Echoes of a Mountainous Land: An Exploration of Kurdish Culture Before Modern Times

I. Introduction: Defining Pre-Modern Kurdish Culture

The tapestry of Kurdish culture, woven over millennia in the rugged heartlands of the Middle East, presents a rich and complex panorama long before the transformative pressures of the 19th century. This report endeavors to explore the multifaceted cultural landscape of the Kurdish people and their ancestral territories, broadly termed Kurdistan, from antiquity through the close of the 18th century. This "pre-modern" epoch is distinguished by the flourishing of autonomous Kurdish principalities, the resilience of unique social structures, and the vibrancy of oral traditions, all developing within the dynamic interplay of powerful regional empires.[1] The 19th century heralded a significant shift, witnessing the decline of Kurdish emirates under the centralizing policies of the Ottoman and Persian states.[2] This study, therefore, focuses on the intricate cultural fabric that existed prior to these profound alterations.

The very definition of "Kurd" and "Kurdistan" in pre-modern times was more fluid and context-dependent than modern nationalist concepts might suggest, often shaped by tribal loyalties and regional affiliations. Early Islamic writings from the 7th century onwards frequently used the term 'Kurd' with a socio-economic connotation, describing nomadic groups on the western fringes of the Iranian plateau and in eastern Anatolia.[1] While some scholars trace the ethnonym to ancient groups like the Carduchoi, mentioned by Xenophon in 401 BCE, or the Cyrtii [1], the term began to solidify in an ethnic sense, albeit encompassing numerous distinct tribes, by the 12th to 14th centuries.[1] "Kurdistan," literally the "Land of the Kurds," refers to a geographically formidable area dominated by the Zagros and eastern Taurus mountain systems.[2] This territory, historically inhabited by Kurds, now straddles parts of modern-day Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Armenia.[2] The rugged mountainous terrain was a crucial factor in shaping Kurdish lifestyles, fostering both nomadic pastoralism and settled agriculture, while also providing natural redoubts that could facilitate evasion of external armies.[2] This geographical isolation, however, proved to be a double-edged sword: it played a vital role in preserving distinct cultural elements and local autonomies, but concurrently hindered the development of sustained pan-Kurdish political unification.[2] The persistent lack of overarching political unity in Kurdistan, noted by historical observers, can be directly linked to this fragmented landscape, which naturally supported the emergence of localized tribal entities and semi-independent emirates rather than a centralized Kurdish state. Consequently, "Kurdishness" before the 19th century was likely a layered identity, where allegiance to one's tribe or local principality often held precedence. This pre-modern political fragmentation and

the nuanced nature of identity formation would have significant implications for the subsequent rise of Kurdish nationalism in the 19th and 20th centuries, presenting inherent challenges to unified movements.
Furthermore, historic Kurdistan was a remarkably diverse region, not only in its ethnic composition—with Kurds living alongside Armenians, Assyrians, Turks, Arabs, and others—but also in its religious makeup, which included Muslims (the majority), Christians, Jews, Yazidis, and Yarsanis.[7] This historical diversity suggests that pre-modern Kurdish culture was not an insular phenomenon but was actively shaped through continuous interactions, and at times, symbiotic relationships with neighboring groups. The existence of Kurdish quarters in major cities outside the Kurdish heartlands, such as Aleppo, Damascus, and Cairo [1], and instances like the Shaddadid dynasty ruling over a predominantly Armenian population [2], attest to this dynamic of movement and interaction. Such intercultural engagement undoubtedly enriched Kurdish culture through the borrowing and exchange of practices, languages, and perhaps even social structures. The "symbiotic relationships with settled communities" often noted for Kurdish nomads [8] likely extended across different ethnic and religious lines. Therefore, any comprehensive understanding of pre-modern Kurdish culture must acknowledge these interactions and avoid portraying it as a monolithic or isolated entity. The capacity of Kurdish emirates to manage this internal diversity would have been a crucial element of their governance. Conversely, the breakdown of such coexistence, often exacerbated by external pressures from larger empires or internal shifts in power, could create societal fault lines.

II. Historical Foundations of Pre-Modern Kurdistan

A. Echoes of Antiquity: Early Peoples and Mentions

The deep history of the Kurds is shrouded in the mists of time, though their ancestors are believed to have inhabited the same highland regions of the Near East for many centuries, possibly millennia.[2] While definitive links are debated, ancient Mesopotamian records refer to mountain tribes such as the Guti, who clashed with Sumerian and Akkadian powers in the 3rd and 2nd millennia BCE, as possible precursors.[2] More frequently cited are the Carduchoi (Kardouchoi), a fierce people encountered by Xenophon and his Ten Thousand Greek mercenaries during their retreat through the mountains near modern Zākhū (in present-day Iraqi Kurdistan) in 401 BCE.[1] Xenophon's *Anabasis* describes the Carduchoi as skilled warriors inhabiting a rugged, independent territory. Another ancient group, the Cyrtii (Kurti), noted as slingers in the Zagros Mountains, were recorded by classical writers in the 2nd century BCE.[1] While direct lineage from these groups to modern Kurds is a subject of ongoing scholarly discussion, these early mentions underscore the long-standing presence of distinct, often martial, communities in the mountainous regions later known as Kurdistan. By the time of the Islamic conquests in the 7th century CE, the term 'Kurd' was already in use, often applied with a socio-economic meaning to describe nomadic or semi-nomadic groups inhabiting the western edge of the Iranian plateau and parts of eastern Anatolia.[1]

B. The Flourishing of Medieval Kurdish Dynasties (c. 10th - 13th

Centuries)

Following the Islamic conquests, Kurdish groups initially played a relatively marginal role in the broader politics of the Caliphate, often appearing in chronicles as mercenaries or rebels.[1] However, the period from approximately 950 to 1050 CE has been termed the "Kurdish interlude" by some scholars, a time when various Kurdish tribes asserted their power, seized vast territories, and established their own independent or semi-independent states.[1]
Among these early Kurdish dynasties were:

- The **Hasanwayhids** (c. 959/961–1015/1095), who controlled the Kermanshah region and established Dinawar as a significant center.[1]
- The **Marwanids** (983/990–1085/1096), based in Diyarbakir, who ruled over a substantial territory in Upper Mesopotamia.[1]
- The **Rawadids** (c. 900s–1071/1115), who held power in Azerbaijan, including Tabriz and Maragheh.[1]
- The **Shaddadids** (951–1174/1199), who carved out a domain in parts of Armenia and Arran (modern Azerbaijan), notably ruling over a predominantly Armenian population in cities like Ānī and Ganja.[1] The Shaddadids are credited with building the Menüçehr Mosque in Ani around 1072, considered the first mosque within the current borders of Turkey.[11]
- The **Annazids** (ʿAnnazids) (c. 990/991–1117), who initially ruled from Ḥulwān in the eastern Jibal region.[1]
- Later, in the 12th century, the Kurdish **Hazaraspid dynasty** established its rule in the southern Zagros and Luristan, expanding significantly in the 13th and 14th centuries.[1]

These medieval Kurdish principalities demonstrated a notable capacity for state-building and possessed significant political and military influence that predated the later, more commonly discussed emirates. A key characteristic of these early polities was their military strength, which relied heavily on Kurdish tribesmen and nomadic warriors as the backbone of their armies. They often provided their own mounted troops, unlike some contemporary powers that depended on Turkic *ghilman* (slave soldiers).[1] This reliance on their own tribal warriors suggests a degree of internal cohesion and military self-sufficiency within these early states.
The zenith of medieval Kurdish power was arguably reached with the rise of the **Ayyubid dynasty** (12th-13th centuries), founded by Salah ad-Din Yusuf ibn Ayyub (Saladin), who hailed from a Rawadiya Kurdish family of the Hadabani tribe.[1] The Ayyubids, originating from the Kurdish regions, established a vast sultanate that stretched from Egypt and Syria to Yemen and parts of Mesopotamia, playing a pivotal role in the Crusades.[1] Under Ayyubid rule, several Kurdish chieftainships were established or strengthened. The memory and historical narrative of these powerful independent dynasties, particularly the Ayyubids under the iconic Saladin, likely served as an inspirational touchstone for later Kurdish leaders and nascent collective consciousness, even after their direct political lineage was disrupted by events such as the Mongol invasions.
Around 1150, the Seljuq Sultan Ahmad Sanjar formally recognized a province named

Kurdistan, with its capital at Bahar, near ancient Ecbatana (Hamadan). This province encompassed vilayets such as Sinjar and Shahrazur west of the Zagros, and Hamadan, Dinawar, and Kermanshah to its east.[1] An autochthonous civilization developed around the town of Dinawar, whose cultural radiance was later only partially emulated by Senna.[1] Furthermore, the medieval period witnessed the establishment of Kurdish quarters (*Haret al-Akrad*) in many prominent cities outside the traditional Kurdish heartlands. These quarters, found in urban centers like Aleppo, Baghdad, Cairo, Damascus, Jerusalem, Hebron, and Gaza, arose from the influx of Kurdish tribal forces, as well as scholars and migrants.[1] These were not merely residential enclaves but often included their own mosques, madrasas (Islamic schools), and other edifices, indicating an organized and influential Kurdish presence extending into the cosmopolitan centers of the Islamic world.[1] This phenomenon suggests a level of Kurdish integration and contribution to the broader Islamic civilization that went beyond their mountainous homelands. The Ayyubid expansion likely facilitated this diaspora. This urban presence would have fostered cultural exchange, exposed Kurds to wider intellectual currents, and projected Kurdish influence, challenging any simplistic view of Kurds as solely isolated mountain dwellers.

