

The Oral History of Afrin: A Synthesis of Existing Research

I. Introduction: Understanding Oral History in the Afrin Context

A. Defining Oral History and Its Significance for Afrin

Oral history, as a methodology, involves the collection of historical information through the personal stories and accounts of individuals, particularly concerning specific events or periods.¹ For the Afrin region in northern Syria, an area distinguished by its profound Kurdish cultural heritage and recent history of intense socio-political upheaval, oral history emerges as an indispensable instrument. It serves not only to record but also to preserve memories, cultural narratives, and testimonies that face the peril of being lost, marginalized, or overshadowed by dominant historical accounts. The significance of oral history is amplified in contexts where communities have endured conflict, displacement, and attempts at cultural suppression, as it provides a platform for voices from the grassroots, fostering the preservation of cultural identity and offering a counter-narrative to official or external interpretations of events. The recent history of Afrin, marked by invasion, occupation, and displacement, underscores the critical role of oral history in documenting the lived experiences of its people, thereby contributing to a more nuanced and human-centered understanding of its past and present. The very nature of the available materials—ranging from personal blogs to formal human rights reports based on interviews—indicates a multifaceted drive to record these histories, stemming from both scholarly interest and the pressing need of individuals and communities to bear witness.

B. Overview of Oral Tradition Forms in Afrin

The oral traditions of Afrin, as documented in existing research, are rich and varied. They encompass a wide spectrum of expressive forms, including traditional epic literature, myths, and legends that have been passed down through generations.² Alongside these are folk stories, proverbs, and lyrical songs that encapsulate communal wisdom and aesthetic values.² More contemporary forms of oral history are also prominent, particularly personal narratives that detail life in Afrin before the significant escalation of conflict in 2018, offering glimpses into a period of relative peace and cultural vibrancy.⁵ Crucially, a substantial body of oral accounts documents the profound transformations brought by war, displacement, and the subsequent changes to the cultural and social fabric of the region.⁵ This diversity in oral forms highlights the multifaceted nature of Afrin's heritage, reflecting both its long-standing cultural traditions and its more recent, traumatic experiences.

C. The Role of Language in Afrin's Oral History

Language is a fundamental carrier of culture and identity, and in Afrin, the Kurdish language, specifically the Kurmanji dialect, is central to its oral traditions.² Many of the epics, songs, and stories are intrinsically tied to Kurmanji, shaping their narrative style, emotional resonance, and cultural specificity. The efforts to document and revitalize Kurdish oral traditions are often intertwined with broader movements for language preservation and cultural recognition.⁸ However, the research on Afrin's oral history is not confined to a single linguistic domain. Source materials indicate that oral histories and related documentation also exist in Arabic and Turkish.⁴ This multilingual context reflects the diverse linguistic landscape of the broader region, the languages of researchers or documenting organizations, and the varied audiences for whom these histories are recorded. The presence of research in multiple languages underscores the need for cross-linguistic engagement to achieve a comprehensive understanding of Afrin's oral heritage.

The acute focus on oral history in Afrin's case is intrinsically linked to the context of conflict and displacement. When traditional modes of record-keeping are disrupted and official narratives may seek to obscure or erase particular experiences, oral history becomes a vital, living testament. For the people of Afrin, these narratives are not merely cultural artifacts; they are tools for memory, justice, and the assertion of identity in the face of profound adversity.⁵

II. The Enduring Legacy: Traditional Oral Literature of Afrin

The traditional oral literature of Afrin represents a significant repository of cultural memory, values, and artistic expression. Research efforts, though sometimes fragmented, have sought to document and analyze these enduring narratives.

