

KURDISH CULTURE / ORAL TRADITION

Dengbêjî

Voice, Memory, and Resistance

The Living Art of Kurdish Storytelling,
Song, and Cultural Memory



FERDI ELMAS

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DENGBÊJÎ

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A book about the voices that carry stories across generations.

DEDICATION

To the voices that carried stories before they were written.

To the mothers and fathers who remembered old songs.

To the singers who transformed grief into melody, love into poetry, and memory into something that could be shared.

To those who carried their language with them when they left home.

And to the younger generations who are discovering these voices for the first time.

To those who keep a voice alive by listening.

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Preface

Before the Written Word, There Was a Voice

There was a time when a story could travel a great distance without ever touching a page. It crossed mountains without a map. It passed through villages without belonging to a library. It moved from one generation to another through something both ordinary and extraordinary: the human voice. A person listened.

A person remembered. And one day, that person sang the story again. In this way, words could outlive the moment in which they were first spoken. Among Kurdish communities, one of the most remarkable expressions of this tradition is known as dengbêjî. At first, the word may seem unfamiliar to someone encountering Kurdish culture for the first time. But the idea behind it is deeply human.

Every society has stories it wants to remember. There are stories of love that could not survive distance, of families separated by migration, of people who lost their homes, of individuals whose names became inseparable from particular places, and of events that changed the lives of entire communities. Some of these stories are written in books. Others survive through monuments, letters, and photographs.

And some are carried through song. Dengbêjî belongs to this last world. A dengbêj is not simply a singer in the ordinary sense. The performer is also a storyteller who gives a narrative its voice, rhythm,

and emotional presence. In a single performance, listeners may encounter poetry, personal experience, historical memory, and the musical beauty of language.

A dengbêj may make listeners feel that a distant story is unfolding before them. A person who lived generations ago becomes a presence in the room. A remembered landscape seems nearer. An old sorrow acquires a new voice. This is the extraordinary power of oral storytelling.

It brings the past into the present without making the past identical to the present. The subject of this book is not only the beauty of old songs. It is also the human experience behind them. Why do people sing about those they have lost?

Why does a remembered place become more precious after someone leaves it? Why can a voice make us feel connected to people we have never met? And why do certain songs continue to matter even after the world around them has changed? Dengbêjî offers a way of exploring these questions.

Its traditions are associated with Kurdish language and culture, but its emotional world can be understood far beyond Kurdish communities. Love, grief, courage, belonging, and remembrance belong to everyone. What makes dengbêjî distinctive is the artistic way these experiences have been shaped through Kurdish vocal and narrative traditions.

The stories do not exist independently of the voices that carry them. A pause can be meaningful. A repeated phrase can deepen an emotion. A name pronounced with particular intensity can make an entire narrative feel personal. A melody can communicate longing even before the listener understands every word.

This book is an invitation to enter that world. It begins with the cultural setting of dengbêjî and the people who have carried it. It then

explores the artistry of the voice, the meanings of the songs, and the relationship between storytelling and memory. It considers the pressures that history places upon language and cultural expression. It recognizes the contributions of women whose voices form an important part of Kurdish musical heritage.

Finally, it follows the tradition into the modern world, where recordings and digital platforms allow old performances to reach new listeners. Throughout these pages, one idea returns again and again: A tradition lives through people. It cannot survive through admiration alone. It needs listeners, learners, performers, and people willing to give it a place in everyday cultural life.

A recording can preserve the sound of a voice. A book can explain a story. An archive can protect valuable material. But the deepest continuity begins when someone cares enough to listen. And perhaps, one day, to sing.

Introduction

The World of the Dengbêj

Imagine entering a room where a small group of people has gathered. The conversation gradually grows quieter. An older person prepares to sing. There may be no orchestra, no bright stage lights, and no elaborate equipment. What matters is the voice. The first sounds emerge slowly.

For someone unfamiliar with the language, the performance may initially seem like a long and expressive melody. But those who understand the words recognize something more. A story has begun. Perhaps it concerns a journey, a lost love, a conflict between families, or the death of someone whose memory remains important.

The singer moves through the narrative. At certain moments, the voice rises. At others, it becomes restrained. Words return. Names are repeated. The melody seems to hold the emotion of the story for longer than ordinary speech could. The listeners are not merely receiving entertainment.

They are entering a world of memory. This imagined scene introduces the central experience of dengbêjî, although actual performance settings vary widely. Dengbêjî belongs to Kurdish oral culture and is especially associated with traditions of narrative singing in Kurmanji-speaking communities. The word deng means voice or sound. The element bêj is connected with speaking or saying.

Together, the word dengbêj suggests someone who gives voice to words and stories. But a dengbêj is much more than a literal combination of these meanings. The performer brings language, memory, and artistic expression together. More Than a Song When people think about music, they often imagine melody accompanied by instruments.

Dengbêjî shows that the human voice can carry an extraordinary musical world on its own. A performance may be centered on a long narrative rather than a short song with a familiar chorus. The words matter because they tell a story. The melody matters because it gives that story emotional shape.

The performer matters because every voice brings an individual interpretation. And the audience matters because cultural knowledge helps people understand what is being sung. A listener may recognize the name of a village or the reference to a remembered event. Another may connect the story to an experience in the family.

Someone else may simply be moved by the beauty of the voice. Each form of listening creates a different relationship with the performance. What Is a Kilam? One of the important words encountered in discussions of dengbêjî is kilam. A kilam may be understood as a song or sung narrative, often carrying a story that unfolds through vocal performance.

The word stran is also used for song. The relationship between these terms varies, and Kurdish musical traditions cannot be reduced to a single fixed vocabulary. For the purposes of this book, the word kilam will be used especially when discussing the storytelling dimension of dengbêjî.

A kilam may be remembered because of its narrative. But it may also become unforgettable because of the way a particular performer sings

it. This distinction is important. A story and a performance are closely connected, but they are not the same thing.

Two singers may perform versions of a familiar narrative and create different emotional experiences. One may emphasize grief. Another may make the story feel urgent or dramatic. Another may allow the words to unfold with quiet restraint. The identity of the performer becomes part of the listener's memory.

The Meaning of Remembering Human memory is never simply a storage room where the past remains untouched. We remember through stories, emotions, places, relationships, and the words we use to explain our experiences. A family may preserve the memory of a grandparent through repeated anecdotes.

A community may remember an event through an annual gathering. A song may connect people to a history they did not personally experience. Dengbêji participates in this process. Its narratives may preserve details about people and places, but they also preserve ways of feeling and interpreting the past.

A song of mourning may carry an understanding of loyalty. A song of separation may communicate the importance of belonging. A song about conflict may express grief and admiration at the same time. Such performances do not simply report what happened. They reveal why people continue to care.

A Living Tradition

It is tempting to imagine traditional culture as something belonging exclusively to the past. The word traditional may bring to mind old photographs, historical costumes, or objects behind museum glass. But living traditions are different. They are inherited and changed. People learn from earlier generations, yet they also perform in new circumstances.

Dengbêjî has moved across different social settings and through different forms of media. A voice once heard in a gathering may later be recorded, copied onto a cassette, broadcast, or uploaded to the internet. The sound travels farther, but its meaning continues to depend on people.

This book follows that journey. It begins with the landscapes and communities in which stories have circulated, then moves into the art of performance, the experiences preserved in kilams, and the changing world of cultural memory. It is a journey through Kurdish oral tradition.

But it is also a journey into a question that belongs to everyone: What does a human voice make possible that writing alone cannot?

PART I

The Roots of a Living Tradition



Chapter One

The Voice of the Mountains

A mountain can be many things. To a traveler, it may be an obstacle. To someone who lives nearby, it may be part of the familiar shape of home. To someone who has left that home, it may become an image carried in memory.

