

A Scholarly Review of Research on Kurdish Oral History

I. Introduction: The Landscape of Kurdish Oral History

A. Defining Kurdish Oral History and Its Cultural Significance

Kurdish oral history comprises a vast and rich tapestry of unwritten narratives, songs, epic poems, proverbs, and other traditional expressions that have been transmitted across generations. For the Kurdish people, who constitute one of the largest ethnic groups without a universally recognized independent state¹, these oral traditions are not merely cultural artifacts but form a cornerstone of their identity and collective memory. This unwritten heritage serves as a living archive, preserving historical accounts, social norms, artistic expressions, and a shared understanding of the world, particularly in socio-political contexts where the written documentation of Kurdish history and the use of the Kurdish language have faced systematic suppression.² The profound connection between oral tradition and national consciousness is explicitly articulated in Kurdish thought: "Dîroka devkî ya kurdan, li gor taybetmendiyan kilamên dengbêj û çîrokbêjan têne kifşê û nirxên hevpar yên wekî efsane, çîrok, stran... qada kultura siyasî ya vê bîra neteweyî ye" (Kurdish oral history is defined by the characteristics of dengbêj kilams and storytellers' tales, and common values such as legends, stories, songs... form the political cultural sphere of this national memory).⁴

The statelessness of the Kurds¹ has meant that, for extended periods and in various regions, there has been a lack of state-sponsored institutions dedicated to fostering a unified Kurdish historical narrative or promoting Kurdish language and culture through formal education. In this vacuum, oral traditions, meticulously maintained by figures like the Dengbêjs and through communal storytelling, have assumed the critical role of constructing, sustaining, and transmitting a collective historical consciousness and a sense of shared identity across generations and geographically dispersed communities.² This function elevates the study of Kurdish oral history beyond the realm of folklore, positioning it as an essential lens through which to understand Kurdish resilience, cultural continuity, identity formation, and even political aspirations. Consequently, attempts by various states to suppress these oral traditions² can be interpreted as efforts to undermine this very foundation of Kurdish national consciousness.

B. Overview of Challenges and Importance of Its Study

The scholarly exploration of Kurdish oral history is fraught with complexities. A significant challenge stems from a long history of political repression in the nation-states where Kurds predominantly reside—Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. These states have often pursued policies of forced assimilation, including prohibitions on the public use of the Kurdish language and the suppression of Kurdish cultural expressions.² Such conditions necessitated the clandestine preservation of oral traditions and have imbued efforts at documentation with a sense of urgency. Furthermore, the Kurdish population is not homogenous; it is characterized by internal diversity and is spread across multiple national borders, leading to regional variations in oral traditions and influences from myriad cultural interactions.⁵

The recent "archival turn" in Kurdish Studies signals a burgeoning academic focus and an increase in the availability of source materials.⁸ However, this development brings its own set of challenges, including issues of access to archives, the considerable task of digitization, and

complex ethical considerations, particularly concerning materials held in private collections.⁸ Despite these hurdles, the study of Kurdish oral history is of paramount importance. It offers invaluable counter-narratives to official, often state-sanctioned, histories, provides profound insights into subaltern experiences and perspectives¹⁰, and illuminates the dynamics of cultural survival and resistance in the face of adversity.³ As noted, "Oral traditions can be essential sources for anthropologists, folklorists, and historians in the investigation of political and historical consciousness".¹⁰

The history of Kurdish oral traditions reveals a compelling dynamic: periods of intense repression, rather than extinguishing these cultural forms, appear to have paradoxically reinforced their value within Kurdish communities and spurred innovative methods of preservation and transmission. The persecution faced by Dengbêjs, for instance, did not halt their practice entirely; instead, it led to clandestine recordings on cassette tapes, ensuring the survival of their art.² In contemporary times, this resilience is manifested in revitalization projects and the adaptation of oral motifs into modern literary forms.² This suggests that political oppression, while devastating, can act as an unintended catalyst, fostering a deeper commitment to cultural heritage and driving innovation in its maintenance and reinterpretation. Thus, the study of Kurdish oral history must account for this intricate interplay between suppression and cultural vitality, recognizing it not as a static collection of ancient forms but as a living tradition profoundly shaped by historical struggles, where the very methods of preservation become integral to the historical narrative itself.

II. The Keepers of Memory: Dengbêjs and Their Enduring Legacy

A. The Role and Cultural Significance of Dengbêjs

Central to the preservation and transmission of Kurdish oral history are the Dengbêjs, who are revered as singing storytellers² and often described as the "keepers of Kurdish memory and history".³ The term 'dengbêj' itself is evocative, derived from the Kurdish words 'deng' (voice) and 'bêj' (the present tense of 'gotin', to tell), signifying one who tells through voice.³ These artists are the custodians of a vast repertoire that includes historical accounts, geographical knowledge, narratives of recent events, poignant lullabies, and intricate love songs, traditionally performed without instrumental accompaniment.² Their performances often feature long and elaborate tales and epics recounting sagas of love and warfare, with their songs of mourning, known as *stran*, holding particular cultural resonance and popularity.¹ The path to becoming a Dengbêj traditionally involved a rigorous and lengthy apprenticeship under a master, during which the aspirant would commit to memory hundreds of tales, stories, poems, and epics. This demanding training transformed Dengbêjs into veritable "living libraries" of their people's traditions, myths, culture, and oral literary works spanning centuries.³ The French Orientalist Roger Lescot, who conducted research among Dengbêjs, highlighted their crucial role not only in conserving the traditions of the past but also in celebrating contemporary heroic deeds, noting that their songs could sometimes carry significant political connotations.³ In situations where written historical documents are scarce or non-existent, the songs and narratives of the Dengbêjs become invaluable resources for understanding past events.² They are, as one source emphasizes, "collectors and carriers of

thousands of stories, songs, legends, historical events and as living references to history, culture, and literature".³

The societal function of Dengbêjs extends beyond mere entertainment or archival recitation. They can be understood as organic intellectuals, figures who emerge from the community and articulate its collective worldview, history, and struggles, often providing narratives that stand outside of, or in contrast to, dominant state-sanctioned accounts. In this capacity, the Dengbêj tradition embodies a form of counter-hegemonic historiography. It offers alternative interpretations of past and present events that resonate deeply with the lived experiences and cultural understandings of Kurdish communities, thereby challenging official or externally imposed historical narratives. The analysis of Dengbêj performances and their lyrical content thus provides a unique avenue into subaltern perspectives on power, justice, historical truth, and cultural identity. The persecution these figures have historically endured² can be seen as a direct consequence of their influence, representing attempts by state authorities to silence these potent and often critical counter-narratives.

