

# The Living Archive: An Exploration of Kurdish Oral History

## 1. Introduction: The Vitality of Kurdish Oral History

### Defining Scope and Significance

This report provides a specialized analysis of the multifaceted world of Kurdish oral history, examining its diverse forms, functions, methods of transmission, and contemporary relevance. Moving beyond introductory overviews, it targets an audience already possessing foundational knowledge of the Kurdish context. Oral traditions within Kurdish society are not static relics of a bygone era; rather, they constitute dynamic, living repositories of culture, collective memory, historical consciousness, and identity. This vitality holds particular significance for the Kurds, a large stateless nation whose territories span parts of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria, and whose written culture and language have faced historical and ongoing suppression. The analysis herein focuses on the narratives themselves, the performers who carry them, the mechanisms through which they are transmitted, and the significant challenges faced in preserving this rich heritage in the modern era, drawing upon academic research and documented oral accounts.

### Centrality of Oral Transmission

For centuries, the primary vehicle for the preservation and intergenerational transmission of Kurdish language, history, cultural values, and social norms has been oral transmission. This encompasses a wide range of practices, including storytelling, song, epic recitation, the sharing of proverbs, and embodied knowledge passed down through ritual and daily life. The historical reliance on orality is, in part, a direct consequence of the political fragmentation of Kurdistan and the deliberate policies enacted by various nation-states aimed at curtailing or eradicating the use of written Kurdish. Key figures such as the *Dengbêj*—often male singer-poets or bards—and the *Zarbêj*—often female source creators of oral works—personify this tradition, functioning as living archives, artists, and custodians of cultural memory.<sup>1</sup> The persistence and richness of Kurdish oral tradition, despite centuries marked by political instability, division across state borders, and active state-sponsored suppression and assimilation campaigns, is not merely an incidental cultural feature. It represents a fundamental strategy of cultural survival and resilience. The historical context of being a large stateless nation, dispersed across often hostile political entities that actively sought to erase Kurdish identity through linguistic and cultural repression, created conditions where oral transmission became the most viable, and often the only available, channel for maintaining cultural continuity and collective memory.<sup>2</sup> The suppression of written forms likely amplified the importance and function of oral traditions.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, the enduring strength of Kurdish orality can be understood as both a product of and a response to these sustained

political pressures, serving as an essential tool for preserving identity and historical consciousness against systematic attempts at erasure.

## 2. Mythological and Epic Foundations

Kurdish oral history is deeply rooted in a rich tapestry of myths, legends, and epics that provide foundational narratives for understanding Kurdish identity, cosmology, and historical consciousness. These narratives often reflect centuries of interaction with neighboring cultures, including Iranian, Mesopotamian, and Abrahamic traditions, while articulating distinctly Kurdish perspectives and experiences.

### Core Myths and Origin Legends

Several core myths circulate within Kurdish oral tradition, offering explanations for origins and shaping collective identity:

- **Supernatural Origins:** One intriguing set of legends, recorded by Judaic scholars and later adapted by early Islamic authorities, posits a supernatural origin for the Kurds through King Solomon's arranged marriage of 500 women to *jinn*s.<sup>5</sup> Variations suggest the Kurds descended from King Solomon's concubines and angelic servants sent to procure maidens; upon finding Solomon deceased on their return, the *jinn*s settled in the mountains with the women, their offspring becoming the Kurds.<sup>5</sup> While likely originating from external attempts to explain Kurdish origins, these tales sometimes carry negative connotations, such as Solomon ordering the progenitors to be driven into the mountains ("ukrudūhunna," potentially meaning "thrown away").<sup>5</sup>
- **The Kawa Myth and Zahhak:** A central and politically potent myth revolves around Zahhak (Zuhak), depicted as an evil Assyrian king whose tyranny suppressed nature itself, preventing spring's arrival in Kurdistan.<sup>5</sup> Serpents grew from his shoulders, demanding a daily sacrifice of the brains of two young men.<sup>5</sup> Kawa (Kawe), a blacksmith, defied this horror by substituting one man's brains with a sheep's each day, thus saving many youths.<sup>5</sup> These rescued individuals are considered the legendary ancestors of the Kurds.<sup>5</sup> Kawa eventually trained these men into an army, stormed Zahhak's castle, and killed the tyrant with his hammer.<sup>5</sup> This myth is inextricably linked to the celebration of Newroz (Kurdish New Year, celebrated around the spring equinox), symbolizing liberation from tyranny and the rebirth of nature and the nation.<sup>5</sup> Kawa the Blacksmith remains a powerful symbol in Kurdish nationalism.<sup>5</sup>
- **Shahmaran (Şahmaran):** This figure is a prominent mythical creature in Kurdish folklore, depicted as a hybrid being, half-human and half-snake, often female.<sup>5</sup> Residing in a cave, Shahmaran is considered a goddess of wisdom and the protector of secrets.<sup>5</sup> Belief holds that upon her death, her spirit passes to her daughter.<sup>5</sup> Analysis of the Shahmaran myth often contrasts her feminine-coded wisdom and generative potential (her murdered body yields elixirs of death, healing, and eternal wisdom) with the destructive, masculine-coded tyranny represented by figures like Zahhak.<sup>7</sup>
- **Other Mythic Elements:** The legendary *Simurgh* bird of broader Iranian tradition

appears in Kurdish folktales as *Sîmir*.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, significant parallels and typological similarities exist between Kurdish folklore and Armenian epic traditions, particularly concerning the origin stories of ruling families in shared historical regions like Sasun and Bidlis.<sup>8</sup> Both traditions feature narratives of twin brothers, often from foreign royal houses (e.g., Sasanid princes Izaddin and Zyaddin in Kurdish lore of Bidlis/Sasun; Assyrian princes Adrammelech and Sharezer, sons of Sennacherib, in Armenian lore concerning Aghdznik, Arcruni, and Gnuni clans), who find refuge in the mountains and establish local dynasties.<sup>8</sup> This points towards shared narrative templates and a history of cultural exchange and interaction in the region.<sup>8</sup>

