The sung home : narrative, morality, and the Kurdish nation

Hamelink, W.

Figure 1. The guesthouse that dengbêj Silhedîn built in his village near Van. 2008.

Introduction

i.1 The sung home

The art of the Kurdish *dengbêjs* is the art of storytelling in sung verse. The dengbêjs are the most known oral performers in the Kurdish region in Turkey. Their trained voices picture worlds that can be far from the experience of the public, opening up their imagination to foreign places, or that are about the intimate and nearby, capturing the public's attention for the contingencies of everyday life. Performances are plain and basic: a dengbêj, a voice, a story, and a public. It is this verbal art, in its current form and setting in Turkey,[1] which is the topic of my dissertation.

The dengbêjs form a compelling research topic for a number of reasons. Their songs tell of a distant Kurdish past, and sketch, apart from the adventures of rulers and nobility, also the pursuits of the Kurdish commoner, and give an interesting view on their life world. In the current setting, these songs assume new meanings. For a long time, the dengbêjs and their art were suppressed and forgotten, and only recently did they return into public life. Today the dengbêjs see themselves, and are presented by others, as guardians of Kurdish history and culture. This vision tells much about recent socio-political developments and should be understood in the context of the evolving story of Kurdish nationalism. The dengbêjs and their songs create a tangible Kurdish past, a Kurdish geography, a place of belonging and nostalgia, set within the landscape of the Turkish and surrounding (nation-)states. The dissertation also engages with the life stories of the performers. The dengbêjs are mostly elderly people who can be seen as embodying various discourses and as inhabiting different temporalities. They were looking back and forward from a unique moment of return in public life, and of increasing space for Kurdish cultural production. Such moments of change provoke a repositioning of people within the larger discursive and institutional environment. They also provoke a rethinking of ideas about past, present and future: who are we, where do we come from, and where do we go? As guardians of historical knowledge, the dengbêjs had certain ideas about the past that were different from new political views. Because of their specific position, the dengbêjs and their songs offer a great prism from where to look at Kurdish history, modernity, nationalism, Orientalism, and oppression.

1 I limited my research topic to the context of the Turkish nation-state, instead of the larger Kurdistan region. It would have been an impossible task to do fieldwork in the various countries where the Kurds live, and to study the art of the dengbêjs in relationship to more than one of the nation-states they belong to: "The Kurdish national identity is highly fragmented. It is characterized by the political and cultural diversity of the Other (Turk, Persian or Arab) in each respective nation-state. Consequently, the starting-point for any study of Kurdish national identity must be a localized understanding of its relationship to the respective hegemonic national identity" (Hirschler 2001: 145).

The sung home refers to four partly related issues. First, it refers to the Dengbêj Houses where I conducted a large part of my research, and where the dengbêjs found a new home for their art. Second, it calls to mind the importance of language and traditions as a place of belonging. Third, it refers to the long-term political goals of many Kurds, namely to found a home for the Kurdish nation and to gain acceptance, respect, and legal rights for their existence as a linguistically and ethnically distinct group. And fourth, it indicates that in situations of violent conflict and disrupted lives, songs and stories can become someone's home, a place where s/he pieces together shattered experiences and finds new meaning.

The dengbêjs and their art can be studied in manifold ways. One can for example focus on their literary or musical qualities; on historical developments; or on the music market. In this introductory chapter I outline the approach followed in this dissertation. My main entrance into the topic is through the aspect of storytelling. This choice is first based on the fact that the dengbêjs are storytellers; each of their songs tells a story. But beyond this, the dengbêjs are also *subject* of stories: about their current meaning and place in the Kurdish nation, and in the Turkish nation-state. Institutions and individuals offer certain moral narratives (Zigon 2007, Somers 1994) about the dengbêj art and Kurdish culture. Because of the centrality of the dengbêj art as Kurdish cultural production before the 1980s, its rediscovery in recent years, and the variety of narratives about its meaning, I regard this art as a crossroads signifying larger socio-political developments.

The dengbêjs experienced how the value and meaning attributed to their art changed considerably according to the larger socio-political developments. Many of them lived in villages during their childhood and young adulthood, and experienced the days when dengbêjs were greatly respected for their knowledge and appreciated because of the entertainment they offered. During later years they had difficulty finding a space for performances due to oppression, changing societal structures, and a decreased interest. Since the late 1990s and early 2000s they became a focus of Kurdish political activists who mobilized the dengbêj art as symbols of an 'authentic' Kurdish culture. All these developments took place against the backdrop of Turkish nationalist projects, which regarded the dengbêjs, like any other expression of Kurdishness, for much of the twentieth century as a threat to national unity. Consequently, they either tried to silence them, or to assimilate them to Turkish 'folk' traditions. However, the time of my research saw a gradually increasing space for Kurdish culture which also had its effect on the presence of dengbêjs in public life.

The social changes taking place over the last decades greatly affected the personal lives of the dengbêjs and their performances. These changes resulted in

the need for new narratives about the meaning of their art. Therefore, studying the dengbêj art reveals much about the construction of social identity in the context of the nation-state. It investigates some of the ways in which various stories and storytellers contest each other in Turkey's Kurdish political landscape. The parties involved in this contested field are the dengbêjs; Kurdish and Turkish institutions offering and imposing ideas on folklore[2] and national culture, and these institutions' representatives; and other producers of narratives on the Kurds, the Kurdish nation, and the dengbêjs, most importantly the Kurdish media. As we will see, all of them produced moral narratives about the meaning of the art and the task of its performers. In Kurdish and Turkish nationalist thought, and in nationalist ideology in general, 'folk' culture is regarded as a key to the heart of the nation, and as a tool for the creation of national unity. These ideas gave the narratives evolving about the dengbêj art, and about Kurdish cultural production in general, a strong moral tone. But how did the dengbêjs, at the time of my research, feel about these narratives, and do their stories and performances fit into the framework of contemporary Kurdish nationalist thought? How did they see and value the changes that have taken place? And what meaning did they themselves attach to their art?

Next to the immediate local meaning giving in the Kurdish context, this study also connects to global processes, which gives it a much wider relevance. The narratives that are produced about the dengbêjs place their art in the context of a global path towards nationalism, modernity, and progress. Within this thought, the dengbêj art is understood as 'tradition', 'oral', and 'heritage', words that next to their positive connotation are also charged with ideas about backwardness and underdevelopment. Countering the tradition-modernity dichotomy so dominant in today's global imaginations, I follow the train of thoughts believing that we are all 'entangled in modernity' (Spyer 2000a), and that we are all 'modern' (Abu Lughod 2005). The Orientalist assumption that some people are behind on the road towards progress; contain the 'original traits' of a people; and are not yet entirely transformed by the project of modernity, is misleading in not recognizing the interdependency of east and west, north and south, rural and urban, poor and rich. This dissertation counters such an ideology by engaging strongly with people who are often classified as traditional and backwards. I believe that investigating their life stories, their performances, the songs they sing, their experiences of living on the margins, and their ideas about society and politics, offer a different perspective. Rather than

2 I use the terms 'folklore' and 'the folk' in this dissertation only as ideological terms that serve nationalist ideology. In this ideology, the cultural production of ordinary people, often in the form of oral tradition, was regarded as an important way of creating a national unity. See also below.

placing the dengbêjs and their art outside of the story of modernity, I understand them as being part of what makes modernity.

This dissertation offers an original contribution to two disciplines. It is directed to the field of Kurdish Studies that has grown from a marginal existence into a mature discipline over the last decade. Based on a total of thirteen months of field research in 2007 and 2008 in many towns, cities and villages in Eastern Turkey (see map 1) and in Istanbul, and from 2006-2012 in Germany and Paris, the dissertation gives an anthropological analysis of one of the most important Kurdish traditions in Turkey, and makes use of both Kurdish and Turkish primary and secondary sources. A major contribution is also the large body of material I collected and archived. Video and audio recordings of interviews and performances in Kurdish and Turkish are stored in the archive of the Nijmegen Max Planck Institute and will be made accessible for the general public in the time to come (see appendix). The dissertation also addresses Cultural Anthropology, the field that has been my guide and inspiration during the whole project. It offers an important contribution to the anthropology of morality; to narrative analysis; and to the embodied experience of music. It contributes to a better understanding of nationalism and Orientalism played out in local contexts. It also offers new insights in how people living on the margins of nation-states and global connections experience, negotiate, and give meaning to, that position.