A. Documented Epics, Myths, and Legends

A substantial body of epic and legendary material has been identified as integral to Afrin's Kurdish oral heritage. Notably, writer and researcher Walid Bakr, in a seminar organized by the "Lelûn Association for Victims," presented an extensive overview of such narratives.² Among the famous Kurdish epics and legends he highlighted as being prevalent in Afrin are "The Legend of Azdahak," "Rustam Zal," "Mame Shevan," "Lawke Gharib," "Mount Judi," "Mount Agri," "Munzer River," and "Shah Maran." More specific to the region, Bakr mentioned epics such as "The Epic of Siyamand and Khajah," "Farhad and Sherin," "Darwishe Abdi and Adolah," "Banafshe Narin and Jambali," "Khane," "Zambil Frush," "Mame Alan," "Dalal," and the epic of "Fatma Saleh Agha".²

One of the most renowned Kurdish literary works, "Mem û Zîn," penned by the 17th-century poet Ahmad Khani, itself draws heavily from a true story passed down through generations via oral tradition.³ This classic tale of tragic love is considered a cornerstone of Kurdish literature and is known to have been part of Afrin's oral landscape, with Dengbêj (traditional bards) from Afrin contributing to its transmission.³ The significance of these narratives is further

corroborated by Arabic-language sources, which also list stories like "Siyamand û Xecê" (Siyamand and Khajah) and "Mem û Zîn" as love stories preserved and cherished by the people of Afrin.⁹ Traditional songs and epics such as "Dalal" and "Mami Alan" are also noted as being performed in the region.⁴

The following table provides a consolidated view of some key traditional oral narratives documented as part of Afrin's heritage:

Table 1: Key Traditional Oral Narratives of Afrin

Narrative Title	Genre (Epic/Legend/Folk Tale)	Brief Description/Themes	Key Source Documents Documenting It
<i>Mem û Zîn</i>	Epic/Classic Love Story	Tragic love between Mem of the Alan clan and Zin of the Botan clan, thwarted by the antagonist Bakr. Themes of love, fate, jealousy, Kurdish nationalism, Sufi discourse.	²
<i>Siyamand û Xecê</i>	Epic/Love Story	Tragic love story of Siyamand and Xecê, ending in the "valley of death." Themes of love, courage, loss.	²
<i>Zeyneb Oseh</i>	Epic/Love Story	Tragic love story from an Afrin village. Zainab, a symbol of love, tolerance, and beauty, dies from illness. Highlights social customs limiting women's expression.	²
<i>Darwishe Abdi and Adolah</i>	Epic	Heroic and romantic themes.	²
<i>Mame Alan</i>	Epic/Folk Tale	Popular traditional narrative, often sung.	²
<i>Farhad and Sherin</i>	Epic/Love Story	Classic love story found in broader Middle Eastern traditions, with Kurdish versions. Themes of	²

		love, sacrifice, artistic endeavor.	
<i>Dalal</i>	Epic/Song	Historical epic song, dating back over three hundred years, narrating stories of Kurdish heroes and love.	²
<i>The Legend of Azdahak</i>	Legend	Ancient legend, likely referring to the tyrannical figure Dahāg from Iranian mythology, a common theme in Kurdish folklore.	²
<i>Rustam Zal</i>	Legend	Figures from the Shahnameh, indicating the influence of broader Persianate epic traditions on Kurdish oral literature.	²
<i>Fatma Saleh Agha</i>	Epic	Specific local epic.	²
<i>Aisha Ibeh and Zainaba Oseh</i>	Love Epic	One of the most famous love epics sung in Afrin, often at wedding parties.	²

The act of researching and presenting this traditional oral literature, especially in contemporary contexts of cultural threat and displacement, such as Walid Bakr's seminar for an association for victims ², elevates these ancient narratives. They become more than just folklore; they transform into powerful symbols of cultural resilience, markers of identity, and a subtle form of resistance against cultural erasure. This process aligns with what scholars term "heritagization," where elements of the past are actively selected and re-contextualized to serve present-day cultural and political needs.⁸

B. The Art of Narration: Dengbêj, Storytellers, and Singers

The transmission of Afrin's oral literature has historically relied on skilled individuals. The region is noted for its tradition of narrating myths and epics through both spoken storytelling and lyrical performance by "professional storytellers and skilled singers".² Walid Bakr's lecture specifically acknowledged several folk singers who were instrumental in popularizing these stories through epic singing, including Hamoush Korek, Ibrahim Turko, Jamil Horo, Omar Jamlo, Adik Najjar, and Ali Tejo, among others.² This highlights a living tradition where performance is key to preservation.

