

Kurdish Bards Sing A Homeland: *Dengbêjî* and Conflicting
Nationalisms in the Turkish State
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Introduction

I recall meeting a group of Kurds on two occasions, both in 2011: once in a Turkish border town with Syria and another time in Lefkoşa, the north end of Cyprus's capital. On the first occasion, I spent all day bantering with four young Kurdish men, interspersed with their impassioned outcries against alienation from mainstream Turkish society. The second time, a group of young activists shared their love and sorrow for their denigrated language and culture, taught me some Kurdish expressions, and beseeched me to spread the word about their plight. Since then, a fascination with the Rojava region of northern Syria, particularly its achievement of de facto autonomy in 2012 founded on ideals of feminism, anarchism, universal human rights, and ecological sustainability, has directed me toward its flourishing revolutionary art scene focused heavily on the celebration of Kurdish folklore, music, and language, all having been silenced by repressive regimes (Hamid 2016).

One art form that continually surfaces is *dengbêjî*, a musical genre characterized by *a cappella* singing of Kurdish romances or epic battles featuring heroes and villains dating from past centuries to the present revolutionary moment. In the context of conflicting nationalisms in Turkey, *dengbêjî* has emerged as a political tool deployed by various actors to contest, assert, negotiate, and complicate ideas about Kurdish identity and autonomy. Whether via censorship, curation, revision, or revival, political actors within and outside of Turkey have managed to mobilize this oral tradition to advance their agendas, armed with differential apprehensions of its affective authority. Hence, while this paper does not take an oppositional stance regarding political repression by the Turkish state against Kurds per se, nor does it deny the struggles of Kurds living

outside of Turkey, hegemony is necessarily implicated in my discussion about the creative and historic uses of folklore in the context of Kurdish nationalism in Turkey.

After a review of the literature on folklore and nationalism, I introduce dengbêjî by assaying its idealized content, form, function, and context in performance. Next, I provide historical background to situate the present state of Kurdish folklore, describing the vicissitudes of nationalist discourse and the state's encounters with ethnic minorities, namely Kurds, from the Late Ottoman period to the contemporary Turkish Republic. I then examine the divergent trajectories of Kurdish nationalism among different segments of the population and the ways dengbêjî has been invoked to serve disparate political agendas. I conclude by way of speculation about possible futures for dengbêjî.

Folklore and nationalism

It is the confluence of power and communications that paved the way for the genesis of two deeply interrelated imaginaries, those of folklore and nationalism. The German scholar Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), who is widely credited with spurring the age of Romantic nationalism, was himself greatly influenced by poetry collections that were circulating among elite European circles of his day (Wilson 2006a). Herder was fascinated, for instance, by MacPherson's *Poems of Ossian*, a collection inspired by earlier publications of oral ballads such as the *Hasaginica* of the Balkans (Leersen 2012). Likewise, he was inspired by philosophical discourses around such collections, particularly the musings of Giambattista Vico, whose groundbreaking work on continuity in history and independent cultural entities would prove to be of fundamental value to Herder's work on German nationalism (Wilson 2006a, 110–11).

According to Herder, members of a nation are responsible for delivering humanity through the discovery of their unique national character. By developing a “national soul” guided by laws peculiar to

a shared *zeitgeist* and expressed through language, arts, beliefs, and customs, Herder saw each nation as strengthening its internal unity (Wilson 2006a, 113). Unlike his contemporary Enlightenment thinkers, who propounded a universal law guided by the rational sciences, Herder argued for the distinctness of each nation's innate abilities resulting from a specific environment and history. As I outline, Romantic notions of a primordial national soul have similarly justified political agendas among both Turkish and Kurdish nationals.

Herder's quest for Germany's national soul discoverable in its people's traditions was complicated by the encroachment of foreign influences, most notably France, into the fabric of everyday life. He saw the peasantry as an unspoiled and indispensable link between Germany's shared national past and her promising future and, in the spirit of the times, sought to collect and publish the most authentic "living voice of the nationalit[y]" (Wilson 2006a, 115): folk poetry. The notion of collecting and circulating folk materials of a premodern past in order to reignite the soul of a nation would gain traction around Europe and beyond very quickly, albeit with varying degrees of urgency based on the positionality of elite classes.

