

An Ethnographic Exploration of Kurdish Male Traditions

1. Introduction: Defining the Scope of Kurdish Male Traditions

Overview of Kurdish Male Traditions

Kurdish male traditions represent a multifaceted and dynamic system of customs, roles, and responsibilities that shape a man's identity and his position within Kurdish society. These traditions are deeply rooted in a rich history and are influenced by a confluence of social, economic, and political factors.¹ They are not monolithic or static; rather, they exhibit variations across regions and have evolved significantly in response to internal societal shifts, modernization, and persistent political conflict.¹ This report aims to provide a comprehensive ethnographic account of these traditions, examining their enduring characteristics and their transformations across various domains of Kurdish life, from social organization and familial duties to cultural expressions and rites of passage.

Cultural and Geographical Context of Kurdistan

The Kurdish people constitute one of the largest ethnic groups in the world without an independent, universally recognized state.⁴ Their ancestral homeland, known as Kurdistan, is geographically divided, primarily spanning across southeastern Turkey (Bakur), northern Iraq (Başûr), western Iran (Rojhilat), and northern Syria (Rojava).⁵ This enduring condition of statelessness and the division of their territory by modern nation-state borders have profoundly influenced the development and persistence of Kurdish culture and its associated traditions, including those specifically pertaining to men.³ Despite these divisions and the diverse political environments they entail, a strong sense of shared Kurdish identity and cultural heritage endures, often finding expression and reinforcement through these very traditions.³

The political reality of statelessness has been a powerful force in shaping male traditions among the Kurds. In the face of pressures toward assimilation from the states in which they reside, many traditions have taken on heightened significance as mechanisms for cultural preservation and identity maintenance.³ For instance, the emphasis on having numerous children has been articulated by some Kurdish men as a conscious strategy "to ensure that some Kurds survive the violence to carry on the culture".¹ Similarly, oral traditions, particularly the role of the *Dengbêj* (bards) in transmitting history, epics, and cultural narratives, become exceptionally vital when written forms of the Kurdish language and cultural expression face restrictions or outright bans.⁴ Consequently, male traditions that underscore cultural

continuity, the integrity of lineage, and collective solidarity—such as robust tribal structures or the esteemed role of the *Dengbêj*—can be understood not merely as customs but as adaptive responses and acts of cultural survival. The responsibility for this preservation has often fallen heavily upon men, who traditionally occupy leadership and public roles within these societal frameworks.

2. Foundations of Male Identity: Social Structure and Kinship

Patrilineal Descent Systems

The bedrock of Kurdish social organization is the patrilineal descent system, wherein lineage, inheritance, and social identity are traced primarily through the male line.¹ A lineage typically comprises several generations of a single man's descendants through his male offspring.

Multiple such lineages coalesce to form a clan, and a collection of clans constitutes a tribe.¹ This hierarchical structure based on male ancestry dictates not only social organization and status but also patterns of alliance, mutual obligation, and the transmission of property. The male head of the family is the central figure within this lineage structure, and the household itself is conceptualized as being assembled around him.² This patrilineal framework inherently emphasizes mutual support, collective defense, and shared identity among male kin, particularly those residing within the same ancestral village or territory.²

The Man's Place in Traditional Kinship Structures

A Kurdish man's identity is inextricably linked to his patrilineal kin group. This affiliation profoundly influences his social standing, his rights and responsibilities, and his access to communal resources and support systems.¹ A cornerstone of this system is tribal endogamy, with a strong societal preference for marriage to a father's brother's daughter (FBD), a practice known as patrilateral parallel-cousin marriage.¹ This marital pattern serves multiple functions: it reinforces the bonds within the patrilineage, ensures that property and resources remain within the family unit, and strengthens both patriarchal authority and tribal solidarity.² While patrilineal structures provide a clear framework for alliance and mutual support, particularly against external groups or in times of conflict such as blood feuds², they also delineate internal segments. For example, a man and his brothers and sons form a distinct unit that might find itself in opposition to his father's brother and his sons on certain matters, even as they unite against more distantly related kin or other tribes.²

The powerful emphasis on patrilineal kinship and lineage endogamy serves as a critical mechanism for social cohesion, the management of resources, and collective security within Kurdish society.¹ This system provides men with a strong support network and clearly defined lines of alliance, which are essential for navigating social life and ensuring individual and group survival. However, this same structure, with its intense focus on close agnatic ties and the internal control of property, can also become a source of internal friction and disputes. It

has been observed that while FBD marriage "keeps the family together," it can concurrently "weaken the ties between lineages, thus increasing the likelihood of conflict".¹ Conflicts, especially those concerning the division of land among brothers, are not uncommon, though they are typically managed through established mechanisms such as mediation by village elders.⁷ This suggests that a crucial aspect of a Kurdish man's social acumen involves skillfully navigating the complex politics within his own lineage, as much as managing relations with external tribal entities. The patrilineal system, therefore, presents a duality for Kurdish men: it is both a source of immense strength and a potential arena for internal contestation.

3. The Kurdish Man in the Family and Community

Familial Roles: Head of Household, Provider, Protector

Within the traditional Kurdish family structure, men typically assume the role of head of household, known as *malxî*.² This position entails significant responsibilities, including governing familial affairs, providing economic support, and ensuring the protection of family members.⁸ Men are traditionally tasked with the primary agricultural duties and are the family's main interface with the broader socio-economic and political world.¹ The expectation for men to be the primary providers is deeply embedded in the cultural psyche; an inability to fulfill this role can lead to feelings of inadequacy or a diminished sense of self-worth.¹⁰ Furthermore, men are culturally designated as the protectors of the family unit and, significantly, of its honor, or *namus*.⁹

Traditional Division of Labor

A well-defined division of labor based on gender has historically characterized Kurdish society. Men's responsibilities predominantly lie in tasks performed outside the immediate domestic sphere. These include plowing the fields, sowing crops, harvesting, transporting agricultural surplus to markets for sale or trade, and making necessary purchases for the household.¹ In pastoral communities, men are primarily responsible for herding and managing livestock, although it is common for a village to collectively employ a shepherd for its flocks.¹ The advent of modernization and increased integration into cash economies has seen a shift, with many Kurdish men engaging in wage labor, particularly in urban centers in sectors such as construction and services. Some men adopt a pattern of seasonal migration, working in urban areas for periods but returning to their villages for crucial agricultural activities like cultivation and harvesting.²

Community Leadership: The Role of the Agha

Historically, the *agha*, a term denoting a lineage or clan leader, held a position of considerable influence within the village community.¹ The *agha*'s responsibilities often included the maintenance of a village guest house, which served as lodging for visitors and a communal meeting place for the men of the village to discuss local events and matters of importance.¹ In return for providing this service and fulfilling other leadership duties, the *agha* traditionally

received a tribute from the villagers, often calculated as a percentage (e.g., approximately 10 percent) of their agricultural harvest.¹ However, the societal role and influence of the *agha*, along with the prevalence of traditional village guest houses, have seen a decline. This shift is partly attributed to leaders relocating to larger towns and changes in land tenure systems. In some instances, *aghas* were able to register communal lands in their own names through their contacts with government authorities, effectively transforming these shared resources into private property and altering their relationship with the villagers.¹ Furthermore, tribal leaders and landlords historically had the authority to command *zebari*, a form of forced labor, from the men in their domain, indicating a clear hierarchical power structure that has also been subject to change over time.²

Social Spaces: The Significance of Guest Houses (*Mêvanxane/Divanxane*) and Tea Houses

The village guest house, known as *mêvanxane* or *divanxane*, was traditionally a pivotal institution in Kurdish male social life.¹ Maintained by the *agha* or a prominent local figure, it served as a central hub where men gathered to socialize, discuss recent events, resolve disputes, and entertain visitors.¹ These spaces were crucial for reinforcing communal bonds, exchanging information, and conducting the informal political life of the village.¹² The decline of the traditional *agha*-led guest house system marks a significant transformation in the loci of male social power and interaction.¹ The *agha*'s role in maintaining the guest house was intrinsically linked to his leadership status and the tribute he received, reflecting a somewhat centralized and hierarchical social structure where he was a key figure of authority and patronage. As these guest houses have become less common, partly due to *aghas* moving to urban centers or their power diminishing through processes like land privatization, local tea houses have increasingly emerged as the primary venues for male socialization.¹ This transition from the formal, *agha*-centric guest house to the more accessible tea house may signify a shift towards more decentralized, and perhaps more egalitarian, forms of social interaction among men. While tea houses remain predominantly male spaces, they may foster different dynamics of information flow, opinion-making, and social networking compared to the traditional guest house. This evolution in social venues likely reflects broader socio-economic changes affecting rural Kurdish communities, including shifts in land tenure, leadership structures, and the increasing influence of cash economies and urban lifestyles. It could subtly indicate a democratization of male social space, even as other traditional hierarchies may persist.

