dimensions

Beyond its social and political significance, Kurdish dance also possesses deep religious and mystical dimensions, with certain forms intricately woven into the spiritual practices of various Kurdish communities.<sup>2</sup>

- For the **Yarsan** (Ahl-e Haqq or Ehli Heq) community, dance is an integral part of their religious rituals. They perform specific spiritual dances, often referred to as *Tasawof Dance*, which are accompanied by the sacred music of the *Tembûr* (Tanbur), a long-necked lute that is itself venerated as a holy instrument.<sup>8</sup> Group *Tembûr* playing and associated spiritual practices, which may include rhythmic movement, are also noted during festivals like *Jashn-e-Mehrgan*.<sup>62</sup>
- Among **Ezidi** Kurds, collective dances performed in circular formations are a key feature of religious holidays and ceremonies. These dances are rich in symbolism, often representing universal cosmological cycles, and serve to reinforce social solidarity within the community while fostering a sense of spiritual closeness to God and the divine realm.<sup>22</sup>
- **Alevi** Kurds practice the *Semah*, a ritual dance that is both a form of worship (*ibadet*) and a means of expressing and strengthening social solidarity. The *Semah* is replete with cosmological symbolism, with its characteristic turning and cyclical movements representing the orbits of celestial bodies, the cycles of nature, and the mystical journey of the soul towards union with the divine.<sup>22</sup>
- **Sufi** traditions within Kurdistan also incorporate dance, most notably the *Sema* (whirling dervish ceremony or similar trance-inducing rhythmic movements) performed by dervishes as a spiritual discipline aimed at achieving ecstatic states and divine communion.<sup>2</sup> The melodies accompanying these practices are often influenced by Sufi musical aesthetics and are designed to create a spiritually charged atmosphere.<sup>22</sup> Specific dances are also noted to be performed during Sufi *Sema* gatherings that coincide with events like harvest time or in response to natural disasters, suggesting a ritualistic engagement with life's cycles and crises.<sup>18</sup>

The integration of dance into the core religious and mystical practices of diverse Kurdish communities—including Yarsan, Ezidi, Alevi, and various Sufi orders—indicates that for these groups, dance is not a peripheral activity separate from spiritual life. Rather, it is understood and utilized as a vital medium for expressing devotion, achieving altered states of consciousness conducive to spiritual experience, and enacting and reinforcing their religious cosmology and worldview. This highlights a deep-rooted understanding of dance as a potent spiritual technology within these traditions.

## F. Role and Participation of Women

Women play an active, visible, and significant role in Kurdish dance, often participating alongside men in communal dances. This characteristic is frequently highlighted as a distinguishing feature of Kurdish dance culture when compared to some other Middle Eastern societies where gender segregation in public activities, including dance, may be more

pronounced.<sup>1</sup>

The act of men and women holding hands and dancing together in the same line or circle is often explicitly interpreted as a symbol of gender equality and partnership within Kurdish society.<sup>23</sup> It is noted that Kurdish culture and mindset have historically afforded a special place to women and their rights, and this is visibly reflected in the inclusive nature of their dances.<sup>23</sup> Women's participation in dance is also seen as an indicator of their social status and integration within the community.<sup>5</sup> They contribute significantly to the aesthetic beauty and vibrancy of the dance, particularly through their colorful and intricately embroidered traditional dresses, which add a dynamic visual element to the performance.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, women often accompany the dance with *Zîlgît* or *Tîlîlî*—a form of ululation or high-pitched vocal trill—which serves to express joy, enthusiasm, and encouragement, adding another layer to the auditory and emotional texture of the event.<sup>5</sup> In a broader sense, Kurdish dance is viewed by some commentators as an embodiment and expression of women's freedom, personality, and the respect accorded to them within the culture.<sup>63</sup> The prevalent co-gendered nature of Kurdish dance is thus a significant cultural marker that not only reflects but also actively reinforces ideals of gender equality and partnership, setting it apart from more rigidly segregated traditions that may exist elsewhere in the region.