Victorian England was among those Western European countries whose elites' immense wealth and power did not compel them to galvanize national consciousness based on a mythical shared past, for which William Thoms, 1846 coiner of "folklore" and self-professed Grimmian, bemoaned its lack of archived folk material and undertook his own surveys of peasant lore (Roper 2012). It was not long before scholars such as Tylor and Lang were arguing persuasively that folklore materials were themselves remnants of man's savage past and that direct parallels could be drawn between cultural "survivals" and similar practices in more "primitive" societies (Dorson 1968, 194). As I will argue, elite Kurds have also promoted, and often discouraged, folklore collection and reproduction, their attitude contingent upon *du jour* opinions about progress, modernity, nationhood, and strategy.

Challenging the teleology of Romantic nationalists and folklorists regarding the taken-for-granted character of a nation and the evolutive nature of civilization, Benedict Anderson (1983) defines the nation as an imagined community that is both sovereign and limited, where the very notion of imagination forcefully conditions all that a nation is said to entail. He posits nationhood to be an outcrop of 18th century European Enlightenment principles, whereupon empires were replaced by nations as “the legitimate international norm” (113), spurring new notions of temporality, print capitalism, and creole solidarities overseas. For Anderson, official nationalisms were strategic responses by dynastic and aristocratic groups threatened by emerging popular vernacular nationalisms, and typically involved state-controlled education, propaganda, historiography, and militarism. Newspapers and novels, published by large capitalist enterprises, began circulating among a growing, increasingly literate middle class in popular languages, which ultimately superseded sacred, authoritative idioms such as Latin as well as “lesser” vernacular tongues spoken at empirical peripheries. Furthermore, the census, map, and museum imposed by colonial powers provide bureaucratic templates for future nationalisms. They impose quantifiable identities, geographical imaginaries, and historical heritage symbols on their subjects, who continue to use the models in the postcolonial era.

In all these points we find close parallels in the Ottoman, Turkish, and Kurdish contexts. Here, hegemonic nationalist agendas combine with new technologies and bureaucratic structures (Başgöz 1972; Zeydanlıoğlu 2008; Hamelink 2016) to repress autonomous efforts through violence, coercion, and auto-censorship (Scalbert-Yücel 2009; Foucault 2010). Anthony Smith (1998, 212) argues that “very few national states possess only one form of nationalism,” pointing to the diverse and often contested terrain of multiple nationalisms in spite of a geopolitically-defined nation-state. In the next section, I introduce

dengbêjî, a central site of cultural production that has been and continues to be embroiled in diverse nationalist struggles.

The art of dengbêjî¹

In a provocative study, Metin Yüksel (2019) compares two songs written by two well-known minstrels in the same era about the same episode and with reference to the same object: the rope with which two Kurdish leaders, Sheikh Said and Khalid Beg Cibîrî, were hanged after the 1925 Sheikh Said rebellion². In the first song, the Turkish minstrel Aşık Veysel's composition eulogizes Atatürk and the Turkish Republic, framing them as the embodiment of justice and progress, thus reflecting official ideological discourse persuasively "set to folk poetic meters and expression" (Yüksel 2019, 84). The second is a lament poem by Kurdish minstrel Dengbêj Reso, who uses free-verse narrative to communicate "a Kurdish nationalist and devout Islamic message to his Kurdish listeners" (88).

Yüksel's study demonstrates the significant role oral poets, and folklore more generally, play in the production and transmission of historical consciousness in Turkey, the radically divergent political messages of each song, and the serious implications of these historiographies with regard to the "Kurdish question" (Yüksel 2019, 72). Corroborating his conclusions, Kurdish studies scholar Martin van Bruinessen (1992, 308) argues that the Kurdish oral epics "serve the same ideological function as the history textbooks used in European primary schools." As we will see, the ideological efficacy of Kurdish folklore has resulted in hegemonic struggles between the Turkish state, dengbêjs, their traditional audiences, and radical Kurdish nationalists.

¹ I use the term *dengbêjî* to refer to the art and *dengbêj* to refer to the artist. See Schäfers (2015) for a good discussion on the recent abstraction of the latter term in the production and popularization of the former.

² The rebellion, which cast 15,000 Kurdish tribal fighters against 52,000 Turkish soldier over one month, is considered the "first large-scale nationalist rebellion by the Kurds" (Olson 1989, 153).