The introduction offers the basic elements for the understanding of the chapters. I start with some notes on a day of field research that illustrates well how my research developed, and what were the main questions that being in the field raised. Then, I introduce the dengbêjs and their art: who are they, and what do we know about their history? Subsequently, I place the topic in the field of nationalism, Orientalism and folklore, and suggest to understand the investigated processes as a form of Kurdish self-Orientalism. I follow with some notes on narrative and morality, which are the main theoretical concepts used in this dissertation. I end this introduction with the outline of the chapters.

It was July 2008 when I once again visited the city Van[3] in Eastern Turkey and met regularly with the dengbêjs of the *Mala Dengbêja*, the Dengbêj House.[4] We had become familiar to each other due to the many days I had spent with them, in the House and with their families at home. They had founded the Dengbêj House in 2003 and it was the first of its kind in Turkey. The opening had attracted the

3 Van is the second largest city in Eastern Turkey with approximately 600.000 inhabitants.
4 This section is based on my field notes and video recordings.

attention of the Kurdish media and an article in the European Kurdish newspaper *Yeni Özgür Politika* had formed part of the little information I had on dengbêjs when writing my research proposal.

The Dengbêj House was situated in an apartment complex at the main road crossing Van's city center, and the core of the dengbêjs visited the House nearly everyday. They were almost always men, and the majority were at least fifty years old or above. The director of the House, and one or two other dengbêjs, would start the day with the common breakfast of Kurdish flat bread with cheese, tahin, honey, and a strong tea while sitting on the carpeted floor. Usually they watched the Kurdish satellite channel Roj TV[5] and often discussed the political developments.[6] At noon, when four or five dengbêjs were present, they began to perform, and continued for at least some hours, their heavy voices competing with each other for the nicest stories and melodies. In the afternoon often more dengbêjs dropped by. Because of its place in the apartment complex that could as well be a normal family house, and the way they used it as a meeting place and even started the day with a breakfast, the House became more than just a performance place. Rather, at least for the core of the dengbêjs, the House felt like their home which they had built by their own efforts.[7] Now and then visitors came by: often elderly men who enjoyed and commented on the performances; sometimes also young people who were interested in hearing the dengbêjs sing. Different from the Dengbêj House in Diyarbakır,[8] the dengbêjs of the House in Van emphasized they had set up and organized the House by themselves, and that it was due to their own efforts that they had managed to find a new place to perform after many years of silence.

It was a hot summer day in the weekend when we went together with three dengbêjs to visit dengbêj Dîlan, the only woman who sometimes visited the House, at least at the times I was there. That night I would stay over with her in order to spend more time with her and her family. We took a minibus to her house in a neighborhood on the outskirts of the city. The neighborhoods further removed from the city center closely resembled village life; the mud houses were

5 Previously called MED TV, currently called Stêrk TV. See chapter 4 and 5 for more information.

6 I often witnessed such political discussions at people's homes while they were watching television.

7 The dengbêjs of the Dengbêj House in Van emphasized this repeatedly in the interviews and performances, one of the founders saying for example during a performance where the core group was present: "With these dengbêjs present here we have opened the Dengbêj House, it was opened by the efforts of these four dengbêjs. I want to thank very much all these people and I want to send my greetings to the culture of Kurdistan, to all four parts of Kurdistan, and to all patriotic Kurds" (recorded performance July 2008, translated from Kurdish).

8 Diyarbakır is the largest city in Eastern Turkey with approximately 900.000 inhabitants. It is often referred to as the 'capital of Kurdistan.'

built as in a village, the gardens leading to unpaved streets where children were playing and women walking from one house to the next to visit their neighbors and relatives. The women made their own bread in the bread oven (*tandir*) which was constructed in a shed in the garden. The invitation to visit dengbêj Dîlan's house was an unexpected surprise for me. A year earlier I had already visited her, together with a female Kurdish friend and two dengbêjs of the House. Although she had invited us, when we arrived her two children unexpectedly showed up and were clearly upset by our presence. We were met with uncomfortable glances during the meal they offered us, and when the meal was finished angry words followed. The son and daughter felt that by our presence, and by my wish to interview their mother, we were discrediting her honorability. But in 2008 I met her several times in the House, once even joined by her daughter who had been so upset the previous year, and I was now invited to stay over at her place.

Our visit coincided with a wedding nearby, and shortly after we arrived we left again to join in the celebrations. Before leaving we had already heard the loud sound of the wedding band, and the festive music accompanied us during our walk. The wedding took place on a nearby empty square in the neighborhood. Some party tents were set up and people were dancing on our arrival. The large circle of dancing people is a familiar sight and vital part of any Kurdish wedding. Women and men line up and hold hands, dancing with complicated steps to the rhythm and melody of the music. The dancer in front of the line holds a scarf which s/he whirls around while taking the lead of the dance. Mostly this is a young person, but this time the front dancer was an elderly man who was dressed in traditional Kurdish suit, and about whom I later understood he was both the father of the groom, and a dengbêj who was famous in his home region. The scarf he whirled through the air had the green-yellow-red of the Kurdish flag. The atmosphere was recalcitrant and the songs spoke of recent political developments. The dengbêjs I came with whispered to me that we could not stay long because of the political atmosphere. But the wedding was large and busy, and I disappeared into the crowds when a young theatre player who was active in the Kurdish cultural center offered to show me around. He introduced me to some of his relatives and explained that the newly wed couple originated from outside of Van; the bride was from Hakkari, a town at the Iraqi border, and the groom from Silopi, at the Syrian border. Therefore, there were many visitors from those regions and the wedding was held according to their customs.

Suddenly I heard the voice of dengbêj Ehmed of the Dengbêj House sounding through the microphone, and I ran back to the central square with my camera. The wedding band had taken a break, and the dengbêjs took their chance for a short

performance. They sat on plastic chairs and a public of about sixty men surrounded them. Although many women had joined in the dancing, they now sat together at the other side of the square. Three dengbêjs sang each in turn, two were my friends from the Dengbêj House, and the third was the above mentioned dancer, dengbêj Xelîl, the father of the groom and thus a relative of many of the people present. Dengbêj Ehmed began by singing a love song, but after the public kept asking for their relative to sing, he handed over the microphone to him. Dengbêj Xelîl had a nice, strong voice and he sang with authority; about the Turkish military that had burned down the house of the song's protagonist, a woman who mourned the loss of her husband and property. Thereafter he recited a poem of the famous political poet Cigerxwîn.[9] When it was the turn of dengbêj Cahîd he sang a love song, and finally dengbêj Ehmed took the floor again and connected to the political atmosphere by singing a song about a battle between the Turkish military and four Kurdish brothers. The dengbêj performance lasted twenty minutes, until the wedding band returned from their break and continued with the instruments and songs typical for Kurdish wedding bands.

I was again walking around with the theatre player, talking with wedding guests, eating in the house of the couple's relatives, and later joining in the dances. After some time someone came to fetch me from the line of dancers, and my dengbêj friends stood waiting for me at the side of the square. Twilight had set in, and they looked clearly uncomfortable and a little angry. They reprimanded me for disappearing for such a long time and wanted to get home urgently. Dengbêj Dîlan had left already. On our walk home they said to me that I should always follow them and stay close to them, that such weddings can be dangerous places, and that they had wanted to leave much earlier. They whispered that they had seen civil policemen at the square, and that 'events'[10] were likely to happen. When we came home to dengbêj Dîlan's house and sat down for a tea, dengbêj Cahîd urged me to erase the part of the video recording where he was performing, even though he was the only one who had not sung a song with a political content. I gave him the camera and let him film for some time during the tea we were having, until our casual conversations had

9 Şêxmûs Hesen (1903-1984), alias Cigerxwîn, is a famous Kurdish poet who wrote political poems in a simple and accessible language about the need for education and unity for Kurds. I did not witness dengbêjs citing Cigerxwîn on other occasions. In the performance discussed in chapter 2 one of his poems was recited, but by someone who was not a dengbêj.