Kamil Hesên, an artist and cultural researcher affiliated with the Baqî Xido Center for Culture and Art in Kobani, reinforces this point by noting that due to the historical suppression of written Kurdish history, artists, particularly singers, played a crucial role in orally conveying stories, historical events, and cultural knowledge through the medium of extended songs.⁷ The tradition of singing epic tales, often accompanied by instruments like the *tanbur*, *ney*, and *balour*, was a vibrant part of village gatherings and social events.⁴ The *dengbêj*, or traditional Kurdish bard, is a central figure in this process, responsible for memorizing and performing vast repertoires of songs and stories, thus acting as living archives of communal history and culture.⁸

C. Themes and Cultural Values in Traditional Narratives

The themes explored in Afrin's traditional oral narratives are diverse, offering insights into the cultural values, social structures, and historical consciousness of the community. Love is a predominant theme, often depicted in its tragic dimensions, as seen in "Zainb Oseh," "Mem û Zîn," and "Siyamand and Khajah".² These stories frequently explore the tension between individual desires and societal constraints. For instance, "Zainb Oseh" is described not only as a tale of unfulfilled love but also as a reflection of social customs that limited women's freedom of expression. Despite her tragic end, Zainab emerges as a "symbol of love, tolerance and beauty," her story enriching the region's heritage.² Similarly, "Mem û Zîn" delves into themes of passionate love thwarted by jealousy and societal machinations, but also carries undertones of Kurdish national sentiment and Sufi philosophical ideas.³ Heroism, bravery, and resistance against injustice are also common motifs, particularly in epics that recount the deeds of historical or legendary figures.⁴ These narratives serve not only as entertainment but also as vehicles for transmitting moral codes, social norms, and a sense of shared identity.

D. Documented Research and Collection Efforts

While much of Afrin's oral tradition has been sustained through informal, community-based transmission, there have been notable efforts to research and document this heritage. Walid Bakr's lecture, as reported, is itself a form of research dissemination, where he presented his findings on "Oral Literature in Afrin" and explicitly mentioned having "previously conducted research about this epic [Zainb Oseh]".² A significant historical effort includes the work of Kurdish intellectual Celadet Ali Bedirxan and French Orientalist Roger Lescot, who in the 1930s documented the "Memê Alan" narrative, a variant of the Mame Alan stories, with the direct assistance of *Dengbêj* singers from the Afrin region in Syria.³ This early 20th-century work underscores a long-standing scholarly interest in these traditions.

However, despite these efforts, there are indications that comprehensive academic documentation remains incomplete for parts of this rich heritage. Kamil Hesên observes that many historical epics, though preserved and performed by artists, have not undergone extensive academic research, evaluation, or systematic documentation.⁷ This suggests a potential gap between the vibrancy of the living oral tradition and its formal academic study, possibly due to historical political circumstances that hindered Kurdish cultural and linguistic

research within Syria.⁷ Consequently, much of the existing "research" may be the product of cultural activists, community scholars, and diaspora initiatives, making it vital yet perhaps less visible within mainstream academic channels. The cross-referencing of key epics like "Mem û Zîn" and "Siyamand û Xecê" in both Kurdish-focused sources² and Arabic-language discussions of Afrin's culture⁴ nevertheless confirms their deep-rooted significance as recognized cultural touchstones for the region.

III. Echoes of a Bygone Era: Oral Histories of Life in Afrin Before 2018

Oral histories provide invaluable insights into the lived experiences of Afrin's residents before the major upheaval of 2018. These narratives often paint a picture of a distinct period, characterized by peace, local autonomy, a deep connection to nature, and a vibrant social fabric.

A. Narratives of Peace, Prosperity, and Local Governance

Personal testimonies frequently recall Afrin before 2018 as a "peaceful city".⁵ Accounts describe an era where the local economy was "thriving," and daily life was characterized by "peace, democracy and kindness".⁵ Crime rates were reportedly low, contributing to a sense of security and stability.⁵ Following the withdrawal of Syrian government forces in the summer of 2012, Afrin experienced a period of de facto autonomy under the administration of local Kurdish groups.⁵ These oral accounts often highlight positive aspects of this local governance, including the promotion of equality between men and women and democratic practices.⁵ This period, as remembered, contrasts sharply with the subsequent turmoil, often imbuing these recollections with a nostalgic quality. Such "nostalgic narrativization" is a common response in communities that have undergone significant trauma and displacement, serving as a psychological anchor and a vision of what has been lost.¹⁴ While these memories may idealize the past to some extent, they also convey factual elements of lived experience and communal aspirations.