4. Transitions and Milestones: Rites of Passage for Kurdish Males

Rites of passage are crucial markers in the life of a Kurdish male, signifying his progression through different stages of social and cultural maturity. These transitions are often accompanied by specific rituals and communal acknowledgments.

Childhood Rituals: Naming, Early Upbringing

The early years of a Kurdish boy's life are imbued with cultural significance. The choice of a name, for instance, can reflect familial aspirations or cultural values, with a preference sometimes shown for names that carry nationalistic, strong, or religiously significant connotations, such as Bakr, Sheikh, or Muhammad.¹⁴ The oral traditions of the community begin to shape the child's worldview from an early age; mothers' lullabies, for example, may weave in themes of connection to the homeland, resilience in the face of adversity, or stories of paternal endeavor.¹⁴ The birth of any child is a cause for celebration, and in many Kurdish communities, Islamic traditions such as the recitation of the *adhan* (call to prayer) into the newborn's ear are observed.¹⁴

Circumcision (*Khatne / Sunnet*)

Circumcision, known as *khatne* or *sunnet*, stands as a pivotal rite of passage for Kurdish boys, marking an important step towards manhood and full integration into the religious and cultural community.¹⁴ This event is often accompanied by celebrations, which can range from modest family gatherings with the distribution of sweets and the singing of nationalistic or traditional songs, to more elaborate affairs.¹⁴

A particularly notable tradition associated with circumcision, documented among some Syrian Kurdish communities, involves the role of the *Kîv* (also referred to as *Krem* or *Kirîf*).¹⁵ The family of the boy undergoing circumcision selects an honored individual, the *Kîv*, in whose lap the child is held during the procedure. This act is not merely ceremonial; it is intended to forge a deep and lasting bond of fictive kinship between the two families. This newly established relationship is considered so profound that it often carries an incest taboo, meaning the children of the boy's family and the *Kîv*'s family are thereafter considered akin to siblings and are prohibited from marrying each other.¹⁵ The *Kîv* often bestows gifts or provides financial assistance to the boy's family, signifying a commitment to a supportive and enduring relationship.¹⁵ This *Kîv* tradition, therefore, functions as a unique social contract that extends a man's network of obligations, support, and alliance beyond his immediate patrilineal kin. In a society heavily structured by blood ties¹, the *Kîv* system provides a formal mechanism for integrating non-kin into a deeply personal and binding relationship, potentially offering an additional layer of social capital and mutual support throughout the boy's life.

Educational Pathways: Traditional and Religious Learning

Traditional educational pathways for Kurdish boys often commenced with religious instruction. Around the age of six, it was common for boys to be sent to a *Mullah* (religious teacher) or a *Sheikh* for foundational learning in religious principles and basic literacy.¹⁴ This initial schooling typically occurred in settings where boys and girls were educated separately. The successful completion of Quranic studies could also be an occasion for celebration within the family and community, underscoring the value placed on religious knowledge.¹⁴ This early education played a crucial role in instilling religious values, cultural norms, and fundamental

literacy, forming an integral part of a young man's upbringing and his preparation for adult responsibilities.

Markers of Adulthood Beyond Marriage

While marriage is widely recognized as a primary formal transition to adulthood for both young men and women in Kurdish society⁷, the journey to mature manhood is also shaped by a range of other experiences and the demonstration of certain capabilities. Historically, acquiring proficiency in the use of weapons and the readiness to participate in the defense of one's family and tribe would have been indispensable aspects of becoming a man. The memoir referenced in⁶², which states "carrying a gun is not the way to a better life," is presented within the specific context of armed conflict and implicitly acknowledges the prevalence and significance of firearms in certain historical and social settings. More broadly, the ongoing affirmation of manhood is contingent upon a man's ability to fulfill his role as a provider for his family, to exhibit courage in the face of challenges, and to meticulously uphold the family's honor (*namus*).⁸ While some ethnographic accounts of various global cultures detail elaborate and distinct coming-of-age rituals for adolescent males¹⁶, specific, formalized Kurdish male initiation ceremonies—separate from circumcision and marriage—are not extensively detailed in the available research beyond the general societal expectation of learning and internalizing adult responsibilities and codes of conduct. General discussions of adolescence in some contexts describe it as a period of profound transition and identity formation, but without pinpointing unique Kurdish rituals for this phase.¹⁹

5. Marriage: A Cornerstone of Kurdish Male Life

Marriage is a central institution in Kurdish society, marking a significant transition to adulthood for men and profoundly impacting their social status, responsibilities, and alliances.¹

Arrangement and Preferred Unions

Kurdish marriages are traditionally arranged by the families of the prospective bride and groom.¹ The process often commences with discussions and negotiations initiated by the women of the respective families. Once a preliminary understanding is reached, the men typically step in to finalize the arrangements, culminating in a formal marriage settlement.¹ A strong cultural preference, historically amounting to a prescriptive norm, is for a man to marry his father's brother's daughter (FBD). This patrilineal parallel-cousin is considered the ideal spouse, and the man is often said to have "first rights" to her hand in marriage.¹ This form of endogamous marriage serves critical social and economic functions: it consolidates property and resources within the patrilineage, prevents the fragmentation of family wealth, and reinforces patriarchal authority and tribal solidarity.² If marriage to an FBD is not feasible, unions with other cousins or more distant patrilineal kin are the next preferred options.¹ Conversely, cross-cousin marriages (unions between the children of siblings of the opposite

sex) are reported to be rarely practiced.⁷

In some parts of Kurdistan, such as Iraqi Kurdistan, specific protocols govern the initiation of marriage discussions. When a young man is deemed of marriageable age, a member of his family, often his mother or another senior female relative, will broach the subject of marriage with him. If the young man has a particular girl in mind, his family will approach the girl's mother. For the marriage to proceed, consent must be obtained not only from the girl herself and her father, but also from her brothers, her paternal uncle, and significantly, her paternal male cousin (father's brother's son), who, according to custom, holds a prior claim or right to marry her.²⁰

The Role of Men in Marriage Negotiations and Bride-Wealth (*Naxt*)

Men play a decisive role in the final stages of marriage negotiations, particularly in determining the terms of the marriage settlement. This agreement explicitly states the amount and nature of the bride-wealth, known as *naxt* or *qelen*, which the groom's family is obligated to provide to the bride's family.¹ The value of the bride-wealth can vary considerably, influenced by the wealth, social standing, and reputation of the groom's family. However, it is customary for the bride-wealth to be substantially lower if the marriage is an FBD union, further incentivizing such lineage-endogamous marriages.⁷ The groom and his family are typically responsible for covering all expenses related to the wedding, including the provision of new clothing for the bride, household furniture, and the costs of the celebratory events.²⁰ A portion of the bride-wealth paid may be allocated to the bride's family to assist them in preparing her trousseau (*ceyiz*) and acquiring essential household items.²⁰

An alternative to bride-wealth payments exists in the form of direct exchange marriages, known as *pê-guhurk*.² The most common form of this is sister exchange, where two families simultaneously arrange marriages between a son from one family and a daughter from the other, and vice versa. Such arrangements effectively eliminate the need for bride-wealth transfer and highlight the strategic dimension of marriage in forging and solidifying alliances between families.²

The institution of marriage for Kurdish men extends beyond personal and social fulfillment; it represents a critical strategic and economic undertaking deeply interwoven with lineage continuity, property management, and the affirmation of social status. The strong preference for FBD marriage is explicitly tied to the objectives of "keep[ing] property in the family" and reinforcing "patriarchal and tribal solidarity"², underscoring a potent economic and political rationale. The system of bride-wealth itself constitutes a significant financial commitment for the groom and his family, and its reduction in FBD marriages further encourages the retention of resources within the lineage.⁷ The practice of direct exchange marriages, such as sister exchange, which bypasses bride-wealth entirely, suggests that marriage can function as a direct transaction of social capital to create or cement inter-familial alliances without a net financial outflow for either party.² Furthermore, while polygyny is rare, its association with "high economic and political status"² implies that acquiring multiple wives can be a demonstration of wealth and power, and potentially a strategy to expand alliances and

household labor. Thus, for a Kurdish man, the process of selecting a spouse and navigating the complexities of marriage involves intricate calculations related to kinship obligations, economic capacity, and strategic social positioning. It is a pivotal life event that concerns not only the establishment of a new family unit but also the consolidation of lineage resources, the cultivation of alliances, and the affirmation or enhancement of his and his family's standing within the wider community.