C. Navigating Empires: Kurdistan under Ottoman and Safavid Influence (Post-Chaldiran, 16th - 18th Centuries)

The political landscape of Kurdistan underwent a profound transformation following the Battle of Chaldiran in 1514. This pivotal conflict between the Ottoman Empire under Sultan Selim I and the Safavid Empire of Persia under Shah Ismail I saw many Kurdish chieftains, persuaded by the Kurdish scholar Idris Bitlisi, ally with the Ottomans.[1] This alliance was a strategic move for these Kurdish leaders, aiming to preserve a degree of autonomy in the face of expanding imperial powers. As a result, Kurdistan became a crucial, yet often contested, borderland between the Sunni Ottomans and the Shia Safavids (and their successor dynasties in Persia) for centuries.[1]

In the aftermath of Chaldiran, numerous Kurdish principalities, or emirates, either solidified their existing autonomy or were newly recognized by the Ottomans or Safavids. These emirates, often hereditary, managed their internal affairs with considerable independence in exchange for loyalty, military support, and acting as strategic buffers between the two rival empires.[2] The Ottoman administration, particularly in the newly conquered province of Diyarbekir (1515), incorporated many of these Kurdish chiefdoms, allowing them to retain local rule in return for acknowledging Ottoman sovereignty.[3] Some emirates, such as Kelhor, Erdelan (Ardalan), Baban, Şehrizur, and Mukri, initially either remained independent of both empires or continued to recognize Safavid suzerainty.[3]

The *Sharafnameh*, completed in 1597 by Sharaf Khan Bidlisi, the prince (*mir*) of Bitlis, stands as a monumental work of this era. Written in Persian, it is the first comprehensive history of the Kurds, meticulously detailing the genealogies, histories, and territories of various Kurdish dynasties and principalities.[1] The creation of such a work signifies a conscious effort by a segment of the Kurdish elite to record, legitimize, and preserve their heritage and claims to

rulership.
The Treaty of Zuhab (also known as Qasr-e Shirin) in 1639 formally demarcated the long-disputed border between the Ottoman and Safavid Empires. This treaty had the profound and lasting consequence of effectively dividing Kurdistan into Ottoman and Persian spheres of influence, a division that would shape Kurdish society and political destiny for centuries to come.[3] Despite this formal division, trans-border relations among Kurdish elites and tribes often remained fluid, with some Kurdish rulers, like Sharaf Khan himself, adeptly navigating dual allegiances to maintain influence over their subjects across these imperial frontiers.[3]
The post-Chaldiran arrangement, where Kurdish emirates secured a degree of autonomy by strategically aligning with either the Ottoman or Safavid empires, was a pragmatic approach to self-preservation. However, this autonomy was inherently conditional and often required intricate political maneuvering and the shifting of allegiances based on the prevailing balance of power.[13] The "war economy" that emerged from the continuous imperial conflict in and around Kurdistan often led to devastation, massacres, and forced migrations, which, while sometimes reinforcing tribal ways of life, also created immense hardship.[6] While this system preserved a measure of Kurdish self-rule for several centuries, it also institutionalized the division of Kurdistan and rendered Kurdish political fortunes largely dependent on the fluctuating interests of these larger states. This long period of conditional autonomy fostered a political culture characterized by negotiation, alliance-shifting, and, frequently, internal rivalries among the Kurdish emirates themselves. Consequently, when these empires embarked on centralizing reforms in the 19th century, the foundations of this Kurdish autonomy proved vulnerable and were systematically dismantled.[2] The Ottoman provinces of Diyarbekir and Erzurum, which included significant portions of Kurdistan, were economically important to the Ottoman treasury from the early 16th to the early 19th centuries, indicating periods of stability and productivity under this system.[3]

III. The Social Tapestry: Structure and Daily Life

A. Tribal Organization, Kinship Systems, and Leadership (Aghas, Sheikhs)

The foundational unit of traditional Kurdish society, particularly before the widespread urban and modernizing influences of later centuries, was the tribe (*eşiret* or *'ashira*). These tribes were typically led by a chieftain, known as an *aga* (agha) or, in some contexts, a *sheikh* (if the leader also held religious authority or lineage), whose rule was generally firm and whose authority was paramount within the tribal structure.[2] Tribal identification and the authority of these leaders remained significant social forces, persisting even as some segments of Kurdish society became more urbanized.[2]
Kurdish kinship systems were predominantly based on patrilineal descent. A lineage (*berek* or *mal*) comprised several generations of a man's descendants traced through the male line. Several such lineages, often claiming descent from a common male ancestor (real or

putative), would constitute a clan (*hoz* or *tayife*). A tribe, in turn, was typically a confederation of several clans.[16] It was not uncommon for outside groups or individuals to attach themselves to a powerful tribe and, over generations, become incorporated as full members into a clan and the tribe itself, adopting its lineage claims.[16]

Tribalism was a powerful and pervasive component of the largely agrarian and pastoral society of pre-modern Kurdistan.[6] Even after the eventual decline and abolition of the autonomous Kurdish principalities in the 19th century, tribal leaders, local notables (*begzade* or remnants of princely families), and increasingly influential religious figures like Sufi sheikhs often stepped in to fill the leadership vacuum, maintaining considerable property, local power, and social influence.[6] Sufi orders and their shaykhs, in particular, played a crucial role in social integration, with their networks sometimes transcending purely tribal divisions. These religious leaders also, at times, spearheaded early uprisings that had nationalist undertones, demonstrating their significant sway.[17]

B. Family, Marriage, and Inheritance Practices

The traditional Kurdish household (*malbat*) typically consisted of an extended family: a man, his wife (or wives, as polygyny was permissible though not universally practiced), their unmarried children, and often their married sons with their wives and children.[16] In households with multiple wives, each wife might have her own designated section of the dwelling and manage her domestic affairs with a degree of independence.[16]

Marriage was a pivotal social institution, invariably arranged between the families of the prospective bride and groom.[16] A strong preference, often considered an ideal, was for a man to marry his father's brother's daughter (FBD), a form of patrilateral parallel cousin marriage. This practice of lineage endogamy was believed to "keep the family together" by consolidating relationships and, crucially, property within the patrilineage.[16] Reports from as late as the 1960s indicated this was still a majority practice, suggesting deep historical roots.[16] Such marriages often involved a lower bride-price compared to marriages with non-relatives.[18]

The payment of bride-wealth (*navejin*, *qelen*, or *şîr بها*) by the groom's family to the bride's family was a key component of marriage negotiations.[16] This payment, which could include cash, gold, livestock, or other valuables, was not typically claimed by the bride herself but was often used by her father to secure brides for his own sons.[18] The bride's family, in turn, was expected to provide her with a trousseau (* جهاز çeyiz*) and sometimes a dowry of movable goods.[18] Divorce could be initiated by the man, traditionally by renouncing his wife three times. A woman might seek divorce if the agreed-upon bride-wealth was not paid, if she was not supported according to the standards of her own family, or by repaying the bride-wealth in full.[16] Childlessness was a common reason for a man to take a second wife or to divorce.[16] Customs like the levirate (where a widow married her deceased husband's brother) and the sororate (where a widower married his deceased wife's sister) were also practiced. These arrangements aimed to ensure the well-being of children from the previous union and, importantly, to keep any land inheritance within the family lineage.[18]

The prevalence of lineage endogamy, particularly FBD/FBS marriage, was a powerful social

mechanism that reinforced patrilineal structures and was instrumental in consolidating resources, especially land, within the lineage. While fostering cohesion within the immediate kin group, this inward focus on marriage alliances could simultaneously limit the creation of broader social and political capital across different lineages or tribes. By concentrating ties internally, it potentially weakened inter-lineage bonds and, as one source suggests, might have increased the likelihood of conflict between lineages.[16] This internal focus could have contributed to the characteristic of Kurdish principalities being "almost always divided and entered into rivalries against each other" [5], hindering larger-scale, sustained political unifications.

Inheritance practices strongly favored males. Property, particularly land, pastures, houses, and livestock, was typically divided equally among a deceased man's sons. Daughters generally did not inherit such immovable property, despite provisions in Islamic Sharia or later civil laws that might have suggested otherwise.[16] The practice of FBD/FBS marriage further reinforced this patriarchal control over inheritance, as a woman married to her cousin within the lineage was less likely to have her husband support any claim she might make to her natal family's property.[18]

C. Patterns of Existence: Nomadic, Semi-Nomadic, and Settled Lifestyles

The traditional Kurdish way of life was predominantly characterized by pastoral nomadism or semi-nomadism. This lifestyle revolved around the herding of sheep and goats, involving seasonal migrations across the Mesopotamian plains and the highlands of what are now Turkey and Iran.[2] These migrations, known as *koçer*, took pastoralists and their flocks between summer highland pastures (*zoma* or *yayla*) and winter lowland pastures (*germiyan* or *qishlaq*). While nomadism was a defining feature, most Kurds also practiced some form of agriculture, although it was often marginal for the fully nomadic groups.[2]

Nomadic and semi-nomadic Kurds often forged symbiotic relationships with settled agricultural communities, exchanging animal products (wool, dairy, meat) for grains, crafts, and other goods.[8] However, these interactions were not always harmonious; competition for resources, particularly pasture and water, could lead to chronic conflict not only with central governments but also with sedentary rural dwellers.[19] The authority of tribal leaders or emirs was crucial in mediating these relationships and managing access to resources.

Alongside these mobile populations, settled life in villages and towns was also a permanent and significant feature of pre-modern Kurdistan. Urban centers such as Bidlis, Amida (Diyarbakir), and later Sulaymaniyah (founded by the Baban emirs in 1784 [13]) had considerable populations and developed infrastructures, including shops, workshops, and religious schools (*madrasas*).[6] Some Kurds were city dwellers who contributed to the local urban culture and economy.[8] The "war economy" that often prevailed due to the prolonged Ottoman-Safavid conflicts could, in some areas, disrupt urban growth and reinforce tribal ways of life by making settled existence precarious.[6]

The symbiotic relationship between nomadic/semi-nomadic Kurds and settled communities

was crucial for the overall economic and social fabric of pre-modern Kurdistan. Nomads provided essential animal products, and sometimes security along migratory routes, while settled communities offered agricultural produce, markets, and specialized crafts. This interdependence, however, was a delicate balance. Competition for vital resources like land and water, especially during periods of drought or with increasing population pressures, could easily lead to tensions. The authority of aghas, sheikhs, or the emirs of the principalities would have been vital in mediating these interactions and attempting to maintain equilibrium. Any disruption to this balance, whether through internal factors or external interference by imperial powers favoring one group over another, could readily escalate into wider instability within Kurdish regions.

D. Roles and Status of Women in Pre-Modern Kurdish Society

The roles and status of women in pre-modern Kurdish society present a complex and somewhat varied picture. Compared to women in some other contemporary Islamic societies in the Middle East, Kurdish women traditionally appear to have had relatively more rights and were often more active and visible in public life.[9] The Kurdish writer Mahmud Bayazidi, in his observations from the mid-19th century (reflecting on earlier traditional life), noted that women in many Kurdish tribal, nomadic, and rural communities often did not veil in the same manner as urban women in other parts of the region. He described their participation in social activities such as work, traditional dances (*govend*), and singing alongside men, and even their involvement in warfare when their tribes were attacked.[20] European travelers in the region also sometimes remarked on the absence of strict veiling among Kurdish women, their freer association with men (including strangers and guests), and even instances of women holding positions of leadership as tribal chiefs or rulers.[20]

Sharaf Khan Bidlisi's *Sharafnameh*, written in the late 16th century, offers a different perspective, particularly concerning women of the ruling landowning class. He mentions the practice of polygyny (up to four wives and, if affordable, concubines or slave girls) among this elite, and implies the general exclusion of these women from direct participation in public life and the exercise of state power.[20] In the court of the powerful Bidlis principality, for example, women of the ruling family were reportedly not allowed into the marketplace.[20] However, even Bidlisi acknowledges exceptions, citing three Kurdish women who assumed power in Kurdish principalities after the deaths of their husbands, ruling effectively until their sons came of age. He praises their "male-like" ability to govern, even calling one a "lioness".[20] Later historical examples, such as Lady Adela, the influential ruler of Halabja in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (whose authority reflected older patterns of female leadership potential), further attest to the capacity of some Kurdish women to wield significant political power.[20] Another notable figure from an earlier period is Asenath Barzani, a 17th-century Jewish Kurdish woman who is considered by some scholars to be the first female rabbi and was a respected scholar and leader in her own right, known for her writings and correspondence.[20]

Despite these instances of agency, relative freedom in certain social contexts, and occasional assumption of leadership, traditional Kurdish culture was, like most societies in the region at the time, fundamentally patriarchal.[20] This is clearly evidenced in areas such as inheritance

laws, where women were generally excluded from inheriting immovable property like land and livestock, which passed down the male line.[18]
These contrasting depictions suggest that the status and roles of women in pre-modern Kurdish society were not uniform. Instead, their experiences likely varied significantly based on several intersecting factors, including social class (ruling elite versus commoner), lifestyle (nomadic pastoralist versus settled agriculturalist or urban dweller), and specific regional or tribal customs. Nomadic life, for instance, often necessitated more shared labor and greater public visibility for women due to the demands of a mobile existence and potentially less rigid social stratification compared to more hierarchical urban or courtly settings. Elite women, particularly those in more settled principalities that interacted closely with Ottoman or Safavid courts, might have faced more restrictions aligned with the patriarchal norms prevalent in those imperial centers, even if exceptional individuals could still rise to positions of power. Therefore, generalizations about "Kurdish women" in this period must be carefully qualified, acknowledging a spectrum of experiences rather than a single, overarching norm. The documented instances of female leadership, though perhaps not the common rule, do point to a cultural undercurrent that allowed for female agency and authority in ways not always as visible in some neighboring societies.