10 People often used the Turkish word *olay* and the Kurdish word *bûyer*, both meaning 'event', 'happening,' when they referred to protests or violence related to political problems. It seemed that, by using these words, they could avoid naming them and speaking about them directly. Instead of saying 'the police might come and intervene', they would say: 'events might happen.'

overwritten his performance. Also previously, at the Dengbêj House, he had asked me not to record his performances, because he was afraid of losing his job.[11]

In spite of the fears, the wedding day ended peacefully, and the two dengbêjs returned to their homes whereas I stayed at dengbêj Dîlan's place. The next day I conducted two interviews. One with dengbêj Dîlan who said that the *saz*, the lute, had extinguished the dengbêj art (*saz dengbêjî îptal kiriye*), meaning that the popular Kurdish wedding bands with their musical performance had replaced the dengbêjs' position at weddings. Dengbêjs used to have a leading role in the old days when the voice was (one of)[12] the only musical instrument(s) people accompanied dancing with. The second interview was with dengbêj Xelîl, the father of the groom. I visited him in the house of a relative. He expressed his deep regret about the loss of the importance of the dengbêj art and other Kurdish traditions, and spoke passionately about his past experiences of performances with other dengbêjs in his home region.

In the early afternoon I returned to the Dengbêj House and we set off by car to the village of dengbêj Abdulqadîr for an evening performance, a two hours drive from the city. I always loved to visit the quiet villages, and I felt that this small village surrounded by farm lands looked beautiful. The houses were painted in dark pink and green. Animals walked around and the gardens with fruits and vegetables were well-kept. Dengbêj Abdulqadîr owned two houses: a large family home where he and his wife stayed; and another house he had built recently as a , a guesthouse, with the specific aim to use it as a performance place for the dengbêjs. We spent the whole evening in the dîwan where four dengbêjs and one aşık (see glossary) were singing each in turn, listened to by dengbêj Abdulqadîr's relatives. Dengbêj Dîlan was also with us, but apart from singing a short song she did not partake much in the performance. It was one of the last days I spent in Van and the dengbêjs were trying to complete the program they had planned for me. From the first day that I had entered the House, the dengbêjs had had clear ideas about what I needed for my research, and I mostly followed them in their plans and had taken up the position of a student learning from the master dengbêjs what the dengbêj art implied. On this last evening the atmosphere was light and enjoyable, and when the relatives had left to sleep the dengbêjs stayed behind for some more time and let me record while

11 When I once visited him at his home and spoke with him, his brother, and his family, they talked lengthy about the possible risks of performing at the Dengbêj House, and also about the risks of my research. They were critical about my endeavors, on the one hand because they felt I was putting people in danger, on the other hand because they felt I should be more politically engaged and that it was my duty to bring the Kurdish question to the notice of the European Union. Especially the latter point was often brought up by people in relation to my research.

12 In many regions, next to the dengbêjs, *dahol* (drum) and *zirna* (oboe) players also accompanied the dancing.

they danced the joyful wedding dances accompanied by their own voices. When the recordings were done they went to sleep together in the dîwan, and dengbêj Dîlan and I found our beds in the neighboring family home where dengbêj Abdulqadîr's wife and some other female relatives were already sleeping.

The days in Van introduce some of the central concerns and complexities of this dissertation, and of the field research it is based on. I had chosen the topic of Kurdish dengbêjs based on my 2004 MA research on Turkish singer-poets, the *aşık*. Their life stories and songs, their position in the larger community they were part of, and the institutional context they were operating in, had offered interesting starting points from where to look at many socio-political developments in Turkey's recent history. Although I had hardly any information about Kurdish singer-poets before I started my research, I hoped they would turn out to be an equally fascinating research topic. They most certainly did. In 2007, when I started my research in Turkey, the dengbêjs had only recently returned to public life after almost twenty years of silence; most dengbêjs I spoke with performed again only since one to five years. It was a time of massive changes in which the dengbêj art obtained new meanings, and in which the dengbêjs were searching for their place and opportunities in a new setting. Following the 1999 arrest of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, and the coming to power of the AKP party, the political climate in Turkey showed slow but positive changes for the Kurds, after two decades of extreme suppression. The Kurdish question became increasingly incorporated in the established political field, and cultural activism (Ginsburg e.a. 2002, see chapter 4) became an important way for Kurdish activists to open up a space for a Kurdish voice in Turkey. The newly founded Dengbêj Houses were part of this larger development of cultural activism and of a growing Kurdish institutionalization. Because of the novelty of the development many things were not yet stabilized and the dengbêjs were grappling with their new position. What meaning would be attached to them after having been silenced for such a long time, and what place did they have in the new institutional environment? The time of my research (2007 and 2008) thus formed a particular moment that came to be the backdrop of the performances I attended, and of the interviews and discussions I had with the dengbêjs.

The Dengbêj Houses were a good starting point for my research, as they were part of a recent development in which Turkey's political climate offered an increasing space for the Kurds and other minorities to visibly enter public life. The Houses were also a consequence of the renewed interest of Kurdish activists in their 'origins.' Different from the Dengbêj House in Diyarbakır, the House in Van turned

out to be more independent, run by the dengbêjs themselves, and less structured by the politicized scene of Kurdish cultural activism at the moment of my research.[13] To what extent the dengbêjs were really more independent remained a bit obscure to me. Officially, the House was part of the NÇM chain of Kurdish cultural centers that were highly politicized. In Diyarbakır the Dengbêj House was run by NÇM cultural activists who had a strong presence in its running (see chapter 4). In Van the dengbêjs had fought for more independence, and stated that they had to be the ones in charge, as they knew how to arrange things, and were the experts of this art. At the beginning they had been successful in attracting the attention of the Kurdish media, which came to film in the House. However, over time their independence was not yielding the expected results of a large audience and a good income. The Dengbêj House in Diyarbakır became much more visible and successful than the House in Van, arguably because of the influence of political activists and the support of the municipality, and because of the launch of the Dengbêj Project (see chapter 4).

The (in)visibility of female dengbêjs kept haunting me during my field research. Despite the efforts of the political activists at the Dengbêj Houses to encourage women to join the Houses and to perform there, the reality was that in the many weeks I spent in both Houses women rarely showed up. And despite my own efforts to speak to female dengbêjs, my attempts were often in vain. When I started my research I focused primarily on the most visible and institutionalized forms of the dengbêj art, and the manner in which they had recently been revitalized by the Kurdish movement. I aimed to investigate how the dengbêjs experienced their new position, and how they were presented by political activists in public life. Therefore, apart from asking regularly whether there were female dengbêjs I could interview, I did not emphasize women's absence too much as not to interfere with the at that moment common practice of the Houses.