B. The Centrality of Olive Cultivation and Nature

A dominant theme in pre-2018 oral histories is the profound connection between the people of Afrin and their natural environment, particularly the olive tree. Narrators describe the olive tree as the "center of our livelihoods, of our traditional Kurdish practices, and of our ecosystems".⁵ The region has long been famed for its extensive olive groves.¹³ Personal stories recount family legacies intertwined with olive cultivation; for instance, Hammude speaks of his great-grandfather planting 300 olive trees, with the oldest tree being over 200 years old, a source of sustenance and income passed down through generations.⁵ This deep, multi-generational bond elevates the olive tree beyond a mere agricultural commodity to a core symbol of ancestral ties, cultural continuity, and identity.¹⁶ Afrin itself was remembered as a "green city," adorned with mountains, gardens, trees, flowers, natural springs, and a river

known as "the black river." Residents are recalled as having actively protected their environment, for example, by not building factories around the city and keeping the streets clean.⁵ This ecological consciousness, as remembered, forms a significant part of Afrin's pre-conflict identity.

C. Cultural Practices and Social Fabric

Oral accounts paint a picture of a vibrant cultural life and a distinct social fabric in pre-2018 Afrin. The region was known for its musical talents, with many residents excelling in the music industry and numerous skilled instrumentalists.⁵ Cultural celebrations like Nowruz, the spring festival, were observed with great fervor and communal participation, showcasing resilience and cultural pride.¹⁷ Traditional songs, dances, and wedding customs were integral to social life, with specific melodies and dances being passed down.⁴ Narratives also highlight progressive social values promoted by the local Kurdish leadership, such as gender equality, where women were not obligated to wear the hijab if they chose not to, and had opportunities to work or join the army.⁵ The area, historically known as Kurd-Dagh (Mountain of the Kurds), was characterized by a dense population of Kurdish villages, fostering a strong sense of Kurdish cultural identity.¹³ These recollections of local governance promoting specific social values serve as performative assertions of a particular socio-political identity and achievement, offering a counter-narrative to external portrayals of the region.

The following table summarizes key themes emerging from oral histories of pre-conflict life in Afrin:

Table 2: Themes in Oral Histories of Pre-Conflict Life in Afrin

Theme	Illustrative Examples/Quotes from Narratives	Key Source Documents
Peaceful Coexistence & Local Governance	"Afrin was a peaceful city...the economy was thriving, and people were working in peace, democracy and kindness." ⁵ Low crime rate. Democratic local Kurdish group promoting equality after 2011. Semi-autonomous since 2012.	⁵
Olive-centric Livelihood & Ecology	"The olive tree was the center of our livelihoods...traditional Kurdish practices...ecosystems." ⁵ Multi-generational family olive groves (e.g., 300 trees, one 200+ years old). "Green city" with protected environment.	⁵

Cultural Vibrancy & Social Values	Residents excelled in music. Kurdish leaders promoted gender equality (no forced hijab, women in work/army). Nowruz celebrated with fervor. Strong Kurdish identity in Kurd-Dagh. Traditional songs and dances.	⁴
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These oral histories of a bygone era are crucial for understanding the profound sense of loss experienced by the community and provide a vital context for interpreting the narratives of upheaval that followed.

IV. Narratives of Upheaval and Resilience: Oral Accounts from Times of Conflict and Displacement (Post-2018)

The period from 2018 onwards marks a dramatic rupture in the history of Afrin, characterized by invasion, occupation, widespread human rights abuses, and mass displacement. Oral testimonies from this era are crucial for documenting these experiences and understanding the community's response.