## Foundational Epics and Folktales

Alongside myths, major oral epics and folktales form a crucial part of the Kurdish cultural repertoire, transmitted through performance and storytelling:

- **Mem û Zîn:** Widely considered a masterpiece of Kurdish literature, this tragic romance tells the story of Mem of the Alan clan and Zîn, the sister of the Emir of Botan, whose love is thwarted by the antagonist Bekir.<sup>9</sup> Often compared to Romeo and Juliet, it existed in oral versions long before being codified in a famous 17th-century poetic rendition by Ehmedê Xanî (Ahmed-i Khani).<sup>9</sup> The existence of Neo-Aramaic and Armenian versions underscores its cross-cultural significance.<sup>9</sup>
- **Dimdim:** This epic recounts the historical events surrounding the siege of Dimdim fortress (south of Lake Urmia) and the Kurdish insurrection led by Emîr Xan Lepzêrîn against the Safavid ruler Shah Abbas I in the early 17th century (1609-1610).<sup>9</sup> It serves as a powerful example of oral narrative preserving historical memory, particularly themes of resistance against external domination.<sup>9</sup>
- **Zembilfrosh** ("Basket Seller"): Popular in both Turkish and Iraqi Kurdistan, this tale narrates the story of a spiritually inclined prince who leaves his life of privilege to live as a wandering dervish, making and selling baskets with his wife.<sup>10</sup> He faces temptation when the wife of a local emir falls in love with him and attempts to seduce him, a narrative structure echoing the widely known story of Joseph (Yusuf) and Potiphar's wife (Zuleikha).<sup>9</sup>
- **Khej û Siyabend:** Another significant romance within Kurdish folklore, also ending tragically.<sup>9</sup>
- **Keçelok Tales:** Numerous folktales feature the adventures of *Keçelok*, a recurring bald-headed boy character, often portrayed as a clever trickster.<sup>9</sup> Similar figures exist in neighboring traditions (Turkish *Keloğlan*, Persian/Azerbaijani *Kachal*).<sup>9</sup>
- **Proverbs and Riddles:** These shorter forms of oral expression are also popular and widely used.<sup>9</sup>

Table 1: Key Kurdish Oral Narratives/Myths

| Narrative/Myth | Key Figures | Brief Description | Cultural Significance/The | Relevant Sources |
|----------------|-------------|-------------------|---------------------------|------------------|
|----------------|-------------|-------------------|---------------------------|------------------|

|                        |                                  |  |  |              |
|------------------------|----------------------------------|--|--|--------------|
|                        |                                  |  | <b>mes</b>   |              |
| Kawa and Zahhak        | Kawa the Blacksmith, King Zahhak | Myth of liberation from tyranny; blacksmith hero saves youths from serpents, kills oppressive Assyrian king.   | Foundational myth for Newroz, resistance against oppression, Kurdish origins, rebirth.     | <sup>5</sup> |
| <i>Mem û Zîn</i>       | Mem, Zîn, Bekir                  | Tragic love story between Mem of the Alan clan and Zîn of the Botan clan, thwarted by the antagonist Bekir.    | National epic, themes of love, fate, betrayal, Kurdish identity, cross-cultural resonance. | <sup>9</sup> |
| Shahmaran              | Shahmaran (Queen of Snakes)      | Mythical half-snake, half-human queen possessing wisdom; narrative of her betrayal and death yielding elixirs. | Wisdom, secrets, feminine power, nature, healing, connection to regional folklore.         | <sup>5</sup> |
| <i>Dimdim</i>          | Kurds of Dimdim, Shah Abbas I    | Epic based on historical 17th-century siege and battle between Kurds and Safavid Persia at Dimdim fortress.    | Historical memory, resistance against external powers, tribal history, martyrdom.          | <sup>9</sup> |
| <i>Zembilfrosh</i>     | Zembilfrosh, Emir's Wife         | Dervish prince resists seduction by a powerful woman while living humbly as a basket seller.                   | Piety, resistance to temptation, spiritual values, echoes of Yusuf/Zuleikha story.         | <sup>9</sup> |
| <i>Khej û Siyabend</i> | Khej, Siyabend                   | Tragic romance narrative.  | Themes of love, loss, fate within Kurdish folklore.  | <sup>9</sup> |
| <i>Keçelok Tales</i>   | Keçelok (Bald Boy)               | Adventures of a recurring  | Humor, cleverness, social  | <sup>9</sup> |

|  |  |                                  |  |  |
|--|--|----------------------------------|--|--|
|  |  | bald-headed<br>trickster figure. | commentary,<br>parallels with<br>neighboring folk<br>traditions. |  |
|--|--|----------------------------------|--|--|

These myths and epics function as more than mere entertainment. They serve as foundational charters that articulate origins, legitimize cultural practices like Newroz, provide historical precedents and moral justification for resistance against oppression (Kawa vs. Zahhak, Dimdim), and encode core cultural values, social structures, and a shared historical consciousness. The emphasis on struggle against tyranny in these foundational narratives provides a symbolic language that resonates with contemporary Kurdish experiences and reinforces a collective identity rooted in resilience and the quest for self-determination. The annual celebration of Newroz, grounded in the Kawa myth, thus becomes a powerful performative enactment of this enduring identity.<sup>12</sup>

### 3. The Dengbêj and Zarbêj: Voices of Memory and Artistry

Central to the transmission and vitality of Kurdish oral history are the figures of the *Dengbêj* and the *Zarbêj*, performers and creators who embody the living archive of Kurdish culture.