Who is this authoritative purveyor of folkloric knowledge that governs such contentious political and historical consciousness? The word *dengbêj* derives from the Kurdish words *deng* and *bêj*, meaning “voice” and “tell,” with one Kurdish-English dictionary broadly defining it as “reciter of romances and epics” (Chyet 2003). The terms bard and troubadour are sometimes used, indicating the long epics that are recited without musical accompaniment (Allison 2016). A prominent Los Angeles-based *dengbêj* interviewed by two Kurdish linguists in 2015 defines his occupation as “animator, musician, composer, performer, linguist, and historian of Kurdish life” (Sharifi & Barwari 2020, 136). A French scholar of Kurdish oral literature in the 1970s offers a more illustrative definition of *dengbêj*:

These professional poets, who over the course of years furnished their memories as apprentices of certain old masters, assumed the task of conserving the traditions of the past and, if some new event were to occur, the celebration of the heroic deeds of the present. ... They sometimes faced each other in competitions which were held regularly until quite recently. Every emir or chief of an important tribe maintained one or more of these bards, whose songs, because of the contemporary allusions they might contain, sometimes also had political connotations. Thanks to their unlimited repertoire and matchless gift of improvisation, these men transmitted, from the remotest centuries until today, poems with thousands of verses (Lescot 1977, 798, cited in Scalbert-Yücel 2009, 4).

The romantic overtones of this definition notwithstanding, Kurdish scholar Clémence Scalbert-Yücel (2009) affirms most of its descriptive elements. She cautions, however, that they are reflective of an earlier lived reality, the *dengbêj* having undergone major transformations since repressive measures against the practice by the Turkish state began in earnest in the mid-20th century. She also notes the geographical contingency of such measures: “As pressure was always greater in town, the village played an essential part in

preserving the *şevbihêrk* [evening gatherings] where dengbêjs used to sing, and the apprenticing of the *kilam* [song]” (5). Again, the romantic image belies a relationship of subservience between the apprentice singer, who was typically poor, orphaned, or forced into beggary, and his master, a feudal lord or slaveowner who trained his pupil in the art over several years leading up to the latter’s requisite performances before large audiences (6).

Performance of dengbêjî embodies what Richard Bauman describes as “the dual sense of the artistic action—the doing of folklore and artistic event” and may therefore be treated as a “symbolic and expressive art” (Bauman 1977, 4). With a vast repertoire comprising lyrical love poems, tales of intertribal conflict, heroic epics, and eulogies to historical figures confronting the Iranian and Turkish state (Sharifi & Barwari 2020, 143), rooted in personal and narrativized events, and due to a long history of repression and stigmatization of Kurdish art in Turkey and ensuing Kurdish diasporas, folkloric components of performances vary widely across time and space. For the remainder of this section, I consider the popular form, content, context, and function of dengbêjî performances over the course of recent history.

Once a free-verse lyrical narrative improvised to incorporate current events, in recent history dengbêjî has been entextualized through preservation in recordings, transcriptions, and translations, or incorporated into other types of performance or genre, each diverging from the ideal form that lives in collective memory. Nonetheless, scholars aver that a homogenizing form need not destroy dengbêjî, as its affective value remains largely unchallenged: “[Kurdish] oral traditions are not dying out altogether; they are changing in form and becoming less varied, but remain powerful and emotive... For the Kurds the heroic and often tragic world of life in the villages and nomad encampments of the past is very appealing.” (Allison 2001, 209).

Linguists Amir Sharifi and Zuzan Barwari (2020), using literary analysis and personal experience narratives, offer a comprehensive examination of reported speech in performance. Their analysis reveals how “aesthetics and functions of common language, literary and artistic creativity, literary mastery, theatrical performance, imagery, and genre come together at the locus of what Bakhtin calls a ‘plurality’ found in ‘the human voice’” (144). They articulate dengbêjî as a speech event that uses direct and indirect speech³, polyphony, and intertextuality (Bakhtin 1981) across narrative genres to convey cultural information to Kurds. One informant, a dengbêj living in Germany, states that “historical awareness, showing and telling, extensive memory, familiarity with stories of the past, storytelling skills, quality of voice, and character all contribute to re-echoing competent telling” (Sharifi & Barwari 2020, 146). Depending on the character being animated by the dengbêj, prosodic and embodied features such as voice, pitch, and quality are engaged, as are gestures, facial expressions, and gaze. Paralleling Western ballad performances (Porter 1986), the dengbêj’s audience plays a formal role by listening and responding to, participating in, and anticipating events as they unfold in performance.

As mentioned above, the kilams deal predominantly with themes of love and battle, the latter comprising either intertribal conflict or battles against other polities such as neighbouring tribes, Iran, or the Turkish state. According to cultural and political theorists Wendelmoet Hamelink and Hanifi Bariş (2014), they are replete with images, such as caravans, horse riders, and tribal alliances, from an idealized social and political world of the past, typically casting the local leader as the protagonist, thereby suggesting a strong allegiance

³ Kurdish, like other Iranian languages, does not make a clear syntactic or morphological distinction between direct and indirect speech (Ebert 1986), which necessitates extensive skill on the part of the dengbêj to adopt multiple roles effectively in order to change his footing so as to produce and animate different voices (Goffman 1974).

to local political structures. Other recurring figures are the fugitive, the rebel, and the traitor, with the commoner conveying the prime vantage point. The narrative content wherein place names are continuously mentioned during performance also conjures and draws an imaginary map of a Kurdish-centred geography.