Polygyny: Prevalence and Socio-Economic Context

While Islamic tradition permits a man to have up to four wives concurrently, provided he can support them all equally and treat them justly, the practice of polygyny among Kurds is statistically uncommon.¹ When it does occur, it is often associated with men who possess considerable economic resources and high political or social status.² The financial burden of maintaining multiple households and wives means that few men can afford even two wives.¹ One of the common socially accepted grounds for a man taking a second wife, or for divorce, is a childless first marriage.¹ Patriarchal ideology may justify polygynous marriages by emphasizing Islamic prescriptions and asserting that social harmony can develop between co-wives who share household responsibilities and childcare, though in reality, polygyny can introduce complexities into the social relations within extended households.⁷

Wedding Ceremonies: Men's Participation and Specific Customs

Kurdish wedding ceremonies are typically vibrant and communal affairs, often extending over several days. In traditional peasant communities, the entire village of the groom is usually involved in the celebrations and preparations.⁷ In regions like Iraqi Kurdistan, wedding festivities commonly last for three days and can sometimes extend to seven.²⁰

Men play active and specific roles in these ceremonies. A notable custom involves the groom, or one of his brothers, ascending to the roof of the groom's house upon the bride's arrival and throwing a plate laden with sweets and money down to the assembled guests, symbolizing abundance and celebration.²⁰ As the bride departs from her parental home, her eldest brother traditionally places a belt around her waist, an act signifying his ongoing support and protection.²⁰ In some Jordanian Kurdish communities, a playful custom involves a group of young men attempting to "kidnap" the groom on the wedding night; the bride is then expected to plead for his release, adding a theatrical element to the festivities.¹⁴

Music and dance are integral to Kurdish weddings, and men participate enthusiastically in traditional group dances such as the *Govend* or *Halparkê* (also known as *Dîlan* or *Çopî*), often dancing in lines or circles with women.¹⁴ A period of social adjustment follows the wedding; traditionally, a newly married couple would avoid being in the same room as the groom's father for approximately a week, even if they were residing in the same household. Only after this customary period of prohibition would the bride typically visit her parents to receive their blessings.⁷

6. Expressions of Manhood: Cultural Traditions

Kurdish male identity finds vibrant expression through a rich array of cultural traditions, encompassing oral literature, distinctive attire, communal celebrations, and recreational pursuits. These traditions serve not only as markers of cultural heritage but also as arenas for the performance and affirmation of manhood.

6.1. The Power of the Word: Oral Traditions

Oral traditions hold a place of profound importance in Kurdish culture, serving as the primary vehicle for the transmission of history, social memory, ethical values, and artistic expression, particularly in contexts where written forms of the Kurdish language have faced suppression.

Dengbêj (Bards): Men as Keepers of History and Culture

The *Dengbêj* are revered figures in Kurdish society, traditional folk singers, storytellers, and bards, who are predominantly, though not exclusively, male.⁴ The term *dengbêj* itself translates literally as "voice-sing" or "voice-teller," highlighting the centrality of vocal performance in their art.⁴ They are the custodians of an immense oral archive, responsible for preserving and disseminating Kurdish history, cultural narratives, epic poems, and the collective memory of the Kurdish people.⁶ Their performances, often delivered *a cappella* without instrumental accompaniment, are characterized by the recitation of lengthy epic poems, known as *Lawj* or *Lawik*, which recount tales of love, heroism, warfare, significant historical events, and social realities.³ Alongside these epics, *Dengbêj* are also renowned for their poignant mourning songs, or *Stran*, which articulate communal grief and lamentation.⁴ The path to becoming a *Dengbêj* traditionally involved a long apprenticeship under an established master, during which the novice would commit to memory hundreds of intricate tales, poems, and melodies.⁶ The most accomplished *Dengbêj* were not merely rote reciters; they possessed the improvisational skill to adapt existing material and even create new stories, songs, and stylistic variations, thereby enriching the tradition.⁶ Historically, *Dengbêj* were highly sought after for public gatherings, community events, and especially weddings, where their performances would entertain guests and solemnize the occasion.⁶ Some were even maintained by tribal chieftains or emirs, underscoring their esteemed status within the community.⁶ The tradition of the *Dengbêj* has proven exceptionally resilient and vital for cultural survival, particularly during periods when the Kurdish written language was proscribed or restricted; their oral performances ensured the continuity of Kurdish narratives and identity.⁶

The role of the *Dengbêj* transcends that of a mere entertainer; they function as organic intellectuals and crucial custodians of a counter-narrative to state-sanctioned histories. This function is particularly vital for a stateless people whose historical accounts might otherwise be marginalized or erased.⁶ By preserving and propagating traditions, myths, and historical events through oral performance, *Dengbêj* act as "living libraries" and the "archival memory of the Kurdish nation".⁶ Their repertoire, encompassing tales of "love and war," "heroic deeds," "rebellions," and contemporary "social realities" ³, often includes narratives of resistance and distinctly Kurdish perspectives on historical events that may diverge significantly from official

state historiographies. The observation that their songs "sometimes also had political connotations" ⁶ further underscores their societal role. As predominantly male figures occupying the public sphere of oral performance, *Dengbêj* are not just artists but also educators, social commentators, and, in a sense, political actors. They maintain and propagate a Kurdish worldview and historical consciousness, ensuring intergenerational cultural and political continuity, making their performances acts of cultural sovereignty.

Epic Poems (*Lawj / Lawik*) and Storytelling (*Çîrokbêj*)

Epic poems, known as *Lawj* or *Lawik*, form a central pillar of Kurdish oral literature. These lengthy narrative poems typically recount heroic adventures, tales of profound love, significant battles, and pivotal moments in Kurdish history or folklore.³ One of the most celebrated works in Kurdish literature, *Mem û Zîn*, composed by the 17th-century poet Ehmedê Xanî, exemplifies this tradition. It exists in both a sophisticated written form and as an oral epic, often titled *Memê Alan* in its folkloric renditions.⁴ This epic, which explores themes of tragic love, heroism, and nascent Kurdish national consciousness, features male protagonists whose actions and dilemmas are central to the narrative. Beyond the *Dengbêj*, other figures such as storytellers (*çîrokbêj*) and minstrels (*stranbêj*), who are also often male, contribute to the richness and diversity of Kurdish oral heritage, ensuring that stories and songs continue to resonate within the community.²⁷

6.2. Threads of Identity: Traditional Male Attire

Traditional Kurdish clothing for men, known collectively as *Cil û bergên kurdî*, is a visually striking and culturally significant expression of identity.²⁹ While the specific styles, fabrics, and embellishments exhibit considerable diversity across the various regions and tribes of Kurdistan, these garments consistently serve as powerful symbols of Kurdish heritage, cultural pride, and belonging.²⁹ Traditional attire is particularly prominent during important cultural festivals, such as Newroz (the Kurdish New Year), weddings, and other communal celebrations.³⁰

Key Garments

Several distinct styles and garments characterize Kurdish male traditional dress:

- **Şal û Şapik:** This ensemble is particularly characteristic of Central Kurdistan, including areas in Iraqi Kurdistan (Başûr) and southeastern Turkey (Bakur) such as Hakkari province and the Urmia Plain in Iran (Rojhilat).²⁹ It typically consists of a fitted, often collarless, jacket (*şapik*) that is open to the waist and tucked into voluminous trousers (*şal*) that are gathered at the waist and flare towards the ankle. The suit is frequently adorned with intricate embroidery, and the colors can range from striped patterns in brown and cream hues to solid, self-colored stripes.³⁰ A white shirt with distinctive funnel-shaped sleeves is commonly worn underneath, with the long sleeves often artfully wound around the outside of the jacket arms. A wide waist sash, known as a *Peshtwen*, is an essential component, historically large but now sometimes more modest, tied around the waist in elaborate ways and traditionally used for carrying small

personal items.²⁹ This style is also known by regional names such as *Badinani*, *Hakkari*, or *Rewanduzi* attire.³⁰