#### The Dengbêj Tradition

The term *Dengbêj* translates literally as "master of the voice" (*deng* meaning voice, *bêj* from the verb "to say" or "to tell").<sup>13</sup> Dengbêjs are the renowned singer-poets, bards, or minstrels of Kurdish society, traditionally male, known for performing *kilam* (recital songs).<sup>13</sup> Their extensive repertoire encompasses historical narratives, heroic epics, tales of tribal warfare and rebellions, love songs, laments for the deceased, and reflections on daily life.<sup>15</sup> They traditionally performed in communal settings such as village gatherings (*şevbuhêrk* or evening storytelling sessions), weddings, and sometimes engaged in competitive performances.<sup>2</sup> The significance of the Dengbêj lies in their role as custodians and transmitters of Kurdish collective memory, history, language, and culture.<sup>2</sup> Through their performances, they recount historical events from a Kurdish perspective, often providing alternative narratives to official state histories.<sup>16</sup> They preserve archaic vocabulary and linguistic nuances, chronicle the joys and sorrows of their communities, and function as living archives of the Kurdish experience.<sup>17</sup> Their performance style is typically characterized by unaccompanied, improvised vocals, although stringed instruments like the *tembûr* (similar to the Turkish saz) were sometimes used.<sup>9</sup> The delivery is often highly emotive, aiming to transport listeners and evoke deep feelings connected to the stories being told.<sup>13</sup>

The social standing and perception of Dengbêjs have evolved significantly over time. Historically, they were often maintained by tribal chiefs or emirs, and their songs could carry political weight.<sup>2</sup> However, with the rise of modern Kurdish political movements in the mid-20th century, particularly those with socialist leanings, Dengbêjs were sometimes viewed

critically as symbols of a "feudal" or "backward" past associated with tribalism and aghas, an order deemed divisive and needing to be overcome.<sup>19</sup> Consequently, politically oriented protest music gained favor over traditional Dengbêjî for a period.<sup>19</sup>

A significant revival and re-evaluation of the Dengbêj tradition began in the early 2000s.<sup>19</sup> This resurgence was driven by several factors: a shift in Kurdish political discourse towards emphasizing cultural and linguistic rights, renewed interest from Kurdish intellectuals and writers, and crucially, the active promotion of Dengbêjî by Kurdish cultural institutions like the Mesopotamia Cultural Centres (NÇM - Navendên Çanda Mezopotamya) and municipalities in Kurdish regions of Turkey.<sup>19</sup> These institutions organized festivals and concerts, opened dedicated Dengbêj Houses (*Mala Dengbêjan*), and facilitated recordings.<sup>19</sup> As a result, Dengbêjs gained unprecedented public visibility, appearing on television programs and becoming recognized symbols of "authentic" Kurdish cultural heritage.<sup>19</sup> Among the many Dengbêjs, some notable figures mentioned in research include historical or legendary performers like Evdalê Zeynikê and Karapetê Xaço, as well as contemporary or recently documented Dengbêjs such as Salihê Şirnexî, Seyidxanê Boyaxçî, Ahmedê Aqutê, Ehmedê Fermanê Kiki, Apê Qado, Alihan, and Rifatê Darê.<sup>13</sup>

## **The Role of Zarbêj Women**

While the public face of the Dengbêj tradition has often been male, research highlights the foundational role of *Zarbêj* women.<sup>1</sup> These women are identified as the "source creators" (*zar* meaning lament/melody, *bêj* meaning teller/singer) of many forms of oral expression, including laments, songs, folk tales, and stories.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, some analyses suggest they are the originators of the Dengbêj tradition itself.<sup>1</sup> Scholar Marlene Schäfers posits that women originally mastered the art of singing *kilams*.<sup>14</sup>

Despite this crucial creative role, women's participation as professional, public performers (*Dengbêj*) has historically been constrained by social customs, religious interpretations, and dominant patriarchal structures within society.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, women from diverse religious and ethnic backgrounds within Mesopotamia (including Yazidi, Yarsani, Muslim, Christian, and Jewish communities) have been instrumental in preserving and transmitting Kurdish musical and oral heritage.<sup>1</sup> They often did so under extremely challenging circumstances, including political repression and bans on the Kurdish language, sometimes resorting to using pseudonyms or recording works outside their homelands.<sup>1</sup> Notable female artists whose contributions are being recovered include Elmas Muhamed, Meyrem Xan, Gulbihar, Nesrîn Şêrwan, and Ayşe Şan.<sup>1</sup> Dedicated research and archiving projects, such as those undertaken by the Kurdish Heritage Institute and initiatives like "Zarbêj and Dengbêj Women whose voices resonate with music in Mesopotamia," specifically aim to document and give recognition to these often-overlooked female voices, recording their works and stories under their real names.<sup>1</sup>

The recent revival and celebration of Dengbêjî as "authentic Kurdish heritage" is a complex phenomenon, extending beyond a simple cultural renaissance. It is deeply intertwined with contemporary Kurdish identity politics and the dynamics of cultural commodification. The shift

in perception from Dengbêjî being viewed as 'backward' or 'feudal' to becoming the embodiment of 'authentic culture' <sup>19</sup> was actively shaped by Kurdish political and cultural actors and facilitated by periods of limited state openings for cultural expression.<sup>19</sup> This reframing turns Dengbêjî into both a potent political symbol and a valuable cultural commodity. Politically, this creates a strategic ambiguity: Dengbêjî can be presented as innocuous 'folklore' to navigate state censorship and gain public space, while simultaneously serving as a powerful emblem of national identity, historical memory, and resistance for the Kurdish community.<sup>19</sup> This puts pressure on performers, who risk censorship or legal action if their narratives are deemed too politically charged, and some performers actively resist this politicization of their art.<sup>26</sup> Economically, the 'heritage' status introduces market logic.<sup>19</sup> Questions arise regarding ownership and authorship of songs traditionally considered part of a collective, anonymous oral tradition.<sup>19</sup> Performances are often staged in settings designed to evoke 'authenticity' for media consumption (TV shows, festivals), potentially decontextualizing the art form from its original social functions.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, the public representation of Dengbêjs as heritage icons often defaults to male figures, risking the further marginalization of the historical and ongoing contributions of Zarbêj and female Dengbêjs.<sup>19</sup>

## 4. Mechanisms of Transmission and the Shaping of Collective Memory

The endurance and dynamism of Kurdish oral history rely on specific mechanisms of transmission that shape how collective memory, cultural knowledge, and historical consciousness are passed down through generations.