IV. Political Landscape: Kurdish Emirates and Autonomy

A. Rise and Governance of Kurdish Principalities (Emirates) (c. 15th - mid-19th Centuries)

From the 15th century until the mid-19th century, a significant feature of the Kurdish political landscape was the existence of numerous semi-independent principalities, often referred to as emirates (*mîrnişîn*) or chiefdoms. These entities flourished particularly during the long period of intermittent warfare and rivalry between the Ottoman and Safavid Empires.[2] These hereditary Kurdish rulers, known as *mirs* or *begs*, often enjoyed considerable autonomy in managing their internal affairs, administering justice, collecting local revenues, and maintaining their own military forces composed of tribal levies.[3] The Ottoman Empire, for instance, often granted or recognized this self-rule to ensure Kurdish loyalty and military support against Safavid Persia, and to maintain stability in a rugged and strategically vital frontier zone.[5]
Among the most prominent of these pre-modern Kurdish emirates were Bohtan (Cizre), Hakari, Bahdinan, Soran, and Baban, which were primarily situated within the Ottoman sphere of influence. In the Persian sphere, notable emirates included Mukri and Ardalan.[1] The *Sharafnameh* of Sharaf Khan Bidlisi, completed in 1597, provides an invaluable contemporary account of many of these ruling houses, detailing their genealogies, territories, and political histories.[1]
The internal governance of these emirates often involved the mir presiding over a confederation of tribes, balancing their interests and ensuring their allegiance. Urban centers

within these emirates, such as Bidlis, Amida (Diyarbakir), Erbil, and later Sulaymaniyah (which was founded by the Baban emirs in 1784 and became their capital [13]), experienced periods of flourishing trade, craftsmanship, and cultural activity under the patronage of their rulers.[6] However, the political landscape was also characterized by fragmentation; the Kurdish principalities were "almost always divided and entered into rivalries against each other".[2] The Baban emirate, for example, was in constant rivalry with Ardalan, Bohtan, and Soran, with its territory oscillating based on military successes and shifting alliances.[13]

Table 1: Key Kurdish Dynasties and Principalities (Pre-19th Century)

Dynasty/Principality	Approximate Period of Influence	Key Regions/Centers	Notable Rulers/Events	Cultural/Political Significance
Medieval Dynasties				
Hasanwayhids	c. 959–1015/1095	Kermanshah, Dinawar	Founded by Hasanwayh b. Husayn al-Kurdi	Early Kurdish state-building, controlled important trade routes. [1]
Marwanids	983/990–1085/1096	Diyarbakir, Mayyafariqin	Nasr al-Dawla Ahmad	Significant regional power in Upper Mesopotamia, period of cultural flourishing. [1]
Shaddadids	951–1199	Ganja, Dvin, Ani (Armenia/Arran)	Fadl ibn Muhammad; Menüçehr ibn Shavur (built Menüçehr Mosque in Ani)	Ruled over mixed populations, engaged with Byzantines and Seljuks, architectural contributions. [1]
Ayyubids	1171–1260 (main period)	Egypt, Syria, Yemen, Hejaz, Diyarbakir	Salah ad-Din (Saladin), al-Kamil	Major Islamic dynasty of Kurdish origin, led Muslim resistance against Crusaders, significant cultural and architectural patronage. [1]
Later Principalities				

(Emirates)				
Ardalan (Erdelan)	c. 14th century – 1867	Sanandaj (Senna), Shahrizor, Hamadan (parts of)	Khusraw Khan Bozorg, Aman Allah Khan Ardalan; Mastoureh Ardalan (poet/historian)	Major principality in Persian Kurdistan, patron of arts and literature, often allied with Persia but maintained autonomy. [1]
Baban	16th century – 1850	Sulaymaniyah (founded 1784), Qala Çolan, Shahrizor	Pîr Budek Beg (early founder); Mahmud Pasha Baban (founded Sulaymaniyah)	Powerful emirate in southern Kurdistan (Ottoman sphere), encouraged Sorani Kurdish literature, constant rivalry with neighbors. [2]
Bohtan (Botan)	c. 14th century – 1847	Cizre (Jazira Botan), Finik	Bedr Khan Beg (19th c., led major revolt)	Historically significant emirate in northern Kurdistan, associated with Ehmedê Xanî and *Mem û Zîn*, strong tribal confederation. [2]
Soran	c. 15th century – 1836	Rawanduz	Mir Muhammad "Kor" (the Blind)	Rose to prominence in early 19th c. under Mir Muhammad, challenging Ottoman authority, known for military strength. [2]
Hakari	Medieval – 19th century	Hakkari region, Julamerk (Çölemerîk)	Long line of hereditary rulers	Mountainous emirate in strategic border area, maintained autonomy for centuries, often

				aligned with Ottomans. [2]
Mukri	Medieval – 19th century	Mahabad (Sawj Bulaq)		Principality in Persian Kurdistan, known for its cavalry, distinct cultural traditions (e.g., Mukriyani attire). [2]
Bahdinan (Badinan)	c. 13th/14th century – 1843	Amadiya (Amêdî)		Important emirate in northern Iraqi Kurdistan, controlled strategic mountain passes, maintained considerable autonomy. [2]

B. Cultural Patronage and Contributions of the Emirates

Despite their political fragmentation and often precarious existence, the Kurdish emirates of the pre-modern era served as important centers for cultural development and patronage. The courts of the *mirs* in cities like Cizre, Sanandaj (Senna), Sulaymaniyah, and Amadiya sometimes became focal points for poets, scholars, musicians, and the production of literature.[6] This patronage, although varying in intensity and focus from one emirate to another, played a crucial role in fostering distinct regional Kurdish cultural expressions and the development of Kurdish dialects as literary vehicles.

For example, the Baban principality, particularly after the founding of Sulaymaniyah as its capital, is noted for encouraging the use of the Sorani dialect of Kurdish among its local literary authors.[13] This laid some of the groundwork for Sorani's emergence as a major literary standard in later centuries. Similarly, the emirate of Bohtan (Cizre) is famously associated with Ehmedê Xanî (1650-1707), the author of *Mem û Zîn*, the most celebrated epic in Kurdish literature. While Xanî himself lamented Kurdish disunity, the cultural milieu of his time, supported by such local autonomies, allowed for the creation of such monumental works in the Kurmanji dialect.[22] The Ardalan emirate, centered in Persian Kurdistan, also boasted a significant literary legacy, with figures like the 19th-century female poet and historian Mastoureh Ardalan (who wrote in Persian and Kurdish) emerging from its courtly environment, though she straddles the pre-modern and modern periods.[21]

Beyond literature, the emirates also contributed to architecture and urban development. The establishment of new towns, such as Sulaymaniyah by the Baban, or the maintenance and expansion of existing urban centers like Bidlis, with their mosques, madrasas, markets, and fortifications, attest to the administrative and cultural vitality of these principalities during

their periods of stability.[6]

The cultural patronage observed within these Kurdish emirates indicates that these political entities were more than just administrative or military units. They played an active role in cultivating and shaping distinct regional Kurdish cultural expressions and linguistic development. This patronage, however, was often localized and tied to the fortunes and specific inclinations of particular ruling families and their courts. This fostered the growth of regional cultural centers and may have reinforced dialectal differences rather than promoting a single, unified Kurdish culture or language across all emirates. The legacy of these principalities thus includes not only a history of political autonomy but also a rich and diverse patchwork of regional cultural and linguistic achievements. This diversity, while a source of immense cultural wealth, also presented inherent challenges for later efforts to create a unified Kurdish national culture and a single standardized language. The differing historical trajectories of Kurmanji and Sorani as major literary dialects, for instance, can be partly traced back to the patronage and political contexts of the specific emirates where they were most prominently cultivated.

C. Dynamics of Power: Relations with the Ottoman and Safavid States

The relationship between the Kurdish emirates and the two dominant regional powers, the Ottoman and Safavid Empires, was complex and defined the political existence of Kurdistan for much of the pre-modern period. Following the Battle of Chaldiran in 1514, most Kurdish principalities in eastern Anatolia and northern Mesopotamia were incorporated into the Ottoman Empire. This incorporation was often negotiated, with Kurdish *mirs* acknowledging Ottoman sovereignty in exchange for the confirmation of their hereditary rule and substantial local autonomy.[3] Some Kurdish emirates, particularly those further east or with stronger existing ties to Persia, such as Kelhor, Ardalan, and initially Baban and Mukri, either attempted to remain independent of both empires or recognized Safavid suzerainty.[3]

The Ottomans and Safavids frequently relied on these Kurdish emirates as crucial buffer zones along their long and often volatile frontier. The *mirs* and their tribal forces were also valued for their military support in the protracted imperial conflicts.[3] However, the loyalty of the Kurdish emirates could be fluid, with some rulers skillfully shifting allegiances to maximize their autonomy or gain advantages from one empire against the other. The Baban emirate, for instance, is known to have fluctuated in its loyalties between the Ottomans and Persians depending on the strategic circumstances.[13]

The degree of autonomy enjoyed by the Kurdish principalities varied considerably over time and from one region to another. It was generally contingent upon the strength of the central imperial government – periods of imperial weakness often corresponded with greater Kurdish independence – and the specific strategic importance of a particular emirate.[8] The formal division of Kurdistan, largely along the Zagros Mountains, by the Treaty of Zuhab in 1639, solidified the influence of the two empires over their respective Kurdish territories, creating a lasting geopolitical reality.[3]

This system of Kurdish emirates, while providing a framework for a degree of Kurdish self-rule and cultural expression for several centuries, was inherently unstable. It was characterized by

internal rivalries among the emirates themselves [5] and an external dependence on the competing Ottoman and Safavid empires. This "golden age" of relative autonomy was thus built on a fragile foundation. When, in the first half of the 19th century, the Ottoman Empire under Sultan Mahmud II and his successors embarked on a series of modernizing and centralizing reforms (the *Tanzimat*), these age-old Kurdish administrative structures were systematically dismantled. Hereditary rulers were removed, their powers curtailed, and Kurdish territories were brought under more direct imperial control, marking the end of this long era of semi-independence.[2] A similar process, though sometimes with different timing and methods, occurred in the Persian-controlled parts of Kurdistan. The autonomy of the emirates was a product of a specific geopolitical configuration—namely, Ottoman-Safavid rivalry and a degree of decentralized imperial control. It was not, in itself, a trajectory towards unified Kurdish statehood due to the persistent internal fragmentation and the nature of their power, which was often derived from, or negotiated with, external suzerains. Nevertheless, the memory of these autonomous emirates, their rulers, and their cultural achievements would later contribute significantly to the historical narratives and aspirations of modern Kurdish nationalist movements, representing a tangible precedent for self-governance.