And to a poet, a mountain may become a way of speaking about distance, endurance, beauty, or longing. The landscapes associated with Kurdish life have found expression in many forms of cultural storytelling. Mountains, valleys, villages, roads, and changing seasons are part of the physical world in which generations have lived and moved. Dengbêji belongs to that human geography.

But the tradition cannot be explained simply by saying that mountains created singers. People create stories wherever they live. What matters is the relationship between place and memory. A place becomes culturally meaningful when people attach experiences to it. A village is not only a collection of houses. It may contain the memory of a wedding, the story of a family, or the childhood of someone who later moved away.

A road is not merely a route between two destinations. It may be remembered as the road on which someone departed. A mountain may stand in the background of a story and become associated with an entire generation's experience. Through oral storytelling, these places can acquire a second life.

They exist physically in the landscape, and they exist again in memory. A World Without a Single Beginning No one can point to one moment and say that dengbêjî began there. The tradition has emerged through a long history of oral communication, performance, and cultural transmission.

People have told stories through song in many societies, often long before the invention of technologies capable of preserving their voices. The histories of individual Kurdish songs are not always easy to reconstruct. A narrative may have circulated for generations before a surviving recording was made.

A familiar story may have been performed by numerous singers, each contributing something distinctive. An old performance may be remembered in one region and known in a different form elsewhere. This makes the history of dengbêjî complex. It also makes it fascinating. Unlike a printed book, which usually carries a clearly identified edition, an oral narrative can have several lives.

It may be remembered differently by different performers. Its words may vary. Its structure may change. Yet listeners may still recognize it as the same story. That recognition is one of the ways oral tradition creates continuity. The Landscape of Human Experience A landscape does not sing.

People sing about what happened within it. The mountains and plains of Kurdish regions have been settings for everyday life, movement, trade, family relationships, political conflict, seasonal change, and migration. Dengbêj narratives draw meaning from the human experiences associated with such places. In a song, a location may function like a key.

For a listener who knows the place, the name may unlock memories and associations that require no explanation. For an unfamiliar

listener, it may simply identify where an event occurred. This difference reveals something important about cultural storytelling. The same words can hold different degrees of meaning for different audiences.

A name that sounds ordinary to one person may carry an entire history for another. A successful translation can explain the literal meaning of a song, but it may not be able to reproduce every association familiar to its original audience. That is why listening to dengbêjî involves more than understanding vocabulary.

It involves entering a world of cultural references. The Singer and the Place The association between voice and place can be powerful. People often remember performers through the sounds of particular recordings, through family listening habits, or through stories about where they performed.

A song may become associated with a location even when it circulates far beyond it. As communities migrate, the geography of listening changes. A performance connected with one landscape may be heard in an apartment in another country. The listener may never have visited the places named in the song.

Yet the voice can still create a sense of connection. The relationship between a person and a homeland is not always based on direct memory. It may also be inherited through language, stories, photographs, and music. Dengbêjî can be part of that inheritance.

What the Mountains Cannot Tell Us There is a danger in describing any cultural tradition entirely through beautiful images. Mountains, old villages, and distant landscapes can create a romantic picture. But the lives of real people are more complicated. They include ordinary work, difficult decisions, family conflicts, social differences, and changing historical conditions.

Dengbêjî is important precisely because its narratives are not limited to idealized images. The songs may express beauty, but they may also confront suffering. They may speak about belonging, but they may also describe exile. They may remember courage while acknowledging loss. Their emotional range makes them deeply human.

The voice of the mountains is therefore not a voice that belongs only to nature. It is the voice of people whose experiences have become attached to places. Through song, geography becomes memory. And memory becomes something another generation can hear.

Chapter Two

The People Who Carried Stories

Every tradition has people who make its continuation possible. Some are remembered by name. Others remain unknown beyond their families or communities. They may not have published books, appeared on television, or left behind professional recordings. Yet they contributed to the survival of songs by remembering them.

The history of dengbêjî belongs to both groups. Famous performers are important, but the tradition cannot be understood through famous names alone. It has also depended on the everyday act of listening. Someone hears a song. The words remain in memory. Years later, the person sings it for somebody else.

Something passes between them. That act may appear small, but repeated across generations, it becomes a powerful form of cultural transmission. The Art of Remembering Remembering a long sung narrative is different from memorizing a short piece of information. A performer must understand how the story moves.

There may be recognizable episodes, central characters, recurring images, and patterns of expression. The performer also needs an artistic understanding of how the narrative should be delivered. The voice must follow the emotional direction of the story. Some passages may require a sustained phrase.

Others move more directly. The performer must know how to make a familiar narrative meaningful in the present moment. This is one reason oral storytelling should never be dismissed as a simple act of repetition. It requires skill. It also allows creativity. A performer does not necessarily reproduce an inherited text word for word.

Variation can be part of the living tradition. *A Story Belongs to More Than One Voice* Imagine a narrative known by several singers. Its central story remains recognizable. There is a remembered person, a conflict, a journey, or a loss. But each singer brings a different voice.

One performance is restrained and reflective. Another is dramatic. Another emphasizes particular details. The listeners may prefer one rendition without considering the others incorrect. Over time, a particular performer may become especially closely associated with the narrative. This can create confusion between the person who performed a song and the person who originally composed it.

In oral traditions, authorship is not always easy to establish. A song can belong to a shared repertoire while becoming famous through an individual voice. Both forms of significance deserve recognition. *The Listener as a Keeper of Memory* The audience also has an active role.

Listeners remember. They recognize passages. They tell others about performances. They may compare one singer's version with another. They can keep the memory of a voice alive long after a performance ends. A tradition therefore does not move from performer to performer alone.

It moves through a wider network of relationships. Families, friends, gatherings, cultural institutions, recordings, and communities all contribute to its circulation. A listener may become a performer. A child who once heard songs in the family may later become interested in their meaning.

A young person who discovers a recording may begin learning Kurmanji in order to understand its words. The path from listening to participation can take many forms. Reputation and Responsibility A respected dengbêj may acquire cultural authority. People may seek out the performer because of artistic ability, knowledge of repertoire, or the emotional force of a familiar voice.

But cultural authority is not the same as historical certainty. A performer may preserve an important community account without possessing a complete documentary history of the event. The storyteller's task and the historian's task overlap, but they are not identical. The storyteller makes a remembered world audible.

The historian asks how available evidence can help reconstruct what happened. Both approaches can contribute to cultural understanding.

The Unknown Performers

When we speak about cultural heritage, we often focus on individuals whose names survive. Yet countless acts of transmission leave few public traces. Someone may have known dozens of songs and performed them only within a small circle. Another may have taught a child a particular narrative.

A family may remember a singer who never entered a formal archive. These contributions matter. Cultural heritage is not created solely by institutions or celebrated artists. It is also sustained through ordinary relationships. The survival of dengbêjî reflects the combined efforts of performers and listeners, including people whose names may never appear in a history book.

This is one of the most important lessons of oral tradition. Sometimes a culture is carried forward not through a remarkable public event, but through the simple decision not to let a story disappear.

Chapter Three

The House of Words: How a Tradition Travels

A written book can remain on a shelf for many years. Its pages wait for the next reader. An oral performance has a different relationship with time. When the singer stops, the sound disappears from the room. What remains is memory. Before sound recording became widely available, the survival of a particular performance depended greatly on what others remembered and transmitted.

This made the relationship between performers and listeners essential. The tradition lived through encounters. The Social Life of a Song A song does not circulate in isolation. It travels through people. A person may hear a performance during a gathering and later repeat it for relatives.

Someone who has moved to another region may carry familiar narratives into a new community. A performer may encounter another singer and learn a different version of a known story. Through such exchanges, songs can move across geographical and social boundaries. Their movement may change their form.

Words that are familiar in one community may be replaced with expressions used elsewhere. A detail may become more important to one audience than another. An unfamiliar listener may understand the central emotions without recognizing every reference. These changes reveal the flexibility of oral culture.