A. Testimonies of Invasion, Occupation, and Human Rights Abuses

Personal accounts vividly describe the offensive launched in January 2018 by Turkish forces and allied Syrian armed groups (often referred to as the Syrian National Army, SNA), which led to the occupation of Afrin after a two-month siege.⁵ Hammude recounts the immediate aftermath, including violations of international law, break-ins, theft, and the destruction of infrastructure like schools and hospitals, leading to civilian deaths, including his grandfather.⁵ These individual narratives are extensively corroborated and expanded upon by systematic research conducted by human rights organizations. Reports from Human Rights Watch¹², Amnesty International²¹, and Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ)²³, all based on numerous interviews with victims and witnesses, document a consistent pattern of grave violations. These include arbitrary detentions, torture, enforced disappearances, looting of property, confiscation of homes and agricultural land, and instances of sexual and gender-based violence perpetrated by various SNA factions. Specific groups, such as the Sultan Suleiman Shah (Al-Amshat) division and the Hamzat Division, are frequently named in testimonies as responsible for abuses.²⁰ For example, STJ collected testimonies from individuals like Ramzia Sheikho, Fatima Mustafa, and Azza al-Mohammad, detailing arbitrary arrests of family members, demands for ransom, and the profound distress caused by these actions.²⁴ An STJ report from late 2023, based on 40 interviews conducted earlier that year, highlighted ongoing gross human rights violations against Kurds and Yazidis in Afrin.²³ YPJ Commander Rohilat Afrin, in interviews, also spoke of the continuous state of war and Turkish aggression

targeting the region and its achievements.²⁷ The collection and dissemination of these testimonies by such organizations represent a formalized approach to oral history, transforming individual traumatic experiences into documented evidence intended for international scrutiny and potential accountability mechanisms. This work underscores that oral history in the Afrin context often serves not just cultural preservation but also critical human rights advocacy.

B. Experiences of Forced Displacement and Life in Exile

The 2018 offensive triggered a massive wave of forced displacement. Narratives describe families "running for their lives away from Afrin" ⁵, leaving behind their homes, livelihoods, and communities. Many became unemployed and homeless, finding refuge in makeshift camps or overcrowded temporary shelters, often separated from family members and grappling with immense loss.⁵ Detailed stories of displacement from Afrin and the nearby al-Shahba region (where many Afrin IDPs initially fled) recount perilous journeys, the loss of personal belongings, and the harsh living conditions in exile.⁶

Zamji Abdo, a father of four displaced from his Afrin village in 2018 to al-Shahba, and then forced to flee again, shared his pain: "I was living on the hope that I would return to my village. Despite the cold and hunger in al-Shahba, I could smell the scent of nearby Afrin. But the recent attack made us leave again".⁶ He described being forced by militants to abandon his car and belongings, and his children walking long distances in the cold.⁶ Kamiran, a musician displaced from al-Shahba, carried only his tanbur (a traditional stringed instrument), leaving behind other instruments, stating, "This instrument is not just a musical tool. It is part of my identity and our identity as children of Afrin. I carry it with me wherever I go to preserve our lyrical heritage".⁶

Reports from non-governmental organizations like CARE and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) further illustrate the plight of the displaced, including accounts of Afrin residents returning to find their homes occupied by others or completely destroyed.²⁹ The Kurdish writer Îbrahîm Êzîdî describes the forced migration to the Şehba region and the subsequent ongoing attacks, even in displacement camps.³¹ Despite these hardships, a remarkable spirit of resilience is often evident. Displaced people from Afrin in the Shahba camps, for instance, have been documented planting trees and gardens in front of their tents, an act seen as both a way to beautify their surroundings and a poignant echo of their lost homeland.¹⁶ These acts of creating small pockets of normalcy and cultural continuity are powerful forms of resistance.

The recurring theme in these oral testimonies of original inhabitants being displaced and their homes subsequently occupied by others, often families from different parts of Syria including those linked to SNA fighters ⁵, points towards concerns of deliberate demographic change. Human Rights Watch noted that "Turkish authorities were quick to orchestrate the resettlement of hundreds of Sunni Arab families displaced from Eastern Ghouta in homes of the district's Kurdish inhabitants," aligning with what it describes as "Türkiye's stated goals of weakening the Kurdish presence in northern Syria".¹² These oral histories provide crucial

ground-level evidence for such claims, which have profound implications for the future social fabric and potential for reconciliation.