V. Spiritual Worlds: Religious Beliefs and Practices

The spiritual landscape of pre-modern Kurdistan was exceptionally diverse, characterized by ancient indigenous faiths, the widespread adoption of Islam in its various forms, and the influential presence of Sufi orders. This religious pluralism was a defining feature of Kurdish culture.

A. Ancient Faiths and Syncretic Traditions: Yazidism, Yarsanism, and Zoroastrian Echoes

Before the advent of Islam, the majority of Kurds are believed to have followed a western Iranic pre-Zoroastrian faith, with roots directly in ancient Indo-Iranian religious traditions.[11] Elements of this ancient spiritual heritage survived and evolved, often in syncretic forms, within distinct Kurdish communities, most notably the Yazidis and Yarsanis. Kurdish Alevism also incorporates some of these older substratum beliefs.[11]

Yazidism is a monotheistic ethnic religion primarily found among Kurds in northern Iraq, southeastern Turkey, northern Syria, the Caucasus region, and parts of Iran.[26] Its origins are complex, with roots in ancient western Iranian religious traditions, later overlaid with elements of Islam (particularly Sufism), Judaism, and Nestorian Christianity.[26] Yazidism became notably syncretic over time, also absorbing aspects that some scholars link to Manichaeism.[29] Yazidis believe in one God, *Xwede*, who created the world and then entrusted its care to seven Holy Beings or Angels (*heft sirr*), the chief of whom is Tawûsê Melek, the Peacock Angel.[26] Outsiders have often misunderstood Tawûsê Melek, mistakenly identifying him with Satan, which has subjected the Yazidis to centuries of persecution and misrepresentation as "devil worshippers".[26] Some trace the historical origins of the Yazidi faith to communities in the Kurdish mountains where devotion to the fallen Umayyad dynasty persisted long after 750

CE.[26] The Yazidis experienced a period of geographic expansion and increased political power during the 13th and 14th centuries, but their influence waned from the 15th century onwards due to pressure and massacres by surrounding Muslim rulers who viewed them as apostates.[26] Key Yazidi beliefs include a unique creation story (they believe they are descended from Adam but not from Eve), which traditionally led to strict endogamy, forbidding marriage outside the community.[26] They also believe in metempsychosis, the transmigration of souls, which allows for progressive spiritual purification.[26] The central religious site for Yazidis is the tomb of Sheikh ʿAdī ibn Musafir (d. circa 1162) in Lalish, northern Iraq, which is the object of annual pilgrimage.[17] Sheikh ʿAdī, a figure of paramount importance in Yazidism, was historically an orthodox Sunni Sufi whose followers, in the unique religious environment of the Kurdish mountains, gradually developed the distinct theological and ritual system that became Yazidism.[17] The sacred texts of the Yazidis have been primarily transmitted orally; the two best-known written texts, the *Meshefa Reş* (Black Book) and the *Kitêba Cilvê* (Book of Revelation), are now widely suspected by scholars to be 19th-century compilations, though their contents are believed to reflect authentic Yazidi oral traditions and a corpus of hymns in Kurdish.[22]

Yarsanism, also known as Ahl-e Haqq ("People of Truth") or Ali-Allahi, is another distinct faith found among Kurds, particularly in western Iran and parts of Iraqi Kurdistan. It is believed to have been founded, or significantly reformed, by Sultan Sahak in the late 14th or early 15th century.[27] Yarsanis believe in one God who manifests Himself in successive human forms (*mazhariyyat*). In each epoch of the world, there is one primary and seven secondary manifestations (the *Heft Tan* or "Seven Persons").[27] Ali ibn Abi Talib, the cousin and son-in-law of Prophet Muhammad, is considered a primary divine manifestation, which explains the alternative name "Ali-Allahi" (believers in the divinity of Ali).[30] Sultan Sahak is revered as the primary manifestation of the current, Fourth Epoch.[30] Core Yarsani tenets include the belief in the transmigration of the soul (*dunaduni* in Kurdish), angelology, millenarian expectations, and a strong emphasis on egalitarianism within the community.[30] Their cosmology posits a universe composed of two distinct yet interrelated worlds: the internal (*bātinī*) and the external (*zāhirī*), with human lives governed by the rules of the inner world. This aspect of Yarsani faith is often identified as a form of Kurdish esotericism that emerged under the strong influence of Bātinī Sufism.[30] The principal holy book of the Yarsanis is the *Kalâm-e Saranjâm* (Discourse of the End), which contains their sacred teachings and hymns.[22] The *tembûr*, a long-necked lute, is a sacred instrument in Yarsanism, played during religious ceremonies and gatherings (*jem*).[30] Similar to Yazidism, Yarsanism may have emerged from a matrix of orthodox Sufi communities interacting with pre-Islamic Iranian beliefs and practices prevalent in the region.[17]

The persistence and profoundly syncretic nature of faiths like Yazidism and Yarsanism are telling. They incorporated diverse elements from ancient Iranian spiritual traditions, various interpretations of Islam (especially Sufism), and sometimes other regional beliefs. This highlights a deep-rooted cultural tendency among some Kurdish communities to synthesize a multitude of spiritual influences rather than adopting monolithic religious systems wholesale.

These were not simply static "holdovers" from a bygone pre-Islamic era but dynamic, living traditions that actively absorbed, reinterpreted, and integrated various elements encountered within the complex religious landscape of Kurdistan. This suggests a historical cultural environment where religious boundaries were perhaps more porous, or where existing spiritual frameworks were creatively adapted to accommodate new influences, particularly those of Islam as mediated through Sufi orders. This syncretic tendency is a key characteristic of the pre-modern Kurdish spiritual experience for a significant portion of the population. It also helps to explain why these groups were often viewed as heterodox or even heretical by more dogmatic Islamic authorities, leading to periods of misunderstanding, discrimination, and persecution.

Regarding **Zoroastrian influences**, while Zoroastrianism was a dominant religion in the broader Iranian world, including parts of Kurdistan, before the Islamic era [28], its direct and continuous practice among large segments of the Kurdish population into later pre-modern times is less clear. The pre-Islamic faith of most Kurds is described as a "western Iranic pre-Zoroastrian faith" [11], implying shared ancient Iranian roots and potential influences from Zoroastrianism, rather than universal adherence to the Sasanian state version of Zoroastrian orthodoxy. Yazidism itself is seen as having roots in this pre-Zoroastrian Iranic milieu.[27] While some modern Kurdish nationalists have emphasized Zoroastrianism as the "original religion of the Kurds" [32], its widespread practice in an organized form appears to have significantly declined after the Islamization of the region, though its cultural and symbolic echoes may have persisted in folklore and certain customs.

B. The Arrival and Consolidation of Islam: Sunni, Shia, and Alevi Communities

The spread of Islam among the Kurdish population began in the 7th century CE, concomitant with the early Muslim conquests of Mesopotamia and Persia.[11] Figures like Jaban al-Kurdi and his son Meymun al-Kurdi are traditionally believed to be among the first Kurds to convert to Islam.[11] While initial conversions occurred, mass conversion of Kurdish tribes to Islam largely took place during the reign of the second Rashidun Caliph, Umar ibn Al-Khattab (634-644 CE).[11] Kurdish tribes, who had been an important element within the Sasanian Empire, initially offered resistance to the advancing Muslim armies. However, as the eventual collapse of Sasanian power became evident, Kurdish tribal leaders gradually submitted to Muslim rule, and their tribe members followed suit in accepting Islam.[11]

The majority of Kurds who embraced Islam became Sunni Muslims, predominantly following the Shafiʿi school of jurisprudence, with a smaller number adhering to the Hanafi school.[11] Sunni Islam, often intertwined with Sufi practices, became the dominant religious affiliation for most Kurds and remains so today. Shia Muslim communities also exist among the Kurds, particularly in regions of Iran bordering Shia majority areas and in parts of Iraq.[11]

Kurdish Alevism represents another significant religious community with a presence among Kurds, particularly in parts of Anatolia. Alevism is a syncretic faith on the periphery of Shia Islam, characterized by a profound veneration for Ali ibn Abi Talib, the cousin and son-in-law

of Prophet Muhammad.[19] The term "Alevi" itself means "adherent of Ali." Alevism as a distinct socio-religious phenomenon is thought to have developed in Central and Eastern Anatolia from the 13th century onwards, shaped by itinerant Sufi mystics (*babas*) who were influential among nomadic and semi-nomadic Turkoman and Kurdish tribes. These tribes were often only superficially Islamized and lived on the margins of state control.[19] Alevism incorporates elements from pre-Islamic Turkic shamanism (though Kurdish Alevism would also draw upon local Iranic and Kurdish pre-Islamic beliefs), as well as aspects of mainstream Shia Islam, particularly influenced by cultural and religious contacts with Safavid Iran from the 16th century onwards.[19] Historically, Alevis were often referred to by the term *Kızılbaş* ("Red-Heads," after their distinctive headgear associated with early Safavid supporters), a designation that frequently carried pejorative connotations from the Ottoman authorities who viewed them with suspicion due to their Safavid sympathies and heterodox practices.[19] The Kızılbaş movement was closely connected with the Safavid order (Safaviyya), founded in Ardabil (northwestern Iran) in 1301. This order initially began as a Sunni Sufi brotherhood but, under leaders like Sheikh Junayd and Sheikh Haydar in the 15th century, gradually adopted militant esoteric Shia doctrines and attracted a large following among Anatolian Turkmen and Kurdish tribes.[19] The harsh reaction of the Ottoman state to Kızılbaş support for the Safavids, especially after the Battle of Chaldiran, combined with the Safavid dynasty's own later shift towards a more orthodox Twelver Shiism, tended to isolate the Kızılbaş communities. This led them to develop into relatively closed societies, practicing endogamy, avoiding extensive contact with state institutions, and preserving their distinct doctrines and rituals in secrecy.[19] Until the mid-20th century, the social structures of many Kurdish Alevi communities remained largely tribal, with religious life guided by hereditary holy families known as *ocak* ("hearth"). These *ocak* lineages often claimed descent from Imam Husayn (Ali's son and the third Shia Imam) and their leaders held titles like *seyit* (sayyid). The religious organization was hierarchical, based on the relationship between disciples (*talip*) and their spiritual guides: the *rayber* (guide), *pir* (elder or master), and *murshid* (master of masters).[33]

C. Sufi Orders and their Influence in Kurdish Society

Sufism, the mystical dimension of Islam, has had a profound and lasting influence on the religious practices, social fabric, and even political life of the Kurds.[17] For many Kurds, Islam was, and continues to be, experienced through the lens of Sufi teachings and the guidance of Sufi shaykhs (masters). Networks of madrasas and Sufi orders (*tariqas*) often functioned as important mechanisms of social integration, creating bonds of solidarity that could transcend or overlay purely tribal divisions.[17]