Tradition and Creativity The word tradition sometimes creates the impression that the past must be repeated exactly. But living traditions depend on a balance between recognition and creativity. If everything changed beyond recognition, listeners might lose the connection with an inherited narrative. If nothing could ever change, performers would have little room for interpretation.

Dengbêjî exists within this relationship. A familiar song can remain recognizable while taking on the distinctive character of a particular voice. The words may belong to a shared repertoire, but the performance belongs to a moment. No two performances are completely identical. Even the same singer may deliver the same song differently depending on mood, audience, or setting.

The Importance of Language Language makes oral transmission possible. It carries the narrative, but it also carries cultural associations. A word can remind a listener of family speech. A regional expression can evoke a familiar community. A phrase may sound poetic because of its rhythm or because it recalls other songs.

These qualities can be difficult to reproduce in translation. That does not mean a translation is useless. An English translation can introduce new readers to the story. But it should be understood as a bridge. The original language remains an important part of the artistic experience.

From Family Memory to Public Heritage A song may begin its known life within a relatively small community and later reach a much wider audience. A recording can change its cultural status. A performer whose voice was once familiar to a limited group may become recognized by people in distant places.

A local narrative may enter a national or international discussion of cultural heritage. These developments can bring recognition and preservation opportunities. They can also change how the tradition is

understood. Public institutions may emphasize certain songs because they seem to represent a particular cultural identity.

Audiences may associate dengbêjî mainly with a small number of famous performers. Yet the broader tradition remains more diverse. The House of Words The phrase house of words is a metaphor for the social world that makes oral culture possible. Its foundations are language and memory.

Its rooms are the many stories people carry. Its doors are the encounters through which those stories travel. Its windows open whenever a new listener discovers a familiar voice. Such a house has no single location. It exists wherever people continue to listen and perform.

And because it belongs to living people, it is never entirely finished.

PART II

The Art of the Dengbêj



Chapter Four

When the Human Voice Becomes Music

There is something remarkable about the human voice. It is the first instrument most people encounter. Long before a child understands music as an art form, the child hears voices expressing tenderness, joy, urgency, and reassurance. We learn to recognize emotion through sound.

A familiar voice can comfort us. An unfamiliar voice can attract our attention. A change in tone can communicate meaning before a sentence is complete. Dengbêjî uses these possibilities with extraordinary artistic concentration. The voice becomes the central instrument through which a narrative is performed.

Music Without an Orchestra A listener accustomed to modern popular music may expect drums, guitars, keyboards, or other instrumental accompaniment. Many dengbêj performances show that a voice can create a powerful musical experience without depending on an elaborate arrangement. The singer's control of pitch, breath, phrasing, and intensity gives the performance its shape.

The narrative develops through the voice. This does not mean that all Kurdish oral performance is unaccompanied or that every dengbêj follows exactly the same musical practice. The forms and contexts vary. The essential point is that vocal expression occupies a central artistic position.

What a Voice Can Do Ordinary speech moves through words at a pace shaped primarily by conversation. Singing creates different possibilities. A single syllable can be extended. A phrase can rise gradually. A familiar word can return several times. A moment of sorrow can remain suspended in sound.

The listener experiences the narrative through duration as well as meaning. This relationship between time and emotion is one of the most distinctive qualities of vocal art. Consider the difference between reading a sentence about someone leaving home and hearing that idea expressed through a sustained melodic phrase.

The written sentence communicates an event. The performance can invite the listener to remain emotionally within that event. The story is not merely delivered. It is experienced through sound. Breath and Silence The voice depends on breath. Every phrase begins within the physical possibilities of the singer's body.

Breath shapes how long a passage can continue and where the performer must pause. A pause may also become a deliberate artistic choice. Silence creates space. It may separate one episode from another. It may allow a name or image to remain in the listener's mind.

It can make the return of the voice more powerful. In written language, punctuation suggests pauses. In performance, the singer creates them. This difference is one reason a transcription can never fully replace listening.

The Individual Voice

Two people can speak the same language and sound entirely different. Their voices differ in timbre, pitch, rhythm, and articulation. The same is true of singing. A dengbêj's artistic identity may be associated with the way the voice moves through a narrative. Listeners may recognize a performer from the sound of the opening phrases.

A particular recording can become inseparable from memories of the singer. Yet a voice also changes over a lifetime. Age, health, experience, and performance circumstances may influence delivery. An artist's work should therefore be heard as the expression of a developing human life rather than a fixed sound.

When Words Are Not Enough

A person can understand the story of a kilam and still discover something new by listening to it. The voice adds a dimension that explanation alone cannot provide. This is not because sound is mysterious or impossible to analyze. It is because artistic experience involves several forms of communication at once.

Words tell us what is happening. Melody shapes how events unfold. Pacing creates expectation. Repetition gives certain moments additional weight. The audience brings its own memories. Together, these elements produce a performance. Learning to Listen Listening carefully to dengbêjî can be an education in attention.

Instead of asking only whether a song is beautiful, a listener can ask how it achieves its effect. Where does the singer slow down? Which words return? How does the voice change during the narrative? Does a particular name receive unusual emphasis? What happens after a pause?

These questions open a deeper form of appreciation. They help us recognize that the artistry of dengbêjî is not simply contained in the words or the melody. It emerges through the relationship between them.

Chapter Five

Kilam: Songs That Tell Stories

Some songs can be understood almost immediately. They express a feeling, repeat a central idea, and return to a familiar refrain. A narrative song asks for a different kind of attention. The listener follows a story. People may appear. Places may be named.

Relationships may change. An event may lead to another event. The emotional meaning grows as the narrative unfolds. The kilam belongs to this rich world of sung storytelling. The Story Inside the Song A kilam may begin by introducing a person or situation.

It may then move toward a conflict, separation, encounter, or remembered event. Sometimes the emotional meaning becomes clear only after the listener understands the wider story. This gives narrative singing a distinctive power. The audience does not simply hear an emotion. It discovers how that emotion has developed.

Grief becomes more meaningful when the listener knows what was lost. Longing becomes more intense when the circumstances of separation are understood. Courage becomes complicated when a narrative also reveals fear or suffering.

People Become Stories

Human beings remember one another in many ways. A photograph preserves an image. A letter preserves words. A monument preserves a public form of recognition. A song can preserve a person through narrative. The individual may become associated with particular qualities or experiences.

A loved person may be remembered through longing. A figure connected with conflict may become associated with bravery or tragedy. A family story may grow into a narrative recognized beyond the immediate family. Over time, artistic expression and memory can become closely intertwined.

The person remembered in the song is not necessarily identical to the person known through historical documents. The song presents a meaningful account, shaped by storytelling. This distinction does not reduce the cultural importance of the performance. It reveals how human communities make memory shareable.

The Importance of Repetition A repeated phrase can serve several purposes. It can help a listener recognize a familiar song. It can create a sense of musical structure. It can return attention to a central emotion or image. It can also connect different moments of the narrative.

Repetition does not always mean that the singer has run out of words. Often it is part of the artistic design. A phrase that appears early in a song may carry a different emotional weight when it returns later. The words remain recognizable, but the story has changed around them.

Images That Remain

Poetry often becomes memorable through images. A landscape, season, road, or familiar object may carry emotional associations. In Kurdish poetic expression, words such as *dil*—heart—can connect physical and emotional language. A song may place a person within a landscape or describe distance through a journey.

These images should be understood within the narrative. A mountain does not always stand for resistance. A night does not always mean sorrow. A road does not always represent exile. Meaning arises from the relationship between the words, the story, and the people who hear them.

The Performer as Interpreter A narrative may circulate in more than one version. The performer therefore has an interpretive role. A singer may emphasize the suffering of one character. Another may bring attention to the actions of a different person. Changes in wording, pacing, or vocal style can alter the listener's experience.