The sung narratives of dengbêjî performance, elaborately and imaginatively juxtaposing landscapes, characters, relations, and normative values that reflect the lived realities of many Kurds, nonetheless exemplify what Propp (1984) refers to as “historicity of folklore”: Although the plots, characters, and struggles do represent aspects of a certain reality of a Kurdish past, it is often impossible to establish a direct link with a specific period in Kurdish history, so the historicity lies less in the correct depiction of real events and more in a group’s expression of historical self-awareness, as well as its attitude toward past events, persons, and circumstances. Historical significance thus becomes an ideological phenomenon central to individual and group identification. Images and symbols are also used to decorate the sites of televised or live staged performances, so that furniture, stylized props, framed pictures of notable dengbêjs, costumes, and superimposed backdrops of iconic Kurdish landscapes such as highland pastures, remote villages, and high mountain passes serve to unite the audience in a shared, imaginary life-world.

There are multiple and complex dimensions to the changing context of dengbêjî, the most apparent being the physical space associated with performances. Whereas performances in earlier times were typically performed in private homes and guesthouses, or during weddings and competitions, today’s performances are staged at festivals, on television, and at allotted dengbêj cafes. These new settings and associated audiences have a limiting effect on kilam lengths, where earlier it was not uncommon for a dengbêj to begin singing after supper and continue until dawn (Hamelink 2016). Scalbert-Yücel (2009) attributes shorter contemporary performances to memory loss due to their decades-long ban, diverse expectations of

contemporary audiences who may not appreciate or understand long epic stories, and constraints on recording and radio broadcasting, which began cutting songs as early as the 1950s (17).

The transmission context that was central to dengbêjî has also changed or disappeared. Previously, there was an “education” where pupils or servants would learn from a master, often a family member. The ongoing dialogue between teacher and apprentice consisting of practice, critique, omission of errors, recitation, repetition, and performance for large audiences served as a model for future teachers and apprentices, thereby ensuring an endless chain of transmission (Scalbert-Yücel 2009, 18). Today, many dengbêjs have learned not from masters but from tapes and advise the younger generations to do the same. However, it is also apparent that young people are losing an interest in learning the kilams, many preferring more modern musical genres or those with instrumental accompaniment. Nonetheless, dengbêjî continues to be significant as strenuous efforts are made to maintain the tradition “despite modernization and the supremacy of the written word over oral tradition” (Galip 2015, 71).

The Kurdish diaspora has furnished performers with different cultural and technological resources as well as new audiences that simultaneously broaden the imagined community of Kurds while sharpening differences between performers with varying political sensibilities. Interviews with diasporic singers lead Sharifi and Barwani (2020) to conclude that “*dengbêjî* produced in exile and disseminated through the media, drawing on the old expressive and aesthetic elements and folklore, has proven to be a powerfully imaginative aesthetic resource for preserving and promoting Kurdishness” (141). Hamelink (2016) suggests that since many Kurds feel they have “missed out on experiencing that Kurdish life world from within,” due to language attrition or non-traditional local environment, they see dengbêjî as triggering and symbolizing “ideas about Kurdishness, origin, authenticity, and the past,” which are conveyed “through the continuous repetition of figures and landscapes

of past times, the accompanying sounds of the voices, the use of Kurdish and common phrases, and the performance setting” (146). For young and old listeners alike, dengbêjî evokes nostalgia for an identity seen as stolen through forced assimilation, migration, resettlement, or persecution.

Finally, while the preservation of ethno-linguistic identity and authoritative narration of morals specific to the Kurdish experience have remained the overarching function of dengbêjî performance across the ages, political tensions over the past century have thrust the art into a complex arena of conflicting nationalisms. On the one hand, adherents to the Kurdish political movement, which I discuss below, tend to regard “strong and outspoken moral viewpoints on what Kurdish society should be and become as the only way to form a unitary front against the dominance and oppression of Turkey’s politics regarding the Kurds” (Hamelink 2016, 339). Central to their strategy is the imposition of these new social narratives onto new and existing kilams and the omission of old narratives of tribal warfare and primitivism, which they see as counterproductive to the cause for liberation through nationhood.