### Modes of Transmission

Orality remains the cornerstone of transmission, conveying knowledge, history, culture, and identity primarily through the spoken word, song, and performance.<sup>17</sup> Key methods include:

- **Storytelling:** This fundamental practice occurs in various contexts, from formal performances by Dengbêjs or traditional storytellers (*akhoonds*) to informal sharing within families by elders.<sup>27</sup> Narratives range from ancient myths and epics to historical accounts and moral tales.<sup>27</sup>
- **Song and Music:** Music is a powerful vehicle for transmission. The *kilams* performed by Dengbêjs encapsulate historical events, social commentary, and emotional experiences.<sup>13</sup> Folk songs convey cultural values and communal feelings. In specific communities like the Ahl-e Haqq (Yarsan), religious knowledge, cosmology, and history are embedded within sacred musical repertoires (*nazm*) and ritual performances, where music itself embodies the community's narrative.<sup>28</sup>
- **Sîna wa sîna ("Chest to Chest"):** This Kurdish phrase captures the essence of oral transmission as more than just verbal exchange.<sup>28</sup> It signifies a deep, embodied, and interpersonal transfer of knowledge, learned and assimilated through direct experience and close connection.<sup>28</sup> This concept encompasses communication through spoken

words and sounds, but also through bodily performance, shared social memory, and the integration of aural and visual senses within the community context.<sup>28</sup>

- **Family and Community Settings:** Much transmission occurs organically within daily life. Households are primary sites where children hear stories, learn language nuances, and absorb cultural values, often through informal interactions like dinner conversations.<sup>29</sup> Community gatherings—weddings, funerals, festivals (like Newroz), religious ceremonies, and events organized by diaspora organizations—provide crucial public forums for performance, collective remembrance, and reinforcement of shared identity.<sup>29</sup>
- **Shorter Forms:** Proverbs and riddles serve as concise carriers of cultural wisdom and social norms.<sup>9</sup>
- **Master-Apprentice Relationships:** In traditions like Dengbêjî, knowledge and performance skills are often passed directly from an experienced master to an apprentice, ensuring continuity of style and repertoire.<sup>2</sup>

## Oral History, Collective Memory, and Trauma

Kurdish oral history is not merely a collection of past events but a living, intergenerational phenomenon crucial for maintaining linguistic continuity, cultural knowledge, political consciousness, and identity.<sup>31</sup> It provides vital access to collective memory.

- **Constructing Community:** Collective memory, often nurtured through oral traditions, plays a key role in holding together "imagined communities," particularly for stateless nations like the Kurds.<sup>29</sup> Shared narratives, especially those centered on collective traumas (such as the Anfal genocide, the Halabja chemical attack, or the siege of Kobane) and collective glories, become foundational elements of group identity, providing a shared lens through which the social environment is understood.<sup>29</sup>
- **Transmission of Trauma (Postmemory):** A significant aspect of Kurdish oral history, particularly in the diaspora, involves the intergenerational transmission of trauma.<sup>29</sup> Second and subsequent generations, who may not have directly experienced the violence, persecution, or displacement endured by their parents or grandparents, inherit these traumatic memories through symbolic transgenerational acts.<sup>29</sup> This phenomenon, termed "postmemory," occurs via family storytelling, participation in commemorative events, community rituals, and even subtle emotional legacies within the family.<sup>29</sup> This inherited trauma profoundly shapes their identity, sense of belonging, political awareness, and motivation for engagement with the Kurdish cause.<sup>29</sup>
- **Memory as Resistance:** In contexts where official state narratives actively deny or distort Kurdish history and experiences of suffering, oral history functions as a powerful counter-narrative.<sup>29</sup> Preserving and recounting memories of persecution, displacement, and resistance becomes an act of defiance and a means of asserting group identity against dominant discourses.<sup>29</sup> The act of remembering and seeking justice for past atrocities serves to unify the community and reinforce its sense of self.<sup>29</sup>
- **Memory Work in Diaspora:** Diaspora communities are active sites of "memory work."



Organizations host commemorations, cultural events, and language classes designed to transmit historical knowledge and foster collective identity among younger generations.<sup>29</sup> These diasporic collective memories evolve over time, shaped by the experiences in the host countries and potentially diverging from narratives prevalent in the homeland.<sup>29</sup>

The fabric of Kurdish oral history is woven from the threads of both intensely personal experiences—individual stories of suffering, migration, resilience, and daily life<sup>33</sup>—and collectively constructed and shared narratives of nationhood, foundational myths, historical struggles, and shared traumas.<sup>29</sup> The transmission process itself is where this interplay unfolds. Personal anecdotes shared within the intimacy of a family gain broader collective significance when retold and validated in community settings or through diaspora networks.<sup>29</sup> Conversely, overarching collective narratives, like the memory of the Anfal campaigns, are internalized by individuals, acquiring personal resonance and shaping identity even for those born long after the events or far from the homeland, a key aspect of postmemory.<sup>29</sup> The specific context of transmission—be it a private family conversation, a public festival performance, or a diaspora commemoration event—influences how these memories are framed, interpreted, and understood.<sup>29</sup> Consequently, Kurdish oral history is a dynamic arena where the personal and the collective continually inform, shape, and reshape one another. It is less about passively recalling a fixed past and more about actively making meaning of that past in the present, negotiating individual lived experience within a shared, evolving framework of history and identity. This dynamic is particularly evident in the way traumatic memories are processed and transmitted across generations and geographical divides.<sup>29</sup>

## **5. Regional Landscapes of Kurdish Oral Tradition**

The vast geographical expanse inhabited by Kurds, stretching across the modern nation-states of Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Syria, and encompassing communities in the Caucasus and a global diaspora, has fostered a diverse landscape of oral traditions.<sup>10</sup> While unified by overarching cultural themes and a sense of shared identity, Kurdish oral history exhibits significant regional variations shaped by distinct political contexts, linguistic specificities, and local historical experiences.