Dengbêj Dîlan, whom I introduced above, was an exceptional female visitor to the House in Van, but she was not usually regarded as a dengbêj, nor did she define herself as such. She said that she knew many wedding songs, but that she did not know how to sing like a dengbêj. The dengbêjs of the House were 'real' dengbêjs, she said, and indeed only people who know how to sing in the specific style of the dengbêj art are referred to as dengbêjs by others. At the time of the research I had

13 Although the Dengbêj House in Van was part of the NÇM (Navenda Çanda Mesopotamia) chain of Kurdish cultural centers, at the time of my research it led a relatively independent existence. During my first visits in 2007 the main organizer of the House was a young political activist who motivated the dengbêjs and organized events. In 2008 he was gone, and the dengbêjs organized most things alone. Shortly after my last visit the House moved to the newly constructed cultural center in another building and possibly became more firmly incorporated into the center.

difficulty understanding why the dengbêjs had asked her to join in the program they organized for me. Later I realized that this may have been because they were aware of the necessity of promoting female dengbêjs in the current socio-political climate in which they were pushed forward as positive examples on the road towards Kurdish modernity (see chapter 4). On the wall in the Dengbêj House hang the pictures of all registered dengbêjs, among which are several women. However, they did not visit the House and it may well have been that there were tensions between the male and female dengbêjs.[14] It seems that the dengbêjs were afraid of losing their position to female dengbêjs who received more attention. Because of their up to that time often subordinate position, and the taboo of performing beyond the family circle, the sight of a female dengbêj on stage was much demanded by new audiences, who felt it was more special to see a woman perform than a man. Although male dengbêjs seemed to feel threatened by the popularity of female dengbêjs, they did realize their importance in the current context. Therefore, it made sense that the dengbêjs chose a woman to accompany the program they had set up for my research. By choosing someone whom they called 'dengbêj', but would not be regarded as such by the audience, they avoided losing their central position to a woman. It was clear that they did not take her seriously in her role as they hardly ever gave her the floor to sing. Nonetheless, by inviting her they could give me the impression that they gave the appropriate space to women that the new political climate required from them.

I did build up some good relationships with female dengbêjs (see chapter 3 and 5), and besides that women who were not dengbêjs (or of whom I did not know they were)[15] were important for me during my research. I often had the chance to engage with the female relatives of the dengbêjs. I joined them while they were cooking, they showed me around in their homes and gardens, and at night I shared a room with them. Kurdish village houses often have two or three large rooms which at night are used to sleep. Over twenty colorful mattresses are piled up in the store room and taken out in the evening. When there are guests staying for the night, one room is used for men and the other for women. In the city people mostly live in apartments with more rooms, but also there I often shared a bedroom with several women. The women of the houses I visited made my research much more colorful

14 Both in Van and Diyarbakır I noticed that male dengbêjs did not fully respect female dengbêjs, as was confirmed by a female dengbêj in Diyarbakır (see chapter 4). In 2010 female dengbêjs in Van set up a center for themselves (personal communication with Marlene Schafer, 2011), and I heard from several people that the male dengbêjs were against the existence of such a center and tried to block it from being set up.

15 I usually asked the relatives of dengbêjs if they also knew many songs, but mostly they replied that they did not know how to sing. However, once a woman told me later that she had not dared to tell me at that moment because of the men present.

and enjoyable than had I had only been able to spend time with the male dengbêjs. They were fantastic hosts who tried everything to make me feel at home. We laughed together and made jokes, they were curious about my life and I about theirs, and we shared our personal stories. The conversations also enhanced my understanding of the daily lives of the dengbêjs, and I thus owe much gratitude to the many women I came to know who welcomed me, a complete stranger, so warmly into their homes.

During my research I learned that confusion is a central feature of living in a conflict region. In many cases it was unclear how good or bad the political situation was. For example, at the wedding the dengbêjs were afraid of trouble, but the theatre player who walked me around was not. Times were changing and people did not yet feel confident that the positive climate would continue. After decades of conflict people were used to sudden changes for the worse. At the time of my fieldwork Van's city administration was in the hands of the Islamist AKP party, whereas Diyarbakır was run by the pro-Kurdish party DTP. There was a clear difference in atmosphere between the two cities; in Van people were often afraid, and some of my friends were not willing to accompany me to the Dengbêj House which was regarded as a marked Kurdish place and therefore political. In Diyarbakır people were generally less worried about such issues. But in both cases, the many civil policemen present; the frequent road blocks outside of the cities; the presence of soldiers and military vehicles; and the many political prisoners, were effective in creating an atmosphere of fear that scared people off even if nothing really happened. The fears of people varied, as well as their reactions to immediate situations. Some people were at ease during interviews and told many personal details, whereas other people were afraid and kept on the surface. Some people criticized me for doing the research in the first place as they felt it could bring people into danger, whereas others felt I was taking too many precautions which hindered me in carrying out some parts of the research.[16] The conflicting reactions people gave to safety issues left me often confused and in doubt which decisions to take. Although on the one hand there was much more space for expressions of Kurdishness in public life than before, and also for a research like mine, on the other there were still threats, arrests, violent demonstrations, and battles between the PKK and the Turkish army in certain regions.

The moment of my field research thus was a time of a new institutionalization of Kurdish culture in public life in Turkey. Dengbêj Houses were in the process of

16 One precaution I took was that I never stayed too long in one place as to not attract the attention of the authorities. I had decided this because of conversations with other researchers on the Kurdish issue who had recently experienced significant problems such as arrests and expulsion from Turkey.

being set up; television programs were broadcast about the dengbêjs; and in the music market interest in the dengbêj art was rapidly increasing. As the political climate was still often hostile towards Kurdish expressions, and as an open display of Kurdishness was something that needed to be fought for, much of this institutionalizing took the form of cultural activism. People involved in promoting Kurdish culture had a political affiliation and were often overtly propagating political messages. The renewed interest in the dengbêjs had a strong political tone and the narratives evolving about the meaning of the dengbêjs and their art were likewise politicized. However, my dissertation goes beyond the analysis of political narratives. It focuses on the dengbêjs as the main actors, and takes their life world and their art as its starting point. It investigates the concerns of people who often had a different agenda than the people who brought them back on stage. As such the dengbêjs and their songs show a more diverse picture of Kurdish socio-political engagement. While writing the dissertation I have attempted to do justice both to the political atmosphere I found during my field research, as well as to the diversity of personal and social stories that went beyond this.

Area of field research and collected data

My research started in Germany and Belgium in 2007 where I met with Hozan Şemdin and Hakan Akay who provided me with information and contacts in Turkey and abroad. Over the years I conducted interviews with seven dengbêjs and other singers in Germany and France. I built up a long-term research contact and friendship with a family in Germany, whom I visited every year in Germany between 2006 and the present, and once in their village of origin in Turkey (see chapter 5). In general, I focused more on the quality of individual contacts than on speaking with large numbers of people. In total, I interviewed sixty performers, who were forty dengbêjs and twenty other types of musicians. Invaluable were also the interviews and private talks I had with journalists, writers, scholars, political activists and television producers, who helped me find my way in the often complex landscape of Kurdish life in Turkey. Almost all interviews were in Turkish or Kurdish.

In 2007 I spent six months, in 2008 seven months in Turkey where I was based in Istanbul and from there traveled to many places in Eastern Turkey. I spent much time at the Kurdish Institute in Istanbul where Sami Tan and Aysel Çetin taught me Kurmanji, the largest Kurdish language in Turkey. They also offered a great work space when I was in Istanbul. My main destinations in Eastern Turkey were Van and Diyarbakır, where I built up long-term contacts with the dengbêjs in the Dengbêj Houses. I visited them regularly during my research periods. From there

I traveled to other towns and villages in eastern Turkey where I visited individual dengbêjs or aşıks. With some individual performers I built up a long-term friendship that continues until today. I recorded most interviews with performers and others on video or audio. This was helpful in order to do narrative analysis of the interviews, which I translated in full. Although I initially hesitated to record interviews because of the political sensitivity of research in the Kurdish region, many dengbêjs were comfortable with recording. When at the beginning I left my video camera at home, some dengbêjs reprimanded me for not being a serious researcher and for not giving them the importance they deserved. In the end, the dengbêjs are performers who had a high status in the past, and they expect an attitude that appreciates that position.

I also attended and recorded over sixty hours of performances. Many took place in the cultural centers and Dengbêj Houses of Diyarbakır and Van, and one in a Kurdish cultural center on the outskirts of Istanbul. I recorded performances at two festivals, two weddings in Turkey and one in Germany, and a concert of young dengbêjs in Istanbul. Additionally I recorded or attended a number of performances at the homes of dengbêjs whom I visited, in Turkey as well as in Germany and one in France. Sometimes they performed in the evening when relatives and neighbors were present, mostly one dengbêj performing, sometimes with two or more. I also recorded many dengbêjs singing alone in front of the camera as part of the interview, sometimes for hours, and sometimes spread over several sessions. Hanifi Barış was of great help in transcribing, translating, and analyzing dengbêj songs. Zeki Aydın also listened to many songs of my recordings and wrote Kurdish summaries for me.