On the other hand, less radical dengbêjs, who often subscribe to future ideals of the Kurdish nationalist movement, tend not to concur about the omission of supposedly problematic kilams. In interviews with dengbêjs in Turkey and abroad, Hamelink found that “most dengbêjs were primarily interested in the transmission and performance of their art. The bodily experience of singing the old kilams they had learned when they were young, but had to hide from public life for so many years, was in itself a rewarding experience for them” (Hamelink 2016, 339). Having suffered through decades of oppression, these traditional singers see their moral messages as imbued with a certain authority. Moreover, it is precisely the anonymity of their kilams from which they derive a sense of collective Kurdish ownership. Rather than heed the activists’ call to develop a common Kurdish cause, nationalist mindset, and adaptation of

performances to contemporary norms, traditionalists express a strong desire to remain artistically autonomous and to retain links with ancestral values.

Ottoman and Turkish nationalisms

The challenge of reconciling divergent liberatory goals, including the adaptation of *dengbêjî* to political agendas, within the Kurdish community in Turkey and the diaspora necessitates an understanding of the roots of Kurdish nationalism. However, since the dawn of nationalism it has been made apparent that no nationalist movement occurs in a vacuum but rather always exists in relation to competing nationalisms. As this paper's focus is limited to Kurdish nationalism in present-day Turkey, other allegiances to consider are the various ethnic groups comprising the Ottoman Empire followed by the post-independence Turkish state. In this section, I take a brief tour through the authoritative attempts in the region to unify its subjects in the 19th and 20th centuries, first through Ottomanism, then Kemalism, and finally Kurdish nationalism. As with the European Romantic nationalists, folklore collection has played a prominent role throughout.

The Ottoman Empire, a great and influential expanse spanning North Africa, the Middle East, and Europe, exercised a policy of ethnic pluralism among its subjects, whose relative freedoms undoubtedly contributed to the empire's stability for over six centuries beginning in 1299 (Başgöz 1972). The Kurds saw themselves as a distinct ethnic group despite never having experienced political unity, in contrast to their neighbours, the Ottomans and the Persians, perhaps owing to their tribal organization and location as a buffer zone between rival empires. As such, they were nomadic or semi-nomadic peoples who expanded their territories on behalf of local leadership rather than a greater Kurdistan. Contact between Kurds and Ottomans allegedly dates from the early 16th century when an alliance was forged to stave off Safavid encroachments on Ottoman territory

(Strohmeier 2003, 10). By the late 19th century, Kurds “presented a picture of dissolution, fractionalization, and tribal conflict,” with Islam as their only “transcendental” unifier, along perhaps with antagonisms toward Christians (16).

Tanzimāt was a period of intensive restructuring of the Ottoman Empire by bureaucratic elite members between 1839 and 1876, beginning with nationalist reforms by Abdulmejid I, the 31st Sultan of the Empire. He implemented Ottomanism, a nationalistic policy inspired by but also a reaction against European Romantic nationalism. Fearing dissolution of the empire owing to brazen nationalist sentiments among the Empire’s disparate ethnicities, the reforms sought social cohesion via modernization and civil liberties that ensured lawful equality among all subjects. Tanzimāt writers inspired by European collectors of oral literature began to “discover” a true Turkish literature emanating from the folk and unspoiled by foreign influences or elite language (Başgöz 1972, 163). However, intelligentsia and ruling classes, who self-identified primarily as Ottomans and Muslims, did not share the budding movement’s fascination with Turkish folk culture, which for them reeked of ignorance and poverty (164).

Nevertheless, the Empire was severely weakened and lost most of its territories in the years leading up to World War One, the final blow occurring in the aftermath of the war when the Allied Powers partitioned what was left of the Empire into several states. The Turkish War of Independence enlisted Kurdish assistance in exchange for promised autonomy (Zeydanlıoğlu 2008, 7), ultimately preventing Western powers from partitioning present-day Turkey, and the Republic of Turkey emerged in 1923 with Mustafa Kemal Atatürk as its founding father. Aided by the nationalistic principles of Turkish ideologue and folk collector Ziya Gökalp, the Republic of Turkey began co-opting folklore, along with shared history and language, into the nation-building project known as Atatürkism or Kemalism, which sought to create loyalties by the Turkish people around the modern

nation-state rather than the traditional religious and social circles that had commanded popular allegiance during Ottoman reign. Chief among Atatürk's projects were free education and state support of the sciences, parliamentary democracy, and denial of non-Turkish identities⁴, specifically the "erroneous appellations" of "citizens and co-nationals who have been incited to think of themselves as Kurds⁵, Circassians, Laz or Bosnians" (Atatürk cited in Mango 1999, 20).