### **Geographical Spread and Diversity**

The division of Kurdish territories by 20th-century state borders created distinct political environments.<sup>36</sup> Kurds in Turkey faced policies of forced assimilation and denial of identity ("Mountain Turks").<sup>4</sup> In Iraq, promises of recognition were often followed by brutal repression, culminating in genocide under the Ba'ath regime, later giving way to regional autonomy.<sup>36</sup> Iran pursued Persianization policies while navigating complex tribal and political dynamics.<sup>38</sup> Syria, under the French Mandate, initially offered a refuge and space for cultural activity, but later Arab nationalist regimes imposed restrictions.<sup>36</sup> The former Soviet Union also hosted Kurdish communities with their own unique historical trajectory.<sup>36</sup> This political fragmentation is a crucial factor in understanding the variations within Kurdish oral history.<sup>35</sup>

## Linguistic Diversity and Oral Tradition

The Kurdish language itself is not uniform but comprises a group of related dialects, principally Kurmanji (Northern Kurdish) and Sorani (Central Kurdish), along with others like Zazaki (Dimli), Gorani, Laki, and Hawrami.<sup>37</sup> Mutual intelligibility between major dialect groups can be limited.<sup>37</sup> Oral traditions are naturally expressed in these diverse linguistic forms, reflecting regional vernaculars and histories. Kurmanji, spoken across large parts of Turkey, Syria, and parts of Iraq and Iran, is suggested by some linguistic analyses to have ancient roots, possibly predating Aramaic as a lingua franca in certain areas, and possesses a rich corpus of orally transmitted religious texts, such as those of the Alevis.<sup>40</sup> Sorani is prevalent in much of Iraqi and Iranian Kurdistan.<sup>39</sup> The precise classification of varieties like Zazaki and Gorani remains a subject of linguistic and socio-political debate, highlighting the interplay between linguistic features and socially constructed perceptions of shared identity and history.<sup>39</sup> The vitality of oral tradition is thus tied to the vitality of these specific dialects.

## Regional Experiences Reflected in Oral History

Oral history narratives collected from different parts of Kurdistan often bear the distinct imprint of local experiences under specific state regimes:

- **Turkey:** Oral accounts and Dengbêj *kilams* frequently engage with the experience of Turkish state policies: forced assimilation, the suppression of Kurdish language and identity, the banning and stigmatization of Dengbêjî itself, memories of state violence following events like the 1925 Sheikh Said Revolt or during the protracted conflict from the 1980s onwards, forced displacement from villages, and the complex, often antagonistic relationship with state authority.<sup>4</sup> Dengbêj songs from this region often depict borders as foreign impositions on the Kurdish landscape.<sup>13</sup>
- **Iraq:** Narratives collected from Iraqi Kurds, particularly those who became refugees, prominently feature the struggle against successive Iraqi regimes, especially Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath party.<sup>42</sup> Key themes include experiences of Arabization policies (e.g., mandatory Arabic schooling, denial of Kurdish language), the horrors of the Anfal campaigns (genocide involving mass killings, disappearances, and village destruction) and the chemical attack on Halabja, displacement and life in refugee camps (in Iran or Turkey), the 1991 uprising, migration to the West, and the eventual establishment of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).<sup>33</sup> The Kurdish Oral History Project at Binghamton University, for example, primarily documents the experiences of refugees from the Dohuk region of Iraqi Kurdistan who settled in the US in the 1990s.<sup>33</sup>
- **Syria:** Oral histories may recall the period of the French Mandate, sometimes characterized ambivalently or negatively (e.g., as a "Christian state" biased against Muslims).<sup>36</sup> Syria served as a refuge for Kurds fleeing violence in Turkey after 1925, leading to resentment from Arab nationalists.<sup>36</sup> It was also a center for Kurmanji cultural revival, notably through the publication of the influential journal *Hawar* (1932–1943).<sup>36</sup> Later periods involved suppression under Syrian Ba'athist rule.<sup>45</sup> The oral history of

Syrian Kurds reflects this distinct trajectory.

- **Iran:** Oral traditions here connect to specific historical events like the Battle of Dimdim, figures from the Safavid era, and experiences under Pahlavi and Islamic Republic rule, including Persianization policies and political struggles.<sup>38</sup>
- **Diaspora:** Oral histories gathered from Kurdish communities in Europe, North America, and elsewhere focus heavily on the migration journey itself, the process of adaptation and assimilation in host countries, the intergenerational transmission of trauma and memory (postmemory), the negotiation of identity across cultures, and the maintenance of emotional, political, and familial ties to the fragmented homeland.<sup>29</sup>

The marked regional variations observed within Kurdish oral history are a direct reflection of the political fragmentation of the Kurdish homeland and the diverse experiences of Kurdish communities under different state systems.<sup>35</sup> While unifying narratives of Kurdish identity, shared myths, and common cultural practices certainly exist and are powerful, the specific content, emphasis, and texture of remembered history—as expressed through oral traditions—often bear the unmistakable imprint of the particular state context. The struggles against assimilation in Turkey, the memory of genocide in Iraq, the complexities of the French Mandate and Arab nationalism in Syria, and the specific political dynamics in Iran each shape the narratives passed down orally in those regions.<sup>36</sup> Dengbêj songs themselves, while embodying a broader Kurdish art form, often focus on local events, alliances, and grievances, portraying state-imposed borders as alien intrusions into their perceived world, rather than consistently articulating a unified, pan-Kurdish political project.<sup>13</sup> This reflects how lived experience under fragmented sovereignty shapes the very content of the living archive.

## 6. Contemporary Challenges: Preservation in an Era of Change and Conflict

Despite its resilience, Kurdish oral history faces a multitude of pressing challenges in the contemporary era, threatening its transmission and vitality. These stem from ongoing political pressures, the impact of conflict, rapid socio-economic changes, and the complexities of preservation itself.