As additional research material I used the recordings of television programs on dengbêjs of an international and a local TV channel, CDs and some cassettes, Kurdish and Turkish newspaper articles and books written about the dengbêjs, their performances, and their songs and stories. The latter provide sometimes detailed descriptions of performances, and are also helpful in gaining understanding in the way the author, and people in his or her near environment, experienced these. Also, the way in which the Kurdish authors present the dengbêj art reveals much of its current framing.

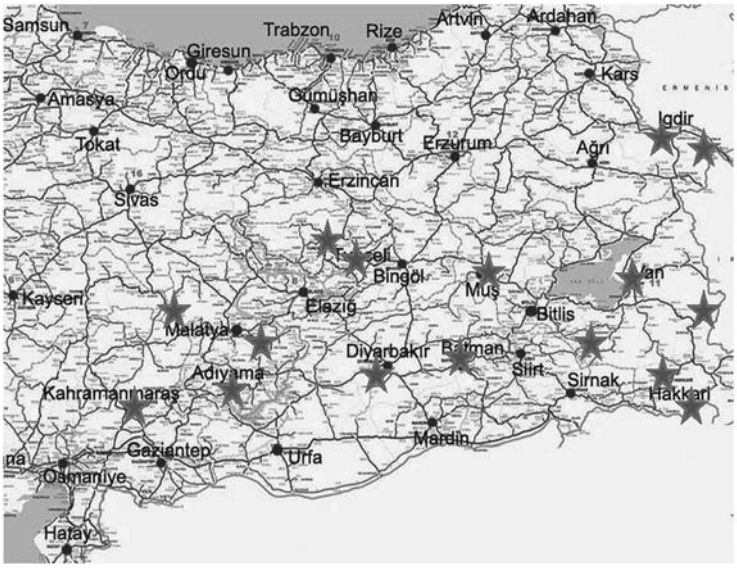

Figure 2. The places in Eastern Turkey where I carried out the research in 2007 and 2008

i.2 Some notes on the dengbêj art

The word dengbêj can be translated with 'master of the voice', meaning voice, *bêj* derived from the verb 'to say'. In the Kurdish region in Turkey it is used for a singer-poet who sings a cappella, or is occasionally accompanied by a *bilûr* (shepherd's pipe) or *mey* (woodwind instrument).[17] He or she has a large repertoire of *kilams* (recital song, see chapter 1), a nice and strong voice, and knows kilams from well-known master dengbêjs.[18] A good dengbêj also composes kilams him/herself and is known by many people in the near environment. The kilams can be about many themes such as love and its complications, local conflicts, battles with the Ottoman and Turkish army, or legendary events.[19] Since the dengbêj art is a secular tradition, their kilams are generally secular songs with few religious references. The dengbêj is not the only oral performer; other performers are *stranbêj* (singer), çîrokbêj (storyteller), and

17 Depending on the Kurdish region different terms are used.

18 Parıltı 2006, Kevirbirî 2005, Kızılkaya 2000

19 In recent years some anthologies have been published, such as Berbir 2007, Karasu 2007, Özalp 2007 and Kevirbirî 2001. The work of Allison (2001) is the first comprehensive study of Kurdish secular oral tradition. Although it is focusing on Yezidi oral tradition, one can also read it as a broader introduction into Kurdish oral tradition, since many stories and songs are shared with non-Yezidi Kurdish oral traditions.

derwiş (wandering dervish with a religious repertoire[20]). Among these performers, the dengbêj seems to have been the most prestigious, and is also the only type of oral performer who is currently active on a wider scale. Dengbêj is a term that can be used for men as well as for women, but performing in public was generally regarded as inappropriate for women. Female dengbêjs performed mostly at home, within the family circle, or together with other women during work or at weddings, and did not have the status of a male dengbêj. Although since recently female dengbêjs have become more accepted, their position is not yet firmly established.

Unfortunately there is hardly any information available on the history of the dengbêjs. Until the 1970s most studies that provide a collection and sometimes translation of Kurdish songs and stories[21] give very little information on the position of the performers as this was not their primary interest. Also, when such information is provided, it is rarely about the region where I did my research. It was often difficult to get access to Kurdistan in Turkey today due to restrictions already under the Ottoman Empire and later the Turkish Republic to allow researchers into these regions.[22] Mann (1906) makes a few remarks on the position of singer-poets in the area where he did his research, in present day Iran. He heard of 'a kind of singing schools' meant to train pupils in 'epic folk poetry'. All he says is that young people went to a master to learn their oral repertoire, and after having served that master for

20 A *derwiş* was someone known for his piety who was either wandering around without having a stable place to live, or had devoted his life to a particular religious order (*tariqat*), and stood in the service of the order's leader. Many people told me how in the past *derwiş* visited their villages, and sang religious songs or told stories with a religious message, with the accompaniment of the *erbane*, the hand drum. They knew old Kurdish poems such as those written by Feqiyê Teyran or Melayê Cizîrî. In return they received some butter or other products. They did not have much prestige; most people pitied them or looked down upon them. I interviewed one *derwiş* who currently lives in Istanbul but originates from Malazgirt. He had learned this art from his father in law, and took pride in it. He played and sang at weddings and other celebrations. He is one of the few remaining *derwiş*; after the abolition of the caliphate (1924), the prohibitions of Sufi orders and the persecution of their adherents, these organizations were marginalized and went underground.

21 Early sources (such as Mann 1906 and LeCoq 1903) are by European researchers who collected songs and stories as linguistic data for the grammars they wrote. Typically, their studies consist of an introduction on the area and circumstances of the research; a corpus of transcribed stories and songs; a translation of the corpus; and a grammar.

22 Mann (1906) for example mentions about his research trips in 1903 and 1904, when he studied the Mukrî Kurdish dialect: "Since I have not been permitted to conduct a study in the Turkish region, I am not in the position to indicate how far to the west the language area of the Mukrî extends" (Mann 1906: xix, translated from German). However, in 1906 he managed to get access to Ottoman Kurdish regions. And much later McKenzie (1961) writes: "It was originally intended to spend an equal amount of time in the Kurdish speaking areas of Turkey and Iraq. In the event, permission not been forthcoming from the Turkish authorities, some 10 months were spent in northern Iraq" (pp. xvii).

some time they could go to one or two additional masters if they were very talented.[23] Also later studies focus on collection and transcription of a corpus of texts, rather than on the lives and position of the performers.[24] Turkish folklore studies directed their attention to the Turkish aşık tradition, which is therefore well researched, and many works have been published in Turkish on the position of its performers. However, as the art of the aşıks is quite different from the dengbêjs, these studies do not help much in understanding the latter's position. Due to the nationalist agenda of Turkish folklore researchers, and the prohibitions on research and publications in and on the Kurdish language, they completely ignored Kurdish traditions as an object of study. Therefore, the only thing we can do to compensate for the lack of studies is by looking at the socio-political history of the Kurds, and combine this with the more recent information we have on the position and lives of the dengbêjs. Based on this information it seems likely that, historically, dengbêjs functioned at different levels according to their qualities. The best performers performed for the Kurdish kings, the mîr, and others performed for lower rulers referred to as agha (see glossary). They accompanied them on their journeys, and also traveled independently to other places to perform. Again others were not professionally occupied with the dengbêj art, but they were acknowledged and appreciated as good dengbêjs in their immediate environment. Today only the last group has remained.