## VII. Across the Kurdish Landscape: Regional Variations in Dance

Kurdish dance is not a monolithic entity but rather a rich mosaic of styles, rhythms, and forms that have evolved distinctively across the diverse geographical and cultural landscapes of Kurdistan. These regions, historically spanning parts of modern-day Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria, have each nurtured unique dance traditions influenced by local environments, historical experiences, and interactions with neighboring cultures.<sup>1</sup> The sheer number of catalogued Kurdish dances is extensive, with some accounts suggesting hundreds of variations, where even individual villages might possess their own signature dances, regional names, and stylistic nuances.<sup>13</sup> This inherent diversity makes a comprehensive, unified study of all Kurdish dance forms a formidable scholarly undertaking.<sup>10</sup> The extensive regional variation is a testament to Kurdistan's complex internal cultural geography, where local histories, specific social structures, and even micro-climatic conditions have fostered the development of distinct choreographic dialects within a broader, shared dance language. This points to a decentralized, grassroots evolution of dance traditions, deeply rooted in the specific life-worlds of different Kurdish communities.

### B. Specific Regional Styles and Characteristics

While a complete survey is beyond the scope of any single report, several key regional characteristics and styles can be highlighted:

- **Turkey (Northern Kurdistan/Bakur):**
  - In the Kurdish regions of Turkey, **Halay** is the most common and widespread dance type. However, this general term encompasses many different forms and

variations found in areas such as Diyarbakır (Amed), Van, and Hakkâri (Colemêrg). These dances are typically fast-paced and rhythmic, traditionally accompanied by the powerful sound of the Zurna and Dahol.<sup>5</sup>

- The dances from the **Diyarbakır and Serhad** regions are often characterized by particularly rapid rhythms and enthusiastic, forceful foot stamping. This style is thought to reflect the historically conflict-ridden nature of these areas, with the dances sometimes described as being full of epic sounds and movements intended to display strength or even intimidate adversaries.<sup>14</sup>
- Dances from the **Hakkari (Colemêrg)** region are noted for a unique characteristic: the dancers are said to "dance to the left," a directional emphasis that distinguishes their style.<sup>64</sup>

- **Iran (Eastern Kurdistan/Rojhilat):**

- Kurdish dances in Iran are often described as possessing a more elegant and aesthetic quality. The graceful movement of women's long, flowing traditional dresses is considered an important visual component of the dance in these regions.<sup>5</sup>
- In Rojhalat, the leader of the dance is specifically known as the **Sar Chopy**, and the handkerchief they wield is called a **Choppy**.<sup>24</sup> This region is also known for its handmade *Dilan* flags, crafted by women and inspired by Kurdish national colors, which are used in dances and celebrations.<sup>24</sup>
- The city of **Sanandaj (Sine)** is recognized for a rich repertoire of Halparke rhythms, including *Geryan*, *Pasht Pa* (Posht-pa), *Fattah Pashayi*, *Chepi*, *Zangi*, *Shalan*, and *Sejar*. These dances are characterized by specific meters and a typical progressive increase in tempo throughout a performance sequence.<sup>10</sup>
- The **Mukriyan** region, which includes cities like Mahabad, Saqqez, and Bokoan, is identified as the origin of the *Sêpêyî* dance<sup>3</sup> and is also known for its distinctive *Mûkryanî* style of traditional clothing.<sup>51</sup>
- Dances from the **Roha (Urfa) and Jazira (Cizre)** regions (areas with historical Kurdish populations that may overlap present-day borders of Turkey, Syria, and Iran) are said to express the joyful moments and rhythms of agricultural life and farming.<sup>14</sup>

- **Iraq (Southern Kurdistan/Bashur):**

- Dances in Iraqi Kurdistan can incorporate themes of war and peace, often featuring dramatic movements and gestures that narrate historical struggles, commemorate victories, or reflect the resilience of the people.<sup>5</sup>
- The **Sheikhani** dance is particularly common in the Kurmanji-speaking areas of Iraqi Kurdistan.<sup>13</sup>

- **Syria (Western Kurdistan/Rojava):**

- Kurdish dances in Syria are generally characterized by fast and energetic movements, playing a role in strengthening community identity and cultural expression.<sup>5</sup>