This is one of the reasons it matters to identify the performer when discussing a recording. The song and its performance belong together. *The Beauty of a Long Story* Modern media often encourages speed. A brief recording is easier to share than a long performance.

A short clip may capture an emotionally striking moment. But the complete narrative offers something different. It asks the listener to remain. The story needs time to develop. Names acquire significance. Emotions become connected to events. A repeated passage gains meaning through what has come before.

Listening to a full *kilam* can therefore be an act of patience. It invites us to experience a story at the pace chosen by the performer. In a world increasingly organized around brief fragments of information, that kind of attention has its own cultural value.

Chapter Six

Love, Loss, War, and the Long Road Home

What do people remember most strongly? Often it is what they have loved, what they have lost, and what has changed their lives. A person may forget the details of an ordinary day while remembering a farewell for decades. A family may preserve the story of a difficult journey long after the people who made it are gone.

A community may continue discussing an event because its consequences were felt across generations. Dengbêj narratives speak to these experiences. Their emotional world is broad. It includes affection and longing, sorrow and mourning, conflict and courage, migration and belonging. Love and Distance Love becomes especially powerful in storytelling when it encounters difficulty.

A relationship may be separated by geography. Family expectations may create obstacles. A person may be unable to return. Time may change circumstances. Through song, love becomes more than a private feeling. It becomes part of a narrative about the social world in which people live.

A performance can communicate tenderness while also revealing the pressures surrounding relationships. The singer may dwell on absence rather than presence. The most emotionally important person in the narrative may be someone who is no longer there. This is one reason longing has such enduring artistic power.

It gives the imagination something that ordinary experience cannot provide: the possibility of speaking to absence.

Grief That Becomes Shared

Grief is deeply personal. Yet mourning can also become a social experience. People gather around loss. They remember the person who has died. They repeat stories. They search for words capable of expressing something difficult to explain. A lament or mourning narrative can give form to that experience.

Through performance, a private sorrow may become recognizable to others. Listeners may not know the person named in the song. They may not share the exact circumstances of the loss. But they can understand the human feeling that gives the narrative its force.

This is one of the ways art creates connection across time and place. Conflict and the Human Cost of Violence Songs about conflict are sometimes remembered for their accounts of courage. But the emotional world of conflict is rarely simple. A narrative may contain admiration and grief.

It may remember an individual while also communicating the suffering of a family or community. It may express anger at injustice, sorrow over death, or concern for those left behind. A story about conflict can therefore become a place where historical memory and moral judgment meet.

The listener is invited not only to learn about an event, but also to consider what the event meant to the people who remembered it. Exile and the Meaning of Home Home is more than a geographical location. It may be the place where a person learned a language, heard familiar voices, or formed early relationships.

When people leave home, these memories can become especially important. Migration may offer safety or opportunity, but it can also create separation. People may live in a new country while continuing to remember places they left behind. For some, a familiar song becomes a connection between the present and the past.

The language of a performance may evoke family conversations. A place name may recall stories told by parents or grandparents. A voice may create a sense of closeness to people who are far away. Dengbêjî can carry this relationship between distance and belonging.

The Long Road Home

The idea of returning home appears in many forms of storytelling. Sometimes return is physically possible. Sometimes it is delayed. Sometimes the place remembered has changed. Sometimes the people associated with it are no longer alive. And sometimes the home that exists in memory cannot be recovered exactly as it was.

A song can give expression to this complicated experience. It does not necessarily offer a solution. It allows the feeling to be heard. This may explain why certain performances remain meaningful even to listeners who live far from the places connected with their families.

Through song, a remembered world can become present again.

More Than Sadness

It would be a mistake to describe dengbêjî only through suffering. Its repertoire belongs to the full range of human experience. Beauty, affection, admiration, humour, social observation, and artistic pleasure also matter. A tradition that speaks about loss does not exist only to preserve pain.

It also reveals the human capacity to transform experience into expression. That transformation is one of the deepest forms of cultural creativity.

PART III

Memory, History, and Resistance



Chapter Seven

The Stories History Did Not Always Write Down

History is often encountered through dates, documents, and names. We learn about events through books, archives, museums, and official records. These sources are essential. But they do not contain every human experience. A document may record that people moved from one place to another without describing what the journey felt like.

An official account may mention a conflict without preserving the memories of every family affected. A historical record may identify a public figure while leaving the lives of ordinary people largely invisible. Oral storytelling can help us approach another dimension of the past.

The Memory of Ordinary People Much of human history consists of experiences that were never formally documented. Families remember departures, marriages, disagreements, losses, and unexpected events. Communities remember people who played important roles in local life. These memories are often preserved through stories.

Some eventually become part of a wider cultural repertoire. Dengbêji can carry such accounts in artistic form. A name in a kilam may introduce a person whose importance is understood through the narrative. A location may connect the story to a community. An

emotional passage may reveal how an experience was remembered by those who transmitted it.

A Song Is Not a Court Record The historical importance of a kilam does not mean that every word should be interpreted literally. Songs are shaped by artistic choices. A narrative may emphasize particular characters or events. It may compress time. It may contain imagery or dialogue that serves a poetic purpose.

Different versions may preserve different details. This is normal within the world of oral storytelling. A song can be historically meaningful without functioning like a formal legal document. Its value includes what it reveals about memory, emotion, and cultural interpretation.

Why Stories Change

Every act of remembering takes place in the present. When people recount an old event, they speak from their own position in time. They may have learned the story from someone else. They may connect it to later experiences. They may emphasize details that seem important to their current audience.

A song can therefore change while continuing to refer to a recognizable event. These changes can tell us something about the history of the narrative itself. The story becomes a record not only of what people remember, but also of how they have remembered it.

The Silence of the Archive Written archives are shaped by the institutions and individuals that create them. Some events receive extensive documentation. Others leave relatively few records. The lives of people with limited access to formal institutions may be especially difficult to reconstruct.

Oral accounts can provide valuable perspectives in such circumstances. They may preserve names, relationships, and experiences that deserve closer attention. But oral and written sources should not be treated as enemies. They can illuminate different aspects of the past. A document may help establish a date.

A song may reveal the emotional meaning attached to an event. Together, they can support a richer understanding of history. When a Story Becomes Collective Memory A narrative becomes part of collective memory when it is recognized, repeated, and given meaning within a community.

It may become associated with a particular place or family. It may be taught to younger people. It may be performed during gatherings. It may acquire importance during later historical events. The story's meaning can expand beyond the circumstances that first gave rise to it.

This process is especially visible when an older song gains new listeners. A generation that did not experience the original event may still understand the narrative as part of its inherited cultural world.

The Unwritten Archive

Calling dengbêjî an unwritten archive is a way of recognizing its role in preserving memories. But it is not an archive in the conventional institutional sense. It is alive. Its stories move. Its performances change. Its listeners interpret. Its meanings continue to develop.

A written document can preserve one account. A living performance can bring an account into a new relationship with the present. This is the remarkable contribution of oral culture to historical understanding. It reminds us that the past survives not only through

evidence stored in institutions, but also through stories people consider worth telling again.

Chapter Eight

Language, Silence, and Resistance

Language is one of the most intimate parts of human experience. It is the medium through which many people first encounter the world. A child learns words for family members, familiar places, emotions, and everyday activities. Over time, those words become part of memory.

A language can therefore be much more than a tool for exchanging information. It can carry belonging. For Kurdish communities, language and cultural expression have existed within different political and historical circumstances across the region. The conditions have varied from place to place and from one period to another.

These circumstances have influenced opportunities for education, publication, broadcasting, and public artistic expression. Dengbêjî belongs to this wider history. A Voice in Its Own Language A song carries meaning through the language in which it is performed. The words are not interchangeable objects.