The Ottoman Empire and early Republic

Until the sixteenth century the Kurdish region was politically organized in small dynasties and tribes of mostly Turkic, Kurdish, and Armenian ethnicity, competing for territory. The tribes and dynasties sometimes grew in size and power, but often remained marginal in influence and the level of political organization. The Ottoman Empire was built on the incorporation of an increasing number of these factions into their realm. Between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, or the heyday of the Ottoman empire, Kurdish emirates (confederations of tribes) enjoyed a high level of independence compared to regions closer to the central

23 "It appears that among the Kurds, next to the schools led mostly by Mullahs (…), existed and still exist a kind of singing schools that practice epic folk poetry. Young people with an appealing voice are apprenticed to a Master (*wastâ*) and learn the repertoire of these masters, that solely consists of oral tradition, by heart. Very few of these bards can read and write, also Rahman did not know the letters. Those who are most capable possibly continue their apprenticeship with a second or third [master] and become their *shâgird*, of course not without pay, be it that these students do house services, or that they show their appreciation by paying in kind" (Mann 1906: xxviii, translated from German).

24 For example Cindî and Evdal 1936, the publications of the Celîl family (2004, 2002, 2001, 1982), Chaland 1980, Blau 1986.

government.[25] Their geographic position on the Persian Ottoman border, in a mountainous region difficult to conquer, turned their territory into a buffer zone between the two empires.[26] It was difficult for the empires to establish firm control, and "until the emergence of the nationalist challenge to state sovereignty after the First World War, and the discovery of mineral resources, absolute control of this very marginalised area was not considered to be of paramount importance" (O'Shea 2004: 17). The emirates derived much of their power from their ties with the Ottoman government, and had thus a clear benefit from remaining loyal.[27] In the seventeenth and eighteenth century they had a large following and had their own political and military organisation.[28] The mîrs, or leaders of the emirates, played an important role as mediators between the tribes under their control, and it seems they were highly respected in that function. Despite their importance I did not come across songs about such mîrs in current performances,[29] probably because it is too long ago, and most songs sung today are from more recent times (see chapter 1).

The emirates had an active court life like the surrounding empires, to which singer-poets undoubtedly contributed; the courts of larger Kurdish principalities followed the model of Ottoman and Persian court life.[30] During (1991) suggests that music associated with the court in the Middle East had a certain uniformity until the first quarter of the eighteenth century. "Formerly, a musician from Tabriz could try his luck in Bokhara or Baghdad (..) They sang in different languages, for in those times – from Istanbul to Kashgar - educated people knew Persian, Arabic and Turkish."

25 The most inaccessible districts got the status of *Kurd Hukumeti* (Kurdish Government), and were virtually independent. They had their own system of rule, and were neither obliged to collect taxes for the state treasury, nor to supply soldiers for the state army.

26 "The pattern of nominal submission to central government, be it Persian, Arab or subsequently Turkic, alongside the assertion of as much local independence as possible, came to be an enduring theme in Kurdish political life." (McDowall 1996: 21).

27 The borders between the Persian and Ottoman empires were established after clashes between the Safavids and the Ottomans in 1511. The Ottomans had won the support of many Kurdish tribes by promising them a better position than they had under the Safavids. Tribal rule was connected to and based on the support of the central state. "The Kurdish tribes do not exist in a vacuum that would allow them to evolve independently. (..) Kurdistan's political history of the past five centuries shows how the important developments among the tribes were always in response to developments at the state level." (Van Bruinessen 1992: 134).

28 In some cases the emirates developed into large confederations, for example the emirate of Bitlis. In 1650 it consisted of no less than seventy tribes, that were led by aga's, of which the largest one alone numbered forty thousand. The emir of Bitlis could assemble an army of several tens of thousands of soldiers (Van Bruinessen 1992).

29 Aghas are sometimes referred to as mîr, in 'lo mîro', oh king. See for an example chapter 2. But this is not because they were mîrs, but to address them with the highest respect.

30 The Ottoman Empire had adopted many of the institutions that already existed in previous Middle Eastern empires. "[T]hey were part of the common cultural heritage of the Middle East in which both the emirates and the Ottoman and Safavid empires shared." (Van Bruinessen 1992: 173).

(During 1991: 31). Popular musicians also performed at the courts, which means that court music and popular styles influenced each other. "Numerous groups made up especially of Jews and Armenians played light music. They also frequented the court and were, therefore, in touch with art music." (During 1991: 33). Kurdish may have been one of the languages of entertainment at the courts of Kurdish principalities, as it seems likely that Kurdish rulers would invite famous performers of the surroundings to perform at the court. Court life was only accessible to a minority; most singer-poets must have been in the service of a tribal agha rather than a mîr. The emirates were the highest level of political organization, after which followed the tribes, which were again divided into clans and lineages. In the late eighteenth century, when the Ottoman Empire was in decline, the Ottoman government attempted to centralize its reign. The majority of Kurdish mîrs, who had played a central role in maintaining the power equilibrium between local aghas, were killed or exiled. They were replaced by Ottoman government officials whose authority turned out to be effective only in the cities and their immediate environment. In all regions conflicts broke out, and the existing power vacuum was filled by Sufi sheikhs who had also previously been influential and powerful. They would play a large role in the Kurdish rebellions after the foundation of the Turkish Republic.

Because of the destruction of the emirate and the eradication of the mîrs, the tribal and village aghas were the ones remaining to support dengbêjs in their art. The Kurdish tribe is "a socio-political and generally also territorial (and therefore economic) unit based on descent and kinship, real or putative" (van Bruinessen 1992: 51). It is unclear how the tribes exactly functioned in the past. It seems that they were especially needed and mobilized in times of conflicts. Tribes were flexible rather than rigid political systems, and kinship was not the only reason to belong to a tribe. In times of (inter-tribal) conflicts, weaker tribes lost many of their members to tribes that proved to be stronger. In such cases, political preferences were more important than kinship ties.

Until the beginning of the twentieth century, most Kurds lived in the countryside and were either nomads or peasants. Peasants and semi-nomadic pastoralists lived in villages, which were the most important form of social organisation. Apart from the need for some handicrafts that were only produced in the cities, they were mainly self-supporting. Villages were relatively small,[31] and one agha could be the leader of more than one village at the same time. Most villages had a dîwan or guesthouse, a place where the community gathered during winter

31 The dengbêjs mentioned between twenty to two-hundred houses in the villages where they had lived during their childhood and young adulthood. Most villages have decreased in size since that time.

evenings, on special days, and when there were guests. The agha was responsible for hosting guests, which was one of the means through which he could strengthen his position.[32] Inviting dengbêjs and other performers was also an important means to do so.

Nomadic groups travelled around, semi-nomads lived in their village in winter, and went higher in the mountains in summer with their flocks. It seems that tribal organisation generally (but not totally) corresponded to a (semi-) nomadic lifestyle; the nomads and peasants living in the mountains were organized in tribes and dominated the non-tribal peasants living in the plains. The word agha was used as a general term for a leader and could be used at all levels; the agha of the village, of the clan, of the tribe. In the areas further removed from the central government and thus more independent, the tribal system was more strongly developed and functioned as the main political entity, whereas in those regions closer to the centre tribal ties were weaker.

It is known from more recent times that aghas supported dengbêjs who could praise and spread their name and fame. They often had a dengbêj in their service whom they provided with a livelihood. The competition among dengbêjs was an important means of defending the agha's honour, and they would therefore search for the best dengbêjs in the region. Chapter 1 discusses this position through songs ascribed to the legendary dengbêj Evdalê Zeynikê, about whom it is said that he was in the service of Surmeli Memed Pasha in Ottoman times. A dengbêj I spoke with from a village near Van told me that his father was in the service of Kor Huseyin Pasha in Iran and traveled with him. These dengbêjs must have been few of the last dengbêj serving an Ottoman Kurdish Pasha. From Republican times on, dengbêjs could still be in the service of aghas, of which the dengbêjs I spoke with gave me some examples. One dengbêj had performed for twenty villages in his area that were led by several aghas (life story 3 in chapter 3). When there was a wedding they invited him, but also at other times they asked him to come and entertain them. He received some payment for his services from the villagers; "they sent grain, money, they cared". However, while speaking about this topic, he spoke more of the villagers than about the aghas, and he emphasized that the agha system has disappeared.