- **Kortek û Şalvar:** This style is prevalent in Southern Kurdistan (Başûr), parts of Rojhilat, and is considered by some to be a standard Kurdish costume, often associated with the Peshmerga (Kurdish fighters).³⁰ It features baggy trousers, called *şalvar* or *shrawal*, which are gathered at the waist and taper towards the ankles.²⁰ These are paired with a jacket (*kortek*) that is similar in cut to the Central Kurdish *şapik* but often lacks the elaborate embroidery. Suits in this style are typically made in solid colors or with subtle pinstripes.³⁰ A waist sash is also a standard part of this ensemble. Unlike some more traditional styles that rely on specific handwoven fabrics, *Kortek û Şalvar* can be made from a variety of materials, including fabrics commonly used in Western clothing, allowing for a broader range of colors.³²
- **Northern Kurdish Attire:** The traditional clothing of men in Northern Kurdistan (Bakur) tends to be more tight-fitting compared to other regional styles. It often features trousers that are snug on the lower legs but have a loose, baggy crotch extending to knee length. Waistcoats worn over shirts and neck scarves are common elements. This style bears some resemblance to rural Turkish attire and traditional Balkan costumes.³⁰
- **Peshtwen (Belt/Sash):** A long, wide cloth belt or sash, wrapped around the waist, is an iconic and nearly ubiquitous element of most traditional Kurdish men's outfits.²⁹ The *Peshtwen* (or *pêştênk*, *shutk*) serves both practical and symbolic functions, providing a sense of formality and tradition to the attire. The length and material of the waist shawl can sometimes signify the wearer's social status, with elders, tribal leaders, or important personalities often wearing longer or more elaborate ones.³⁴ These sashes can be made from various fabrics, including commercially produced Fastoni fabric³³, or traditionally woven materials. The *Shal* itself, referring to a specific type of high-quality fabric often made from goat hair (Marz hair), is particularly valued for making these garments. Regional variations in *Shal* production, such as those from Ranya, Bahdinan (especially Zakho), and Hawraman, are renowned for their durability and are typically reserved for special occasions.³⁵
- **Headwear: Cemedanî (Keffiyeh), Klaw, Turban:** Headwear is an important component of traditional Kurdish male dress, with a customary belief that a man's head should not be left bare.³⁴
 - The *Cemedanî* or *Jamadani*, the Kurdish version of the Keffiyeh, is a commonly worn headscarf.³² Historically, some Kurdish communities adopted the Keffiyeh and the *agal* (a cord used to secure it) following contact with Arab cultures, sometimes replacing more traditional forms of turbans.³⁷ The *Cemedanî* is available in various colors and patterns, and can be tied in numerous distinct styles.³⁷
 - The *Klaw* is a type of cap or skullcap that is also widely worn, either on its own or, more commonly, as a base underneath a turban.²⁹
 - Turbans are typically fashioned from a long piece of cloth, often a checkered

scarf, skillfully coiled around a *Klaw*. The style, size, and color of the turban can vary significantly by tribe and region. Favored colors for turban scarves include black, gray, and white, although specific groups have distinct preferences; for example, members of the Barzani tribe and Yezidi men often wear turbans made from red and white checkered scarves.³⁰ In areas such as Mahabad (Rojhilat), Sulaymaniyah, and Erbil (Başûr), turbans are the customary head covering for men.³² It is noted that the tradition of regularly wearing the *Klaw* and *Jamana* (a term likely referring to the *Cemedanî* or a similar head covering) has somewhat diminished in everyday life in modern times, though they remain significant for cultural events.³⁶

Symbolism

Kurdish traditional clothing is laden with symbolism, serving as a potent visual marker of Kurdish identity, cultural pride, regional affiliation, and sometimes even political stance.²⁹ Specific colors, patterns, and styles of dress can carry particular meanings or be associated with certain tribes, regions, or social statuses.³⁰ For instance, the *Shal* fabric and the garments made from it hold considerable folkloric value and are deeply embedded in cultural heritage.³⁵

The act of wearing traditional Kurdish male attire, especially in regions where Kurdish culture and identity have faced suppression, such as Bakur (Turkey) and Rojhilat (Iran), transcends mere custom or aesthetic preference. It becomes a powerful political statement and a visible form of non-violent resistance.³ In contexts where assimilationist policies have sought to erase Kurdish cultural markers, including traditional dress which was at times deemed contraband³, the deliberate choice to don garments like the *Şal û Şapik* or specific headwear like the *Camane* (a headscarf, likely a regional term for a *Cemedanî* or similar style, particularly noted in Rojhilat during Newroz³⁹) is transformed into a public assertion of Kurdishness. It is an act of defiance against cultural erasure and a symbol of resilience and political aspiration. This is especially true during national celebrations like Newroz, which themselves carry profound political connotations for the Kurdish people.

Table 1: Traditional Kurdish Male Attire – Regional Variations and Symbolism

Garment/Item	Description	Primary Materials	Region(s) Prevalent	Key Symbolism/Notes
<i>Şal û Şapik</i>	Fitted, collarless jacket open to waist, tucked into voluminous trousers flared at ankle; often embroidered.	Wool, cotton, traditional weaves	Central Kurdistan (Başûr/Iraqi Kurdistan, Bakur/SE Turkey - Hakkari), Rojhilat (Urmia Plain). Also <i>Badinani</i> , <i>Hakkari</i> , <i>Rewanduzi</i> styles.	Identity marker, formality, regional pride. Funnel sleeves on shirt often wound around jacket arms. ³⁰

			³⁰	
<i>Kortek û Şalvar</i>	Baggy trousers (<i>şalvar/shrawal</i>) tapered at ankle, paired with a jacket (<i>kortek</i>); often less embroidered.	Various fabrics, including Western types	Southern Kurdistan (Başûr), Rojhilat, standard costume. Associated with Peshmerga. ²⁰	Practicality, widely adopted standard, identity, symbol of resilience (Peshmerga). ³⁰
Northern Kurdish Style	Tighter-fitting trousers with loose crotch, waistcoats over shirts, neck scarves.	Wool, cotton	Northern Kurdistan (Bakur/Turkey). ³⁰	Resembles rural Turkish/Balkan attire; regional distinction. ³⁰
<i>Peshtwen</i> (Sash/Belt)	Long, wide cloth belt/sash wrapped around the waist.	Wool, cotton, silk, Fastoni fabric	Common across most Kurdish regions with traditional attire. ²⁹	Formality, tradition, status (length can denote importance), practical (storing items), iconic element of Kurdish dress. ³⁰
<i>Shal</i> (Fabric/Garment)	High-quality fabric (often goat/Marz hair) used for trousers/sashes; also refers to the trousers themselves.	Marz hair (goat), wool	Bahdinan, Hawraman, Ranya (specific types of <i>Shal</i>). ³⁵	Significant folkloric value, durability, prized for special occasions, craftsmanship. ³⁵
<i>Cemedanî</i> (Keffiyeh)	Square headscarf, often checkered or patterned.	Cotton, other light fabrics	Widely used across Kurdistan; adopted by some Kurds from Arabs. Also <i>Jamadani</i> . ³²	Protection from elements, identity marker, political statement (e.g., <i>Camane</i> in Rojhilat during Newroz). ³⁷
<i>Klaw</i> (Cap/Skullcap)	Small cap, often worn under a turban or alone.	Various fabrics	Common across Kurdistan. ²⁹	Practical head covering, base for turban, tradition (head should not be bare). ³⁴
Turban	Long scarf coiled	Cotton, silk, wool	Varies by	Tribal affiliation

	around a <i>Klaw</i> .	(checked/plain)	tribe/region. Prominent in Mahabad, Sulaymaniyah, Erbil. ³⁰	(e.g., Barzani/Yezidi red & white check), status, regional identity. ³⁰
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6.3. Celebrations and Festivities: The Newroz Festival

Newroz, celebrated annually on March 21st, marks the Kurdish New Year and the arrival of spring. It is arguably the most significant cultural and national festival for Kurds across all regions of Kurdistan and in the diaspora.⁴ More than just a calendrical event, Newroz is imbued with profound symbolism, representing renewal, rebirth, resistance against oppression, and the enduring aspirations of the Kurdish people for freedom and self-determination.³⁹ The festival is rooted in ancient traditions, often linked to the myth of Kawa the Blacksmith defeating the tyrannical king Zuhak, and its celebration is a vibrant affirmation of Kurdish identity and cultural continuity.