B. Historical Persecution and Modern Revitalization Efforts

The tradition of Dengbêjî has faced existential threats, particularly in Turkish Kurdistan. In the 1930s, the Turkish government imposed fines for every word spoken in Kurdish, gravely endangering the practice. This was followed by outright persecution of Dengbêjs for singing in Kurdish during the 1980s.² During these oppressive periods, the resilience of the tradition was evident as Dengbêjs were recorded clandestinely on cassette tapes, which were then secretly distributed, ensuring the continuation of their art form.² A significant shift occurred in 1991 when Turkish President Turgut Özal announced the legalization of the Kurdish language for use in non-official contexts, such as broadcasts, publications, education, and politics, which allowed Dengbêjs to perform with greater freedom.²

In more recent decades, concerted efforts have been made to revitalize the Dengbêj tradition. A notable development has been the establishment of *Mala Dengbêjan* (Dengbêj Houses) in various cities, beginning with Van in 2003, followed by a significant center in Diyarbakır in 2007, supported by the Democratic Society Party (DTP) led municipality.² These initiatives have also received support from Kurdish politicians and, in some instances, funding from international bodies like the European Union.² Concurrently, Dengbêj music has become increasingly politicized, embraced as a potent symbol of Kurdish nationalism and cultural identity, often in direct confrontation with Turkish nationalist ideologies.² Research indicates that Dengbêjî is now widely understood as a "paradigmatic form of Kurdish heritage." However, this process of heritagization is complex, involving ongoing negotiations and interactions between various Kurdish nationalist actors and state authorities.¹²

The institutionalization and politicization of Dengbêjî, while providing crucial support, visibility, and a platform for cultural assertion, may also present certain challenges. The establishment of formal institutions like Dengbêj Houses and the influence of political agendas could potentially lead to the standardization of what was once a more fluid and orally transmitted art form. There is a risk that certain narratives or styles might be selectively promoted over others, or that the tradition could be subtly altered or co-opted to fit contemporary institutional frameworks or political objectives. While revitalization is vital for the survival and

continued relevance of Dengbêjî, critical scholarly attention must be paid to how these efforts shape the tradition itself. It is important to consider both the undeniable benefits of preservation and increased public awareness, and the potential risks of modifying its organic nature or imposing new, perhaps narrower, interpretations. The historical record shows that both state entities and Kurdish movements have exhibited contradictory attitudes towards Dengbêjs, ranging from protection and promotion to disinterest and repression, further complicating the landscape of its modern revival.¹²

C. The Dengbêj Tradition as a Living Archive

Dengbêjs are fundamentally the carriers of the "archival memory of the Kurdish nation".³ Their artistry is not static; they possess the ability to draw upon the social realities surrounding them, weaving contemporary events and experiences into their narratives, thereby continually enriching this repository of collective memory.³ This oral tradition proved to be a powerful tool for cultural preservation, particularly in the face of systematic assimilation policies. As one commentator aptly put it, "books could be burned and entire libraries destroyed, but the living memory, the stories that carried on through the oral traditions from one dengbêj to another, from master to apprentice could not be so easily destroyed".³

Despite its profound cultural importance and resilience, the oral tradition has, at times, been viewed through a Eurocentric and modernist lens that tended to categorize such practices as "uncivilized, uncultured, backward, and feudal traditions".³ This perspective often privileged written cultures and overlooked the sophisticated intellectual and artistic systems embedded in oral practices. Modern scholarship and contemporary revitalization efforts actively challenge these outdated perceptions, seeking to highlight the complexity, dynamism, and enduring value of the Dengbêj tradition and Kurdish oral heritage as a whole.

III. Forms and Voices: Key Genres in Kurdish Oral Tradition

A. *Stran*, *Kilam*, *Çîrok*, *Lawj*: Exploring Diverse Narrative and Poetic Forms

Kurdish oral tradition is characterized by a rich diversity of narrative and poetic forms, each with its distinct features and cultural functions. Among the most prominent are *stran* (songs), which are widely recognized and frequently performed by Dengbêjs. Particularly well-known are their songs of mourning.¹ The *stran* form is typically melodic and rhythmic, and it also includes popular and love songs often featured at weddings and other communal gatherings.² Another specialized form associated with Dengbêjs is the *kilam*. This genre is characterized by its spontaneous and emotive expression, where the Dengbêj articulates what moves them, often in a continuous flow without deliberate pauses after phrases.² The content of *kilams* can be extensive and varied; for instance, one study analyzed place names mentioned in 84 *kilams*, indicating their capacity to encapsulate geographical and historical information.¹³ It is noted that Kurdish oral history itself is revealed through the specific characteristics of *kilamên dengbêj* (Dengbêj kilams) and the narratives of *çîrokbêjan* (storytellers).⁴

Çîrok (stories) constitute a significant and versatile component of Kurdish oral literature.⁴ Historically, women played a crucial role in transmitting history and cultural values through various narrative forms, including *masallar* (tales or stories), *destanlar* (epics), and *ninniler* (lullabies), often shared within the family and community.¹⁵ *Lawj* are another important genre, referring to epic poems that frequently recount adventures in love or valorous deeds in

battle.⁵ Dengbêjs traditionally immerse themselves in this rich heritage, learning ancient songs and narratives before performing their own compositions or interpretations.²

While these genres are often categorized with distinct names, the boundaries between them in actual performance and transmission may be more fluid than such classifications suggest. It is plausible that significant intertextuality exists, with performers adapting and blending elements from different forms based on the specific context, audience, and their individual artistic skills. For example, a kilam might incorporate narrative elements typical of a çîrok, or a lawj recounting an epic tale could be sung in a style characteristic of a stran. Therefore, research into these oral genres should not be limited to mere categorization. It must also explore their dynamic interplay, the ways in_JSTOR

which performers navigate and combine them, and how themes, motifs, and stylistic features travel across different forms. This requires a nuanced understanding that moves beyond simple classification to appreciate the improvisational and adaptive nature of oral performance.