- **Dilan** is a common term used for dance styles in this region.<sup>14</sup>
- Compared to Iranian Kurdistan, the variety of distinct traditional dance forms in Rojava may be somewhat less extensive. However, influences from neighboring Arabic and Assyrian dance traditions are evident in some Rojava Kurdish dances. For example, the *Baagi* dance, performed by some Kurdish groups, is considered by some researchers to be originally Assyrian.<sup>14</sup>
- Specific dances such as *Delilu*, *Shour ve Martaal*, and *Tashi ve Biri* are learned and performed by dance enthusiasts and groups in Rojava.<sup>14</sup>

The distinct characteristics observed in these regional dance styles—such as the martial undertones in Diyarbakır/Serhad, the agricultural themes in Roha/Jazira, the elegance noted in Iranian Kurdish dances, or the dramatic narratives in Iraqi Kurdish forms—strongly suggest that Kurdish dance has evolved as a direct reflection of, and a dynamic response to, the specific historical experiences, dominant socio-economic activities, and unique cultural interactions of Kurdish communities situated in different geographical and political contexts. This demonstrates a clear and compelling correlation between the lived experiences of the people in various parts of Kurdistan and their resultant choreographic expressions.

## VIII. Kurdish Dance in the 21st Century: Evolution, Preservation, and the Diaspora

As Kurdish society navigates the complexities of the 21st century, its rich dance traditions continue to evolve, facing both challenges and new opportunities for expression and preservation. Modern interpretations, the vibrant cultural life of the Kurdish diaspora, and dedicated preservation initiatives all contribute to the ongoing story of Kurdish dance.

### A. Contemporary Adaptations and Modern Interpretations

Kurdish dances today are being dynamically reshaped by the interplay of traditional elements and modern influences.<sup>5</sup> This evolution is evident in several ways:

- **Stage Adaptations:** Professional and amateur dance groups frequently adapt traditional Kurdish dances for stage performances, sometimes incorporating theatrical elements or contemporary choreographic ideas while aiming to retain the essence of the original forms.<sup>5</sup>
- **Fusion with Other Dance Genres:** A notable development is the fusion of Kurdish dance concepts with other global dance genres, most strikingly with ballet.
  - **Pioneering Kurdish Ballerinas:** Princess Leyla Bedirxan, active in the 1920s and 1930s, stands as the first recognized Kurdish ballerina to achieve prominence on European stages. She was lauded for her unique "oriental style," which creatively blended Middle Eastern movement aesthetics with classical ballet techniques.<sup>9</sup>
  - **Contemporary Artists:** More recently, figures like Nazik Al-Ali, a ballerina from Qamishlo in Rojava (Syria), have gained international attention for using ballet as a medium to convey messages of peace and to challenge prevailing stereotypes about Kurdish women and culture.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Leyla Lois, a Kurdish-Celtic poet and

ballerina based in Australia, consciously incorporates ancestral Kurdish myths and themes into her choreographic and poetic work.<sup>9</sup>

- **Integration of Modern Music and Movement:** Modern musical arrangements and contemporary dance vocabularies are sometimes integrated with traditional dance figures and rhythms, leading to new hybrid forms that seek to bridge tradition and modernity.<sup>5</sup>

The emergence of Kurdish artists excelling in Western classical forms like ballet, and their conscious efforts to infuse these forms with Kurdish themes, narratives, or aesthetic perspectives, represents a dynamic and sophisticated process of cultural negotiation and artistic innovation. This trend not only challenges simplistic or monolithic stereotypes about Kurdish culture but also significantly expands the expressive range of Kurdish artistic identity on a global stage, demonstrating a capacity for creative adaptation rather than mere assimilation.

## B. The Kurdish Diaspora and Dance

The Kurdish diaspora, spread across numerous countries worldwide, plays a crucial role in the preservation, evolution, and international visibility of Kurdish dance.