An Armenian dengbêj who worked for a Kurdish agha in the region of Sason mentioned how he had learned most of his repertoire from an older dengbêj (life story 4 in chapter 3). The latter, in turn, had learned his repertoire from a dengbêj who had

32 His son told me that his grandfather became the agha of four villages, even though he did not come from an agha family. He managed to spread his good name by consistently inviting all guests to his place, feeding and entertaining them. This eventually made the villagers accept him as their agha.

been in refuge with this agha in the 1920s, after the sheikh Said rebellion (a major Kurdish rebellion against the Turkish government, see below). The dengbêj was in the service of an agha from Muş, and with some others they had escaped persecution. This story goes back to the 1920s, and it seems that examples of dengbêjs who were provided a livelihood by an agha date the latest from the 1960s. Sheikhs sometimes also supported a dengbêj; it is known, for instance, that the famous dengbêj Reso served sheikh Kiyasetin Emre from Bulanık.[33] However, dengbêjs were secular performers and they were sometimes frowned upon by the religious establishment (see chapter 3 for an example). I have not been able to find more examples of dengbêjs who were in the service of sheikhs.

In the course of the twentieth century the importance of the aghas gradually decreased, against an increasing control of the state over regions in the periphery. The agha system largely disappeared after the land reforms in the 1960s,[34] and many of the old performance opportunities for dengbêjs had already disappeared by then. After the Kurdish rebellions in the early Republican period, many sheikhs and aghas were killed or forcibly deported to western Turkey. Even before the downfall of the agha system economic conditions had changed considerably, and many aghas had moved to the cities and had lost their daily connection with the village population. Also the dîwan lost much of its previous importance and meaning. This is not to say that the opportunities for the dengbêjs had entirely vanished, as we will see below. However, the agha system had been the most important support system for the dengbêjs, and after its downfall the incentive to produce kilams as in the old days seems to have disappeared.

Cultural exchange

The ethnic and religious variety in the Kurdish region resulted in cultural exchange as well as in clashes, a topic that is also present in the songs (see chapter 1). The largest groups next to Sunni Kurds were Armenians, Assyrians, Alevi Kurds, and Yezidi Kurds (see glossary). Until the Armenian genocide, Sunni Kurdish and Christian Armenian villages were situated side by side in many regions. People visited each other's weddings and celebrations and adopted cultural elements. Armenians in these regions often knew Kurdish, and there are many cases known of Armenians

33 He later lived in Ankara and became a member of Parliament for the Democratic Party in the time when Adnan Menderes was prime minister (1950-1960). When the sheikh left to Ankara, Reso lost his support (interview with dengbej Osman in Turkish in Istanbul 2007).

34 MacDowall 1996, Zürcher 1993, van Bruinessen 1992

who became dengbêjs and performed in Kurdish.[35] In the larger region it seems to have been common practice to perform in several languages; in the eighteenth century the famous Armenian poet Sayat Nova performed in Armenian, Georgian, and Turkish (Reinhard 1990: 75), and from the songs ascribed to Evdalê Zeynikê it appears that dengbêjs at times performed in Kurdish and Armenian (see chapter 1). Dengbêj Cihan (chapter 3) also speaks of an Armenian dengbêj who performed in Armenian and Kurdish before the Armenian genocide.

In cities such as Van, Diyarbekir and Urfa, Armenians and Turks were in the majority compared to Kurds, and there were also Greeks, Jews, and Arabs. Mardin had large Assyrian and Arabic communities. These non-Kurdish groups dominated handicraft and trade, and Turks were often stationed in the cities as part of the Ottoman bureaucracy. Yezidi Kurds mainly lived in villages, also often side by side with Sunni neighbours. There are many songs that mention clashes between Sunni and Yezidi tribes, or cases of elopement of a Kurdish man with a Yezidi woman. An example is the well-known song Dewrişê Evdî, about the love between a Yezidi man and a Sunni woman (Allison 2001: 108). The large variety of ethnicities and religions decreased significantly during the 1915 Armenian genocide when the majority of Armenians and other Christian groups were killed or deported. In the course of the twentieth century many other minorities also left for other countries, and the Kurdish region became, as a result, more homogeneous than it used to be.

The major non-Sunni Kurdish group that remains in Turkey until today are the Alevi Kurds. The majority lives in the border zone between eastern and western Turkey; important Alevi strongholds are Bingöl, Varto, Dersim, Adiyaman, Malatya and Maraş. In these regions Alevi and Sunni Kurds and Turks live mixed and traditions have influenced each other. Because of the central role of music in Alevi religious celebrations, Kurdish Alevi music has more in common with Turkish Alevi than with Kurdish music. Singer-poets are called *aşık* or *zakir* instead of dengbêj; they perform with the accompaniment of the saz (long-necked lute); and they often perform in Kurdish as well as in Turkish. I found examples of aşıks who were clearly influenced by the dengbêj art. For example, aşık Yusuf from Adiyaman performed with the saz, but sang many songs in dengbêj style and with topics familiar in the

35 In the 20th century this was often the result of the 1915 genocide. The famous dengbêj Karapetê Xaco was saved by a Kurdish agha, and learned to perform the dengbêj art. I got to know an Armenian from Sasun now living in Istanbul whose father was a genocide survivor and who had become a dengbêj. His mother tongue is Kurdish, and he does not speak another language. Also other Armenians I got to know were fluent in Kurdish and had adopted Kurdish traditions, in an environment often hostile to their Armenian background. However, it seems that before the genocide a more positive and less forced cultural exchange between Kurds and Armenians took place, as appears from some songs.

dengbêj art. He had learned this from his father. Several people in the Alevi region (for example in Pazarcık and Karakoçan) told me how in their childhood years dengbêjs had come by horse from Urfa and Diyarbakır to visit their village and perform. These are indications that exchanges took place between aşıks and dengbêjs.

Although I conducted much research among Alevis in Istanbul and many towns and villages in the Kurdish Alevi region, and among Armenians in Istanbul originating from Sason, I decided to leave most of this material out of the dissertation to keep a clear focus. The Alevi and Armenian musical traditions are both large topics that require separate study. However, it is important to stress that the dengbêjs were not isolated, but were in contact with neighbouring arts. In the case of the Armenians, this exchange was abruptly stopped after the Armenian genocide (see chapter 3). In the case of the Alevis, musical exchange seems to have decreased considerably after the dengbêj art lost much of its former position and productivity.

In the Republic of Turkey

As Kurdish was forbidden for official use, music production, or publication, such opportunities were very restricted for dengbêjs and other Kurdish musicians within Turkey.[36] Much of the music production was informally or illegally organized. Before 1980 dengbêjs and other singers could operate relatively freely in informal networks of performances and production, especially in the countryside.[37] Also in the cities there was some space for cultural expression, as long as it was kept in the informal sphere. In the 1960s and 1970s in Diyarbakır, the only large city in eastern Turkey at that time, a Dengbêj Café existed where dengbêjs gathered to perform.[38] This seems to have been a new development, possibly modeled after the Aşık Cafés[39] that existed in other cities in Turkey.

Another new development, but starting a bit earlier, were the Kurdish radio programs that could be received illegally from Iraq, Iran, and, most importantly,

36 Opportunities for official music production and institutionalized activities became possible only in the 1990s, when "with the lifting of the ban on the use of Kurdish language in 1991, Kurdish cultural institutionalization started in Turkey" (Çakır 2011: 31).

37 Much of the countryside remained outside government control until 1980, which made informal distribution of music possible. "Turkey's state system (..) was in practice rather detached from large parts of the countryside which were outside its control (..) Indeed, many villagers only knew the state from occasional patrol missions" (Jongerden 2010).