Their sounds and associations form part of the artistic experience. When a listener hears a familiar language, the effect may be deeply personal. The voice may recall family members, childhood experiences, or remembered places. Even someone who does not understand every word may recognize a connection.

This relationship between language and emotion helps explain why cultural expressions can remain important across generations.

Cultural Continuity

When opportunities to use a language are limited, communities may rely on different practices to sustain it. Family conversation, storytelling, poetry, music, and other forms of cultural expression can contribute. Dengbêjî may play a role because it places language at the center of an artistic tradition.

Its repertoire offers listeners extended narratives rather than isolated vocabulary. Words are encountered through emotion and story. Expressions become associated with people and events. Language is heard as something living. Resistance Is Not Always a Slogan The word resistance often brings to mind direct political opposition.

But cultural resistance can take different forms. A narrative may openly criticize an injustice. A song may preserve the memory of people or experiences excluded from a dominant public account. A performance may maintain cultural expression under circumstances where opportunities are constrained. These meanings depend on context.

Not every Kurdish song is political. Not every dengbêj sets out to communicate resistance. A love song should not automatically be transformed into a political statement. The personal and artistic meanings of the repertoire deserve equal respect. The Importance of Complexity It can be tempting to tell cultural history as a simple story of suffering followed by survival.

Real histories are more complicated. Communities experience differences of class, gender, region, language, generation, and political perspective. Performers make individual choices. Audiences interpret

songs differently. A tradition may receive recognition in one setting while facing obstacles in another. The relationship between dengbêjî and political power should therefore be understood through specific circumstances rather than broad assumptions.

The Power of Being Heard Public visibility can change the life of an artistic tradition. A performance recorded for wider circulation may reach listeners who would otherwise never encounter it. A cultural event may introduce younger audiences to the repertoire. Educational resources may provide language explanations that make long narratives more accessible.

Such opportunities matter because cultural traditions require space. They need places where people can perform and listen without being reduced to symbols. **The Right to Complexity** Dengbêjî has cultural significance beyond any single political interpretation. It belongs to the world of human storytelling.

The voices of performers may communicate grief, pleasure, love, criticism, pride, uncertainty, and remembrance. To value the tradition is to allow it to express this full range of experiences. A voice becomes culturally powerful not only when it opposes something. It also matters when it remembers, loves, questions, and tells a story that listeners want to hear.

Chapter Nine

Women Who Refused to Be Forgotten

A history of voices is incomplete when it remembers only some of the people who sang. The history of Kurdish musical and oral expression includes women, although their contributions have not always received the same public attention as those of male performers. This difference in visibility raises important questions.

Who was able to perform publicly? Whose voice was recorded? Whose biography was written? Which performances were preserved, and which remained within families or local communities? These questions matter because the surviving cultural record is not always a complete picture of artistic life.

The Voices Beyond the Stage A tradition may have many forms of participation. Some performers are publicly recognized. Others sing within particular social settings. Some acquire recordings that circulate widely. Others are remembered primarily by relatives or local audiences. Women may have contributed to singing and storytelling in settings that received less formal documentation.

Their presence cannot be measured only through surviving commercial recordings. To understand the tradition fully, it is necessary to consider the spaces in which cultural knowledge was transmitted. The Meaning of Visibility Public recognition can bring

opportunity. It may allow a performer to develop an audience, record songs, or become part of a wider cultural history.

But visibility also depends on social conditions. Family expectations, access to resources, public attitudes, and historical circumstances may influence who can perform and where. These conditions differ across communities and generations. Women performers should not be treated as though they all lived the same story.

Their artistic lives were shaped by individual decisions and circumstances. Women as Artists, Not Only Symbols Women singers are sometimes discussed mainly through the difficulties they encountered. Those difficulties may be important. But an artist's work deserves attention beyond biography. What songs did she perform?

How did she use her voice? What made her style distinctive? How did listeners respond? What narratives became associated with her performances? These questions place artistic achievement at the center. A woman performer is not valuable only because her life illustrates a social problem.

She is valuable because she created and transmitted art. Eyşe Şan and Meryem Xan The names Eyşe Şan and Meryem Xan occupy important places in discussions of Kurdish women's musical history. They represent opportunities to explore how women's voices reached audiences and became part of cultural memory.

Their artistic legacies invite listeners to consider the relationship between personal experience, public performance, and the recording of Kurdish music. They also remind us that recognition is shaped by history. A voice becomes widely known through particular networks of performance, recording, circulation, and remembrance.

Listening Differently

Recovering women's contributions does not require creating a separate, isolated history. It requires listening to the larger tradition with greater attention. When examining a cultural archive, we can ask which voices are missing. When encountering a recording, we can consider whose contribution is credited.

When discussing a famous performer, we can resist assuming that fame alone represents historical importance. This approach expands cultural memory. It allows more people to become visible within the story of dengbêjî. The Next Generation of Women The future of Kurdish oral performance includes new possibilities for women as singers, researchers, educators, archivists, and cultural organizers.

Digital platforms and cultural projects may create opportunities for voices to reach wider audiences. But meaningful participation requires more than technological access. It also depends on education, recognition, resources, and the freedom to develop artistic expression. A living tradition becomes stronger when more people can contribute to it.

The history of dengbêjî is not simply a collection of famous male voices with a few exceptional women added later. It is a wider human story. And every voice deserves to be heard within that story on its own terms.

PART IV

The Voices We Remember



Chapter Ten

Şakiro, Karapêtê Xaço, and the Art of Being Remembered

There are performers whose names become closely connected with a cultural tradition. Their recordings travel beyond the places where they lived. Their voices become familiar to people who never met them. Younger listeners encounter their work long after the original performances were made.

Over time, their names acquire a place in collective cultural memory. Şakiro and Karapêtê Xaço are among the figures frequently encountered in discussions of Kurdish dengbêj performance. Their significance offers an opportunity to consider what makes an artistic voice memorable. A Voice Becomes a Signature

Most people can recognize the voice of someone close to them almost immediately. A familiar voice carries a distinctive combination of sound, rhythm, and expression. In music, this individuality can become an artistic signature. Listeners may associate a performer with particular forms of phrasing or narrative delivery.

A song becomes recognizable not only through its melody or words, but through the person who sings it. When a performance is recorded, this individual sound can travel across generations. Someone listening decades later encounters an artistic moment preserved in sound. Şakiro and the Power of Vocal Memory

Şakiro's name is strongly associated with Kurdish dengbêj performance in contemporary cultural memory. For listeners interested in vocal artistry, recordings associated with him offer opportunities to consider how a singer's style can shape the experience of a narrative. The importance of a performer does not rest only on technical ability.

It also depends on the relationship that audiences develop with the voice. Listeners may return to a recording because it reminds them of family life, a particular period, or an emotional experience. The recording becomes part of their personal history. In this way, artistic legacy is created through listening as well as performance.

Karapêtê Xaço and the Journey of a Repertoire Karapêtê Xaço is another significant figure in the circulation and remembrance of Kurdish narrative singing. His name invites attention to the relationship between a performer and an inherited repertoire. A singer may become famous through a particular song without having originated the narrative.

This is especially important in oral traditions. Songs travel between performers. Versions develop. A memorable performance can become widely recognized. The singer's artistic contribution remains important, but it should not be confused automatically with original composition.

Why Great Voices Matter

A widely admired performer may introduce audiences to material they would otherwise never encounter. A listener begins with one famous recording. Curiosity develops. The listener searches for other versions, other singers, and the stories behind the songs. A celebrated artist can therefore become a doorway into a much larger tradition.

This is one of the most valuable aspects of cultural recognition. Fame can attract attention. But the best result is not merely admiration for an individual. It is a deeper interest in the artistic and cultural world to which the individual belongs. **The Difference Between Legend and Life**

Over time, stories grow around famous performers. Admirers repeat memorable anecdotes. Personal qualities become part of public reputation. The lives of artists may be described in language shaped by affection and pride. These accounts can reveal the emotional importance of a performer to a community.