- **Development of New Styles:** Within diaspora communities, new stylistic variations of Kurdish dance have emerged as traditional forms interact with and adapt to different cultural environments and the experiences of displacement and resettlement.<sup>5</sup>
- **Preservation of Heritage:** The active practice and transmission of folkloric dances in diaspora settings demonstrate the strong and enduring connection that Kurds abroad maintain with their cultural heritage. Dance becomes a vital link to the homeland and a means of maintaining cultural continuity across generations.<sup>9</sup>
- **Festivals and Community Events:**
  - **Mîhrîcana Govendên Kurdistan:** This annual festival, held in various cities in Germany, is a significant event for the Kurdish diaspora in Europe. It typically features parades, cultural displays, and, most importantly, dance competitions. The festival serves as a vibrant space for expressing cultural identity, fostering community cohesion, asserting cultural resistance, and empowering participants, particularly by engaging younger, second-generation Kurds in learning and performing traditional dances.<sup>9</sup>
  - **Newroz Celebrations:** Newroz is also celebrated with great enthusiasm in the diaspora, with cities like Cologne, Germany, hosting large gatherings. Traditional Kurdish dance is a central feature of these celebrations, which also serve as important platforms for political expression and cultural advocacy, allowing diaspora communities to voice their concerns and aspirations.<sup>65</sup>

For the Kurdish diaspora, traditional dance transcends mere cultural performance or entertainment. It becomes a vital mechanism for community building, enabling social cohesion and mutual support in new and often challenging environments. It serves as a critical tool for the intergenerational transmission of cultural heritage, ensuring that traditions are passed on to younger members born or raised outside Kurdistan. Furthermore, public dance

performances in the diaspora often function as a powerful assertion of Kurdish identity and presence in their new host societies, frequently intertwined with political advocacy for Kurdish rights and recognition on the international stage.<sup>5</sup>

## C. Initiatives for Cultural Preservation, Education, and Promotion

Recognizing the importance of Kurdish dance as a cornerstone of cultural heritage, various initiatives have been undertaken by communities, organizations, and individuals to preserve, educate about, and promote this art form.

- **Cultural Institutes:** Organizations such as the Kurdish Institute of Paris (established in 1983) and the more recently inaugurated Kurdish Institute of Lausanne (Switzerland) are dedicated to the broader mission of preserving and promoting Kurdish language, culture (which implicitly includes dance), and heritage. They serve as important intellectual and cultural hubs for Kurdish communities in the diaspora and for researchers interested in Kurdish studies.<sup>67</sup> The Kurdistan Center for Arts & Culture (KCAC) in Erbil also aims to preserve and promote Kurdistan's heritage through collection, digitization, education, artist support, and exhibitions.<sup>68</sup>
- **Dance Groups and Academies:** Professional and amateur Kurdish dance groups are active both within Kurdistan and in the diaspora, performing at cultural events and festivals. Some, like Anadolu Atesî (Fire of Anatolia), a world-class performance group based in Turkey, explicitly incorporate Kurdish dance elements and music into their repertoire. The director of Anadolu Atesî has expressed a desire to establish an arts academy, including dance instruction, in Erbil, Kurdistan Region, building on their existing network of 12 academies that already train around 2,000 students in dance, music, and other arts.<sup>64</sup>
- **Competitions and Festivals:** Folk dance competitions, such as the annual event held in Hakkari, Turkey, play a role in preserving and promoting local Kurdish culture. These competitions, often supervised by local authorities and cultural federations, encourage the continuation of traditional dance forms and aim to pass these traditions on to future generations.<sup>69</sup> Diaspora festivals like Mîhrîcana Govendên Kurdistan in Germany also feature dance prominently.<sup>9</sup>
- **Academic and Educational Programs:**
  - Efforts are being made to incorporate more formal instruction and theoretical understanding into dance education. For instance, dance instructor Mostafa Shaheen in Rojava emphasizes teaching the theoretical and philosophical background of Kurdish dance, alongside the physical practice, and highlights the pressing need for more academic resources and scholarly publications on the subject.<sup>14</sup>
  - Organizations like The Kurdish Project offer grants to support Kurdish cultural initiatives, which can include educational projects, films, and events related to dance and other cultural forms.<sup>70</sup>
  - Academic institutions are also contributing. For example, Northeastern Illinois University (NEIU) in the United States hosts a Summer Institute in Kurdish

Language and Culture, which includes a Kurdish Teacher Training Program designed to help educators integrate culture, content, and language into Kurdish instruction for various learners.<sup>71</sup>

- **Research and Documentation:** Scholars in fields like ethnomusicology and anthropology continue to conduct research on Kurdish music, rhythm, and dance, contributing to the documentation and understanding of these traditions.<sup>29</sup> However, there is a widely recognized need for more extensive and systematic academic research, documentation, and archiving of Kurdish dance forms, given their diversity and the challenges to their preservation.<sup>10</sup>

These multifaceted preservation efforts—ranging from grassroots community initiatives and diaspora-led festivals to the work of formal cultural institutions, academic programs, and performing arts groups—reflect a broad and deep recognition of the cultural importance of Kurdish dance. However, these endeavors often operate within challenging political, economic, and social contexts, requiring sustained commitment and resources to ensure the continued vitality of this rich heritage.