The two most prominent Sufi orders among the Kurds have historically been the **Qadiriyya**, named after Abd al-Qadir Gilani (d. 1166), and the **Naqshbandiyya**, which gained widespread influence in Kurdistan from the 15th century onwards and particularly in later centuries.[17] Many Kurds claim thatAbd al-Qadir Gilani himself was of Kurdish origin, hailing from a district named Gilan in southern Kurdistan, although this is debated by scholars who usually place his origin in Gilan, Iran.[17] Regardless of his origins, his order found fertile ground in Kurdistan. Learned Kurdish ulama (religious scholars) and Sufis made significant

contributions to Islamic scholarship and literature, writing in Arabic and Persian as well as Kurdish. An early Kurdish Sufi teacher who gained international renown wasAmmar b. Yasir al-Bidlisi (d. circa 1200).[17]

Sufi shaykhs often wielded considerable social, economic, and political influence. Their *zawiyas* (lodges or hospices) served as centers for religious worship, spiritual instruction, and social welfare. They also acted as spaces for mediation, for instance, between urban and rural communities, or between different tribal groups, and provided networks of support and solidarity, especially for individuals migrating to new areas.[34] The authority of these shaykhs could sometimes rival or even supersede that of tribal aghas or local emirs. Indeed, many of the early Kurdish uprisings that had a proto-nationalist character, particularly in the 19th and early 20th centuries (though drawing on pre-modern structures of authority), were led by influential shaykhs of the Qadiriyya or Naqshbandiyya orders, such as Sheikh Ubeydullah of Nehri (Naqshbandi) or Sheikh Mahmud Barzanji (Qadiri).[17] This demonstrates that Sufi orders and their leaders were pivotal socio-political actors in pre-modern Kurdistan, forming an alternative or complementary power structure. Their influence on shaping Kurdish society, politics, and collective identity was profound and cannot be understood solely through the lens of princely or tribal rule. This also implies that the process of Islamization among Kurds was often mediated and shaped by Sufi interpretations and networks.

D. Madrasas: Centers of Learning and Islamic Scholarship

With the consolidation of Islam in Kurdistan, madrasas (Islamic schools or colleges) emerged as important centers of learning and religious scholarship.[11] The first Kurdish madrasa is reported to have been established around the 950s CE in Hamadan, in what is now Iranian Kurdistan.[11] These institutions played a crucial role in educating the local population in Islamic sciences and preserving and transmitting knowledge.

It is reported that Saladin, the Ayyubid Sultan, undertook reforms of the madrasa educational system in the lands under his rule, which included Kurdish regions. These reforms are said to have broadened the curriculum beyond purely Islamic sciences to include various branches of other sciences, and notably, to have emphasized "Kurdish lessons".[11] The curriculum in Kurdish madrasas typically included the study of Quranic exegesis (*Tafsir*), Prophetic traditions (*Hadith*), Islamic jurisprudence (*Fiqh*), Arabic grammar, logic, and often subjects like mathematics, astronomy, medicine, and philosophy.[11] While most advanced textbooks were in Arabic (the scholarly lingua franca of the Islamic world), there is evidence that these texts were often translated into Kurdish by educators and scholars to facilitate understanding among students.[11] This practice suggests an early awareness of the importance of the vernacular in education and knowledge transmission, even within a predominantly Perso-Arabic scholarly environment. It points to a pragmatic approach to education, aiming for genuine comprehension by students, and also suggests a value placed on the Kurdish language itself as a medium for learning, not just for oral communication. While a fully standardized written Kurdish was slow to develop, these efforts at the madrasa level likely laid some groundwork for literacy in Kurdish and the preservation of the language in learned contexts.

There appears to have been a cultural emphasis on education, with an expectation or aspiration that at least one child from each household (primarily male, though female scholars like Fakhr-un-Nisa are noted [11]) would receive an education in a madrasa.[11] Beyond the formal madrasas, primary schools (*maktab* or *kuttab*, often attached to mosques), mosques themselves, and Sufi dervish lodges also served as venues for imparting knowledge, particularly in ethics, basic literacy, arts, and vocational skills, reflecting a pattern seen in the broader Ottoman and Islamic world.[35] The more centralized Ottoman state educational institutions like the Enderun (Palace School) and the *devshirme* system were primarily designed to train personnel for state service and likely had limited direct impact on the general educational landscape of the more autonomous Kurdish regions, where education remained largely localized and often linked to religious scholars and Sufi networks.

Table 3: Religious Diversity among Pre-Modern Kurds

Religious Group	**Brief Core Tenets/Characteristics**	**Key Figures/Founders (if applicable)**	**Regions of Prevalence in Kurdistan (Pre-19th c.)**	**Sacred Texts/Oral Traditions**	**Relationship with other groups/empires**
Sunni Islam (predominantly Shafi'i)	Adherence to Quran and Sunna, recognition of first four Caliphs. Shafi'i school of jurisprudence common.	Prophet Muhammad; Imam Shafi'i	Widespread throughout most Kurdish areas.	Quran, Hadith.	Dominant religion; relationship with Ottoman (Sunni) state generally aligned, though political tensions existed. [11]
Yazidism (Êzidîtî)	Monotheistic; belief in God (*Xwede*) and seven Holy Beings, chief among them Tawûsê Melek (Peacock Angel). Syncretic, with elements from ancient Iranic religions, Sufism,	Sheikh ʿAdī ibn Musafir (revered reformer/saint)	Sinjar, Sheikhan (Iraq); parts of Syria, Turkey.	Primarily oral tradition; *Kitêba Cilvê* (Book of Revelation) and *Meshefa Reş* (Black Book) are key texts (though dating debated).	Often misunderstood and persecuted by surrounding Muslim populations as "devil worshippers." Maintained distinct identity. [17]

	Christianity, Judaism. Belief in metempsychosis.				
Yarsanism (Ahl-e Haqq / Kakai)	Belief in one God with successive manifestations (*mazhariyyat*), including Ali and Sultan Sahak. Transmigration of soul (*dunaduni*). Esoteric (*bātinī*) interpretations.	Sultan Sahak (founder/reformer, c. 14th-15th c.)	Kermanshah, Luristan (Iran); Kirkuk, Khanaqin (Iraq).	*Kalâm-e Saranjâm* (sacred text). Strong oral tradition. Use of *tembûr* in rituals.	Syncretic, often practiced discreetly. Viewed as heterodox by orthodox Muslims. [27]
Alevism (Kurdish Alevi / Kızılbaş)	Reverence for Ali and the Twelve Imams (similar to Shia), but with distinct rituals and syncretic beliefs incorporating pre-Islamic elements. Not strictly bound by Sharia.	Pir Sultan Abdal, Shah Ismail (Safavid founder, revered by Kızılbaş)	Dersim, Maraş, Sivas, Malatya regions (Anatolia).	Oral traditions, *deyiş* (religious hymns), *buyruks* (manuals).	Historically allied with Safavids, faced persecution from Ottomans. Maintained distinct communal structures. [19]
Shia Islam (Twelver)	Adherence to Quran and Sunna through Ahl al-Bayt; belief in Twelve Imams.	Prophet Muhammad, Ali, the Twelve Imams.	Southern Kurdish areas of Iran (e.g., parts of Kermanshah, Ilam), some communities in Iraq.	Quran, Hadith (Shia collections), teachings of Imams.	Official religion of Safavid/Persian empires; Kurds in these areas often adopted or were influenced by Shia Islam. [11]
Sufi Orders	Mystical paths	`Abd al-Qadir	Widespread	Quran, Sunna,	Highly

(e.g., Qadiriyya, Naqshbandiyya)	within Islam focused on spiritual development and direct experience of God. Organized around a Shaykh (master) and disciples.	Gilani (Qadiriyya); Baha-ud-Din Naqshband Bukhari (Naqshbandiyya)	across Sunni Kurdish areas, deeply integrated into religious and social life.	writings of Sufi masters, oral teachings.	influential socially and politically; provided networks across tribes; Shaykhs often powerful leaders. [17]
Pre-Islamic Iranic Traditions (General Influence)	Echoes of ancient Indo-Iranian and pre-Zoroastrian beliefs regarding nature, deities, and cosmology.	Not applicable (diffuse influence).	Underlying stratum in Yazidism, Yarsanism, some folk beliefs.	Reflected in folklore, certain customs, and the syncretic elements of other faiths.	Largely absorbed or transformed by later dominant religions, but elements persisted. [11]

VI. The Power of Words: Language, Orality, and Early Literature

A. The Kurdish Linguistic Mosaic: Dialects and Development

The Kurdish language, a member of the Northwestern branch of the Iranian language family (itself part of the Indo-Iranian and broader Indo-European family), is closely related to Persian and Pashto.[2] However, "Kurdish" is not a single, monolithic, standardized language but rather a complex continuum of dialects spoken across a vast and often mountainous territory.[36] Before the 19th century, this dialectal diversity was a defining feature of the Kurdish linguistic landscape.

The major pre-modern dialect groups generally recognized by linguists include Northern Kurdish (Kurmanji), Central Kurdish (often referred to as Sorani, though this term more accurately applies to its later standardized literary form), and Southern Kurdish (including Kermanshahi, Laki, Faili, and Kalhuri, though Laki's classification is sometimes debated).[36] It is important to note that Zazaki (also known as Dimli) and Gurani (Gorani or Hawrami), while spoken by communities often considered culturally Kurdish and geographically interspersed with Kurdish speakers, are linguistically distinct West Iranian languages. Although they share numerous phonetic, phraseological, and syntactic similarities with Kurdish dialects due to long

periods of contact and mutual influence, historical phonology confirms their separate origins from the Kurdish language proper.[22]

The degree of dialectal differentiation within Kurdish itself was, and remains, significant. Communication between monolingual speakers of geographically distant dialects, such as Northern Kurdish (Kurmanji) from the Anatolian highlands and Southern Kurdish from the southern Zagros, would have been very difficult, if not impossible.[36] This lack of a unifying standard Kurdish language across the regions inhabited by Kurds contributed to the evolution of distinct regional cultural and literary traditions.