C. Destruction of Cultural and Natural Heritage – The Case of Olive Groves

Given the deep economic and symbolic importance of olive trees to Afrin's identity, their widespread destruction since 2018 is a particularly painful theme in oral accounts. Hammude narrates that invading forces "cut down or burned more than 150,000 olive trees," deliberately prevented people from caring for their groves, and forced the sale of olive oil at exploitative prices. His own family lost over 50 ancient olive trees and their olive pressing machines.⁵

These personal accounts are echoed by media reports and local observations. Kurdistan24 reported that, according to local estimates, over 280,000 olive trees had been cut down in Afrin by armed groups since 2018.³³ Residents described this destruction as "deliberate and systematic" and a "blow to our identity and heritage," with the felled trees often being sold as firewood, creating a lucrative business for the factions involved.³³ Farmers attempting to harvest their remaining olives have faced harassment, extortion, and demands for shares of their crops from various military factions.³⁴ This destruction is perceived not merely as economic sabotage but as an assault on the cultural soul and ancestral heritage of Afrin, a form of symbolic violence intended to sever the community's connection to their land. The oral testimonies are vital in exposing the intent and profound impact of this ecocidal and cultural devastation.

D. Narratives of Resistance, Hope, and Identity Maintenance

Despite the overwhelming trauma of invasion, occupation, and displacement, oral histories from Afrin are also replete with narratives of resistance, hope, and the tenacious maintenance of identity. The very act of bearing witness, of sharing stories of suffering and injustice, can be seen as a form of resistance. Beyond this, more active forms are also documented. The displaced women of Afrin in Shahba, for example, are described as resilient, creative, and actively organizing themselves to cope with their new realities and preserve their community.¹¹ Accounts from various sources speak of the unbroken will of the Afrin people and their enduring hope of return.³⁵

Kamiran, the displaced musician who carried his tanbur, exemplifies the commitment to preserving cultural heritage as an act of identity maintenance.⁶ The planting of gardens and trees in the barren landscapes of displacement camps in Shahba is another powerful symbol of this resilience, a way of recreating a semblance of home and asserting a continued connection to life and nature.¹⁶ The concept of *çanda berxwedaniyê* (culture of resistance) is highlighted as being deeply rooted in Afrin's history and as a specific target of the occupying forces.³¹ YPJ Commander Rohilat Afrin also emphasized the resilience of the YPJ (Women's Protection Units) and its role as an example of women's strength and self-defense, drawing from experiences in conflicts including Afrin.²⁷ These narratives of resilience are crucial for a

holistic understanding of the community's experience, demonstrating agency and the creative adaptation of cultural practices in the face of adversity, refusing to be defined solely by victimhood.

The following table categorizes the dominant themes found in oral accounts of life in Afrin post-2018:

Table 3: Dominant Themes in Oral Accounts of Conflict, Displacement, and Occupation in Afrin (Post-2018)

Theme	Illustrative Examples/Quotes from Testimonies	Key Source Documents
Arbitrary Detention, Torture & Human Rights Abuses	Accounts of arrest without charge, torture in detention, enforced disappearances, extortion for release. "They had forcibly removed his fingernails, toenails and teeth, and he had burn marks on his feet". ²⁰ Testimonies from STJ, HRW, Amnesty International.	⁵
Forced Displacement & Life in Exile/Camps	"Running for their lives away from Afrin". ⁵ Living in tents, separated from family, unemployment, loss of homes. Repeated displacement experiences. "We did not even have time to bring anything but the clothes on our backs". ³⁰	⁵
Destruction of Olive Groves & Cultural/Natural Heritage	"Military invaders cut down or burned more than 150,000 olive trees". ⁵ "Every tree cut is a blow to our identity and heritage". ³³ Forced sale of olive oil at low prices, theft of pressing machines. Destruction of historical sites. ³⁷	⁵
Property Confiscation, Looting & Demographic Change	Homes broken into, personal belongings stolen. ⁵ Widespread looting and pillaging, property seizures by SNA factions. ¹² Homes of	⁵

	displaced Kurds occupied by resettled families. ⁵	
Resilience, Resistance & Identity Maintenance	Hope of return, determination to preserve heritage (e.g., Kamiran's tanbur ⁶). Women organizing in Shahba. ¹¹ Planting gardens in displacement camps. ¹⁶ <i>Çanda berxwedaniyê</i> (culture of resistance). ³¹ YPJ's continued struggle. ²⁷	⁶

V. Documenting the Voices: Contemporary Efforts to Preserve Afrin's Oral Heritage

The preservation and documentation of Afrin's oral heritage, both its traditional forms and contemporary testimonies, are being undertaken by a variety of actors through diverse means. These efforts are crucial in the face of ongoing conflict and cultural pressures.