B. The Epic of *Mem û Zîn*: Its Oral Roots, Literary Adaptation, and Cultural Impact

The epic of *Mem û Zîn* stands as a paramount work in Kurdish literature, often considered its national épopée. Penned in 1692 by the esteemed Kurdish writer and poet Ahmad Khani (Ehmedê Xanî)¹⁶, its significance is deeply intertwined with the oral traditions from which it emerged. Crucially, *Mem û Zîn* is "based on a true story narrated from generation to generation through oral tradition".¹⁶ It is believed that the narrative core of the epic likely originated around 1450 and was preserved and transmitted through the performances of Dengbêjs for centuries before Khani committed it to writing.¹⁷

In the 1930s, the Kurdish intellectual Celadet Ali Bedirxan and the French Orientalist Roger Lescot undertook the task of documenting a version of this oral narrative, known as *Memê Alan*. They achieved this with the invaluable assistance of several Kurdish Dengbêj singers from regions such as Adiyaman and Afrin in Syria.¹⁶ This documented version is considered to be particularly close to the original folk tale and is thought to have historical roots extending back to the 14th century.¹⁶

Ahmad Khani's literary rendition of *Mem û Zîn* is multifaceted, weaving together themes of tragic love, Sufi philosophical discourse, and an emergent sense of Kurdish nationalism.¹⁶ For many Kurds, the story of the star-crossed lovers, Mem and Zîn, serves as a powerful allegory for the Kurdish nation's own arduous quest for self-determination and statehood.¹⁷ The epic's cultural impact is magnified by the fact that Khani made the conscious and courageous decision to write it almost entirely in the Kurdish language (specifically the Kurmanji dialect), at a time when Persian and Arabic were the dominant literary languages in the region. This act itself was a significant cultural and political statement.¹⁷ The enduring power of *Mem û Zîn* is evident in its continuous adaptation into various artistic forms, including songs, films, and theatrical plays, despite historical periods when its publication and performance were suppressed.¹⁷ The academic significance of the epic is also notable, with scholars like Michael Chyet dedicating doctoral research to *Mem û Zîn*, applying analytical frameworks such as oral-formulaic theory to understand its structure and composition.¹⁶

Mem û Zîn represents more than just a compelling story; it is a cultural phenomenon that

occupies a critical nexus between orality, literature, and the articulation of national identity. The epic embodies a pivotal moment of transition where a deeply rooted oral tradition was masterfully transformed into a foundational literary text. This literary formalization, in turn, did not supplant the oral tradition but rather re-energized and helped to shape a broader Kurdish national consciousness. Khani's work demonstrates the powerful synergy that can exist between oral performance and literary creation, and how such synergy can contribute to the articulation of collective identity and political aspirations. The study of *Mem û Zîn*, therefore, necessitates a comprehensive approach that encompasses its oral antecedents, Khani's literary artistry, and its ongoing reception and reinterpretation as a potent symbol of Kurdish cultural identity and resilience. It serves as a prime example of how oral traditions can be "heritagized" ⁷ and endowed with new layers of meaning and contemporary relevance through literary adaptation and continued engagement by successive generations.

IV. Mapping the Field: Historical and Contemporary Research Trajectories

A. Early Scholarly Contributions

The earliest documented information regarding Kurdish-inhabited areas often appeared as incidental observations within the broader travelogues and missionary reports of adventurers and envoys journeying through Anatolia and Persia from the 16th to the 19th centuries.¹⁸

These accounts were typically superficial concerning Kurdish life and culture, being secondary to the primary objectives of their authors. A more systematic approach to what would eventually be termed "Kurdish Studies" began to emerge in the mid-to-late 19th century. This development was particularly notable within the Austro-Hungarian Empire, where scholars, linguists, and natural scientists undertook research expeditions into regions previously largely unexplored by Western academia. Their work spanned linguistics, ethnography, and the natural sciences, yielding promising initial results.¹⁸ However, this burgeoning phase of research was abruptly curtailed by the outbreak of World War I and the subsequent political realignments.¹⁸

In a different geopolitical sphere, Kurdish Studies experienced a period of significant development within the Soviet Union. The Soviet system actively promoted and institutionalized linguistic and folklore studies, as well as historical research concerning the Kurds, albeit often framed within the prevailing Soviet ideology.¹⁸ Key focal points of this Soviet-based scholarship included institutions like the *Riya Teze* newspaper, founded in Yerevan in 1930, and the 'Kurdish Cabinet' in Leningrad (active from 1959 to 2005).¹⁹ Another important early contribution came from the French Orientalist Roger Lescot, who, during the period of the French Mandate in Syria and Lebanon, conducted significant studies on Dengbêjs and their art.²

The trajectory of these early scholarly endeavors reveals a pattern: the primary centers for the systematic study of Kurdish oral history and culture were predominantly located outside the Kurdish-majority regions that would later form parts of modern nation-states like Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria, where such research often faced suppression. These external powers—the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Soviet Union, and Mandate-era France—had their own distinct political, strategic, or academic interests in the Kurdish regions and their populations. Consequently, the development, focus, and methodologies of early Kurdish Studies were

significantly influenced by the geopolitical considerations and academic traditions of these external entities, rather than being driven solely by intrinsic Kurdish initiatives or priorities. For example, Soviet support for Kurdish cultural studies was intrinsically linked to Soviet ideological aims.¹⁸ Understanding this early body of research thus requires a critical awareness of the potential biases, perspectives, and limitations imposed by these external frameworks. It also underscores the subsequent intellectual and academic vacuum that emerged when this external support diminished and internal state-sponsored suppression of Kurdish cultural expression intensified.