Men's Roles and Activities

Kurdish men play highly visible and active roles in the communal celebrations of Newroz. Their participation is often characterized by specific symbolic actions and adherence to traditional customs:

- **Traditional Attire:** It is customary for men to don their finest traditional Kurdish clothing for Newroz festivities. This typically includes regional variations of *Şal û Şapik* or *Kortek û Şalvar*, complete with wide waist belts (*Peshtwen*) and traditional headwear such as turbans or *Cemedanî*.⁴⁰ In East Kurdistan (Rojhilat), for instance, there have been calls for men to specifically wear the *Camane* (a traditional headscarf) as a mark of cultural identity during Newroz.³⁹
- **Torchlight Processions:** One of the most iconic and visually dramatic aspects of Newroz celebrations, particularly in regions like Akrê in Iraqi Kurdistan (Başûr), involves men participating in large torchlight processions.⁴⁰ As dusk falls, hundreds or even thousands of men, each carrying a burning torch, ascend mountainsides or parade through towns, creating a symbolic river of fire that illuminates the night and signifies the dispelling of darkness and the welcoming of spring's light and warmth.⁴⁰
- **Bonfires:** The lighting of large bonfires is a central ritual of Newroz, symbolizing purification, the defeat of winter, and the flame of freedom. Men are actively involved in building and igniting these fires, around which communities gather to celebrate.³⁹
- **Traditional Dances:** Men participate with great enthusiasm in traditional Kurdish folk dances, such as the *Govend* or *Halparkê*. These communal dances, often performed in circles or lines with interlocked hands, take place in public squares, streets, and even in the hills surrounding villages and towns, accompanied by the sounds of traditional Kurdish music, including the *dahol* (drum) and *zurna* (oboe-like wind instrument).³⁹
- **Display of National Symbols:** During Newroz celebrations, it is common to see Kurdish flags being prominently displayed and waved by participants, including men, as an

assertion of national identity and aspiration.⁴⁰

- **Cultural Resistance:** In regions where Kurdish cultural expression is restricted or politicized, such as in Turkey (Bakur) and Iran (Rojhilat), men's participation in Newroz takes on an added layer of significance as an act of cultural resistance and political assertion.³⁹ The very act of gathering publicly, wearing traditional attire, singing Kurdish songs, or displaying Kurdish symbols can be a form of defiance against state policies of assimilation or suppression. In such contexts, participants, including men, may face the risk of harassment, arrest, or other forms of reprisal from authorities.³⁹

6.4. Recreation and Skill: Traditional Sports and Pastimes

Traditional sports and recreational activities have long played a role in Kurdish male culture, serving not only as forms of entertainment but also as means of developing and showcasing physical prowess, skill, and courage—qualities historically valued in often rugged and challenging environments.

- **Wrestling:** Wrestling is a popular traditional sport among Kurdish men, providing a direct contest of strength, agility, and technique.³
- **Hunting and Shooting:** Given the often mountainous and rural nature of Kurdistan, hunting has historically been both a means of subsistence and a respected male skill. Proficiency in shooting, whether for hunting or defense, has also been highly regarded.³
- **Cirit (Javelin Throw on Horseback):** *Cirit* is a traditional equestrian sport that holds a significant place in Kurdish cultural heritage. It involves riders on horseback throwing wooden javelins at opposing team members, requiring exceptional horsemanship, accuracy, and bravery. This dynamic and often thrilling sport showcases skills that were historically relevant for cavalry and tribal warfare.³
- **Horse and Camel Racing:** In rural areas, camel and horse racing are popular pastimes, further highlighting the importance of equestrian skills and the cultural connection to these animals.³

These traditional sports and pastimes do more than just offer recreation; they have historically served to hone physical fitness, strategic thinking, and skills that were valuable for survival, defense, and maintaining a livelihood in the diverse terrains of Kurdistan. They also provide avenues for communal gathering, friendly competition, and the intergenerational transmission of cultural practices.

7. Pillars of Kurdish Society: Hospitality and Honor

Two deeply ingrained ethical principles, hospitality (*mêvanperwerî*) and honor (*namus*), form foundational pillars of Kurdish social life, profoundly shaping interpersonal relations, communal identity, and the conduct of Kurdish men.

The Centrality of Hospitality (*Mêvanperwerî*)

Hospitality is a paramount virtue in Kurdish culture, characterized by extraordinary generosity, warmth, and a profound sense of duty towards guests.⁴¹ This is not merely a polite custom but

a core cultural value, often described by observers as "next-level hospitality" due to its intensity and sincerity.⁴¹

Men's Roles in Hosting

Traditionally, men, particularly figures of authority and means such as the *agha* (village leader) or the head of a prominent family, bore the primary responsibility for extending hospitality. This often involved maintaining a dedicated guest house (*mêvanxane* or *divanxane*) where travelers and visitors to the village could be lodged, fed, and entertained.¹ These guest houses also served as important communal spaces where village men would gather to socialize, discuss local affairs, and receive news.¹ The host was expected to provide the best available food and comfort for his guests, and the act of hosting was a significant marker of his status and standing within the community.

Even in contemporary settings, the ethos of Kurdish hospitality remains strong among men. It is a common practice for Kurdish men to insist on paying the bill when dining out with guests, viewing this as an integral part of showing generosity and respect.⁴¹ They are also noted for their willingness to offer assistance, as well as refreshments like tea and coffee, to strangers, new neighbors, or anyone perceived to be in need, without expecting anything in return.⁴¹ Refusing an offer of hospitality can be considered an offense, as it may imply a rejection of the host's goodwill and social connection.

The practice of hospitality by Kurdish men can be understood as more than simple generosity; it is also a performance of social status, an indication of resourcefulness, and a vital means of building and maintaining social capital. The traditional *agha's* role in managing a guest house was directly linked to his leadership position and the tribute he received, illustrating a clear connection between hospitality, power, and economic capacity.¹ In modern interactions, insisting on paying for guests or providing lavishly demonstrates the host's ability and willingness to provide, thereby enhancing his reputation within his social circle and the wider community.⁴¹ Historically, guest houses were centers for information exchange and social networking among men.¹ Thus, for Kurdish men, extending generous hospitality is a way to affirm their social standing, display their resources (however modest), and cultivate the relationships that constitute their social network. It is an investment in social capital, where acts of generosity can translate into respect, influence, and reciprocal obligations—all crucial elements in a society where strong community ties are paramount.

Namus (Honor)

Namus is an ethical concept of profound significance in Kurdish society, as it is in many other Middle Eastern cultures. It is a multifaceted term that encompasses notions of virtue, honor, integrity, respectability, and modesty, particularly as they relate to the conduct and reputation of individuals and their families within the community.¹¹

Application to Men

While *namus* is often discussed in relation to female chastity and modesty, it applies with equal force to men, albeit with different manifestations and responsibilities. For a Kurdish

man, *namus* involves upholding his own moral reputation, acting with integrity, and, crucially, safeguarding the honor of his family, especially its female members.⁹ A man who commits acts considered morally reprehensible, particularly sexual offenses such as rape, is deemed *namussuz*—a person without honor—a deeply pejorative label.¹¹

Responsibilities in Upholding Namus

Men are culturally assigned the primary responsibility for protecting and defending the family's *namus*. If the honor of the family is perceived to have been violated—for example, through a sexual offense against a female relative—the male members of the family may feel a strong societal and personal obligation to respond and restore that honor.¹¹ This response can, in some interpretations and contexts, involve taking action, sometimes violent, against the perceived perpetrator of the dishonor. A family's failure to react to such a violation can lead to them being collectively viewed as *namussuz*, thereby diminishing their social standing.¹¹

Consequences of Violation

The loss of *namus*, whether through the actions of a male or female family member, can have severe consequences, potentially leading to social stigmatization, ostracism, and exclusion from the community for the entire family.¹¹ In the most extreme and tragic cases, perceived severe violations of *namus*, particularly those related to female sexual conduct outside of prescribed norms, have resulted in "honor killings." It is important to note that such practices have been condemned by prominent Kurdish figures, including the poet Abdullah Goran, indicating internal critique and evolving perspectives on these interpretations of honor.¹¹ The concept of *namus* functions as a powerful social control mechanism that dictates expected standards of behavior for both men and women, thereby contributing to social cohesion and the maintenance of communal reputation. For men, it is a double-edged sword: it provides a framework for esteemed masculine conduct, casting them in the role of virtuous protectors and upholders of family integrity. Simultaneously, it places upon them the heavy burden of enforcement, potentially leading to cycles of violence or extreme social pressure if *namus* is perceived to be violated or inadequately defended. A man's reputation, and indeed that of his entire family, is intricately tied to his ability to navigate and uphold these stringent honor codes, making *namus* a source of both social order and intense personal and familial pressure.

8. The Final Passage: Funerary Customs

Funerary customs among Kurdish men are shaped by a blend of Islamic religious principles, ancient local traditions, and, in contemporary contexts, the socio-political realities of their respective regions. These rites mark the transition from life to death and involve specific roles and responsibilities for men within the family and community.