A. Role of Cultural Associations, Researchers, and Human Rights Organizations

Several organizations and individuals are actively involved in documenting Afrin's oral history. Cultural associations play a role in preserving traditional lore; for example, the "Lelûn Association for Victims" hosted a seminar where writer Walid Bakr presented his research on "Oral Literature in Afrin".² Similarly, Kamil Hesên, an artist and cultural researcher at the Baqî Xido Center for Culture and Art in Kobani, has spoken about the vital role artists play in the oral transmission and preservation of history and culture, especially when written forms are suppressed.⁷

A significant portion of contemporary oral history collection is driven by human rights organizations. Groups such as Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ), Human Rights Watch (HRW), and Amnesty International conduct extensive interviews with victims and witnesses of violations in Afrin, compiling reports that effectively document contemporary oral testimonies.¹² For instance, an STJ report detailed 10 arrests in Afrin based on field researcher documentation and testimonies following events in February 2025.²⁴ The Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights and YASA Kurdish Center for Studies and Legal Consultancy also monitor and document violations in Afrin based on victim and witness testimony, submitting findings to international bodies.³⁷ This form of documentation, while focused on human rights abuses, inherently captures personal narratives and lived experiences, thus contributing significantly to the corpus of Afrin's contemporary oral history. This work often shifts the purpose of oral history from purely cultural preservation towards socio-legal activism and advocacy.

B. Use of Media and Platforms for Dissemination

The dissemination of Afrin's oral history occurs through a multitude of channels. Formal presentations like lectures and seminars provide platforms for researchers to share their findings.² Reports published by NGOs, often available online, reach a global audience and serve as crucial resources for advocacy and awareness.¹²

News agencies and media outlets also play a significant role in capturing and broadcasting personal stories and cultural information. Hawar News Agency (ANHA) has featured articles on traditional artists and stories of displacement.⁶ The Rojava Information Center has published interviews with key figures like YPJ commanders, offering perspectives on the conflict.²⁷ Kurdistan24 has reported on the destruction of olive groves, including local testimonies³³, and Enab Baladi has covered traditional stories and the challenges faced by olive harvesters through interviews.⁹

Furthermore, online platforms and social media have become important avenues for individual narratives and cultural content. The personal story of Hammude, for example, was shared on youth4nature.org.⁵ YouTube channels host videos featuring traditional Afrin songs, musical performances, and discussions related to Afrin's culture and current events.³⁸ This use of digital platforms democratizes the sharing of oral history, allowing for wider reach, but it also presents challenges regarding verification, contextualization, and the long-term archiving of such materials compared to more formal academic or institutional projects.

C. Challenges and Gaps in Documentation

Despite these varied efforts, significant challenges and gaps in the documentation of Afrin's oral heritage persist. As Kamil Hesên pointed out, some traditional historical epics lack extensive academic research, evaluation, and systematic documentation.⁷ The ongoing conflict, political instability, and displacement create formidable obstacles for researchers attempting to conduct systematic fieldwork and preservation projects. Access to affected areas can be restricted, and the safety of both researchers and narrators is a paramount concern.

Fear of reprisal can also lead to the silencing of voices, particularly when dealing with sensitive topics like human rights abuses under occupation.³³ Many individuals may be hesitant to share their stories publicly or even privately if they fear repercussions for themselves or their families. The displacement of a significant portion of Afrin's population, including intellectuals, storytellers, community elders, and cultural practitioners, to various locations within Syria (like Şehba and Qamishli) and abroad (such as Europe) means that the knowledge and the efforts to preserve it are geographically dispersed and potentially fragmented.² This necessitates transnational and collaborative research approaches to bridge these divides and ensure that the diverse strands of Afrin's oral history can be woven together.