But the artist's actual life is often more complex than the legend. A respectful cultural portrait allows both dimensions to exist. It recognizes admiration without replacing the person with an idealized image.

More Than One Great Voice

No two singers represent exactly the same artistic possibility. Different voices invite different kinds of listening. The richness of dengbêjî lies in this diversity. Studying Şakiro and Karapêtê Xaço can deepen appreciation of the tradition, but their importance should encourage exploration rather than create a closed list of approved performers.

Many voices remain to be discovered. Some belong to historical recordings. Others continue through live performance. Still others survive in community memory. A tradition is larger than its most famous artists. Their greatest legacy may be the interest they awaken in the voices around them.

Chapter Eleven

Eyşe Şan, Meryem Xan, and the Power of a Woman's Voice

A recording can preserve a voice long after the circumstances of its creation have changed. The listener hears a person who may belong to another generation. The singer's physical presence is absent. Yet the sound remains immediate. This experience can be particularly moving when listening to performers whose lives were shaped by historical conditions different from our own.

Eyşe Şan and Meryem Xan are important names in Kurdish women's musical heritage. Their recordings and cultural reputations invite us to consider the place of women's voices in the history of Kurdish performance. The Artist Behind the Story When an artist becomes famous, biography can sometimes overshadow the work.

Audiences become interested in hardships, relationships, and dramatic events. These stories may be meaningful, but they should not replace listening. A singer's artistic choices are central to understanding the contribution. The way a phrase is delivered, the structure of a performance, and the relationship between voice and narrative all deserve attention.

To respect a singer as an artist is to recognize that the work is more than an illustration of the life. Eyşe Şan and Cultural Memory Eyşe Şan's name has become closely associated with discussions of Kurdish women's singing and artistic expression. Her place in cultural

memory invites reflection on the relationship between gender, recognition, and the public circulation of Kurdish-language music.

The significance of her work is not limited to one theme. A performer can communicate a wide range of human experiences. Listeners should approach individual songs with curiosity rather than assume that every performance represents the same message. Meryem Xan and the Recorded Voice

Meryem Xan is another important figure in the history and remembrance of Kurdish women's singing. Her work opens a window onto an earlier world of recording and musical circulation. A historical recording is valuable not only because it preserves sound. It is also evidence that an artist's performance entered a technological and cultural network.

The recording may have traveled through different formats and reached new audiences over time. With each generation, the voice can acquire additional meanings. For one listener, it may be part of family memory. For another, it may be a discovery. For a researcher, it may provide insight into performance history.

Beyond the Exceptional Woman Celebrated women performers are sometimes described as exceptions. But focusing only on exceptional individuals can hide the broader history of women's cultural participation. A famous voice may be remembered precisely because recording and public recognition made it more visible.

Other women may have sung in local or private settings without leaving a comparable public record. Their contributions are also part of the cultural history of Kurdish music. Recognition and Continuity Remembering women's voices is not simply an act of correcting an old list.

It changes how we understand the tradition. It reveals that cultural transmission has taken place through different spaces and relationships. It encourages greater attention to artistic diversity. It also raises questions about the future. Who has opportunities to learn? Who has access to performance spaces?

Whose work is documented? Which recordings are preserved and made accessible? A cultural tradition is strengthened when these questions are taken seriously. A Voice Belongs to a Person There is a final reason to approach these performers with care. An admired voice can become a symbol of many things: heritage, sorrow, courage, identity, or cultural memory.

But behind every symbolic meaning is a human being. An artist has personal experiences, creative choices, and a life that cannot be reduced to a single story. Respect begins by remembering that. The power of women's voices in Kurdish musical history lies not only in what they represent.

It lies in what they created.

PART V

An Old Tradition in a New World



Chapter Twelve

From Village Gatherings to Radio and Cassette

Imagine hearing a singer perform a long narrative. The experience depends on being present. You hear the voice within a particular place. You may notice the reactions of other listeners. The performance begins, unfolds, and ends. When the singer stops, the sound is gone.

Now imagine hearing that same voice again years later. A recording makes this possible. The development of sound technology changed the history of oral performance. It allowed moments that once disappeared into memory to become repeatable.

The Recorded Moment

Recording technology makes a remarkable promise. It can preserve the sound of something that happened only once. The listener can return to the performance. A researcher can examine particular phrases. A family can preserve the voice of someone they remember. A younger generation can hear a singer who lived before its time.

These possibilities are enormously valuable. But a recording is not the same as the event. It cannot preserve every gesture, relationship, or detail of the surrounding environment. It captures a particular representation of a performance.

The Radio Years

Radio introduced new ways of encountering music and oral performance. A listener no longer needed to be physically present in the same room as the artist. Broadcast sound could reach many homes. A performer could become familiar to audiences who had never met them.

Radio also changed the relationship between culture and institutions. Broadcast schedules, recording selections, and presentation formats influenced which material audiences encountered. A performance that reached the radio could gain recognition, while other voices remained less visible. The Cassette as a Traveler Cassettes created another important possibility.

They were portable. They could be replayed and exchanged. A recording could pass from one person to another and travel across considerable distances. A cassette might become part of a family collection. It could be played during everyday activities or shared with visitors.

For people living away from familiar places, recorded voices could become meaningful connections to language and cultural memory. The cassette was more than a storage device. It could become part of social life. The Problem of the Missing Label Recordings can survive while information about them disappears.

A cassette may lose its cover. A copied recording may carry an incomplete title. The performer's name may be written incorrectly. The original recording date may be unknown. Over time, such uncertainty can become part of the material's history. This reminds us that preservation requires both sound and information.

A voice without context can still move a listener. But context helps people understand whose voice they are hearing and how the

recording came to them. Television and the Public Stage Television created new possibilities for visual as well as musical presentation. Audiences could see performers, not merely hear them.

Public cultural events could introduce traditional forms to people who had never encountered them in their earlier social settings. These developments expanded visibility. They also transformed the performance. A staged event may involve microphones, cameras, lighting, and time limits. The singer may address an audience quite different from the one associated with earlier community gatherings.

Such changes do not necessarily reduce artistic value. They create a different cultural situation. The Past Reaches the Present The recordings of earlier generations have become important resources for contemporary listeners. They allow people to explore voices and repertoires that might otherwise be inaccessible.

They also invite comparison. A listener can hear different singers perform versions of a familiar narrative. A researcher can study vocal styles. A language learner can return repeatedly to a passage. Recording technology has therefore created new forms of continuity. But it has also made the listener's responsibility more important.

A recording should not be treated as a mysterious object detached from history. It belongs to a performer, a moment, and a chain of transmission. Understanding that chain deepens the experience of listening.

Chapter Thirteen

Dengbêjî in the Age of YouTube and Digital Memory

A young person opens a phone. A short video begins to play. The voice is unfamiliar, and the language may not be fully understood. There are no elaborate visual effects. The recording may even sound old. But something about the performance attracts attention.

The listener searches for the singer's name. One video leads to another. Soon, a tradition that once seemed distant becomes the subject of curiosity. This is one of the possibilities created by digital media. An Old Voice on a New Screen The internet has transformed cultural circulation.

Recordings can reach audiences across countries and generations. People can discover performers without traveling to an archive or cultural institution. A song can be shared within seconds. For dengbêjî, this accessibility creates opportunities. A person interested in Kurdish language and culture may find recordings that introduce unfamiliar vocabulary and narratives.

A family may share material associated with its own memories. An educator may use a recording to explain oral tradition. A researcher may discover sources for further study. The Beauty of Discovery Digital media can make cultural exploration feel immediate. A listener may begin with a single recording and gradually develop a deeper interest.

The voice becomes an entry point into language, history, and cultural expression. This process is especially important for people who did not grow up in environments where dengbêjî was regularly performed. They may encounter the tradition through online platforms rather than through direct intergenerational experience.