B. The Impact of Political Suppression on Research and Tradition

The formation of modern nation-states in Western Asia following the collapse of the Ottoman and Persian empires had profound and often detrimental consequences for Kurdish culture and the academic study thereof. The successor states—Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria—frequently adopted homogenizing nationalist ideologies that aimed to create unified national identities. These policies often resulted in the denial of distinct Kurdish ethnicity and culture, and actively prevented or discouraged scientific and scholarly work on Kurdish topics.¹⁸ This suppression took various forms, including policies of *linguicide*, aimed at the eradication of the Kurdish language.⁷

The extent of this cultural repression was severe. Kurds were often forbidden to speak their language in public spaces, forced to adopt non-Kurdish names to secure employment or enroll their children in schools, and Kurdish books, music, and traditional clothing were frequently deemed contraband and had to be hidden.⁵ This environment of suppression directly impacted the oral traditions. The *Dengbêj* tradition in Turkey, for example, faced severe persecution, with artists being fined or imprisoned for performing in Kurdish.² For much of the 20th century, "Kurdish studies" remained a marginalized and underdeveloped academic field. The prevailing political circumstances in the Middle East made it exceedingly difficult for Western researchers to gain access to Kurdish regions or source materials, while researchers from within the region (both Kurds and non-Kurds) risked legal sanctions, including incarceration, for engaging in even relatively benign academic activities related to Kurdish culture or history.²⁰ This politically charged atmosphere significantly stymied the growth of the field and the documentation of invaluable oral traditions.

C. Modern Academic Approaches: Ethnography, Linguistic Analysis, and Textual Studies

Despite historical challenges, recent decades have witnessed a resurgence and diversification in the academic study of Kurdish oral history, employing a range of modern methodologies.

- **Ethnographic Research:** Early ethnographic groundwork includes Glenn M. Fleming Jr.'s 1981 Master's thesis, "An Ethnographic Study of the Kurdish People." Although based on published studies rather than direct fieldwork, it provided a comprehensive overview of Kurdish culture, covering language, ecology, economy, political organization, and social structures, thereby offering a contextual background for understanding oral traditions.²¹ Contemporary ethnographic approaches emphasize the researcher's "positionality" and advocate for treating archives themselves "as an ethnographer," critically examining the power relations embedded within them.²² Recent

ethnographic studies have focused on specific communities and practices. For example, Wendelmoet Hamelink has conducted research on Dengbêjs and the geographical and historical content of their *kilams*.¹³ Emrah Karakuş has undertaken ethnographic studies of Kurdish queer soundscapes, including the performances and identities of queer Dengbêjs.¹² Marlene Schäfers' fine-grained ethnography explores the sociopolitical power of Kurdish women's voices, with a particular focus on Dengbêj women singers in contemporary Turkey.²³

- **Linguistic Analysis:** H. Ebrahim's 2016 doctoral thesis provides a significant example of linguistic analysis applied to Kurdish oral narratives. The study involved a comparative narrative analysis of oral stories of personal experience told by Iraqi Kurdish women and white British English-speaking women, utilizing established models such as Labov's framework for narrative structure and Ochs and Capps' model for narrative styles.²⁴ The findings revealed distinct cross-cultural variations in storytelling, such as a preference for repetition and a more dramatized, interactive style among Kurdish participants, alongside an emphasis on the moral purpose of storytelling, often conveyed through exemplums.²⁴ Other linguistic research has focused on the metrical system of Kurdish poetry, particularly in the Central Kurdish (Sorani) dialect. This work identifies quantitative, syllabic, and free verse forms and grapples with challenges posed by the non-phonemic nature of vowel length in determining syllable weight and meter.²⁵ The observation that a significant portion of classical Kurdish literature is in poetic form is attributed, in part, to the ease with which poems could be memorized and transmitted under conditions of linguistic suppression.²⁵ The influence of Persian poetic traditions on Kurdish literature, including thematic motifs and imagery, also constitutes an area of linguistic and literary investigation.²⁶
- **Textual and Heritagization Studies:** A growing body of scholarship examines the works of modern Kurdish writers for their engagement with and transformation of oral traditions, a process often referred to as "heritagization." The novels of Mehmed Uzun and Mehmet Dicle, for instance, are analyzed to understand their distinct approaches to revitalizing the Kurdish language and incorporating folkloric elements into contemporary literature.⁷ Uzun, a pivotal figure in modern Kurdish prose, aimed to "transfer to novel the richness of oral tradition in a proper way," emphasizing "beauty in simplicity" and viewing Kurdish writers as direct successors to the Dengbêjs. His literary style often featured simple, condensed language, proverbs, and repetitions drawn from oral storytelling.⁷ In contrast, Mehmet Dicle, representing a younger generation, seeks "perfection" by integrating oral experience with established literary rules and drawing inspiration from world literature. His work delves into the "Kurdish collective subconscious" and often presents more nuanced portrayals of traditional figures like Dengbêjs.⁷ These studies typically involve close textual analysis of literary works alongside interviews with contemporary Kurdish writers and folklore collectors.⁷

The evolution of research methodologies in Kurdish oral history—from early descriptive accounts by travelers¹⁸ to specialized ethnographic fieldwork¹², sophisticated linguistic

narrative analyses²⁴, studies of poetics²⁵, and literary criticism centered on heritagization⁷—indicates a significant maturation of the field. Kurdish oral history studies are increasingly interdisciplinary, drawing theoretical frameworks and analytical tools from anthropology, linguistics, literary studies, gender studies²³, and postcolonial theory.²³ This interdisciplinary richness allows for a more holistic and nuanced understanding of Kurdish oral traditions, connecting them to broader academic conversations about culture, power, identity, memory, and social change. It also signals the field's robustness and its capacity to generate complex and theoretically informed insights into a vital aspect of Kurdish and global cultural heritage.