## **D. Challenges: Cultural Appropriation, Political Suppression, and Modernization**

Despite its resilience, Kurdish dance faces several significant challenges that threaten its authentic expression and transmission.

- **Cultural Appropriation:** A serious concern is the misattribution or recategorization of Kurdish dances by dominant state cultures. Turkey, in particular, has been cited for presenting traditional Kurdish dances, such as forms of Halay, as "Turkish folk dances".<sup>6</sup> This practice of cultural appropriation can lead to the erasure of the dances' true origins and historical memory, detaching them from the Kurdish cultural context in which they developed and hold meaning.<sup>6</sup>
- **Political Suppression:** Kurdish cultural expression, including dance, has historically been and continues to be subject to political suppression in several countries where Kurds reside.
  - In Syria, Newroz celebrations, which are central to Kurdish dance traditions, have faced violent oppression in the past, leading to casualties and mass arrests.<sup>11</sup> During the Ba'ath era, learning Kurdish dance was reportedly banned.<sup>14</sup>
  - In Iran, especially in East Kurdistan (Rojhilat), the state often intensifies pressure and imposes restrictions on Newroz festivities. This can include attempts to halt celebrations, censorship of Kurdish cultural expressions like songs and dances, and the harassment, summoning, or arrest of individuals for wearing traditional Kurdish attire or participating in Newroz events.<sup>60</sup>
  - In Turkey, there have been prolonged periods where the Kurdish language and various forms of Kurdish cultural expression, including the performance of Dengbêj singing (which has contextual links to dance music), were banned or severely persecuted.<sup>31</sup>

- **Impact of Modernization and Globalization:** The forces of modernization and globalization also pose challenges. There is a discernible trend where traditional Kurdish dress, an integral part of the dance aesthetic, is increasingly disappearing from daily life as younger generations adopt Western styles of clothing or the attire of their host countries in the diaspora.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, in the realm of music, some contemporary musicians who perform traditional songs may alter the original styles or melodic structures when incorporating modern instruments or production techniques, potentially diluting the authenticity of the tradition.<sup>32</sup>

The dual challenges of external suppression (including political bans and cultural appropriation) and internal pressures (stemming from modernization, globalization, and changing social norms) create a complex and often precarious environment for the preservation and authentic continuation of Kurdish dance. Paradoxically, resistance to suppression can sometimes serve to strengthen the dance's symbolic power and its importance as a marker of identity. However, navigating the impacts of modernization requires proactive and adaptive strategies to ensure that these rich traditions remain relevant and meaningful for younger generations, balancing authenticity with contemporary appeal.

## **E. Current Status: Urban vs. Rural Practices, Generational Shifts, and Youth Involvement**

Assessing the precise current status of Kurdish dance across different settings and demographics is complex, but available information points to a dynamic and evolving picture.

- **Urban vs. Rural Variations:** It is acknowledged that variations exist in the execution and perhaps the repertoire of Kurdish dances between village (rural) and city (urban) settings.<sup>10</sup> Rural areas may preserve older or more localized forms, while urban centers might see more fusion or staged adaptations.
- **Generational Shifts and Youth Involvement:** While modernization presents challenges, such as the declining everyday use of traditional dress<sup>34</sup>, there is also compelling evidence of significant and even growing interest and participation in Kurdish dance, particularly among youth. This is especially notable during major cultural festivals like Newroz. In East Kurdistan, for instance, the widespread use of social media has reportedly fueled unprecedented enthusiasm and large-scale participation in Newroz celebrations, inspiring more people, especially the youth, to engage actively in these cultural events.<sup>60</sup> The director of the renowned dance group Anadolu Atesî has also observed that Kurdish children possess a natural aptitude and brightness for dance, indicating a reservoir of talent and interest among the younger generation.<sup>64</sup>
- **Continued Practice:** Despite challenges, Kurdish dance continues to be practiced widely in various contexts, from family celebrations and weddings to large public festivals, both in Kurdistan and in diaspora communities.<sup>59</sup>