The new Turkish state now found it necessary to dilute the nation's largest culturally and linguistically distinct minority, the Kurds, with the new constitution of 1924 denying them the autonomy they had been promised (Zeydanlıoğlu 2008, 7). It prohibited the use of the Kurdish language in public and enabled the expropriation of land from Kurdish landowners. The years that followed saw a series of rebellions by Kurds, frequently resulting in massacres where tens of thousands of Kurds perished (Yüksel 2019). These revolts fueled anti-Kurdish sentiment further and contributed to the national image of Kurds as backwards, tribal rabble rousers, leading to heightened efforts to destroy or assimilate them into mainstream Turkish culture. One such strategy was the 1934 resettlement law, a massive displacement programme that prevented any single district from retaining greater than a 10% Kurdish population (Sagnic 2010). Kurdish languages, dress, and customs were forbidden and families divided as children were sent to Turkish-medium boarding schools (Zeydanlıoğlu 2008, 10). Spatial Turkification involved the banning, fining, and replacement of any reference to Kurdistan or any Kurdish

⁴ An official Turkish dictionary in 1936 defined Kurd as: "Name given to a group or a member of this group of Turkish origin, many who have changed their language, speaking a broken form of Persian and lives in Turkey, Iraq, Iran" (Zeydanlıoğlu 2008, 9).

⁵ The euphemism "Mountain Turks" was popularized in official discourse as a way to cancel Kurdish identity by claiming they were Turks who had "forgotten" their Turkishness or were in "denial" of their Turkish origins and needed the truth revealed to them. Similarly, their language was said to have degenerated due to proximity with Iran (Zeydanlıoğlu 2008, 7).

place names, symbols, or monuments with Turkish inscriptions and nationalist symbols⁶.

After a 1980 military coup, anti-Kurdish policies became increasingly violent amid eruption of the Kurdish-Turkish conflict, which saw a reactionary Kurdish guerrilla movement coalesce around the Kurdistan Workers' Party or PKK (Watts 2010). By the mid-1990s, thousands of villages were wiped from the map, with nearly 400,000 Kurdish villagers displaced or left homeless (Human Rights Watch 2005). In the 1980s and '90s, it was especially dangerous to speak Kurdish in public or be caught with Kurdish music, where even possession of a tape was a criminal offence. A substantial amount of music was destroyed or thrown in rivers as protective measures (Hamelink 2016, 203). Since the 1980 coup, many dengbêjs have been exiled, arrested, and tortured while others have fled Turkey, mostly to Europe (35). Since 2005, Article 301 of the Turkish Penal Code has made it illegal to "insult Turkishness" (Karaca 2011), which has led to the imprisonment of people who have dared to insult Atatürk, speak Kurdish in public, or acknowledge the Armenian genocide⁷ (BBC 2007).

Shifting contexts of Kurdish nationalism

Meanwhile, a strain of Kurdish nationalism was starting to take shape already at the end of the 19th century when Kurdish elites, influenced by the prevailing European and Slavic intellectual currents of the time, founded a newspaper, *Kurdistan*, in 1896 with the aim of modernizing what they saw as the backward Kurdish masses in order

⁶ See Güvenç (2011) on creative decolonizing efforts by Kurds in Diyarbakır to reappropriate urban space so as to construct counternarratives of Kurdish nationalism.

⁷ The Armenian Genocide was an ethnic campaign against the Armenian people and identity by the ruling party of the Ottoman Empire during World War I. Roughly one million Armenians were killed in death marches to the Syrian Desert while up to 200,000 others underwent forced Islamization (Sunny 2015).

to try their hand at nationhood (Allison 2016, 116). Political mobilization of folklore did not begin until 1919 with the publication of the Kurdish magazine *Jin*. Here, Kurds publicly voiced complaints against Kemalist policies that excluded Kurds from public life as well as Turkish appropriation of Kurdish literary works, the collection and mapping of which were being commissioned by the newly founded Turkish Folklore Association so as to identify and assimilate non-standard linguistic and cultural forms (Allison 2016). Despite the threat posed by Kurdish music to the Kemalist agenda, collectors were tasked with appropriating, translating into Turkish, archiving, and broadcasting many forms of Kurdish cultural production (Hamelink 2016, 35). Some singers and poets were forced to sing Turkish nationalist songs; others were heavily monitored, specific records prohibited lest they incite Kurdish nationalism through their invocation of epic Kurdish heroes.