### Political Repression and Assimilation

State policies aimed at suppressing Kurdish identity continue to pose a significant threat, particularly in Turkey, Iran, and Syria.<sup>3</sup> These policies manifest in various forms:

- **Language Bans:** Restrictions on the use of Kurdish in education, media, and public life hinder its transmission and vitality.<sup>4</sup> Law No. 2932 in Turkey (1983) explicitly banned publishing and broadcasting in Kurdish, extending even to private spheres.<sup>4</sup>
- **Censorship and Control:** Performances by Dengbêjs or other cultural expressions deemed politically sensitive can be censored or banned.<sup>19</sup> Cultural institutions like the NÇM have faced closure or state interference.<sup>16</sup>
- **Destruction of Materials:** Historical manuscripts and contemporary cultural materials (books, music) have been destroyed or confiscated by state authorities, hindering

access to heritage.<sup>47</sup>

- **Fear and Self-Censorship:** The climate of repression fosters fear among performers and community members, discouraging the open practice and transmission of oral traditions.<sup>2</sup>

## Impact of Conflict and Genocide

Regions of Kurdistan have been theaters of intense conflict and, in cases like Iraq and the Yazidi community, genocide.<sup>48</sup> This violence has devastating consequences for oral history:

- **Loss of Knowledge Bearers:** Conflict leads to the death or displacement of elders, storytellers, and Dengbêjs who are the living repositories of oral traditions.<sup>49</sup>
- **Community Disruption:** Forced displacement shatters the social fabric and communal settings essential for the performance and transmission of oral history.<sup>49</sup>
- **Trauma and Memory:** Extreme violence can induce collective and individual trauma that affects memory, making it difficult for survivors to recall or recount stories and songs.<sup>49</sup>
- **Impediments to Documentation:** Active conflict zones make it perilous or impossible for researchers and community members to safely document and preserve oral traditions.

## Modernization and Technological Shifts

Rapid social and technological changes associated with modernity present complex challenges:

- **Urbanization and Lifestyle Changes:** Migration from rural villages to urban centers disrupts traditional lifestyles and the communal gatherings (like *şevbuhêrk*) where oral traditions were historically performed and transmitted.<sup>2</sup>
- **Media Competition:** The proliferation of mass media—television, radio, internet, social media platforms like TikTok—offers powerful alternative forms of entertainment and information, competing for the attention of audiences, especially younger generations, potentially diminishing interest in longer, traditional forms like Dengbêjî.<sup>2</sup>
- **Generational Gap:** Younger Kurds, raised in urban or diaspora environments and immersed in globalized media, may not develop the same connection to or appreciation for traditional oral forms as previous generations.<sup>2</sup>
- **Technological Double-Edge:** While technology offers tools for recording, archiving, and disseminating oral traditions<sup>1</sup>, it requires significant resources, technical expertise, and infrastructure, which may not be readily available.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, the shift from analog (cassettes, tapes) to digital formats creates new preservation challenges related to data management, format obsolescence, and long-term storage.<sup>47</sup>

## Commodification and Decontextualization

The framing of oral traditions as "cultural heritage," particularly in the context of the Dengbêj revival, can lead to commodification:

- Performances may be staged primarily for media consumption or tourism, potentially altering the form and stripping it of its original social context and function.<sup>19</sup>
- This can lead to debates over authenticity, ownership of traditionally collective material, and the potential simplification or sanitization of content to make it more palatable for wider audiences or state authorities.<sup>19</sup>

## Loss of Elders and Language Shift

- The natural passing of elderly Dengbêjs, storytellers, and other knowledge keepers represents an ongoing and irreplaceable loss of accumulated oral history and cultural knowledge.<sup>2</sup>
- Linguistic assimilation, driven by state education policies, media dominance in majority languages, and the pressures of migration, threatens the vitality of the specific Kurdish dialects in which oral traditions are expressed.<sup>49</sup> If the language fades, especially among youth, the traditions embedded within it are also endangered.<sup>49</sup>

## Archival Challenges

Efforts to preserve oral history through archiving face numerous hurdles:

- **Resource Scarcity:** Lack of adequate funding, trained personnel, and technical infrastructure hampers collection, documentation, digitization, and preservation initiatives.<sup>51</sup>
- **Political and Ethical Complexities:** Issues surrounding access to archives (especially state or private collections), censorship, intellectual property rights, ownership of cultural heritage, the digitization of sensitive personal or communal information, and ensuring ethical engagement with communities are significant challenges.<sup>47</sup>

Modernity thus presents a profound paradox for Kurdish oral history. On one hand, modern technologies (recording equipment, digital databases, online platforms) and institutions (cultural centers, universities, archives) provide unprecedented means to document, preserve, and potentially disseminate these traditions on a wider scale than ever before.<sup>50</sup> On the other hand, the very socio-economic transformations associated with modernity—urbanization displacing rural life, mass media saturating cultural space, globalized influences altering tastes, and assimilationist pressures from nation-states promoting linguistic and cultural homogeneity—actively undermine the traditional social contexts, community structures, and intergenerational transmission pathways that organically sustained these oral traditions for centuries.<sup>2</sup> Preservation efforts, therefore, often become a race against time, attempting to capture and institutionalize traditions precisely because the environments in which they naturally flourished are eroding.<sup>2</sup> This process of archiving and institutionalization, while necessary for preservation, inevitably transforms the nature of oral tradition itself, shifting it from a fluid, living, community-embedded practice towards a collection of documented artifacts.<sup>19</sup> The core challenge lies not just in recording the past, but in finding ways to ensure the continued relevance and meaningful transmission of this heritage to future generations navigating a vastly different world.