While a simple narrative of decline due to modernization would be inaccurate, the current status of Kurdish dance reflects a dynamic interplay between tradition and contemporary youth culture. Young Kurds are finding new ways to connect with, express, and reinterpret their heritage through dance, often amplified by modern communication technologies like

social media. This suggests a capacity for adaptation and renewal within the tradition, even as efforts continue to preserve its historical forms and meanings. However, more specific ethnographic research would be needed to fully delineate the nuances of urban versus rural practices and precise generational shifts in dance participation and preference across all regions of Kurdistan.

## **IX. Comparative Gazes: Kurdish Dance and Other Middle Eastern Traditions**

Kurdish dance, while possessing unique characteristics, also shares affinities with and distinctions from other folk dance traditions in the broader Middle Eastern region. These comparisons illuminate shared cultural substrata, historical interactions, and distinct paths of cultural development.

### **A. Comparison with Turkish Halay**

The relationship between Kurdish dance and Turkish Halay is particularly complex, marked by shared terminology and forms, as well as issues of cultural attribution.

- **Shared Terminology and Forms:** In the Kurmanji dialect of Kurdish, the term "Halay" is commonly used to refer to folk dance, with the indigenous Kurdish equivalent often cited as "Govend".<sup>12</sup> This shared nomenclature itself suggests deep historical and cultural connections or, at the very least, prolonged periods of mutual influence between Kurdish and Turkish communities, particularly in Anatolia. Both Kurdish Govend/Halay and Turkish Halay typically involve line or circle formations of dancers, often linked hand-in-hand or shoulder-to-shoulder, and are frequently accompanied by the powerful combination of the Zurna (oboe-like wind instrument) and Davul (bass drum).<sup>5</sup>
- **Cultural Appropriation Concerns:** A significant point of contention is the documented practice by Turkish state cultural institutions and media of recategorizing or presenting distinctly Kurdish dances as "Turkish Halay" or generic "Anatolian folk dances," without acknowledging their Kurdish origins or specific cultural context.<sup>6</sup> This is viewed by many Kurds and cultural researchers as a form of cultural appropriation that can contribute to the erasure of Kurdish cultural heritage and historical memory.<sup>6</sup>

The term "Halay" thus acts as both a linguistic and cultural bridge, indicating a shared Anatolian and West Asian musical-choreographic complex, and simultaneously a point of contention due to unresolved issues of cultural ownership and representation. The common instrumentation, particularly the Zurna and Davul, points to a broader regional soundscape for festive and communal dances that transcends modern ethnic or national boundaries.

### **B. Comparison with Arabic Dabke**

Kurdish dance, particularly forms like Govend and Halay, shares fundamental structural characteristics with the Arabic Dabke, a popular line and circle dance found throughout the Levant (Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan) and parts of Iraq.

- **Shared Formational and Movement Principles:** Both Kurdish line/circle dances and Dabke involve dancers linking hands or shoulders, moving in unison, and often featuring rhythmic foot-stomping and energetic steps. One source explicitly notes the similarities between Dabke and other regional dances such as Armenian Kochari, Assyrian Khigga, Iraqi Chobi (which itself has variations across different ethnic groups in Iraq), and Turkish Halay. These similarities include line formations, comparable step patterns, methods of hand or shoulder holding, shared rhythmic sensibilities, and the common practice of dancers at the ends of the line twirling handkerchiefs or strings of beads to lead or embellish the dance.<sup>75</sup> This suggests that Kurdish dance fits comfortably within this broader family of Middle Eastern line and circle dances.
- **Cultural Context:** While structural similarities exist, the specific rhythms, melodic content of the accompanying music, precise choreographic details, and the cultural meanings or narratives embedded in the dances can vary significantly between Kurdish traditions and different forms of Arabic Dabke. One general cultural comment, not specific to dance, suggests that the shared Islamic heritage of many Kurds and Arabs sets them apart culturally from historically Christian groups like Assyrians<sup>76</sup>, but this does not directly illuminate dance-specific comparisons.