Reconstructing the earlier historical stages of the Kurdish language is challenging due to the relative scarcity of extant written texts predating the 16th century CE.[36] Unlike Persian, which has a continuous written tradition from Old Persian through Middle Persian (Pahlavi) to New Persian, Kurdish lacks known direct predecessors from Old and Middle Iranian times. Therefore, understanding its earlier evolution relies heavily on comparative linguistics, analyzing available Kurdish data alongside other Iranian languages and dialects, both ancient and modern.[36]

Historical phonology suggests that Kurdish shares certain archaic sound changes with Balochi (another Northwestern Iranian language), diverging from developments seen in Old Persian, which points to an early connection within the Northwestern Iranian group. However, in later, pre-Middle Iranian periods, Kurdish appears to show a greater inclination towards features characteristic of the "Southwestern" Iranian languages (like Persian) compared to Balochi and other "Northwestern" tongues.[36] Morphologically, the differences between Kurdish dialects were even more pronounced than phonological variations. For instance, Northern Kurdish (Kurmanji) and some Central Kurdish dialects preserved an older, more complex inflectional system for masculine nouns and a distinction of grammatical gender, features which were largely simplified or lost in Southern Kurdish and other Central Kurdish dialects, which in this respect came to resemble New Persian.[36] The *Ezafe* construction (a grammatical particle linking nouns and adjectives or nouns in possessive relationships) also varies across Kurdish dialects, being more complex in the Northern dialects and gradually simplifying towards the south, with Central dialects often occupying an intermediate position.[36]

B. The Enduring Legacy of Oral Tradition: Epic Poetry (*Mem û Zîn*), Folklore, and the Dengbêj

In a society where widespread literacy in the vernacular was limited and standardized written forms were slow to develop, oral tradition served as the primary mode of cultural transmission and preservation for centuries. This tradition was exceptionally strong and vibrant among the Kurds, encompassing a vast repertoire of epic poetry, rich folklore, traditional songs, and intricate storytelling.[1]

Central to this oral heritage were the **dengbêj**, the Kurdish bards, minstrels, or storytellers. These highly skilled individuals were not merely entertainers but were revered as the living repositories of collective memory, history, myths, legends, and epic tales.[23] Traveling from

region to region, or attached to the courts of tribal chieftains and emirs, the *dengbêj* played a crucial role in preserving and disseminating Kurdish language, cultural values, and historical narratives through their sung poetry and prose recitations. Kurdish folklore is traditionally categorized into genres such as the narratives of storytellers (*çîrokbêj*), the epic songs of the bards (*dengbêj*), and the more lyrical songs of popular singers (*stranbêj*).[37]

The most celebrated product of this oral-literary tradition is the epic romance of ***Mem û Zîn***. This classic work, considered by many to be the national epic of Kurdish literature, was given its definitive written form in the Kurmanji dialect by the poet and scholar **Ehmedê Xanî** in 1692.[6] However, the story of Mem and Zin is based on an older tale, likely originating in the 14th or 15th century, which had been narrated and sung by *dengbêj* for generations before Xanî committed it to writing.[23] The epic recounts the tragic love between Mem, of the Alan clan, and Zin, of the Botan clan, whose union is thwarted by the machinations of the antagonist Bakr. Beyond the romantic narrative, *Mem û Zîn* is rich in Sufi mystical discourse and, significantly, contains poignant reflections on the state of the Kurdish people. Xanî famously laments Kurdish disunity and the absence of a unifying Kurdish king or independent state, expressing an early form of Kurdish collective consciousness and aspiration for self-determination.[6] In his preface, Xanî explicitly referred to the Kurds, Arabs, Persians, and Turks as distinct *milal* (nations), using the term in an ethnic rather than purely religious sense, which was a remarkable conceptualization for its time.[6]

In a period with limited standardized written Kurdish, the flourishing of such a sophisticated oral tradition, particularly epic poetry like *Mem û Zîn*, served as the primary vehicle for cultural continuity, historical memory, and the articulation of a distinct Kurdish identity. The *dengbêj* were not just entertainers but vital cultural custodians. In the relative absence of widespread literacy in Kurdish or a unified written standard, and given the significant dialectal diversity, this rich oral culture was the main repository and transmitter of Kurdish language, history, values, and collective identity. Epics like *Mem û Zîn* provided shared cultural touchstones that resonated across different regions and tribal groups, helping to maintain a sense of "Kurdishness" despite political fragmentation.

Ehmedê Xanî's explicit articulation of Kurdish identity and his lament for Kurdish disunity in *Mem û Zîn*, using the term *milal* (nations) in an ethnic sense, represents a significant early formulation of proto-nationalist sentiment. This occurred within the context of autonomous Kurdish emirates but also reflected a keen awareness of the Kurds' political position relative to the larger Ottoman and Safavid imperial powers. Xanî's work was not just a love story; it was a profound political and cultural commentary. His clear articulation of Kurdish distinctiveness and the problems posed by internal divisions and the lack of unified leadership points to a sophisticated level of ethno-political consciousness well before the 19th-century rise of modern nationalism in the Middle East. While not nationalism in its fully developed modern form, Xanî's work provides compelling evidence of important intellectual antecedents and a long-standing discourse on Kurdish identity and political destiny, offering a powerful literary foundation for later nationalist movements.

Other forms of oral literature included the *bayt*, an orally transmitted story that could be entirely sung or a combination of sung verse and spoken prose.[37] The religious texts and

hymns of the Yazidis were also predominantly transmitted and preserved through oral tradition for many centuries.[22]

C. The Dawn of Written Kurdish: Key Figures and Foundational Texts

While oral tradition predominated, written literature in Kurdish dialects began to emerge more discernibly from the 16th and 17th centuries onwards, though some earlier traces exist. The earliest "proper text" identified as being written in Kurdish is a Kurmanji translation of a Christian prayer, transcribed in Armenian letters and dated between 1430 and 1446.[22]
One of the most important historical works concerning the Kurds from this period is the ***Sharafnameh*** (The Book of Honor), completed in 1597 by **Sharaf Khan Bidlisi** (1543–1599), the *mir* of the Bitlis principality.[1] This comprehensive chronicle, written in Persian, details the history of various Kurdish dynasties, principalities, tribes, and notable figures, and remains an indispensable, albeit not always impartial, source for pre-modern Kurdish history. The choice of Persian, the dominant literary and administrative language of the wider region, was a pragmatic one for Sharaf Khan, who was educated at the Safavid court. It aimed to ensure his work reached a broad audience across Persian-speaking lands and enhanced the legitimacy and prestige of his own dynasty and the Kurdish ruling class in the eyes of the imperial powers.[12] This decision, while making the *Sharafnameh* an invaluable historical resource *for* the Kurds, also underscores the linguistic pressures and choices faced by Kurdish elites. It highlights a tension between articulating a specific Kurdish history and the need to use the dominant imperial languages for broader intellectual and political currency, especially when Kurdish prose traditions were less developed for such monumental undertakings. Thus, this foundational historical text did not directly contribute to the development of Kurdish prose in the same way that Ehmedê Xanî's *Mem û Zîn* (composed in Kurmanji) contributed to Kurdish poetry.
Several poets writing in Kurdish dialects gained prominence in the pre-modern era:

- **Ali Hariri** (Elî Herîrî): Traditionally dated to 1009-1079 [11], though these dates are disputed by some modern scholars who place him later, possibly in the 15th century or even later.[22] He is considered one of the earliest classical poets in the Kurmanji dialect.
- **Melayê Cizîrî** (Mullah Jaziri) (1570–1640): A highly influential Kurmanji poet from the Jazira Botan region, renowned for his Sufi-inspired *ghazals* (lyric poems) and *qasidas* (odes), many of which remain popular.[22]
- **Feqiyê Teyran** (Faqi Tayran) (1590–1660): Reportedly a student of Melayê Cizîrî, he also composed *ghazals* and *qasidas* in Kurmanji, and is noted for his narrative poems in the *mathnawi* (couplet) form, including *Hikayeta Şêxê Sen'an* (The Story of Sheikh San'an) and *Qewlê Hespê Reş* (The Tale of the Black Horse).[22]
- **Ehmedê Xanî** (Ahmad Khani) (1650–1707): Widely regarded as the most renowned of the early Kurdish poets, his masterpiece *Mem û Zîn* established him as a towering figure in Kurdish literature.[6] He also wrote other works, including a Kurdish-Arabic dictionary for children (*Nûbihara Biçûkan*) and is credited with an early literary account of the Battle of Dimdim (a Kurdish uprising against the Safavids).[22]
- **Mela Huseynê Bateyî** (Mullah Husayn Bateyi) (active 17th - mid-18th century): Known

for his popular *mawlud*, a poem celebrating the birth of Prophet Muhammad, written in Kurmanji, which was so widespread that even some Yazidis reportedly adopted parts of it into their oral religious literature.[22]

- Earlier Islamic poets mentioned include **Bassami Kurdi** (9th century) and **Evdilsemedê Babek** (Abd al-Samad Babak) (972-1019).[11]

Literature in the Gorani dialect (also referred to as Hawrami) also has a significant history, with Gorani serving as a literary *koiné* in parts of Kurdistan, particularly within the Ardalan emirate. Notable Gorani poets include:

- **Balül** (Balul Mahi) (9th century): An early poet associated with the Yarsani faith.[22]
- **Mele Perîşan** (Mala Parishan Dinawari) (14th century).[22]
- **Khana Qubadi** (Xana Qubadî) (1700–1759): A prolific poet from the Qubadi tribe in the Jaf confederacy, known for works like *Şîrîn û Xesrew*.[22]
- **Almas Khan-e Kanoule'ei** (17th-18th century).[22]

As mentioned earlier, the Baban principality in southern Kurdistan encouraged literary production in the Sorani dialect cluster.[13] **Mastoureh Ardalan** (Mah Sharaf Khanom Kurdistani) (1805–1848), a poet and historian from the Ardalan ruling family, wrote primarily in Persian but also composed poetry in Kurdish (likely Gorani or an early form of Sorani). Although her life extends into the early 19th century, her work is rooted in the cultural environment of the pre-modern Kurdish emirates.[22]

Table 2: Major Pre-Modern Kurdish Literary Figures and Works

Author	Approximate Period	Major Work(s)	Language/Dialect Used	Key Themes/Significance
Ali Hariri (Elî Herîrî)	11th c. (traditional) or 15th c. onwards (disputed)	Ghazals, Qasidas (mostly lost)	Kurmanji	Early classical Kurdish poetry, love, mysticism. [11]
Melayê Cizîrî	1570–1640	*Dîwan* (collection of poems)	Kurmanji (Bohtan dialect)	Sufi mysticism, divine love, nature. Highly influential. [22]
Feqiyê Teyran	1590–1660	*Hikayeta Şêxê Sen'an*, *Qewlê Hespê Reş*, *Dîwan*	Kurmanji	Narrative poetry, folklore, Sufism, lyrical poems. [22]
Sharaf Khan Bidlisi	1543–1599	*Sharafnameh* (Book of Honor)	Persian	Comprehensive history of Kurdish dynasties and principalities. Foundational historical text. [1]
Ehmedê Xanî	1650–1707	*Mem û Zîn*,	Kurmanji	National epic,

		Nûbihara Biçûkan, *Eqîda Îmanê*		tragic love, Sufism, Kurdish identity, proto-nationalist sentiments, didactic works. [6]
Mela Huseynê Bateyî	17th – mid-18th c.	*Mewlûda Kurdî* (Kurdish Mawlid)	Kurmanji	Popular religious poem on Prophet Muhammad's birth. [22]
Khana Qubadi (Xana Qubadî)	1700–1759	*Şîrîn û Xesrew*, *Dîwan*	Gorani	Romantic epics, lyrical poetry. Important figure in Gorani literary tradition. [22]
Mastoureh Ardalan	1805–1848	*Tarikh-i Ardalan* (History of Ardalan), *Dîwan*	Persian, Kurdish (Gorani/early Sorani)	History, poetry. Notable female intellectual from a ruling family. (Straddles pre-modern/modern). [22]
Balül (Balul Mahi)	9th century	Religious poetry (associated with Yarsanism)	Gorani	Early Gorani poetry, Yarsani religious themes. [22]

VII. Expressions of Culture: Arts, Crafts, and Customs

A. Material Culture: The Artistry of Carpet Weaving and Textiles

The Kurdish people possess a rich and ancient tradition of weaving, a skill passed down through generations, particularly vibrant among the nomadic and semi-nomadic communities who produced intricate and durable textiles essential for their way of life.[1] These woven items included not only floor coverings (rugs and kilims) but also a variety of bags (*heybe*, *çuval*), tent trappings, animal covers, and bands, all adorned with patterns and motifs reflecting their environment and cultural symbolism.