## 7. Archiving, Research, and Revitalization: The 'Archival Turn' and Beyond

In response to the challenges facing Kurdish oral history, significant efforts in archiving, academic research, and cultural revitalization have emerged, particularly in recent decades, marking what some scholars term an "archival turn" in Kurdish Studies.<sup>47</sup>

### Institutional Archiving Efforts

Several key institutions and projects play vital roles in collecting, preserving, and providing access to Kurdish oral history and related cultural materials:

- **Kurdish Heritage Institute (KHI):** Established in 2003 and based primarily in Sulaimani, Iraqi Kurdistan, the KHI is dedicated specifically to the oral culture of all peoples of Kurdistan, including ethnic and religious minorities.<sup>50</sup> Its activities include systematic collection (sound, vision, text), digital preservation using databases, operating recording studios, publishing books and documentaries, organizing cultural events, and maintaining an extensive library and archive of photos, audio/video files, and books.<sup>1</sup> KHI actively collaborates with international partners like the University of Exeter.<sup>53</sup>
- **Zheen Centre for Documentation and Research:** Also located in Sulaimani, the Zheen Centre's primary focus is on preserving Kurdish written heritage, including endangered newspapers, rare books, manuscripts, and a vast photographic archive (over 700,000 images), along with personal collections of prominent intellectuals like Tawfiq Wahbi.<sup>53</sup> While distinct from KHI's oral focus, it collaborates on broader archival initiatives.<sup>53</sup>
- **Binghamton University Libraries:** This US-based institution houses the significant Vera Beaudin Saeedpour Kurdish Library and Museum Collection.<sup>54</sup> Inspired by this collection, the university initiated the Kurdish Oral History Project, which actively records and archives interviews (in English and/or Kurdish) with members of the Kurdish diaspora, particularly Iraqi Kurds who settled in the Binghamton area.<sup>46</sup> These interviews capture narratives of migration, persecution, identity negotiation, and ongoing connections to Kurdistan.<sup>46</sup>
- **Mesopotamia Cultural Centres (NÇM - Navendên Çanda Mezopotamya):** Operating in Turkey since the 1990s, these centers have been crucial grassroots actors in promoting Kurdish language, arts, and culture.<sup>19</sup> They played a pivotal role in the revival of Dengbêj from the early 2000s, organizing festivals, concerts, and establishing Dengbêj Houses (*Mala Dengbêjan*).<sup>19</sup> Their history reflects the complex relationship between Kurdish cultural activism and the Turkish state, facing periods of support and repression/censorship.<sup>19</sup> Their stance on traditional forms like Dengbêj also evolved, moving from initial critique towards embracing it as vital heritage.<sup>19</sup>
- **Other Significant Archives:** Several other university and institutional archives hold important materials relevant to Kurdish history and culture, often including personal

papers of key figures or specific collections. Examples include the Ismet Chérif Vanly archives at the University of Lausanne, the Silvio van Rooy archive at the International Institute of Social History (IISH) in Amsterdam, the extensive archives of Radio Yerevan (Armenia) containing decades of Kurdish music and folklore recordings<sup>47</sup>, and growing collections at the University of Exeter, which is actively acquiring materials like the Omar Sheikmous archive (a PUK co-founder), the Chris Kutschera photographic archive, and the Kurdistan Photo Library.<sup>53</sup>

**Table 2: Major Archives/Institutions for Kurdish Oral History**

| <b>Institution/Project</b>                       | <b>Location/Affiliation</b>                    | <b>Primary Focus</b>   | <b>Key Holdings/Activities Mentioned</b>   | <b>Relevant Sources</b> |
|--|--|--|--|-------------------------|
| Kurdish Heritage Institute (KHI)                 | Sulaimani, KRI (main); offices/ reps elsewhere | Oral culture of Kurdistan (all peoples, incl. minorities)                      | Audio, video, text archives; digital preservation; recording studios; publications; events; documentaries; library; photo archive. | <sup>1</sup>            |
| Zheen Centre for Documentation and Research      | Sulaimani, KRI                                 | Primarily written heritage (rare books, MSS, photos, newspapers)               | Extensive written/photographic archives; personal collections (e.g., Tawfiq Wahbi); collaborates on broader projects.              | <sup>53</sup>           |
| Binghamton University Kurdish Oral History Proj. | Binghamton University, USA                     | Diaspora narratives (esp. Iraqi Kurds in US); migration, persecution, identity | Interviews (audio/transcript); part of broader Saeedpour Kurdish Collection.   | <sup>46</sup>           |
| Mesopotamia Cultural Centres (NÇM)               | Turkey (various locations, historically)       | Kurdish culture, arts, language; grassroots activism                           | Promoted Dengbêjî revival (festivals, concerts, Dengbêj Houses); faced state pressure/censorship                                   | <sup>19</sup>           |

|   |                        |   |   |               |
|---|------------------------|---|---|---------------|
|   |                        |   | ip.   |               |
| University of Exeter (Centre for Kurdish Studies) | Exeter, UK             | Academic research; archiving; international collaboration | Acquiring/digitizing archives (Omar Sheikhmous, Chris Kutschera photos, Kurdistan Photo Library); collaboration with KHI/Zheen. | <sup>53</sup> |
| Radio Yerevan Archives                            | Yerevan, Armenia       | Broadcasting; preservation of Soviet-era recordings       | Significant collection of Kurdish music and folklore recorded over decades during Soviet period.                                | <sup>47</sup> |
| University of Lausanne                            | Lausanne, Switzerland  | Academic archives   | Holds personal archives, e.g., Ismet Chérif Vanly papers.   | <sup>41</sup> |
| Intl. Institute of Social History (IISH)          | Amsterdam, Netherlands | Social history archives                                   | Holds personal archives, e.g., Silvio van Rooy papers related to Kurdish solidarity movements.                                  | <sup>41</sup> |

## The 'Archival Turn' in Kurdish Studies

The proliferation of these archival efforts and increased scholarly engagement with them constitutes an "archival turn" in Kurdish Studies.<sup>47</sup> This trend, emerging since the early 21st century, signifies a move beyond the traditional reliance on the state archives of major powers (British, French, Ottoman/Turkish) which dominated earlier historiography, often focusing on the first half of the 20th century.<sup>47</sup> This shift is fueled by several factors: the digitization of collections, the gradual opening of state archives from the Cold War era in various countries, and increased access to non-state archives, including those of diaspora organizations, political parties, families, and individuals.<sup>52</sup>