V. Women's Voices in Kurdish Oral Heritage

A. The Historical Role of Women as Transmitters and Creators of Oral Traditions

Evidence strongly suggests that women have historically played a central and foundational role in the creation, sustenance, and transmission of Kurdish oral traditions. Researcher Pınar Şen makes a compelling argument that women's involvement in Dengbêjlik—the art of the Dengbêjs—is not only ancient but intrinsic, asserting that "woman is the concept of Dengbêjlik itself" ("kadın, dengbêjlik kavramının kendisidir").¹⁵ Historically, Kurdish women were primary conduits for transmitting cultural knowledge, history, and values to their children, employing a rich repertoire of tales (*masallar*), epics (*destanlar*), and lullabies (*ninniler*) within the intimate spheres of family and community.¹⁵ This aligns with a common narrative among Kurdish folklore collectors, which posits that stories, fairy tales, and songs were frequently told to children, whose upbringing predominantly rested on women's shoulders.¹¹

However, despite this foundational role, patriarchal social structures and norms prevalent in Kurdish society, as in many others, often led to the marginalization of women's voices in more public and formalized domains of oral performance. Over time, men came to dominate the public persona and performance of Dengbêjlik.¹⁵ As Şen describes, "These transmissions belonging to women, after a certain time, were taken over by men, and as a result, Dengbêjlik came under male dominance" ("Kadına ait olan bu aktarımlar belli bir süreden sonra erkeğin ağzına dolanmış ve bunun sonucunda da dengbêjlik erkeğin hakimiyetine geçmiştir").¹⁵ This historical shift suggests that while women may have been the wellspring of much of the oral tradition, their contributions were later overshadowed or appropriated within the more visible, public-facing contexts of performance that became increasingly male-dominated. The "secret voices" ("gizli sesler") alluded to in Pınar Şen's work refer to this often unacknowledged and under-documented female narrative tradition.¹⁵

This understanding necessitates a re-evaluation of the history of Kurdish oral traditions. It suggests that the commonly perceived image of the Dengbêj as an exclusively male figure may obscure a deeper history where women were not just passive recipients but active creators and primary transmitters of this cultural heritage. A crucial task for contemporary research, therefore, is to uncover, document, and critically re-assess the historical and ongoing contributions of women to all facets of Kurdish oral history. This involves looking beyond the predominantly male figures in established canons, seeking out these "hidden" histories, and challenging patriarchal narratives that may exist both within the scholarly discourse and within the traditions themselves.

B. Contemporary Efforts by Women in Collection, Revitalization, and Scholarship

In the contemporary era, Kurdish women are at the forefront of efforts to protect, revitalize, and promote the Kurdish language and its rich oral heritage. They are actively engaged in collecting and publishing folklore, translating literary works into Kurdish, and creating new literature in their mother tongue.¹⁰ These activities are imbued with a significance that transcends mere linguistic preservation or cultural documentation. For many Kurdish women, this work represents a powerful means of building an alternative to state policies of denial and assimilation, and a way to claim respect, agency, and freedom within their own communities.¹⁰ This empowerment is often framed through theoretical lenses such as Martha Nussbaum's capability approach, which emphasizes human potential and freedoms, and Sara Ahmed's work on how emotions function through language and its circulation.¹⁰

By framing engagement with the Kurdish language and oral tradition as a task particularly suited to or important for women, these activists are able to reinterpret and challenge derogatory societal attitudes towards women while simultaneously asserting female agency and intellectual contribution.¹¹ These endeavors often take place in "small circles"—intimate gatherings and collaborative projects—which facilitate the sharing and repetition of Kurdish texts, including stories and songs, and the acts of storytelling, singing, and listening. Such activities not only preserve cultural forms but also create a powerful circulation of emotions and contribute to the forging of a broader Kurdish sociality and collective identity.¹⁰ A study conducted between 2020 and 2023, based on semi-structured interviews with 37 women language activists, writers, folklore collectors, and translators from diverse regions of Kurdistan (Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria), highlights their combined approach of rediscovering women's historical activities in the linguistic and cultural sphere with a contemporary discourse of women's emancipation and citizen rights.¹¹

Academic research is also increasingly focusing on the roles and contributions of Kurdish women. Scholars like Marlene Schäfers have conducted ethnographic research specifically on Kurdish women Dengbêjs, examining the sociopolitical power of their voices and performances.²³ Furthermore, the broader political context of Kurdish movements also influences women's activism in cultural spheres. The Kurdish Freedom Movement (KFM), for instance, has developed a political paradigm known as Democratic Confederalism, which explicitly includes women's liberation as one of its three fundamental pillars, alongside radical democracy and ecology.²⁷ Researchers like Martina Piccardi have explored this paradigm through militant ethnography with the Kurdish Women's Movement (KWM), investigating the articulation and mobilization of these principles.²⁸ While not exclusively focused on oral history, this political emphasis on women's liberation provides a supportive and empowering environment for women's engagement in all forms of cultural and political activism.

C. Analyzing the Representation and Agency of Women in Oral Narratives and Trauma

Kurdish women's oral narratives are increasingly being analyzed not only for their cultural content but also as crucial sites for understanding experiences of trauma, resistance, and agency. H. Ebrahim's doctoral research, for example, included a detailed analysis of the structure and style of personal experience stories narrated by Iraqi Kurdish women, shedding light on culturally specific modes of expression.²⁴ Other research delves into the profound

psychological and political dimensions of women's experiences in contexts of conflict and displacement. Studies have explored the encounters of bereaved Kurdish mothers with trauma medicine, analyzing affective states such as *gêj* (a Kurmanji Kurdish term translated as "spaced-out") as complex manifestations of colonial wounding. These states are not seen merely as pathological but also as potential sites for the emergence of decolonial imaginaries and forms of resilience.²⁹ While narratives can serve to expose the violence of colonial programs, particularly those targeting mothers and daughters for assimilation or control, there is also an awareness that language can sometimes fail in the face of overwhelming trauma, and that narratives might risk oversimplifying or prematurely closing off the experience of terror.²⁹