Digital access can help build a connection that did not previously exist. The Danger of the Fragment Online media often favors short content. A brief excerpt is easy to watch and share. But narrative songs require time. A clip may contain the most emotionally intense moment of a performance while omitting the story that gives it meaning.

A listener may hear a passage about grief without understanding the people or events involved. The result can be an incomplete interpretation. Short videos can still be valuable introductions. Their greatest educational potential lies in leading listeners toward complete performances and deeper cultural understanding.

When a Recording Loses Its Name Digital recordings are frequently copied and uploaded by people who were not involved in their creation. Sometimes this makes valuable material accessible. At other times, important information is lost. A song may be attributed to the wrong performer.

A title may be altered. A later edited recording may circulate without explanation. A video upload date may be confused with the date of the performance. These changes affect cultural memory. The digital world can preserve sound while weakening the information attached to it.

Building Better Digital Collections

A thoughtful digital collection should do more than provide a play button. It can help listeners understand what they are hearing. A recording may be accompanied by the performer's name, a description of the song, its language, and available historical context. A transcript can make the words easier to follow.

A translation can introduce the narrative to readers who do not speak Kurmanji. Notes can explain difficult expressions. Links to other versions can show how the repertoire has traveled. Such resources turn a collection of recordings into an educational space. The Rights of Performers and Communities

Easy access does not mean unrestricted ownership. A performance may involve the rights of singers, recording producers, families, or other rights holders. Personal recordings may also raise questions of consent. Cultural preservation should respect the people connected with the material. Responsible sharing includes attribution, attention to permissions, and willingness to correct errors.

A tradition should not lose the dignity of its performers simply because technology makes copying convenient. A New Generation of Storytellers Digital media can also support new forms of cultural education. A young creator may introduce a famous dengbêj. A language teacher may explain the vocabulary of a short passage.

An archivist may present an annotated historical recording. A performer may share a new interpretation. These activities can make the tradition more accessible. They do not replace the importance of learning directly from experienced singers where that is possible. But they can create new pathways into the cultural world of dengbêjî.

A Voice Across Distance

Perhaps the most remarkable feature of digital circulation is its ability to connect listeners who are separated by geography. A recording associated with one place may be heard on another continent. People from different generations may discuss the same performance. Someone who knows little about Kurdish culture may discover an artistic form that becomes meaningful.

The voice travels farther than ever. But the essential human experience remains recognizable. One person sings. Another listens. And a story continues.

PART VI

The Song That Must Continue



Chapter Fourteen

Who Will Carry the Voice Tomorrow?

Every generation inherits something. Sometimes it is a home. Sometimes it is a language. Sometimes it is a collection of family photographs or a story repeated during gatherings. And sometimes it is a song. The inheritance of dengbêjî cannot be measured only through the number of recordings that survive.

A recording is valuable, but the tradition also depends on people who understand, perform, and share it. The future of dengbêjî therefore begins with a question: Who will carry the voice tomorrow? The Difference Between Saving and Living Saving a recording is a form of preservation.

It protects an example of a performance from immediate disappearance. But a living tradition requires more. It needs people who can understand its language. It needs learners who become familiar with its repertoire. It needs performers who develop their skills. It needs audiences who value long-form storytelling.

And it needs opportunities for artistic expression. A digital collection can preserve a voice. Only living cultural participation can create the next performance. The Role of Older Generations Experienced performers and older listeners may possess valuable knowledge. They may remember alternative versions of songs.

They may understand references that are unfamiliar to younger people. They may know how particular narratives were transmitted. Their knowledge can be shared through conversation, teaching, interviews, and collaborative documentation. But this process should be built on respect. Older people are not simply sources from whom information can be extracted.

They are participants in cultural life whose choices and perspectives matter. The Role of Young People Younger generations approach culture under different circumstances. Their lives may include several languages, migration experiences, digital platforms, and educational environments. They may not encounter dengbêjî in the same settings as their grandparents.

This difference need not end the tradition. It may lead to new ways of learning. A young person might begin by listening to recordings with subtitles. Another might learn Kurmanji in order to understand a favorite kilam. Someone else might become interested in archival work, performance, or digital storytelling.

Cultural continuity does not require every generation to follow an identical path.

Learning Through Listening

One of the simplest ways to approach dengbêjî is to listen carefully. Not merely to play a recording in the background, but to give it attention. A listener can begin with one performer. The same recording can be heard several times. The listener may notice phrases that were missed before.

Words can be looked up. The story can be discussed with someone familiar with the language. Other versions can be explored. Over time, an unfamiliar performance becomes more understandable. This kind

of listening creates a relationship with the tradition. The Importance of Language

Language learning is especially important. A person may appreciate the sound of dengbêjî without understanding Kurmanji. But understanding the words opens another dimension of experience. Characters become clearer. Places acquire meaning. Poetic images become easier to recognize. The emotional structure of the narrative becomes more accessible.

Language education and cultural education can therefore support each other. A song can motivate someone to learn. Language learning can deepen appreciation of the song.

Community Projects

Cultural organizations, schools, libraries, universities, and community groups can help create opportunities for transmission. Workshops may bring experienced performers together with learners. Listening events may introduce audiences to different styles. Digital collections may preserve recordings and provide educational context. Translations may make narratives accessible to wider audiences.

Projects can also connect generations who might otherwise have few opportunities to exchange cultural knowledge. The most meaningful initiatives involve performers and communities in decisions about their own heritage. Tradition and Change Some people worry that cultural traditions lose their authenticity when they enter modern media.

Others believe that new technology will solve every problem of preservation. Neither view captures the full picture. A tradition can change in ways that weaken its connection with earlier knowledge. It

can also change in ways that create new possibilities. The important question is not whether something is old or new.

It is whether the change supports meaningful understanding and participation. Dengbêjî has always existed through human interpretation. Its future can include new formats while retaining respect for inherited artistic knowledge. A Culture of Listening The future of dengbêjî depends not only on singers.

It depends on listeners. A community that values listening creates opportunities for performers. A young person who asks about an old song encourages an older generation to share knowledge. A researcher who documents a recording carefully makes it easier for others to understand.

An educator who introduces a narrative thoughtfully may inspire further learning. These actions may seem modest. Together, they can help sustain cultural continuity.

The Song That Must Continue

No tradition can be guaranteed an unchanged future. Social circumstances develop. Languages change. Technology alters how people communicate. Communities move. New generations make their own choices. But cultural heritage can remain meaningful through these changes. Dengbêjî does not need to be preserved as a frozen image of the past.

It needs opportunities to remain part of living culture. The tradition continues when people are willing to learn from those who came before them and to create something meaningful for those who will come after. A song belongs to the past because it has already been sung.

It belongs to the present whenever someone listens. And it belongs to the future whenever someone learns how to carry it onward.

Conclusion

As Long as There Is a Voice

A voice seems fragile. It exists only while someone produces sound. A spoken word disappears almost immediately. A song ends, and the room becomes quiet. Yet human voices possess an extraordinary ability to outlive the moment. They remain in memory. They influence other voices.

They become recordings. They enter stories. They inspire people who were not present when they were first heard. Dengbêjî is an expression of this human capacity to carry meaning across time. Through sung storytelling, Kurdish performers have contributed to a rich cultural world of narrative, language, artistry, and remembrance.

Their performances may speak about love, mourning, conflict, distance, courage, or belonging. Each theme belongs to human life. But in dengbêjî, these experiences acquire a distinctive form through the relationship between Kurdish language, poetic expression, and vocal performance. The tradition also teaches us something important about memory.

Remembering is not simply keeping the past unchanged. It is an active relationship between people and the stories they inherit. A song can be remembered differently by different generations. Its meaning can develop as historical circumstances change. A familiar voice can become a source of connection for someone living far from the place associated with the song.