Men's Roles in Mourning and Burial

Upon a death in the community, men assume significant and often public roles in the ensuing

funerary rites. As the majority of Kurds adhere to Sunni Islam⁴, many practices align with general Islamic funeral protocols. These often involve men taking the lead in the public aspects of the funeral service and the burial itself. For example, it is traditional in many Muslim communities for only men to attend the actual interment at the gravesite.⁴³ Male relatives and community members are typically responsible for carrying the bier, performing the final prayers at the graveside, and participating in the physical act of burial. During the mourning period that follows, men receive condolences from the wider community and participate in gatherings for remembrance and prayer. It is a common custom for individuals directly in mourning to curtail their social activities, such as avoiding visits outside their home unless it is to attend another funeral or for similarly grave reasons.¹

Specific Traditions like *Chamari*

Beyond general Islamic practices, some Kurdish communities uphold unique and ancient mourning traditions. One such example is the *Chamari* ceremony, a distinctive and elaborate mourning ritual observed in the regions of Lorestan, Kermanshah, and Ilam, areas with significant Kurdish populations, particularly within Iran (Rojhilat) and Iraq (Başûr).⁴⁵ *Chamari* is described as a special ritual often reserved for prominent men, respected elders, and members of well-known families. It can be performed on several occasions, including during times of war (presumably for fallen warriors), at the time of burial, and as part of ongoing mourning observances.⁴⁵ The ceremony involves specific procedures: after the deceased's body has been washed and shrouded according to custom, it is placed among green branches, often from the willow tree, near the grave, which is typically sited close to a spring or water source.⁴⁵ Both men and women participate in the mourning, and the *Chamari* ritual has its own corpus of specific elegiac poetry and songs. Designated "verse singers" and "hunters" (a term perhaps referring to those skilled in reciting epic or heroic verse) recite the *Chamari* in a distinctive, often mournful, vocal style.⁴⁵ Participants in the *Chamari* ceremony traditionally dress in black attire. A specific location, known as the "Chamarga," is prepared for the ritual. The ceremony typically commences at sunrise and is heralded by the sounding of trumpets and drums, setting a solemn and dramatic tone.⁴⁵ A significant part of the *Chamari* involves the display of the deceased man's personal belongings, such as his weapons, camera, hunting equipment, clothing, and other items associated with his life and status. This public presentation serves to honor his memory and highlight his accomplishments and character.⁴⁵ The *Chamari* tradition underscores the communal and performative nature of mourning for esteemed male figures within these Kurdish communities.

Funerary Customs in Rojava and the Impact of Conflict

In Rojava (northern Syria), particularly within the context of ongoing conflict and the region's revolutionary political project, funerary customs have taken on pronounced political dimensions, especially for those who fall in battle and are considered martyrs (*şehîd*).⁴⁶ Funerals in such cases often transform into significant public demonstrations, serving as religious rituals, expressions of communal grief, and powerful affirmations of political identity

and commitment to the Kurdish cause.⁴⁶

Parents, including fathers, and other community members publicly mourn their lost children not merely as passive victims but as heroic martyrs for a revolutionary ideal. Slogans such as "*şehîd namirin*" ("martyrs never die") are commonly chanted, and expressions of grief often blend with demonstrations of resilience and defiance, including public dancing, marches, and the singing of heroic and nationalistic songs.⁴⁶ This reframing of death and mourning serves to transform private sorrow into a collective political statement, reinforcing solidarity and commitment to the struggle. For example, the father of a 16-year-old boy killed in Rojava was reported to have expressed that he was "happy that his son was sacrificed for the soil and freedom of Kurdistan," illustrating how personal loss can be interpreted through a lens of national sacrifice and collective aspiration.⁴⁶

General Islamic Practices

Given that the majority of Kurds are Sunni Muslims⁴, their funerary practices are largely guided by Islamic tenets. Key Islamic rites include the prompt burial of the deceased, ideally on the same day of death; the ritual washing of the body (known as *Ghusl*), performed by close family members of the same sex as the deceased; the shrouding of the body in simple white cloths (the *Kafan*); the performance of the congregational funeral prayer (*Ṣalāt al-Janāzah*), during which worshippers face the Kaaba in Mecca; and the burial itself, with the deceased's body positioned in the grave so that it faces Mecca.⁴³ Islamic tradition prohibits cremation, as it believes in the physical resurrection of the body on the Day of Judgment.⁴³ A formal mourning period, often lasting 40 days, typically follows the burial, during which the bereaved family receives condolences and support from the community.⁴³

Kurdish funerary customs for men, whether the elaborate *Chamari* tradition, the politicized funerals in conflict zones like Rojava, or those following general Islamic guidelines, serve as more than just methods for disposing of the deceased. They are deeply performative acts that function as powerful arenas for reinforcing core social values, such as respect for elders and leaders, and communal solidarity. In contemporary contexts, particularly in areas marked by political struggle, these rites have also become potent platforms for asserting political identity, commemorating sacrifice, and galvanizing collective resistance. The manner in which a Kurdish man is mourned and remembered can speak volumes about his life, his standing within the community, the values his society upholds, and, increasingly, the political aspirations that animate his people.

9. A Tapestry of Traditions: Regional Variations Across Kurdistan

Kurdistan, while representing a shared homeland for the Kurdish people, is not a monolithic entity. It is broadly understood to encompass four major regions: Bakur (southeastern Turkey), Başûr (northern Iraq, largely corresponding to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq), Rojhilat (western Iran), and Rojava (northern Syria).⁵ Each of these regions possesses distinct historical trajectories, operates under different state systems and political contexts, and is home to

linguistic variations within the Kurdish language (such as the Kurmanji and Sorani dialects).⁵ These factors collectively contribute to notable variations in Kurdish male traditions across the geographical expanse of Kurdistan.

Bakur (Turkey)

In Bakur, Kurdish men have traditionally fulfilled roles as providers and protectors within a patriarchal family structure.¹⁰ However, the long-standing Kurdish political movement in Turkey, notably involving organizations like the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), has exerted considerable influence on traditional gender roles. Some political factions have actively promoted gender equality, even mandating co-chair systems and quotas for women in leadership positions.⁸ Despite these progressive currents, deeply entrenched patriarchal norms often persist, with cultural emphasis placed on male financial provision and a stoic emotional demeanor.¹⁰ Decades of state-led assimilationist policies and often negative portrayals of Kurds in Turkish media have also impacted Kurdish self-perception, identity, and the expression of male traditions.⁴⁹ In terms of attire, Northern Kurdish male clothing styles are generally tighter-fitting compared to other regions, showing some resemblance to rural Turkish and Balkan traditional dress.³⁰ The celebration of Newroz in Bakur is often highly politicized and can face state suppression, making male participation a significant act of cultural and political assertion. Funerary practices likely adhere to general Islamic customs, but in the context of the protracted conflict, the funerals of activists or fighters frequently acquire overt political significance.

Başûr (Iraq)

In Başûr, men have historically been the heads of households, with primary responsibilities in agriculture and managing the family's external relations.¹ The traditional *agha* system of local leadership was historically strong and influential in this region.¹ Due to the Kurdistan Regional Government's (KRG) recognized political status, Başûr has often served as a significant center for cross-border Kurdish cultural activities and revival efforts.⁴⁸ Some observers characterize Başûr as the most consistently Muslim-majority Kurdish region, suggesting that other parts of Kurdistan may have larger proportions of irreligious or secular populations.⁵¹ Traditional male attire in Başûr includes styles like *Kortek û Şalvar*³² and the Central Kurdish *Şal û Şapik*.³⁰ The iconic image of the Peshmerga is often associated with Southern Kurdish traditional dress.³⁰ Newroz is celebrated with large, vibrant public festivities, such as those in Akre, featuring men in traditional costumes, elaborate torchlight processions, and communal dancing.⁴⁰ Detailed marriage customs, including specific proposal protocols, the strong preference for FBD unions, and the intricacies of bride-wealth negotiations, are well-documented in Başûr.¹

Rojhilat (Iran)

Kurdish men in Rojhilat often experience socio-economic and political marginalization within the Iranian state structure.⁵² Despite these challenges, they are actively involved in efforts to preserve their cultural heritage and articulate political demands for greater autonomy and

rights.⁴⁷ Some sources suggest that Rojhilat, similar to Rojava and parts of Bakur, has a significant irreligious or secular segment within its Kurdish population.⁵¹ The *Kortek û Şalvar* style of traditional male clothing is prevalent in Rojhilat³², and headwear often includes turbans.³² The distinctive *Shal* fabric and garments from the Hawraman region are particularly noted.³⁵ Newroz celebrations in Rojhilat are profoundly significant acts of cultural resistance against state suppression. Men prominently participate by wearing traditional attire, such as the *Camane* (headscarf), engaging in traditional dances, and lighting bonfires, often in defiance of restrictions and at the risk of arrest or harassment by authorities.³⁹ The ancient *Chamari* mourning tradition is notably practiced in regions like Kermanshah and Ilam, which fall within or border Rojhilat.⁴⁵

Rojava (Syria)