Kurdish dance, therefore, shares fundamental structural characteristics (line/circle formation, linked dancers, energetic footwork) with Arabic Dabke and other Levantine/Mesopotamian folk dances. This indicates the presence of shared choreographic principles and a common "dance language" across the region, though each tradition has developed its own distinct "dialects" with unique rhythms, steps, musical accompaniment, and specific cultural significances.

## C. Comparison with Persian Folk Dance

Kurdish dance is recognized as one of the oldest and most vibrant local dance traditions within the broader Iranian cultural sphere.<sup>77</sup> The diverse population of Iran includes many ethnicities, each with its own distinct dance styles, and Kurds are a significant component of this mosaic.<sup>78</sup>

- **Formational Differences:** Kurdish dance is predominantly a collective, chain or line dance (categorized as such within Iranian dance typologies<sup>78</sup>), frequently performed by men and women together in the same formation.<sup>13</sup> This emphasis on communal, synchronized group movement distinguishes it from some other Iranian dance traditions, particularly the solo improvisational dances often associated with "classical Persian dance" (reconstructions of Safavid and Qajar court dances), which typically emphasize delicate, graceful movements of the hands and arms, and nuanced facial expressions.<sup>78</sup>
- **Musical and Rhythmic Contrasts:** The music for many energetic Kurdish dances, driven by the Zurna and Dahol, has a distinct character compared to the often more subtle or metrically complex rhythms found in some Persian art music or the specific 6/8 rhythm (reng) that is characteristic of much Iranian solo improvised dance. The Iranian state has, at times, promoted its own forms of "harmonious movements" (*harekat-e*

*mowzun*) intended to replace what it deems "evil-inciting" dance (*raqs*), and has even banned the popular 6/8 dance rhythm from public airways.<sup>66</sup> This political and cultural context surrounding dance expression can impact various traditions differently.

- **Costume Distinctions:** Traditional Kurdish costumes are highly diverse, regionally specific, and often characterized by vibrant colors, layered garments, and elaborate embroidery or adornments.<sup>13</sup> This contrasts with the typical costuming for classical Persian court dances, which often features rich silks, brocades, and flowing long skirts.<sup>78</sup>
- **Context and Social Function:** While both Kurdish and other Persian folk dances serve as expressions of cultural identity and are performed at celebrations, the strong emphasis on collective participation and the frequent co-gendered nature of Kurdish dance may reflect different social dynamics or historical functions compared to solo or gender-segregated dance forms found in other Iranian contexts.

While Kurdish dance is a significant and integral folk dance tradition within the broader Iranian cultural landscape, its strong emphasis on collective line and circle formations, its characteristic musical accompaniment, and its common practice of mixed-gender participation distinguish it from the solo, often improvisational, traditions more commonly associated with "Persian dance" in historical courtly settings or contemporary urban interpretations. The political climate in Iran also creates a complex environment that impacts the public expression and perception of different dance forms, including regional folk dances which can serve to reinforce distinct ethnic identities.<sup>66</sup>

## D. Comparison with Armenian and Assyrian Dances

Kurdish dance traditions exhibit notable similarities and historical connections with the folk dances of Armenian and Assyrian peoples, who have historically coexisted with Kurds in overlapping geographical regions, particularly in Upper Mesopotamia and the surrounding mountainous areas.

- **Armenian Dance:**
  - A specific handhold common in Kurmanji Kurdish dances—where hands are held straight down at the sides with the fingers of adjoining dancers interlocked, or a pinky finger hold—is noted as being familiar to folk dancers from Armenian traditions.<sup>13</sup> This shared choreographic detail points to either common origins or significant cultural exchange.
  - The Armenian *Kochari*, a well-known and energetic folk dance, is mentioned as being a similar line dance to forms like Arabic Dabke and, by extension, Kurdish Halay/Govend, sharing characteristics of formation and rhythmic drive.<sup>75</sup>
- **Assyrian Dance:**
  - The **Sheikhani** dance is a prime example of shared tradition, as it is performed by Kurds, Assyrians, and also by some Armenian communities.<sup>13</sup> This shared repertoire item strongly suggests deep cultural intermingling.
  - The Assyrian **Khigga** is another line dance that shares structural similarities with Kurdish and other regional folk dances.<sup>75</sup>
  - There is evidence of mutual influence. Some Kurdish dances performed in Rojava