While nomadic weaving was primarily for utilitarian and personal use, urban workshops in centers like Sonqor, Senna (Sanandaj), Garrus, Sa'uj Bulagh (Mahabad), and Bijar also developed, producing more elaborate and finely woven carpets, often for tribal leaders, local elites, and for trade both regionally and internationally.[38] Kurdish weaving is distinguished by the use of high-quality, lustrous, and exceptionally strong wool, typically sourced from their

own flocks of sheep. Weavers, predominantly women, especially in nomadic and village settings, employed natural dyes derived from local plants, roots, and minerals, achieving a rich palette of colors known for their depth, subtlety, and harmonious combinations.[39] Kurdish rugs are often characterized by their robust construction, geometric designs, and sometimes by whimsical signs of spontaneous creativity and asymmetry, which lend them a unique charm.[39] The designs and motifs found in Kurdish weavings could vary significantly by region and tribe, reflecting local traditions and influences from neighboring cultures. For example, Kurdish weavers in "Northwest" regions (likely referring to areas bordering the Caucasus) adopted and adapted prevalent Caucasian carpet designs such as those found in Kazak and Karabagh rugs, including diagonally striped fields and stylized dragon borders, yet their products remained distinguishable in texture and color.[39] Similarly, Quchan Kurds, who were moved by Persian shahs to Northeast Persia in the 17th and 18th centuries as a military buffer, incorporated design elements from neighboring Baluch and Turkoman weavers into their own distinct style over the subsequent centuries.[39] The art of rug-making was more than just a craft; it also served as a valuable method of teaching the young the symbolic language of patterns and colors, which formed an integral part of their cultural heritage.[39]

Certain Kurdish weaving centers became particularly renowned. Senneh (Sanandaj), the capital of the Ardalan emirate, was famous for its finely knotted carpets, often with silk foundations, characterized by intricate, small-scale patterns (like the *herati* or fish design) and a closely clipped pile. Senneh also produced distinctive flatweave (*kilim*) rugs, known for their densely ornamented, often curvilinear designs, which stand in sharp contrast to the geometric kilims of many other regions.[39] Nearby, the town of Bijar and its surrounding villages gained fame for producing exceptionally durable carpets, earning them the moniker "Iron Rugs of Persia." Bijar rugs are characterized by their tightly packed knots, heavy wool, and rigid foundation, often featuring bold medallions or all-over floral patterns.[39] While the commercial production in these towns became more prominent towards the late 19th century, their weaving traditions were built upon older, established practices.

B. The Rhythms of Life: Traditional Kurdish Music and Dance

Music and dance are vibrant and integral expressions of Kurdish culture, deeply embedded in social life, celebrations, and rituals, and serving as powerful symbols of identity, unity, and heritage.

Kurdish Music (*Mûzîka Kurdî*) is culturally distinct from the musical traditions of neighboring Arabic, Armenian, and Turkish peoples, though historical interactions have led to some shared instrumental or modal influences. Traditional Kurdish music, often composed anonymously, is frequently characterized by melancholic and elegiac themes, particularly in the epic songs (*lawik* or *beyt*) and love ballads (*heyranok*). However, the repertoire also includes many upbeat and joyous melodies used for dances and festive occasions.[37] Vocals are typically primary in Kurdish music, with instrumental accompaniment supporting the singer. A wide array of traditional instruments are used, including various types of lutes like the *tembûr* (a long-necked fretted lute, also known as tanbur, with specific significance in Yarsani religious music [31]), and the *bağlama* (saz); wind instruments such as the *duduk* (an oboe-like

double-reed instrument), the *kaval* or *bilûr* (end-blown flutes), the *şimşal* (a long shepherd's flute), and the powerful *zirne* (a loud oboe, typically played with the *dahol* drum for outdoor dances); stringed instruments like the *kemenche* (a bowed fiddle); and percussion instruments, most notably the *daf* (a large frame drum, sometimes with rings or jingles, also used in Sufi and Yazidi rituals) and the *dahol* (a large double-headed drum).[1]

Religious music holds a significant place within various Kurdish communities. Among the Ahl-e Haqq (Yarsanis), the sacred *tembûr* is played to accompany the chanting of sacred songs (*kalām*) during their communal gatherings (*jem*).[31] For the Yazidis, a special caste of musicians and reciters known as *qawāls* are responsible for performing religious hymns (*qawl*). They traditionally use the *šabbāba* (an end-blown flute) and the *daf* (frame drum with cymbals), instruments revered as particularly holy and which may only be played by a *qawāl*.[31] Alevi religious gatherings (*cem*) historically featured music played on the *tomir* (a small lute), though in more recent times the Turkish *bağlama* has become commonly used.[31] While the earliest sound recordings of Kurdish music date only to the beginning of the 20th century, these recordings often document much older traditions that had been passed down orally for generations.[31]

Kurdish Dance, known generally as *Dîlan* or *Govend* (also *Helperkê* in some regions), is a dynamic and highly communal activity, central to Kurdish social life.[40] It is performed enthusiastically at weddings, Newroz (the Kurdish New Year, celebrated at the spring equinox), festivals, and other social gatherings, symbolizing unity, celebration, shared heritage, and sometimes even resistance.[40] The history of Kurdish dance is believed to date back thousands of years, with influences from ancient Mesopotamian cultures, and initially may have been performed as part of rituals, storytelling, and celebrations of nature or successful hunts.[41] Kurdish dances are typically characterized by their rhythmic steps, with dancers forming lines or circles (often semi-circles), holding hands, interlocking fingers, or placing arms around each other's shoulders or waists. The movements involve coordinated footwork, often with intricate steps, accompanied by characteristic shoulder shaking (*mil hejandin*).[40] A leader (*sergovend* or *destgirt*), usually at the head of the line, often twirls a colorful scarf (*desmal*) or handkerchief, guiding the dance and energizing the participants.[40] There are hundreds of regional dance varieties across Kurdistan, such as the *Kurmancî*, *Şêxanî*, *Çepik* (a fast-paced dance with clapping), *Seyran* (a slower, more elegant dance), and *Şîlan* (a lively festival dance), each with its own specific rhythms, steps, and formations.[40] Some dances are believed to derive their energy and movements from powerful natural elements important in Kurdish folklore, such as fire, mountains, and rivers.[40] The celebration of Newroz, for instance, invariably features Kurds dancing the *Govend* around bonfires, an act that represents pride in their heritage and a commitment to their identity.[40]

The communal and highly participatory nature of Kurdish music and dance played a vital socio-cultural role in reinforcing group cohesion and collective identity, particularly in a society with strong tribal structures and a legacy of oral tradition. These arts were not merely for performance or entertainment but were integral to social events and rituals, acting as a living embodiment of shared culture. In a society where kinship and tribal ties were central,

these communal artistic expressions served to strengthen these bonds, affirm shared values, and transmit cultural knowledge and collective emotions—be it joy, grief, or a spirit of resistance. They were participatory acts that reinforced a sense of belonging and reaffirmed Kurdish identity in a tangible, embodied way, which was crucial given the lack of a unified political state and the inherent diversity within Kurdish society itself.

C. Attire and Adornment: Traditional Kurdish Clothing

Traditional Kurdish clothing (*Cil û bergên Kurdewarî* or *Kincên Kurdî*) is renowned for its vibrant colors, distinctive styles, and regional variations, reflecting the diverse cultural landscape of Kurdistan and the practical needs of its inhabitants.[1] While specific styles differed, common elements and a general aesthetic often distinguished Kurdish attire from that of neighboring peoples. One of the earliest historical descriptions of Kurds having a particular way of dressing comes from the 13th-century historian Ibn Khallikan, who noted that Kurds of his time wore clothing made of cotton and a type of hat called a *mandil*.[24]

Men's traditional attire typically consisted of several key garments. Baggy trousers, known as *şalwar* or *pirqez*, were common. These were usually gathered at the waist and tapered towards the ankle, allowing for ease of movement.[24] These were often worn with a fitted shirt and a jacket or waistcoat. A wide sash or cummerbund, called a *shutk*, *pêştenk*, or *pishtend*, was wrapped around the waist, serving both as a belt and as a place to tuck small personal items or weapons.[24] Over the shirt, a *kurtik* (short jacket) or *peshm* (a type of jacket, often part of a matching suit with the trousers) might be worn.[42] Traditional materials for men's clothing included sheep wool and goat leather, especially in earlier times, later transitioning to fabrics like linen and baize, chosen according to the weather and seasons.[42] Headgear for men varied regionally and according to status, but common forms included turbans (*serbend* or *leşkerî*), skullcaps (*kefî* or *kum*), or a patterned fabric head cover known as a *jamadani* or *cemedanî* (similar to a keffiyeh), often wrapped in a particular style.[24]

Regional variations in men's clothing were notable:

- **Northern Kurdish** (e.g., Anatolia) clothing could be somewhat tight-fitting, with trousers that were tight on the lower legs but had a very loose, baggy crotch, sometimes extending to knee length. Neck scarves and waistcoats over shirts were typical. Headgear included loose turbans or skullcaps.[24]
- **Central Kurdish** style often featured a fitted, collarless jacket, open to the waist, which was tucked into gathered trousers that flared towards the ankle. This suit could be embroidered, with colors ranging from striped browns and creams to self-colored stripes. A white shirt with distinctive funnel sleeves was often worn, with the sleeves sometimes wound around the outside of the jacket arms.[24]
- **Southern Kurdish** style, which became widely adopted and is often seen as a standard Kurdish costume (famously worn by Peshmerga fighters), included very baggy trousers gathered at the waist and tapered at the ankle. The jacket was similar to the Central Kurdish style but generally lacked embroidery, and the suits were usually in solid colors, sometimes with pinstripes. A sash of varying length and width was worn around the waist. Headgear typically involved a skullcap and a large, fringed square scarf worn as a

turban.[24]

Women's traditional attire was generally even more colorful and elaborate than men's, often described as an "artistic canvas".[42] A common ensemble included a long dress (*kras* or *dishdasha*) that covered the feet. This dress was sometimes made of a somewhat transparent fabric like chiffon or voile, with soft silk threads and assorted designs or shiny metal ornaments, and worn over a thin, silky undershirt or petticoat (*zêr kras*) in a contrasting, often dark, color.[24] Over the dress, women often wore a short, sleeveless vest (*helik*, *êlek*, or *salta*), which could be heavily decorated with embroidery, beadwork, or metal ornaments, adding to the splendor of the outfit. In winter, this might be replaced by a vest or jacket with long sleeves (*kewa* or *kurk*).[24] Sashes were also commonly worn by women around the waist. Traditional materials for the overgarments included velvets and brocades, while dresses were made from cotton, silk, or voile. In more recent times (though reflecting older aesthetics), synthetic fabrics and sequined materials became popular for coats and dresses.[24]