After the failed revolts of the 1920s and '30s, Kurdish intellectuals, who had been leading the nationalist movement, looked increasingly to the Kurdish peasantry as protectors of Kurdish heritage against the Turkish enemy. Oral tradition became a bridge between tribal and urban Kurdish society. Kurdish radio stations broadcast *dengbêjs* from Armenia, Iran, Iraq, and later Europe and were heard in Turkey beginning in the 1950s, thus keeping alive an interest in the singers and their songs even as modern communications, social change, and new music forms were transforming many oral traditions (Hamelink 2016). Underground markets circulated recordings and city cafes in Kurdish-dense cities hosted secret gatherings of *dengbêjs*. Yet, most “*dengbêjs* in Turkey were pushed to the margins, where they could only continue their art in the safety of the home and of smaller villages that were under less scrutiny than the larger towns and cities. Indeed, the *dengbêj* art was predominantly a village tradition, but as the consequence of modernity, rather than as something that preceded it” (198)

By the late 1950s, a radical strain of Kurdish nationalism saw traditional Kurdish society as hindering modernization, which was considered a prerequisite for nationhood, but it also drew heavily on Romantic nationalism. The PKK, wishing to be a popular movement, recruited heavily from the countryside and became the leading Kurdish political power in the 1980s and '90s. Primordialization discourse presented the Kurds as descendants of the first human beings from the Euphrates-Tigris basin and thus as a force that could improve humanity from within by first rediscovering their essence and ideology that has been degraded by foreign domination (Hamelink 2016, 40). Dengbêjs were seen as fundamental purveyors of that original, albeit corrupted, Kurdishness who thus needed to be “awakened” so their essence could be recovered. This era also witnessed new rhetoric around heritage, tradition, and authenticity⁸, coinciding with a global discourse of multiculturalism, which positioned dengbêj as an essential marker of Kurdishness needing to be preserved and showcased (Scalbert-Yücel 2009, 11).

Major tensions surfaced in the 1980s between PKK ideologues, Kurdish traditionalists, and the Turkish state, all having different motivations and strategies for mobilizing dengbêjî (Hamelink 2016). The dominant Leftist ideology considered the themes of tribal warfare to be feudal, primitive, regressive, and contrary to the Kurds’ struggle for national unity, preferring revolutionary themes reflecting their heroic national struggle for liberation. The Left has often indicted dengbêjs as treasonous conspirators working for the state and has

⁸ Schäfers (2015) points out that if heritage is to provide continuity between past and present, its object requires some sort of fixation, and the emergence of dengbêjî as an abstract noun in the late 1990s is one result of this anchoring through time. Other outcrops of heritagization are the evolving notion of “original” and “authentic” kilams, the standardization of a canon of recognized dengbêjs, repertoires, and styles, and the conflation of dengbêj to encompass nearly all Kurdish performers of sung poetry and prose, even though the term used only to refer to one Kurdish region’s practice.

banned them from Kurdish festivals and media⁹. Traditionalists have seen an alternative vision of freedom reflected in the moral narratives of the old epics, where the desire to evade the state is valued more highly than political sovereignty under one united Kurdistan. Some express distaste for the replacement of traditional lyrics with revolutionary ones while retaining the original melody and intonation, seeing such alterations as disrespectful to their cultural heritage.

The Turkish state continues to crack down on dengbêj while also seeking to satisfy the European Union and international bodies, thus it engages in multicultural discourse by openly “tolerating” Kurdish expressive culture. However, tolerance is circumscribed within the boundaries set by the “tolerant majority” (Brown 2009), which is closely attentive to perceived threats to “the territorial integrity, and thus the sovereignty, of the Turkish state” (Karaca 2011, 156). It arbitrarily sanctions any artistic or cultural practice perceived as supporting terrorism, which can amount to any crime under Article 301. Thus, while dengbêjs are regularly invited to perform on state television and at public festivals, they are legally persecuted if their songs deal with political oppression. The tradition is thereby both formally depoliticized (Schäfers 2015, 6–9) out of fear of violent retaliation by the state and framed as authentic and natural, making it immune from questioning as to the historical, economic, and political conditions of its construction and allowing for the commercial and touristic heritage displays common today¹⁰.

⁹ However, since the late 1990s, pro-Kurdish politicians have been permitted to head municipalities and participate in government institutions, which effectively furnishes “subversion with agency, vision and coordination” (Gambetti 2009, 100), achieved largely through “symbolic politics” or “the use of representation—narratives, symbols, and spectacle—to maintain or transform a power relationship” (Watts 2006, 136). Accordingly, mobilization of Kurdish cultural and linguistic forms such as public “multicultural” festivals has seen an uptick since the early 2000s.