The political and social landscape of Rojava has undergone a radical transformation with the establishment of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES). This political project is founded on principles of democratic confederalism, direct democracy, ecological sustainability, and, crucially, profound gender equality.⁸ This ideological framework has led to significant shifts in traditional male roles. Men in Rojava now participate in a political and social system where women hold substantial power and occupy key leadership positions, often through co-chair systems and mandated quotas (e.g., 40% for women in political bodies).⁸ Men are actively involved in local communal councils and cooperative economic structures that form the basis of the region's governance and economy.⁵⁴ Historically, stateless Kurds in Syria faced significant discrimination before some were granted citizenship.⁵⁵ As with other regions outside Başûr, some sources indicate a considerable degree of secularism or irreligion among the Kurdish population in Rojava.⁵¹ While specific details on Rojava male attire are less prominent in the available data compared to other regions, it likely shares similarities with Bakur due to the prevalence of the Kurmanji dialect. Newroz is celebrated openly in Rojava, symbolizing freedom, Kurdish aspirations, and a break from past suppression.⁴⁰ Funerary customs, particularly for those fallen in conflict (martyrs or *şehîd*), are highly politicized, with public mourning ceremonies that serve to reinforce revolutionary ideals and nationalist sentiment.⁴⁶

Tribal Variations

Beyond these broader regional distinctions, it is important to acknowledge that specific Kurdish tribes may possess their own unique customs, variations in attire, or even particular social stereotypes associated with their men. For example, the Barzani tribe is known for its distinctive red and white checkered headwear³⁰, and anecdotal stereotypes exist for the men of various other tribes such as the Berwarî, Silêvanî, or Dûskî.⁵⁷

The distinct political contexts, state policies, and prevailing socio-economic conditions within each nation-state that encompasses a part of Kurdistan appear to be primary drivers of variation in contemporary Kurdish male traditions. While a common Kurdish cultural substratum, linguistic affinities (Kurmanji and Sorani), and shared historical narratives provide

a basis for commonality, the lived experience and public expression of these traditions are significantly refracted through these regional prisms. For instance, the revolutionary political project in Rojava is actively seeking to dismantle traditional patriarchal structures and redefine male roles in governance and society in ways not formally institutionalized elsewhere.⁸ In Bakur and Rojhilat, decades of state suppression have imbued many traditional male cultural expressions—such as wearing specific attire or celebrating Newroz—with potent political meaning as acts of resistance.³ Conversely, the autonomous status of the KRG in Başûr has allowed for more open and large-scale public celebrations of traditions and a focus on cultural revival, shaped by its own internal political and economic dynamics.⁴⁰ Therefore, a man's engagement with and performance of "Kurdish male traditions" is profoundly shaped by whether he resides in a context of relative autonomy, active revolution, or ongoing cultural and political struggle against a dominant state.

10. Continuity and Change: Historical and Contemporary Influences

Kurdish male traditions are not static relics of the past but are living, evolving phenomena, shaped by a long history of interaction with neighboring cultures, transformative historical events, and the ongoing forces of modernization, urbanization, and political mobilization.

Impact of Neighboring Cultures (Persian, Arab, Turkic) and Islam

Kurdish culture, by virtue of its geographical location at a historical crossroads, shares numerous commonalities with other regional cultures, including Iranian (Persian), Arab, and Turkic traditions.³ This is a result of centuries of interaction, migration, and the absorption of various ancient ethnic groups into the broader Kurdish identity.³ The closest cultural affinities are generally observed with other Iranian peoples, exemplified by shared celebrations like Newroz, the Persian New Year, which is also the Kurdish New Year.²⁸ The very ethnonym "Kurd" is thought by some scholars to have originated from a Middle Persian term referring to 'nomads' or 'tent-dwellers,' which gradually became associated with an amalgamation of Iranian and Iranianized tribes in the region, particularly following the Muslim conquest of Persia.²⁸

Islam is the predominant religion among Kurds, with the majority adhering to the Sunni branch, primarily following the Shafi'i school of jurisprudence, though a significant minority follow the Hanafi school or Alevism.⁴ Islamic principles and laws have influenced many aspects of Kurdish life and male traditions, including regulations concerning marriage (such as the permissibility of polygyny and grounds for divorce)¹, funerary rites⁴³, and various daily practices and social norms.⁴ Sufi orders, notably the Naqshbandi and Qadiriyya, also hold considerable sway in many Kurdish communities and have their own traditions and male leadership structures.²⁸ Beyond Islam, other religious beliefs and traditions have left their mark on Kurdish culture, including Yazidism, Yarsanism, and Zoroastrianism (which has ancient roots in the broader Iranian cultural sphere), as well as Christianity, which has historically been

present in Kurdistan with some traditions preserved among certain groups.²⁸ These minority religions also entail distinct roles, responsibilities, and customs for their male adherents. Cultural exchange is also evident in material culture; for example, some Kurdish communities adopted the Keffiyeh and *agal* (head cord) from neighboring Arab populations.³⁷

Effects of Major Historical Events

Anfal Campaign (Başûr)

The Anfal Campaign, a genocidal operation conducted by Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime against the Kurdish population of Iraq in 1988, had a particularly devastating and gendered impact on Kurdish society and male traditions.⁵ This campaign systematically targeted Kurdish civilians, with a specific and brutal focus on men and boys of "battle age," roughly estimated to be between 15 and 50 years old. These males were rounded up en masse, forcibly disappeared, and subjected to summary executions, their bodies often interred in mass graves.⁵⁹ It is estimated that approximately 70% of the total victims of the Anfal campaign were men.⁵⁹

The Anfal campaign was more than a series of mass killings; it constituted a targeted "gendercide" that aimed to sever male lineages and destroy the social and economic fabric of Kurdish rural society.⁵⁹ Given the traditionally patrilineal nature of Kurdish society, where knowledge, leadership roles, and specific traditions are often transmitted through male lines¹, the elimination of such a vast number of men created a profound rupture. The widespread destruction of villages—an estimated 90% of Kurdish villages were razed⁵⁸—eradicated the physical and social spaces where these traditions were enacted and passed down. The loss of a significant portion of a generation of men resulted in a demographic crisis, leaving countless women widowed, children orphaned, and families bereft of their primary male providers and protectors. This created a vacuum in roles traditionally filled by men, impacting everything from agricultural labor and economic sustenance to community leadership and the performance of cultural rituals like the *Dengbêj* tradition. The Anfal campaign thus inflicted not only immense human suffering and demographic catastrophe but also a deep cultural trauma, catastrophically impacting the continuity of male traditions and the overall social structure of affected Kurdish communities in Başûr. The recovery from such a profound rupture involves not only rebuilding lives and communities but also grappling with broken lines of cultural transmission, the loss of traditional leadership, and the psychological scars borne by survivors, inevitably leading to transformations, adaptations, or even the loss of certain male customs.

Republic of Mahabad (Rojhilat, 1946)

The short-lived Republic of Mahabad, established in Iranian Kurdistan in 1946 and led by Qazi Muhammad, remains a powerful and enduring symbol of Kurdish aspirations for self-rule and national identity, despite its swift suppression.⁶⁰ While the political structures of the Republic, such as its cabinet, were entirely male, reflecting the prevailing gender norms of the era⁶⁰, Qazi Muhammad's vision for the republic reportedly included progressive values, such as the

social participation of both men and women in public life.⁶¹ The legacy of Mahabad continues to inspire Kurdish national consciousness, emphasizing the importance of Kurdish unity, cultural development, and the pursuit of democratic ideals. For Kurdish men, the story of Mahabad serves as a historical touchstone, influencing perspectives on national struggle, leadership, and the role of men in achieving collective aspirations.

Modernization, Urbanization, and Political Movements on Traditional Male Roles

The 20th and 21st centuries have brought profound changes to Kurdish society, driven by forces of modernization, increasing urbanization, and the rise of influential political movements, all of which have had a significant impact on traditional male roles and identities.