Such transformations do not necessarily weaken cultural heritage. They can also reveal its continuing relevance. The history of dengbêjî includes celebrated performers, but it is larger than the lives of its most famous singers. It belongs to the people who taught songs, remembered narratives, preserved recordings, and created opportunities for others to listen.

It includes women whose contributions deserve greater recognition. It includes communities whose cultural knowledge may not have entered formal archives. And it includes younger generations who are encountering the tradition in new ways. Technology has transformed the possibilities of preservation. A recording can travel across the world.

A digital collection can make a voice accessible to people who would otherwise never hear it. A translation can open a narrative to readers unfamiliar with Kurmanji. But technology alone cannot create cultural continuity. Continuity begins with interest. It grows through understanding. It becomes stronger through participation.

To preserve dengbêjî is not simply to protect old sound. It is to protect the possibility of future listening, learning, and performance. The most beautiful cultural inheritance is not one that remains untouched. It is one that continues to have meaning. Perhaps somewhere, at this very moment, someone is hearing a dengbêj for the first time.

The listener may not understand every word. The recording may be old. The performer's name may be unfamiliar. Yet the voice creates curiosity. A question follows. What is this song about? Who is singing? Where did this story come from? And so the journey begins again.

One voice leads to another. One story opens the door to a larger cultural world. One listener becomes part of the tradition's future. As

long as people continue to listen, learn, remember, and sing, the story of dengbêjî remains unfinished.

APPENDIX A

Words from the World of Dengbêjî

The following Kurmanji words offer a small introduction to the language of Kurdish cultural storytelling.

KURMANJI	ENGLISH
Kurmanji	English
Deng	Voice; sound
Dengbêj	Singer-narrator; oral performer
Dengbêjî	The tradition or practice of dengbêjs
Kilam	Song or sung narrative
Stran	Song
Stranbêj	Singer
Çîrok	Story
Çîrokbêj	Storyteller
Gotin	Saying; words
Bîr	Memory; mind
Bîranîn	Remembrance

KURMANJÎ	ENGLISH
Dîrok	History
Gel	People; community
Welat	Homeland; country
Evîn	Love
Dil	Heart
Jan	Pain; suffering
Xem	Sorrow
Şîn	Mourning
Koçberî	Migration
Çiya	Mountain
Xak	Earth; soil; land
Bihar	Spring
Şev	Night
Roj	Day; sun
Şer	War; conflict
Azadî	Freedom
Ziman	Language
Çand	Culture
Kevneşopî	Tradition

These words are simple introductions. Their meanings can become richer in poetry, everyday speech, and particular regional contexts.

APPENDIX B

A Listener's Guide to Dengbêjî

Listening to dengbêjî becomes more rewarding when we approach it as both music and storytelling. A first encounter may begin with the voice alone. The listener notices the timbre, melody, rhythm, and emotional atmosphere. Gradually, attention can move toward the narrative. **Begin with One Voice**

Choose a recording associated with a well-known or locally respected performer. Listen without trying to understand every detail immediately. Notice how the performance begins. Pay attention to the pace. Does the singer use long sustained phrases? Are certain words or sounds repeated? Does the voice become more intense as the story develops?

These simple observations can deepen appreciation. **Discover the Story** If a translation or reliable explanation is available, read about the narrative. Identify the people and places mentioned. Consider the relationships between the characters. Ask what the central conflict or emotion may be. Then listen again.

The voice may sound different once the story becomes more familiar. **Learn the Language** A small number of Kurmanji words can help open the narrative. Begin with recurring terms. A word such as *dil*, meaning heart, may appear in emotional expressions. Words associated with places, relationships, or remembrance can also be useful.

Learning does not have to begin with complete grammatical knowledge. Curiosity about a song can become motivation for deeper language study.

Compare Performances

Where several versions of a song are available, listen to more than one. Do not assume that differences make one performance correct and another incorrect. Notice how each singer shapes the material. The comparison may reveal different artistic choices and aspects of oral transmission.

Explore Complete Recordings

Short clips can introduce a voice, but longer recordings offer a fuller experience. Give the narrative time to unfold. Allow repetition and pacing to become part of the listening experience. Dengbêjî rewards patience.

Share What You Learn

A meaningful way to support cultural continuity is to introduce others to the tradition respectfully. Share the performer's name. Explain what is known about the song. Provide a link to a reliable source when possible. Encourage others to listen beyond a short excerpt.

Cultural knowledge becomes more useful when it is shared with care.

BOOKS & SOURCES

For Readers Who Want to Explore Further

The following books, scholarly works, and cultural resources offer ways to learn more about Kurdish oral tradition, performance, cultural memory, and intangible heritage.

Kurdish Music and Oral Tradition

Wendelmoet Hamelink — The Sung Home: Narrative, Morality, and the Kurdish Nation (2016)

A substantial study of Kurdish narrative singing and its relationship to memory, morality, identity, and social life. Publisher: Brill.

<https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004314825>

Joanna Bocheńska — “From Dengbêj to Modern Writer: Heritagization of the Kurdish Oral Tradition and Revitalization of the Kurdish Language in the Works of Mehmed Uzun and Mehmet Dicle” (2022)

An exploration of the relationship between oral tradition, literary expression, and the revitalization of Kurdish language. Published in Iranian Studies.

<https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2022.1>

**Ulaş Özdemir, Wendelmoet Hamelink, and Martin Greve, editors —
Diversity and Contact among Singer-Poet Traditions in Eastern Anatolia
(2018)**

A collection exploring singer-poet traditions and their cultural relationships.

Understanding Oral Storytelling

Albert B. Lord — The Singer of Tales (1960)

A foundational book for understanding oral storytelling and the relationship between performance, memory, and composition.
Publisher: Harvard University Press.

**John Miles Foley — The Theory of Oral Composition: History and
Methodology (1988)**

A study of oral composition and the methods used to understand orally transmitted traditions. Publisher: Indiana University Press.

Richard Bauman — Verbal Art as Performance (1977)

A key work on the importance of studying oral expression as performance.

Women and Kurdish Musical Heritage

**Rojda Zaman — Bir Direniş Hikayesi: Dengbej ve Stranbej Olarak Eyşe Şan
(2019)**

A master's thesis concerned with Eyşe Şan and her significance as a Kurdish performer. İstanbul Bilgi University.

<https://openaccess.bilgi.edu.tr/items/dd373967-ae77-4f11-88b9-af381a62c691>

Cultural Heritage and Preservation

UNESCO – Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003)

An international framework for understanding and safeguarding living cultural practices.

<https://ich.unesco.org/en/convention>

UNESCO – What Is Intangible Cultural Heritage?

An introduction to the concept of living cultural heritage.

<https://ich.unesco.org/en/what-is-intangible-heritage-00003>

UNESCO – Ethical Principles for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage

Guidance on the responsibilities involved in the preservation and sharing of cultural knowledge.

<https://ich.unesco.org/en/ethics-and-ich-00866>

Digital Resources and Listening

Dengbêj Gazîn – Digital Edition

A resource for exploring Kurdish oral performance and its digital documentation.

<https://qed.perspectivia.net/gazin/>

Şakiro Foundation – Dengbêj Şakiro

A cultural and biographical starting point for readers interested in Şakiro.

<https://www.dengbejsakirovakfi.org/dengbej-sakiro/biyografi>

ABOUT THIS BOOK

About this book

Dengbêjî: Voice, Memory, and Resistance introduces readers to the living world of Kurdish oral storytelling. Through accessible language and cultural explanation, the book explores the artistry of the dengbêj, the emotional power of the kilam, the relationship between song and memory, the contribution of women performers, and the transformations brought by recording technologies and digital media.

At its heart is a belief that cultural heritage belongs not only to the past, but also to the people who continue to learn, share, and create it.
Written by Ferdi Elmas THE END