The depiction of Kurdish women's multifaceted experiences—encompassing victimization and marginalization, but also their active resistance and agency as combatants, political activists, and cultural figures—is a growing focus of scholarly inquiry.¹² For Kurdish women, oral history and contemporary storytelling often serve as vital spaces for processing deeply personal and collective traumas, including those stemming from gendered violence, political oppression, and displacement. The act of narrating these experiences can itself be a form of resistance, a means of reclaiming one's voice and subjectivity in the face of forces that seek to silence or erase them. Moreover, these narratives can contribute to the building of "communities of shared predicament, pain, and vision"²⁹, fostering solidarity and collective action. Women's active engagement in folklore collection, language revitalization, and literary creation is intrinsically linked to broader goals of emancipation and the assertion of their rights as citizens and as women.¹¹

Thus, women's oral narratives are not merely passive records of suffering; they are active tools for political mobilization, self-reconstitution, and the articulation of decolonial aspirations. Research into these narratives must therefore be acutely sensitive to the complex intersections of gender, trauma, political agency, and decolonial struggles. This requires methodologies that can capture the affective, psychological, and political dimensions of these stories, moving beyond simple textual analysis to understand their lived significance and transformative potential.

VI. The "Archival Turn": Preserving and Accessing Kurdish Oral History

A. The Growing Importance of Archives in Kurdish Studies

Since the dawn of the 21st century, the use and conception of archives have gained unprecedented significance within the field of Kurdish Studies. This phenomenon, often referred to as the "archival turn," reflects a dual development: a notable increase in the number and diversity of archival sources becoming available, and a growing scholarly recognition of their profound potential to reshape Kurdish historiography.⁸ Historically, research on Kurdish history and culture predominantly relied on state archives of major colonial and regional powers, such as British, French, and Ottoman-Turkish repositories. Later, this base was expanded by the inclusion of Russian, Armenian, and Iranian state archives.⁸ The contemporary "archival turn" encompasses a much broader spectrum of materials. This includes the digitization of existing collections, the incorporation of personal accounts and oral histories, documents from Kurdish diaspora organizations, recently declassified state

archives from European countries pertaining to the Cold War era, and the personal archives of key figures from the Kurdish student and intellectual migrations of the 1960s, which constituted the first significant wave of the Kurdish diaspora.⁸ This influx of diverse source material is facilitating a notable shift in research focus, moving beyond predominantly political or politico-diplomatic histories towards the exploration of social history, transnational networks, and the experiences of ordinary individuals and communities.⁸

This proliferation of archival sources is not merely about an increase in the quantity of data; it is acting as a catalyst for a fundamental re-evaluation of how Kurdish history is written, interpreted, and understood. The new materials often challenge, complicate, or enrich narratives that were previously constructed based on a more limited and often state-centric set of archives. They allow for the exploration of previously marginalized voices, forgotten events, and under-researched topics, such as the social history of various Kurdish communities, the dynamics of diaspora life, and environmental history. Researchers are now compelled to grapple with a wider array of sources, necessitating the adoption of new methodological approaches. For instance, there is a growing call to approach archives not just as repositories of facts but also "as an ethnographer," paying close attention to the contexts of their creation, the power relations they embody, and the narratives they privilege or silence.²² This critical engagement with archives holds the potential to lead to a richer, more complex, multi-vocal, and potentially decolonized Kurdish historiography.

B. Key Digitization Projects and Online Resources

The "archival turn" is significantly propelled by digitization efforts and the creation of online resources that enhance accessibility to materials related to Kurdish oral history and studies. Several key projects and platforms are noteworthy in this regard:

Table 2: Major Digital Archives and Resources for Kurdish Oral History and Studies

Archive/Project Name	Hosting Institution/Key Figure(s)	Primary Focus/Content Type (Oral testimonies, printed materials, music, etc.)	Access Information/URL (if available)	Relevant Source(s)
Arşîva Kurd	Open Access (details not specified)	Kurdish periodicals and books (1898-present)	Implied online access	³⁰
The Kurdish Digital Library (BNK)	Kurdish Institute of Paris	Over 10,000 monographs, documents, periodicals, AV materials, audio archives	www.institutkurde.org (implied access via)	³¹

Minorities in the Middle East: Kurdish communities, 1918-1974	Commercial database (access via subscribing libraries, e.g., UW)	Archival documents	Listed by University of Washington Libraries	³³
Records of the Kurds: territory, revolt and nationalism, 1831-1979	Commercial database (access via subscribing libraries, e.g., UW)	Archival documents	Listed by University of Washington Libraries	³³
Palestinian Oral History Archive (POHA)	American University of Beirut (AUB)	Oral testimonies (Palestinian, but methodological model)	aub.edu.lb/ifi/Pages/poha.aspx	³⁰
Najiba Hama Kaka Rash Testimony	Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung (platform for video)	Individual oral testimony (video)	www.rosalux.de	³⁵
Creative Memory of the Syrian Revolution	Independent Project	Intellectual and artistic expressions during Syrian revolution (may include Kurdish voices)	creativememory.org (implied)	³⁰

These resources, among others, represent a significant step towards making diverse materials more widely available to researchers and the public. The Kurdish Institute of Paris, for example, holds a vast collection and is actively engaged in digitizing its holdings, which include invaluable audio archives and music recordings alongside printed materials.³¹ While some resources like the Palestinian Oral History Archive at AUB are not exclusively Kurdish, their methodologies for digitizing, indexing, cataloging, and providing access to extensive collections of oral testimonies offer important models and comparative insights for similar endeavors in the Kurdish context.³⁰ The existence of individual testimonies, such as that of Najiba Hama Kaka Rash³⁵, also points to the growing body of recorded oral histories that may eventually be consolidated into larger archival projects. The international workshop on the "archival turn," co-organized by Adnan Çelik and Alice von Bieberstein, further underscores the academic community's commitment to leveraging these expanding resources.⁸