This archival turn presents significant opportunities:

- It allows for the investigation of previously under-documented periods (especially post-1950s) and aspects of Kurdish history, such as social and economic history, transnational networks, diaspora mobilization, and the internal dynamics of Kurdish movements.<sup>52</sup>
- It enables research grounded in Kurdish perspectives and languages, challenging



dominant state narratives and recovering marginalized voices.<sup>52</sup>

- It provides richer, more diverse source material for understanding the complexities of Kurdish society and politics.<sup>52</sup>

However, this turn also brings substantial challenges:

- **Methodological:** Integrating diverse and often fragmented sources (official documents, personal letters, oral interviews, photographs, audio recordings) requires new analytical frameworks.<sup>47</sup>
- **Political:** Access remains a major issue. State archives can be restrictive or inaccessible; non-state archives, often held privately, raise questions of ownership, control, and potential censorship.<sup>47</sup> The confiscation of archives by states remains a reality.<sup>47</sup>
- **Ethical:** Handling sensitive materials (personal trauma, political activities, community traditions) requires careful ethical consideration regarding privacy, consent, intellectual property, community rights, and the potential risks to individuals or groups associated with the archives.<sup>47</sup> The digitization process itself introduces new ethical dilemmas regarding access and control.<sup>47</sup>
- **Conceptual:** The sheer volume and variety of new sources necessitate a re-evaluation of existing conceptual frameworks for interpreting Kurdish history and society.<sup>52</sup> Questions arise about the "future of the archives" themselves and the need for an "ethics of care" in their management.<sup>47</sup>

## Research and Revitalization

Academic research is indispensable for documenting, analyzing, and contextualizing Kurdish oral history. Early contributions came from Austro-Hungarian and Soviet scholars, often focusing on linguistics and folklore.<sup>59</sup> Contemporary research spans anthropology, history, literary studies, ethnomusicology, and political science, utilizing oral history methodologies to understand memory, identity, trauma, and cultural practice.<sup>14</sup>

Efforts to collect folklore, both historically by figures like Celadet Bedirxan and foreign scholars, and currently by a new generation of Kurdish collectors, are often explicitly motivated by a desire to preserve endangered traditions and languages in the face of assimilationist pressures.<sup>44</sup> These collectors aim to revive indigenous knowledge and challenge hegemonic educational frameworks.<sup>60</sup>

Furthermore, modern Kurdish literature demonstrates a vibrant engagement with oral tradition.<sup>61</sup> Writers like Mehmed Uzun (1953–2007) and Mehmet Dicle (b. 1977) explicitly draw inspiration from folklore, incorporating traditional motifs, narrative structures (like the *şevbuhêrk*), and the figures of Dengbêjs into their novels.<sup>61</sup> This process of "heritagization" serves not only as artistic inspiration but also as a conscious strategy for revitalizing the Kurdish language and connecting contemporary literature to its deep cultural roots.<sup>61</sup>

The burgeoning archival landscape and the associated "archival turn" signify a crucial advancement in the effort to safeguard and understand Kurdish oral history.<sup>47</sup> However, these archives are far from neutral repositories. The very processes of collection, selection,

digitization, and granting access are imbued with political significance.<sup>47</sup> Consequently, the archives themselves become contested spaces where struggles over historical interpretation, cultural ownership, political legitimacy, and ethical responsibility are actively negotiated.<sup>47</sup> Who controls these archives, who defines access, and whose interpretations prevail are critical questions that reflect the ongoing power dynamics surrounding Kurdish identity, memory, and the right to narrate one's own history.<sup>47</sup>

## **8. Conclusion: The Enduring Resonance of Kurdish Oral History**

Kurdish oral history stands as a testament to the enduring power of the spoken word, song, and embodied memory in sustaining a people's identity across fragmented geographies and through protracted periods of adversity. It serves as the primary repository of Kurdish cultural knowledge, linguistic diversity, historical consciousness, and collective identity, proving remarkably resilient in the face of state-sponsored assimilation policies, political violence, and the upheavals of modernity.<sup>2</sup> Far from being static folklore, it is a dynamic, living tradition that continues to adapt, carrying the immense weight of historical memory, including profound collective traumas, while simultaneously providing avenues for resistance, creativity, and the articulation of contemporary experiences.<sup>29</sup>

Despite this resilience, the challenges confronting Kurdish oral history in the 21st century are formidable. Ongoing political repression and assimilationist pressures in several nation-states continue to threaten the languages and cultural practices in which these traditions are embedded.<sup>3</sup> The devastating impact of conflict and genocide has resulted in the irreparable loss of knowledge keepers and the disruption of communities.<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, the rapid socio-economic shifts associated with modernization—urbanization, the pervasive influence of mass media, and globalization—erode the traditional contexts for oral transmission and can create generational divides in cultural engagement.<sup>2</sup> Preservation efforts themselves, while crucial, grapple with the paradox of using modern tools (archiving, digitization) to save traditions threatened by modernity, risking processes of commodification and decontextualization as living practices are transformed into documented artifacts.<sup>19</sup>

The future of Kurdish oral history hinges on navigating these complex challenges. Continued, ethically grounded efforts in documentation, research, archiving, and revitalization are critical. These initiatives must prioritize collaboration with and empowerment of Kurdish communities and institutions, utilize indigenous languages in research and dissemination<sup>60</sup>, and actively work to recover and amplify marginalized voices, particularly those of women whose contributions have often been overlooked.<sup>1</sup> Addressing the significant political and ethical dilemmas surrounding archival access, ownership, and control is paramount to ensure that these repositories serve the communities whose heritage they contain.<sup>47</sup> Ultimately, ensuring the enduring resonance of Kurdish oral history requires not only preserving the records of the past but also fostering environments where these traditions can continue to be lived, performed, contested, and meaningfully transmitted to future generations as a vital source of

identity, creativity, and understanding.

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