(Western Kurdistan) are said to show Assyrian influence; for example, the *Baagi* dance is considered by some to be originally Assyrian but is also performed by Kurds.<sup>14</sup> Conversely, the Assyrian dance known as *Georgina* is described as being Kurdish-inspired, featuring gentle movements and music with a Turkish and Kurdish flavor.<sup>17</sup>

- Assyrian folk dances like *Bablaka* (pinky interlock, energetic arm/shoulder movements), *Heavy Khigga* (ardent knee bending), and *Sheikhani* (two-step movement, specific arm holds) share fundamental features with Kurdish dances, including line or circle formations, various handholds (pinky, hand-to-hand), and characteristic movements like knee bending and rhythmic footwork.<sup>17</sup>
- The Assyrian *Kochari* (which may be related to the Armenian dance of the same name) involves an arm-on-arm connection described as similar to the Kurdish *dabke* (a term sometimes used interchangeably with Halay/Govend or referring to a specific energetic style) and features a repetitive leg kick.<sup>17</sup>

The significant overlap in specific dance names (e.g., *Sheikhani*), characteristic handholds, general choreographic structures (line and circle dances), and even instances of direct borrowing or shared inspiration between Kurdish, Armenian, and Assyrian dance traditions points to a profound and long-standing history of cultural exchange, mutual influence, and shared heritage among these historically coexisting peoples. These communities have inhabited contiguous or overlapping territories for centuries, making such cultural borrowing and blending not only inevitable but also a source of enrichment for their respective traditions. This shared choreographic heritage underscores the interconnectedness of cultures in the region.

## **X. Conclusion: The Unbroken Circle – The Enduring Spirit of Kurdish Dance**

### **A. Recapitulation of Multifaceted Importance**

Kurdish dance, in its myriad forms and profound cultural resonance, stands as a vital and dynamic art form, deeply woven into the intricate fabric of Kurdish society, history, and identity. It is far more than mere choreographed movement; it is a fundamental communal expression that articulates the full spectrum of Kurdish life—its joys and sorrows, its resilience in the face of adversity, and its unwavering spirit of unity. Throughout this exploration, the evidence consistently underscores its integral role in sacred rituals and secular celebrations, most notably the vibrant festivities of Newroz. Furthermore, Kurdish dance has served as a powerful medium for storytelling, preserving historical narratives and cultural knowledge in the absence of, or alongside, written records. Crucially, it has endured as a potent symbol of cultural perseverance and, in many contexts, active resistance against forces that have sought to suppress Kurdish identity.

### **B. The Continuing Role in Expressing Kurdish Heritage and Identity**

Despite the persistent challenges posed by political suppression in various regions, the pressures of cultural appropriation, and the transformative impacts of modernization, Kurdish dance continues to thrive as a vibrant and evolving tradition. The dedicated efforts in preservation, education, and creative adaptation undertaken by Kurdish communities themselves, by diaspora groups around the world, and by supportive cultural organizations bear testament to the enduring value and profound significance that this art form holds for the Kurdish people.

Kurdish dance remains a powerful, living testament to the unbroken spirit and rich cultural legacy of the Kurds. It functions as an unbroken circle, continuously linking past, present, and future generations through shared movement, music, and meaning. In its myriad forms and profound symbolism, Kurdish dance functions as a dynamic cultural constitution for the Kurdish people—unwritten yet deeply understood, collectively enacted, and fiercely preserved. It is through this embodied heritage that Kurdish identity, history, and belonging are continuously negotiated, reaffirmed, and celebrated in an ever-changing world. The rhythmic pulse of the Dahol and the soaring melody of the Zurna continue to call Kurds to join the dance, to reaffirm their connections to one another and to their enduring heritage, ensuring that this vibrant tradition will continue to spin its stories and express the soul of a people for generations to come.

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