C. Challenges and Ethical Considerations in Archiving Oral Traditions

The increasing availability and use of archives in Kurdish Studies, particularly those containing oral traditions, bring to the fore a host of complex theoretical, methodological, and ethical questions.⁸ While digitization and enhanced access are generally viewed as positive developments, they also necessitate careful consideration of the potential risks and responsibilities involved. Key challenges include ensuring equitable accessibility, as access

can vary significantly across different countries and time periods, and recognizing the inherent limitations of certain types of archives (e.g., state archives may offer limited insights into social history or subaltern perspectives).⁸

The archiving of oral traditions, especially those collected from communities that have experienced trauma, conflict, or political repression, requires particular sensitivity. Ethical considerations revolve around issues such as informant consent (especially for historical recordings where original consent protocols may be unclear or insufficient), intellectual property rights, community ownership of cultural heritage, and the potential for the misuse or misinterpretation of sensitive information. Many valuable archival materials, including personal accounts and family collections, remain in private hands, raising further questions about property rights, preservation standards, and public access.⁸ There are also concerns about censorship and restrictions that may be imposed on access to certain materials, particularly those deemed politically sensitive by state authorities.

The scholarly community is increasingly recognizing the need to develop robust ethical guidelines and an "ethics of care" for these archives.⁸ This involves not only technical protocols for preservation and digitization but also a deeper engagement with the communities from which these oral traditions originate. It requires a commitment to respectful collaboration, ensuring that the archiving process empowers rather than exploits, and that the narratives are presented in ways that honor their original context and meaning. The "archival turn," therefore, must be accompanied by an "ethical turn," ensuring that the drive to preserve and make accessible is balanced with the imperative to protect individuals, communities, and the cultural integrity of the oral traditions themselves. This ethical tightrope walk—balancing the benefits of widespread access against the potential for harm, decontextualization, or the re-traumatization of individuals whose stories are being shared—is a critical ongoing challenge for researchers and archivists working with Kurdish oral history.

VII. Key Scholars and Their Contributions to the Field

The study of Kurdish oral history and related cultural fields has been shaped by a diverse array of individuals, from early chroniclers and literary figures to contemporary academic researchers. Their collective efforts have laid the groundwork for our current understanding and continue to drive the field forward.

Table 1: Key Figures in Kurdish Oral History Research and Related Fields

Scholar Name	Affiliation/Context (if known)	Primary Research Focus (related to oral history/Kurdish studies)	Key Contributions/Publications (as per sources)	Relevant Source(s)
Early & Foundational Figures				
Ahmad Khani (Ehmedê Xanî)	17th Century Poet	Literary adaptation of the	<i>Mem û Zîn</i> (1692)	⁵

		oral epic <i>Mem û Zîn</i> ; foundational work in Kurdish literature		
Roger Lescot	French Orientalist (1930s)	Dengbêj studies; documentation of the <i>Memê Alan</i> oral narrative	Collaboration with Celadet Ali Bedirxan on <i>Memê Alan</i> documentation	²
Celadet Ali Bedirxan	Kurdish Prince, Intellectual (1930s)	Documentation of the <i>Memê Alan</i> oral narrative; Kurdish language and cultural promotion	Collaboration with Roger Lescot on <i>Memê Alan</i> documentation	¹⁶
Modern Literary Figures				
Mehmed Uzun	Modern Kurdish Writer (Turkey, 1953–2007)	Heritagization of oral tradition in novels; portrayal of Dengbêjs in literature; Kurdish language revitalization	Novels: <i>Rojek ji Rojên Evdalê Zeynikê, Hawara Dicleyê</i> ; essays on Kurdish literature and oral tradition	⁷
Mehmet Dicle	Modern Kurdish Writer (Turkey, b. 1977)	Integration of oral tradition with modern literary techniques; exploration of "Kurdish collective subconscious"	Short story "Nara"; novels engaging with oral motifs and complex characterizations	⁷
Dawid Yeşîlmen	Writer/Commentator on Kurdish literature	Analysis of Kurdish novels as resistance against forgetting; themes in post-2000s Kurdish literature from North Kurdistan	Article in PolitikART discussing Kurdish literature	¹⁴
Contemporary Academic Researchers				

Michael Chyet	Academic Researcher	Analysis of <i>Mem û Zîn</i> ; application of oral-formulaic theory to Kurdish epic	PhD dissertation on <i>Mem û Zîn</i> ("And a thorn bush sprang up between them': Studies on 'Mem û Zîn,' a Kurdish Romance," UC Berkeley, 1991)	¹⁶
Pınar Şen	Researcher (Mardin)	Women's foundational role in Dengbêjlik; hidden histories of women in Kurdish oral tradition	Article "Sesleri Saklı Tutulan Dengbêj Kadınlar" (Dengbêj Women Whose Voices Are Kept Hidden)	¹⁵
Wendelmoet Hamelink	Anthropologist/Researcher	Dengbêj studies; analysis of place names in <i>kilams</i> ; Kurdish music and oral poetry	Publications on Dengbêjs and Kurdish oral traditions (co-authored works mentioned)	¹⁰ (implied)
H. Ebrahim	PhD Researcher (University of Leicester)	Linguistic and narrative analysis of Iraqi Kurdish women's oral stories; cross-cultural storytelling styles	PhD Thesis (2016): "Narrative analysis of the oral stories of personal experience told by Iraqi Kurdish and white British English-speaking women"	²⁴
Marlene Schäfers	Anthropologist (Utrecht University)	Ethnography of Kurdish women Dengbêjs; sociopolitical power of women's voices in Turkey	Book: <i>Voices That Matter: Kurdish Women at the Limits of Representation in Contemporary Turkey</i>	²³
Emrah Karakuş	Researcher	Ethnographic studies of Kurdish queer soundscapes, queer Dengbêjs,	Articles: "Cruising the Soundscapes of Kurdish Turkey," "Chameleons of Kurdish Turkey"	¹²