- **Urbanization and Economic Shifts:** The gradual movement of Kurdish populations from rural agricultural and pastoral lifestyles to urban centers, coupled with a shift towards wage labor in diverse sectors, has altered men's traditional economic roles and patterns of social interaction.¹ The decline of the traditional village guest house (*mêvanxane*) and the corresponding rise of urban tea houses as primary male social spaces is one tangible manifestation of these broader socio-economic transformations.¹
- **Political Movements and Gender Ideology:** Modern Kurdish political movements, particularly those with revolutionary or nationalist ideologies such as the PKK in Turkey and its affiliates like the PYD/YPG in Syria, have actively challenged and sought to redefine traditional gender roles, including those pertaining to men.⁸ These movements often demand a full-time commitment from their members, both male and female, which can leave little room for adherence to traditional family structures and gendered divisions of labor.⁸ Some Kurdish political parties have implemented policies mandating gender equality in leadership, such as co-chair systems where leadership positions are shared by a man and a woman, and quotas to ensure female representation in political bodies.⁸ The ideological contributions of figures like Abdullah Ocalan, particularly his development of *jineoloji* (the "science of woman"), have strongly advocated for women's freedom, equality, and empowerment, thereby necessarily influencing male perspectives on gender, power, and social relations within these movements and the communities they influence.⁸ For men involved in such transformative political movements, traditional markers of manhood—such as being the sole provider for a patriarchal household, or basing status primarily on lineage or tribal affiliation—are often supplemented, and sometimes replaced, by new ideals. These can include a commitment to gender equality, adherence to revolutionary discipline, participation in collective action and decision-making, and the adoption of a secular or ideologically-driven worldview. This represents a significant evolution, contributing to a spectrum of Kurdish masculinities that range from the deeply traditional to the consciously revolutionary.
- **Education and Changing Aspirations:** Increased access to formal education, even if sometimes in the language of the dominant state (as alluded to in the advice, "go to

school tomorrow and learn how to read and write, even if it's in the language of your enemies" ⁶²), along with greater exposure to global ideas and media, is undoubtedly influencing the aspirations and perspectives of younger generations of Kurdish men. This exposure may lead to a re-evaluation of certain traditional norms and practices.

- **Cultural Repression and Revival:** Paradoxically, sustained campaigns of cultural repression and forced assimilation by various states have, in some instances, strengthened the resolve within Kurdish communities to preserve and revitalize their cultural traditions. These traditions often become potent symbols of resistance and identity, with men frequently playing prominent roles in their public expression and defense.³

11. Conclusion: The Enduring and Evolving Nature of Kurdish Male Traditions

The exploration of Kurdish male traditions reveals a rich and complex cultural domain, characterized by deep historical roots, significant regional diversity, and an ongoing process of adaptation in the face of profound social, economic, and political transformations.

Summary of Key Traditions

Central to Kurdish male identity and social life are the foundational principles of patrilineal kinship, which dictate lineage, inheritance, and social obligation.¹ Men traditionally occupy defined roles within the family as heads of household, providers, and protectors, and within the community through specific divisions of labor and, historically, leadership positions such as that of the *agha*.¹ Rites of passage, notably circumcision and marriage, mark significant transitions in a man's life, integrating him more fully into the social and cultural fabric of his community.⁷ Marriage itself is an elaborate institution, governed by intricate customs related to arrangement, preferred unions (especially FBD marriage), and economic exchanges like bride-wealth.¹

Kurdish men are also key participants and custodians of vibrant cultural expressions. The oral tradition, particularly through the figure of the *Dengbêj*, serves as a living archive of history, epic, and song.⁴ Traditional male attire, with its regional variations like *Şal û Şapik* and *Kortek û Şalvar*, and distinctive elements such as the *Peshtwen* and various forms of headwear, functions as a powerful symbol of identity and heritage.²⁹ Communal celebrations, paramount among them the Newroz festival, provide arenas for the collective performance of cultural identity, with men playing active roles in processions, dances, and symbolic rituals.³⁹ Deeply ingrained codes of hospitality (*mêvanperwerî*) and honor (*namus*) guide interpersonal conduct and define virtuous manhood.¹¹ Finally, distinct funerary practices, ranging from the ancient *Chamari* tradition to contemporary politicized mourning, mark the end of life and reinforce communal values.⁴⁵

Reflections on Persistence and Adaptation

Despite the immense pressures stemming from statelessness, protracted conflicts, systematic cultural repression, and the pervasive forces of modernization, many Kurdish male traditions exhibit remarkable resilience. This persistence is often a testament to their profound cultural significance and their integral role in maintaining and asserting Kurdish identity in challenging circumstances. These traditions serve as anchors of cultural continuity and communal solidarity.

However, it is crucial to recognize that these traditions are not immutable. They are constantly being negotiated, reinterpreted, adapted, and sometimes actively challenged by new social, economic, and political realities. The influence of urbanization, formal education, global interconnectedness, and particularly the impact of transformative Kurdish political movements, is leading to significant evolution in the understanding and practice of what it means to be a Kurdish man today. The considerable variations observed across Bakur, Başûr, Rojhilat, and Rojava underscore the fact that "Kurdish male traditions" do not constitute a monolithic entity but rather a dynamic and diverse spectrum of practices, profoundly shaped by local contexts and ongoing historical processes.

The very traditions that provide stability and continuity are increasingly becoming sites of internal re-evaluation and contestation. This is particularly evident in discussions around gender roles and power dynamics, often spurred by modern political ideologies, feminist thought within Kurdish movements, and changing social aspirations, especially among younger generations.⁸ The historical emphasis on patrilineal systems and male authority is being interrogated in contexts like Rojava, where gender equality is a core tenet of the political project.⁵⁴ The fading of certain customs, such as the everyday wearing of specific traditional headwear like the *Jamana*³⁶ or the decline of the formal village guest house system¹, also signals ongoing adaptation and change. The tension between the traditional male role as the sole economic provider and newer economic realities or ideologies that promote shared responsibility further illustrates this dynamic interplay between continuity and transformation.

The Future of Kurdish Male Traditions

The future trajectory of Kurdish male traditions will likely be characterized by this continued dialectic between the deeply felt desire to preserve ancestral heritage and the undeniable necessity to adapt to a rapidly changing world. This process is expected to lead to new syntheses, reinterpretations, and diverse expressions of Kurdish masculinity, reflecting both the enduring strength of cultural roots and the capacity for innovative adaptation in the pursuit of collective aspirations for identity, dignity, and self-determination.

Table 2: Men's Roles in Key Kurdish Life Cycle Events and Festivals

Event/Ritual	Key Male Roles/Responsibilities	Associated Customs/Significance
Birth/Naming	Reciting <i>adhan</i> (in some communities), selecting names (sometimes with nationalistic/strong	Celebration of new life, instilling early cultural/religious identity. ¹⁴

	connotations). ¹⁴	
Circumcision (Khatne/Sunnet)	Family arranges ceremony, selection of/acting as <i>Kîv</i> (deepens kinship, involves gift-giving/support). ¹⁴	Major rite of passage to boyhood/manhood, religious obligation, communal celebration, creation of fictive kinship ties (<i>Kîv</i> system). ¹⁴
Education (Traditional)	Sending sons to <i>Mullah</i> or <i>Sheikh</i> for religious and basic education. ¹⁴	Instilling religious values, basic literacy, preparation for adult responsibilities. ¹⁴
Marriage (Negotiation)	Finalizing marriage contract (settlement), negotiation and payment of bride-wealth (<i>naxt</i>), bearing wedding expenses. ¹	Strategic alliance formation, consolidation of lineage property (especially FBD marriage), demonstration of economic capacity and social status. ¹
Marriage (Ceremony)	Groom (or brother) throws sweets/money from roof, groom's eldest brother places belt on bride, participation in "groom kidnapping" (some regions), active participation in wedding dances. ¹⁴	Public celebration of union, expression of joy and abundance, symbolic support from groom's family, communal participation and bonding. ⁷
Newroz (Kurdish New Year)	Wearing traditional attire, carrying torches in processions, lighting bonfires, leading/participating in traditional dances (<i>Govend/Halparkê</i>), displaying national symbols. ³⁹	Symbol of renewal, resistance, freedom, cultural/national identity assertion, communal celebration, political statement (especially in regions of suppression). ³⁹
Hospitality (Mêvanperwerî)	Maintaining guest houses (<i>mêvanxane</i> - traditionally by <i>agha</i>), hosting guests lavishly, insisting on paying for guests, offering assistance and refreshments. ¹	Core cultural value, demonstration of generosity, status, and social capital, building/maintaining social networks, communal bonding. ¹
Upholding <i>Namus</i> (Honor)	Protecting family honor (especially female relatives), maintaining personal moral integrity, responding to violations of <i>namus</i> (sometimes through	Central ethical code, defines virtuous manhood, maintains family/community reputation, social control mechanism, can involve high stakes and severe consequences. ¹¹

	vengeance). ⁹	
Funerals/Mourning	Leading funeral rites, carrying bier, participating in burial (often men only at gravesite), receiving condolences, participation in specific rituals like <i>Chamari</i> (for prominent men), public mourning for martyrs. ¹	Religious obligation, communal expression of grief and solidarity, honoring the deceased's status/life, reinforcement of social values, political statement/mobilization (in conflict contexts). ⁴³

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