VI. Conclusion: The Vital Role of Afrin's Oral History

and Directions for Future Inquiry

A. Summary of Key Findings on Existing Research

The existing research on the oral history of Afrin, as reflected in the available documentation, reveals a multifaceted and dynamic field. It encompasses the rich tapestry of traditional oral literature, including epics, legends, and folk songs that have been passed down through generations, primarily in the Kurdish (Kurmanji) language.² Alongside this, poignant personal narratives provide vivid recollections of life in Afrin before 2018, often depicting a period of peace, cultural vibrancy, and a deep connection to the land, especially its olive groves.⁵ A significant and growing body of oral history comprises contemporary testimonies detailing the profound upheaval caused by the 2018 invasion and subsequent occupation. These accounts document experiences of human rights abuses, forced displacement, the destruction of cultural and natural heritage, and the ongoing struggles of daily life under occupation or in exile.¹²

The actors involved in documenting these oral histories are diverse, ranging from community-based cultural associations and individual cultural researchers² to international and local human rights organizations that systematically collect testimonies for advocacy and accountability.¹² Individual narrators also contribute significantly by sharing their stories through various media, including online platforms, news interviews, and personal blogs.⁵ Consequently, the documentation methods are multi-modal, including academic lectures, formal reports, journalistic investigations, and digital storytelling. This collective body of oral history research forms a powerful narrative of identity, endurance, and profound loss, serving as a testament to a culture actively working to remember and resist erasure.

B. Importance for Collective Memory, Cultural Continuity, and Justice

The oral traditions and testimonies of Afrin are of paramount importance for its community. They are crucial for maintaining collective memory, particularly when official histories may be silent or biased, and when physical landmarks and traditional ways of life are under threat.¹⁴ For a displaced and traumatized population, these shared narratives foster a sense of cultural continuity and connection to their roots, reinforcing identity in the face of dispersal and attempts at cultural assimilation or erasure.⁶ The stories of resilience embedded within these accounts can offer strength and inspiration. Furthermore, contemporary testimonies of human rights violations serve a vital role in the pursuit of justice and accountability, providing evidence and giving voice to victims whose experiences might otherwise be ignored.¹² The act of narrating and documenting these experiences is, in itself, an assertion of dignity and a demand for recognition.

C. Potential Avenues for Future Research and Documentation

While valuable research has been conducted, several avenues for future inquiry and documentation remain critical for a more comprehensive understanding of Afrin's oral history.

1. **Systematic Collection and Archiving:** There is a need for more systematic collection of specific genres of traditional oral literature, as well as contemporary narratives, particularly from underrepresented voices. Establishing secure and accessible archives for these oral histories, with appropriate ethical protocols, is essential for long-term preservation.
2. **Academic Evaluation:** Addressing the gap noted by researchers like Kamil Hesên ⁷, further academic evaluation and analysis of traditional oral forms could provide deeper insights into their literary, linguistic, and cultural significance.
3. **Comparative Studies:** Comparative analysis of pre- and post-2018 narratives could illuminate the impact of conflict and displacement on cultural expression, memory formation, and identity. Furthermore, comparing oral histories collected by different actors (community groups, NGOs, individuals) could reveal nuances in framing, purpose, and the aspects of experience highlighted, offering a meta-understanding of how Afrin's story is being constructed and by whom.
4. **Longitudinal Research:** Longitudinal studies tracking the evolution of oral traditions and memories within displaced communities over time would be invaluable for understanding processes of cultural adaptation, transmission, and transformation in diaspora.
5. **Impact of Demographic Change:** Research into how the documented demographic shifts in Afrin ¹² are affecting the oral traditions of both the remaining original population and the newly settled groups, as well as the memories of the displaced, is crucial.
6. **Ethical and Community-Engaged Methodologies:** All future research must prioritize ethical considerations, ensuring the safety, informed consent, and well-being of narrators. Community-engaged approaches that empower local communities in the documentation and interpretation of their own histories should be central.
7. **Interdisciplinary Frameworks:** Afrin's oral histories, especially those detailing the destruction of cultural symbols like olive groves and experiences of forced displacement, offer a potent case study for the intersection of cultural heritage, environmental justice (including concepts like ecocide), human rights, and memory studies in conflict zones. Framing future research within such interdisciplinary perspectives can enhance its relevance and impact.

The oral history of Afrin is a living, evolving testament to the resilience of its people and the enduring power of their cultural heritage. Continued and expanded research efforts are vital not only for academic understanding but also for supporting the community's efforts to preserve its memory, sustain its identity, and seek justice.

VII. Works Cited

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