		and LGBTQ+ experiences in Kurdish Turkey		
Adnan Çelik	Researcher (CETOBaC, EHESS)	"Archival Turn" in Kurdish Studies; Kurdish diasporas, transnational networks, social history	Co-organizer of the 2025 international workshop on the "Archival Turn"	⁸
Alice von Bieberstein	Researcher (Humboldt-University of Berlin)	"Archival Turn" in Kurdish Studies; Kurdish diasporas, transnational networks, social history	Co-organizer of the 2025 international workshop on the "Archival Turn"	⁸
Kendal Nezan	President, Kurdish Institute of Paris	Promotion of Kurdish language, culture, and history; advocacy for Kurdish studies	Leadership of the Kurdish Institute of Paris; publications on Kurdish history	¹
Glenn M. Fleming Jr.	MA Student (Loma Linda University, 1981)	Early ethnographic overview of Kurdish people (based on published studies)	MA Thesis (1981): "An Ethnographic Study of the Kurdish People"	²¹
Martina Piccardi	PhD Researcher (University of Coimbra)	Kurdish Freedom Movement (KFM), Democratic Confederalism, Kurdish Women's Movement (KWM), Jineolojî, ecology, women's liberation	PhD Thesis (2024): "The Theory and Praxis of Jineolojî, from Rojava to Europe" (based on militant ethnography)	²⁸
Abdullah Öcalan	Political Theorist (PKK Leader)	Development of Democratic Confederalism paradigm, including women's liberation and	Writings on Democratic Confederalism	²⁷

		ecology as pillars		
Joanna Bocheńska & Karwan Fatah-Black	Researchers (Jagiellonian University & Leiden University)	Scholarship on Kurds in the former Eastern Bloc; life of Abdullah Jalal Fatah	Article on Abdullah Jalal Fatah's dissertation on Kurdish culture in Iraq (Warsaw University, 1978)	¹⁹

This table, while not exhaustive, highlights some of the pivotal figures whose work has contributed to the documentation, analysis, interpretation, and revitalization of Kurdish oral history and related cultural expressions. Their diverse disciplinary backgrounds and geographical locations underscore the increasingly global and interdisciplinary nature of Kurdish Studies.

VIII. Conclusion: The Vitality and Future of Kurdish Oral History Research

A. Summary of the State of Research

The study of Kurdish oral history has emerged as a dynamic and increasingly sophisticated field of academic inquiry. It grapples with a cultural heritage of immense richness and resilience, one that has been profoundly shaped by the unique historical and political circumstances of the Kurdish people. For centuries, oral traditions have served as the primary vehicle for cultural transmission, historical memory, and identity formation, particularly in the absence of unified state support and in the face of frequent repression.³ Research has illuminated the central role of figures like the Dengbêjs as "keepers of memory"³, the diverse genres that constitute this oral literature (from epic poems like *Mem û Zîn* to everyday stories and songs)², and the often-overlooked contributions of women as foundational creators and transmitters of these traditions.¹¹

Significant progress has been made in documenting, analyzing, and theorizing Kurdish oral traditions. The "archival turn" represents a pivotal moment, with the increasing availability of diverse archival sources—including digitized collections, personal testimonies, and diaspora materials—offering new avenues for research and prompting a re-evaluation of established historical narratives.⁸ A new generation of scholars, including many Kurdish researchers themselves, is bringing fresh perspectives and rigorous methodologies to the field. Current research is characterized by its interdisciplinary nature, drawing insights and analytical tools from anthropology, linguistics, literary studies, history, gender studies, and political science to explore the multifaceted dimensions of Kurdish orality.

B. The Ongoing Importance of Oral History for Kurdish Identity and Global Cultural Heritage

For a nation that remains one of the largest ethnic groups without its own state¹, oral history continues to be a vital conduit for sustaining and negotiating cultural identity, preserving collective memory, and articulating a sense of belonging and historical continuity. The narratives, songs, and epics passed down through generations are not mere relics of the past; they are living expressions of Kurdish heritage that continue to inform contemporary understandings of self and community.

Beyond its significance for the Kurdish people, Kurdish oral tradition constitutes an invaluable part of global human cultural heritage. It offers unique perspectives on the art of storytelling, the construction of historical consciousness outside of state frameworks, and the remarkable capacity of cultures to survive and adapt in the face of profound adversity. The study of these traditions provides crucial insights into how communities navigate oppression, maintain distinct identities in multicultural and often hostile environments, and creatively engage with the forces of modernity. The resilience and adaptability embedded within Kurdish oral history offer broader lessons about human creativity and the enduring power of cultural expression.

C. Future Directions and Lingering Questions

While the field of Kurdish oral history research has made considerable strides, numerous avenues for future investigation remain, and many critical questions persist. There is a continued need for comprehensive ethnographic fieldwork, particularly in under-researched geographical regions of Kurdistan and concerning specific genres or performance practices that may be endangered or less understood. The exploration of women's roles and narratives within oral traditions should move beyond recovery projects towards deeper analyses of gendered aesthetics, power dynamics, and the unique contributions of women storytellers and performers.

The ethical challenges associated with archiving and digitizing oral traditions, especially those containing sensitive or traumatic content, will require ongoing dialogue, the development of community-centered best practices, and a sustained commitment to an "ethics of care".⁸

Comparative studies of Kurdish oral traditions across the different parts of Kurdistan (Bakur, Başûr, Rojava, Rojhilat) and within the burgeoning global diaspora could yield significant insights into processes of cultural continuity, adaptation, and transformation.

Furthermore, the impact of new media and digital technologies on the performance, transmission, and evolution of oral traditions presents a fertile ground for research. How are younger generations of Kurds engaging with, reinterpreting, or creating new forms of oral expression in a globalized and digitally interconnected world? How do these contemporary practices relate to or depart from older traditions?

Kurdish oral history is not a static artifact to be merely preserved; it is a dynamic and living field characterized by both the imperative of preservation and the inevitability of transformation.² The future of research in this area lies in understanding this intricate tension between continuity and change. It requires an approach that is attuned to the ways in which these traditions continue to shape, and are shaped by, contemporary Kurdish life, political realities, and global cultural flows. By embracing this dynamic perspective, scholars can contribute to a deeper appreciation of the enduring vitality and evolving significance of Kurdish oral heritage.

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