¹⁰ Such actions are reminiscent of the hegemonic struggle described by Bourdieu (1977), in which traditionalists and the Turkish state (and arguably bureaucratic institutions and PKK ideologues as well) vie for habitation at the

Additionally, due to a virtual absence of state funding for explicitly Kurdish arts and culture in Turkey, Kurds often depend on Western bureaucracies for financial support and end up perpetuating “the normative language of liberal multiculturalism promoted by funding bodies like the EU, which frame Kurdish culture mainly as a matter of the exercise of minority rights” (Schäfers 2015, 9) and as a marker of ethnic group identity rather than as individual artistic or political production. Thus, dengbêjs, who are widely considered the most iconic representatives and preservers of oral literature and Kurdish culture, are being increasingly institutionalized and “auto-censored” (Scalbert-Yücel 2009, 15), which enables the tradition to develop only within prescribed institutional limits. The symbolism and imagery used in staged performances inscribes the dengbêjs in the past and reinforces the process of patrimonialization, which grants them heritage status as part of the so-called cultural mosaic of Turkey (19).

Conclusion: The future of dengbêjî

Leersen’s examination of the changing role of the oral poet in the age of Romantic nationalism in Europe has strong parallels to the situation in Kurdistan. He describes how *Hasaginica*, a little-known Balkan oral text, once “discovered” in the West at an opportune moment became entangled in European elites’ fetishization of vernacular literatures as “national literatures” amidst the Romantic folklore collections that were in vogue in the 18th and 19th centuries. Similarly to how one anonymous oral poem-*cum*-epic ballad became a

boundary between doxa and opinion, where agency is expressed. For Bourdieu, doxa is the condition in which a community continually reproduces a culturally constructed world “seen as a self-evident and natural order” (166), which in this case is the traditional art of the dengbêj that is now vulnerable to manipulation by hegemonic forces. Through coercion, omission, and auto-censorship, the dominant power seeks to primordialize “the naturalization of its own arbitrariness” (184).

symbol and validation of Serbian nationalism, with the oral poet now representing the “voice of the nation,” the Kurdish dengbêj has come to be seen as the embodiment of Kurdish nationalism, his kilam invoked as the definitive symbol of Kurdishness.

Building on work by Begikhani, Hamelink, and Weiss (2018) and Karakuş (2022), more attention might be paid to creative ways in which female and queer Kurds are staking out a more visible public space by mobilizing PKK discourse in their assertion of the active participation of marginalized bodies in the struggle for self-determination. Such bodies are using party discourse to improve their own position in their local environments vis-à-vis their hetero-masculine counterparts and to take a more agency-centred approach as opposed to a victim-centred one. In general, a ripe field of inquiry exists regarding changing gender roles in performances of folklore and nationalism in Kurdistan. Particularly in the case of Rojava, where women are often sensationally portrayed in Western media as “badass” fighters combatting groups like ISIS, Gökalp (2010) remains cautious about conflating gender equality on the battlefield with the lived reality of civilians in an otherwise patriarchal society. Where PKK ideology is seen as driving the emancipation of women in Kurdistan, she reminds us of the numerous critics of this dominant political movement who do not wish to align with its aims and policies.

Similar tensions enliven dengbêjî, wherein Kurds vie for representation of an authentic Kurdish culture, each reflecting imaginings about an ideal, autonomous society. Indeed, recent scholarship has illuminated alternative longings of nationalism being voiced by members of the queer dengbêjî community, longings for a queer futurity that challenge “the trenchant heteronormative and homo/nationalist present” (Karakuş 2023, 126). Through their sung performance, these dengbêjs are queering oral histories by rendering queer desire not only visible, but legible—audible—within Kurish

soundscapes, shaping public identities while expanding ideas about Kurdishness.

Finally, rather than shun technological innovations, “non-traditional” forms of folklore, or the influences of new environments on old cultures, Wilson (2006b) implores us to consider the borrowing, adaptation, and generation of all traditions in response to changing circumstances, and focus on how and why such changes fulfill common human needs. Television, social media, revolution, diasporic performances, and queer longing are now integral to dengbêjî, and it is essential to discern why this genre perseveres in spite of these transformations. Clearly, dengbêjî speaks to a visceral part of the Kurdish experience. Like countless oppressed groups, Kurds have witnessed such atrocities as ethnic cleansing, warfare, and disenfranchisement. As soft powers are now encroaching on life-worlds via multiculturalist and pluralist bureaucracies, seeking to essentialize uniqueness under the monolithic banners of nationality and ethnicity, it is incumbent upon us to identify and bring visibility to marginalized cultural expressions in ways that promote dialogue around diversity and cultural difference while enhancing our common humanity.

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