Women's headgear was particularly varied and could be quite elaborate, signifying marital status, region, or wealth. It often included a velvet or brocade skullcap (*kofî* or *fez*), sometimes held under the chin with a beaded chain and decorated with jewelry and ornaments. This skullcap could anchor a cloth covering the back of the neck, and multiple scarves and tasselled fabrics could be artfully arranged to form a tall turban, a style commonly worn by married rural women in the past.[24]

Specific regional styles for women included:

- The **Mukriyani** costume, worn in the region around Mahabad and Saqqez in Iranian Kurdistan, was notably different. It featured more voluminous trousers worn without cotton tops, a short vest top under a sheer, straight-sleeved dress gathered at the hips, a large sash worn on the hips, and a waist-length coat. The traditional headgear included a decorated velvet or brocade pillbox hat, topped with a large triangular shawl that was crossed over the chest, with the ends hanging down the back.[24]
- The **Kurdish East Anatolian** women's costume (also found among the Kurds of Khorasan in Iran, where some Northern Kurdish tribes were deported in the 17th century) included the typical baggy trousers under a knee-length dress, often worn in layers with aprons, all in various colors. A sash was worn at the waist, along with a short jacket, though sometimes a long coat was also seen.[24]

The regional variations in Kurdish traditional clothing and dance are more than just aesthetic differences; they likely reflect historical tribal distinctions, the influence of diverse geographical environments within Kurdistan, and varying degrees of interaction with neighboring cultures (e.g., Turkish, Persian, Caucasian). This material culture served as a visual marker of local and tribal identity within the broader Kurdish cultural sphere. For instance, the resemblance of some Northern Kurdish attire to rural Turkish and Balkan costumes points to significant cultural exchange in that zone, while weavers in other areas adopted and adapted designs from groups like the Baluch or Turkomans but imbued them with a distinct Kurdish character. This rich mosaic of regional subcultures, expressed through clothing and other arts, mirrored the political and social fragmentation characteristic of the pre-modern era, while simultaneously contributing to the overall tapestry of Kurdish heritage.

VIII. Economic Foundations and Daily Sustenance

The economy of pre-modern Kurdistan was predominantly based on pastoral nomadism and agriculture, supplemented by trade and crafts. These activities were intrinsically linked to the mountainous geography of the region and the social organization of its inhabitants.

A. Pastoral Nomadism and Animal Husbandry as Economic Pillars

The traditional Kurdish way of life, and a primary economic activity for a large segment of the population, was nomadic or semi-nomadic pastoralism.[2] This system was centered on the herding of sheep and goats, which were well-adapted to the rugged terrain. Cattle, horses, and donkeys were also raised, though to a lesser extent. Pastoralism involved seasonal migrations, known as *koçer*, between summer highland pastures (*zoma* or *yayla*) where grazing was abundant, and winter lowland pastures (*germiyan* or *qishlaq*) which offered milder conditions.[8]

Animal products formed the cornerstone of the nomadic economy. These included milk (processed into yogurt, cheese, and butter), meat, wool, and hides. Wool was particularly crucial, providing the raw material for clothing, tents (often made of black goat hair), blankets, and the renowned Kurdish carpets and kilims.[39] Livestock also represented a form of wealth and were used in trade and for paying bride-wealth. The organization of nomadic pastoralism was typically tribal, with pasturelands often held collectively by a clan within the tribe's designated territory, and migrations coordinated at the tribal or sub-tribal level to avoid overgrazing and conflict.[16]

The predominance of pastoral nomadism was not merely an economic strategy but a defining feature of pre-modern Kurdish social organization, worldview, and resilience. This lifestyle shaped their tribal structures, fostered mobility, and influenced their military capabilities, as evidenced by the reliance of early Kurdish dynasties on tribal warriors.[1] It also dictated their relationship with settled populations and imperial states, providing a means to evade direct state control when necessary.[7] This economic base had profound cultural implications, influencing everything from material culture (e.g., portable dwellings, specific types of crafts like weaving) to social relations and political dynamics. The ability of nomadic tribes to project power or withdraw from state control was a constant factor in the historical narrative of Kurdistan.

B. Agricultural Practices and Land Utilization

While pastoral nomadism was prominent, settled agriculture was also a significant and long-standing practice in many parts of Kurdistan, particularly in fertile valleys, plains, and terraced hillsides.[8] However, for many Kurds, especially those who were fully nomadic or semi-nomadic, agriculture was often a marginal or supplementary activity.[2] Settled communities cultivated a variety of crops suitable for the diverse microclimates of the region, including wheat, barley, rice (in irrigated areas), lentils, chickpeas, fruits (grapes, figs, pomegranates, apples), and vegetables. Tobacco also became an important cash crop in

some areas in later pre-modern times.
The relationship between nomadic pastoralists and settled agriculturalists was complex. It was often symbiotic, involving the exchange of goods: pastoralists provided animal products, wool, and sometimes manure for fertilizer, while agriculturalists supplied grains, fruits, vegetables, and crafted items.[8] Nomads might also graze their flocks on stubble fields after harvest, by agreement with the settled farmers. However, this interdependence could also lead to conflict, particularly over access to land, water resources, and instances where migrating flocks damaged cultivated fields.[19] The authority of tribal leaders, aghas, and emirs was often crucial in mediating such disputes.
Land tenure systems in settled areas, especially within the territories of the Kurdish emirates, likely involved a hierarchical structure. Large tracts of land were often controlled by the ruling emirs, tribal aghas, and other members of the landed aristocracy or notable families.[6] Peasants, who formed the bulk of the agricultural workforce, typically worked these lands as sharecroppers or tenants, or cultivated their own smallholdings, often subject to various forms of tribute or taxation by the local rulers or the overarching imperial state.

C. Trade Routes and Urban Economic Activity

Kurdistan's geographical position at a historical crossroads between Anatolia, Mesopotamia, Persia, and the Caucasus meant that it was traversed by various trade routes. While the most prominent international "Silk Road" routes often bypassed the most rugged parts of Kurdistan, regional trade networks were active, connecting Kurdish towns and cities with each other and with larger commercial centers in neighboring regions.[6]
Kurdish urban centers, such as Diyarbakir (Amida), Erbil, Mosul (which had a significant Kurdish population and was often contested), Bidlis, Van, Sanandaj (Senna), Kermanshah, and Sulaymaniyah, served as important local and regional markets. These towns facilitated the exchange of pastoral products (livestock, wool, dairy, hides), agricultural goods (grains, fruits, tobacco), and artisanal products (carpets, textiles, metalwork, leather goods).[6] They also hosted shops, workshops (*karxane*), and caravanserais for traveling merchants.
The economic importance of Kurdish-inhabited regions to the larger empires is also evident. For instance, the Ottoman provinces of Diyarbekir and Erzurum, which encompassed substantial parts of Kurdistan, were described as economically burgeoning areas and constituted important sources of income for the Ottoman central treasury from the 16th to the early 19th centuries.[3] This implies significant levels of agricultural production, pastoral wealth, artisanal output, and trade activity that generated taxable revenue. The presence of established Kurdish quarters in major non-Kurdish cities like Aleppo, Damascus, and Cairo also suggests active Kurdish participation in wider economic networks, not just as suppliers of raw materials but also as traders, artisans, and service providers.[1]
The economic significance of Kurdish regions to empires like the Ottomans adds another dimension to the understanding of Kurdish autonomy. While strategic and military considerations for utilizing Kurdish emirates as buffer zones were paramount [3], the economic productivity of these regions suggests that Kurdish autonomy, at least in certain periods and localities, was tolerated or even encouraged partly because local Kurdish elites were effective

at ensuring a steady flow of economic surplus—whether as revenue, tribute, or valuable goods—to the imperial centers. These elites often controlled local production and resource extraction, and in return for their loyalty, they might receive exemptions from direct taxation or other privileges.[8] The "flourishing rural and urban life" reported under some principalities [6] would have been the source of this wealth. Thus, the relationship between the Kurdish emirates and the empires was not solely based on political allegiance or military service but also involved a degree of economic pragmatism. When these empires later embarked on policies of centralization and sought to gain more direct control over these resources in the 19th century, this economic imperative would have been a key driver for dismantling Kurdish autonomy, alongside political and administrative consolidation.

IX. Conclusion: Legacy of Pre-Modern Kurdish Culture

The pre-modern era of Kurdish culture, spanning centuries before the transformative shifts of the 19th century, laid a deep and enduring foundation for the Kurdish people. It was a period characterized by remarkable resilience, adaptation, and the cultivation of a distinct, albeit diverse, cultural identity within a complex geopolitical landscape. The defining characteristics of this epoch include the paramountcy of tribal structures and leadership by aghas and sheikhs, shaping social and political life; a dynamic interplay between nomadic pastoralism and settled agricultural lifestyles, dictated by the mountainous terrain; and the existence of autonomous Kurdish emirates that skillfully navigated the rivalries of the larger Ottoman and Safavid empires to maintain a degree of self-rule.

Spiritually, pre-modern Kurdistan was a rich tapestry woven from ancient Iranic faiths, the widespread adoption of Sunni Islam (often imbued with strong Sufi influences through orders like the Qadiriyya and Naqshbandiyya), and the persistence of unique syncretic traditions such as Yazidism and Yarsanism. Linguistically, it was a mosaic of Kurdish dialects, primarily Kurmanji and the precursors to Sorani, alongside distinct but related languages like Gorani and Zazaki, with a powerful oral tradition serving as the primary vehicle for cultural transmission, famously exemplified by epic poetry. This oral heritage existed alongside an emerging written literature in Kurdish. Material culture found vibrant expression in traditional crafts, most notably the intricate artistry of carpet weaving and textiles, as well as distinctive forms of music, communal dance, and regional attire. The economy, fundamentally tied to the land, was based on pastoralism, animal husbandry, and agriculture, with urban centers facilitating local and regional trade.

The legacy of this pre-modern period profoundly influenced subsequent Kurdish history and identity. The memory of autonomous principalities, even after their 19th-century destruction, provided potent historical precedents for self-governance that fueled later Kurdish nationalist movements.[6] The cultural achievements of this era, particularly the literary contributions of figures like Ehmedê Xanî and the enduring power of oral epics such as *Mem û Zîn*, became foundational texts and potent symbols for the articulation of Kurdish national identity and the revival of the Kurdish language.[6]

However, other aspects of this legacy also presented challenges. The deep-rooted influence of tribalism and regionalism, while sources of local strength and identity, often continued to

complicate efforts towards broader Kurdish unity in the modern era. The historical division of Kurdistan by imperial borders, notably formalized by the Treaty of Zuhab in 1639 [3], created enduring geopolitical realities that fragmented the Kurdish population and posed persistent obstacles to their collective political aspirations.

In essence, the pre-modern period was formative. It forged many of the cultural, social, and political characteristics that continue to define the Kurds today. It demonstrated a long and complex history of distinct cultural development, a persistent assertion of identity in various forms, and a recurring aspiration for self-determination, all played out on the vast and often turbulent stage of Middle Eastern history. Understanding this rich pre-modern heritage is crucial for comprehending the subsequent trajectory of the Kurdish people and their ongoing quest for recognition and rights in the contemporary world.

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