38 See also Scalbert Yücel 2009.

39 See for example the description of the Âşık Café in Kars by Reinhard and Pinto 1989.

Armenia.[40] Radio Yerevan began to broadcast a program in Kurmanji in 1955.[41] Part of the program was devoted to music, and the voices of Kurdish dengbêjs performing from Yerevan became famous throughout the region. The radio had an enormous influence on the evolving awareness of Kurdish language and culture,[42] and the dengbêjs played an important role in this. The tradition became less local, people heard songs from many regions.[43] It also obtained a different form; dengbêjs performed with the accompaniment of musical instruments, something that rarely occurred at home.[44] In the 1960s the introduction of the cassette player was another boost for the dengbêj art. From now on dengbêjs recorded songs on cassettes that were recorded by individuals and distributed informally. Until 1980 the circulation of cassettes thrived, but came abruptly to a standstill in the terror of the aftermath of the 12 September military coup.[45] And although radio and cassettes had initiated important changes, they were still marginal forms of Kurdish expression that had been overshadowed by Turkish as the language and culture of the dominant majority.[46]

In 1967, it became illegal 'to own or distribute recordings in a language other than Turkish' (Blum and Hassanpour 1996: 325). The law led to police raids and arrests for even owning an 'illegal' music cassette. Merely singing in Kurdish or possession of Kurdish cassettes became a political act and was liable to punishment

40 Hassanpour 1992

41 Radio Urmia was not often mentioned. Radio Baghdad was also famous, but could maybe not be received everywhere. Radio Yerevan was by far the most mentioned in the interviews. Although I initially thought that radio Yerevan began its broadcast in the 1930s, since there are sources that mention this date, Yüksel (2011) counters this based on his communication with Celîlê Celîl. According to Celîl, broadcasting began in 1955. Yüksel gives the following sources: Celîl, Celîlê. "Radyoya Kurdî li Êrîvanê û Bingehdanîna Wê (Bona 50. Saliya Radyoya Kurdî ya Êrîvanê)." Bîr 3 (Payîz, 2005), 183-195. Celîl, Celîlê. "Radyoya Kurdî li Êrîvanê û Bingehdanîna Wê –II (Bona 50. Saliya Radyoya Kurdî ya Êrîvanê)," Bîr (Zivistan-Bihar, 2006), 124-143 (personal communication and Yüksel 2011).

42 Kreyenbroek and Allison 1996, Hassanpour 1992

43 For example, Zana Farqînî writes about his childhood memories of radio Yerevan: "Especially Radio Erivan got a special place in the memories of many Kurds. Dengbêjs whose fame and name we had not heard of previously visited our houses [through the radio]. Next to local dengbêjs, we got the chance to get to know dozens of other dengbêjs with different voice qualities and resonance" ("Kılamın bir diğer adı" in Özgür Gündem newspaper, 26-01-2013).

44 Exceptions are Urfa where singer-poets perform with the saz (lute) and are called Sazbend, and Mardin where singer-poets perform with the ribab (spike fiddle).

45 "Even though speaking Kurdish had been strongly discouraged at the local level since the 1920s, it was not officially forbidden at the national level until the 1980s (see e.g. Scalbert Yücel 2005: 56-82). The official ban on language occurred with the 1982 Constitution and Law 2932 of 1983 after the military coup of September 12, 1980 led by Kenan Evren. The first softening of the legislation occurred in 1991 under Turgut Özal when Law 2932 was amended, enabling the use of Kurdish language in recording and publishing" Scalbert Yücel 2009: 15.

46 MacDowall 1996, Hassanpour 1992

in those years. Many people, not only dengbêjs, told me how their parents or they themselves buried, hid, or destroyed illegal music cassettes (see chapter 3). Many cassettes were unique recordings lost when the Turkish government attempted to wipe out all traces of Kurdish culture.

While speaking with dengbêjs about their lives and work, I noticed that almost all of them had been silent between 1980 and 2000, and had only recently started singing again. Judging from the stories they told me, and the stories of people working with dengbêjs, I suggest that there were three main reasons for this silence: the dramatic change of structure of Kurdish society; increasing violence and oppression; and the rise of support for the PKK combined with the newly developing Kurdish music scene that was generally very politicized. I will discuss each of these reasons in some detail.

In the decades from 1950-1980 the Kurdish region had already seen significant changes. Agricultural mechanization had eroded small-scale farming in many Kurdish areas and accelerated the process of migration to large cities; thus seasonal labor migration became an increasingly crucial source of income. Yet until 1980, the majority of Kurds continued to live in the countryside and village traditions, like the dengbêj art, continued to be performed. In the two decades after 1980, migration and displacement became a structural feature of Kurdish society when millions of people were on the move in the Kurdish region within Turkey and across its borders:

> In the 1980s and 1990s the migration process was not only further speeded up but changed in nature; much of it no longer was voluntary. Villagers fled from warfare or were expelled from their villages by security forces in the context of counterinsurgency operations. Thousands of villages were destroyed, and the resources that had made traditional life possible along with them (van Bruinessen 1999: 1-2).

Kurds were on the move not only in Turkey, but also in Iraq and on a smaller scale in Iran. In Iraq, thousands of villages were destroyed during the Anfal campaigns in the late 1980s (see chapter 5). More than 100,000 people were killed and many others escaped or were evacuated to resettlement camps. Turkey followed Iraq's policy in the 1990s with the idea to remove PKK support in the countryside (van Bruinessen 1999). Oppression, police raids and arrests were widespread. Combat between the PKK and the Turkish army, police controls, and forced displacements created an atmosphere of terror.

The destruction of village life, together with oppression and violence, left little space for dengbêjs to continue performing. Millions of people were evacuated

to the cities, which caused large-scale social unrest.[47] The violent situation, the turmoil and destruction, made people feel desperate. Many people lost their houses, lands, villages, livelihoods, and in many cases, also relatives and friends. The loss of the living environment they had grown up in, had built themselves and were used to, also meant the loss of performance occasions for the dengbêjs, that until that time were perceived as natural. Many dengbêjs stopped performing and as a result forgot large parts of their repertoire, others continued singing in private, because they could not endure silencing themselves. All in all, it was difficult to continue the dengbêj art and many other aspects of village life. Dengbêjs sang less frequently at public events than they had earlier.

Singing activities depended on how individual dengbêjs experienced the political situation, as well as on their region, because in some regions oppression was greater than in others. A few dengbêjs continued singing in the 1980s through 2000, and did not seem to have encountered trouble. Others were jailed or arrested because of their singing activities. Some of them had a political agenda and sang political songs, but others were arrested for the sole reason of singing in Kurdish. Osmanê Farqînî, a popular singer who bases his music on the dengbêj art and continued singing in years when many others had already given up,[48] fled to Germany in the early 1990s, and lives there since that time. He told me the following about the consequences of the 1980 coup:[49]

> I remember that time, I remember the day of 12 September, we had a Café where I played Kurdish cassettes. They came and did a search, a raid, and openly, in the street, they tortured people for two hours long. They tortured for two hours and then they took all my cassettes and drove over them so that they were all broken. After that I collected all the cassettes and I threw away the broken plastic and I bought new covers and put them together again. In that way I saved many of them. They were the ones on which I had done research. The 12 September period was a barbarian time. Especially in the Kurdish region.

47 'The evacuation of villages should not be considered a side-effect of the counter-insurgency of the Turkish Armed Forces (..) but one of its main constituents, intended to contribute directly to the "environmental deprivation" of the guerrillas' (Jongerden 2010: 86). See also: Jongerden 2007, White 2000, van Bruinessen 1999, Çetin 1999.

48 For example, dengbêj Silêman invited this singer to his wedding in 1987, see life story 6 in chapter 3.

49 Newspapers were closed down, journalists and university professors arrested, former political parties forbidden, archives destroyed "in their zeal to force a radical break with the past" (Zürcher 2004: 279). Within one year 122.600 arrests were registered (Ibid: 294), and many more unofficially persecuted. "The international League of Human Rights… claimed no fewer than 81,000 Kurds had been detained between September 1980 and September 1982. This suggested the problem of Kurdish dissidence was much more widespread than the generals cared to admit" (McDowall 1996: 416).

> Between 1984 and 1992 I have been tortured for at least nine times, I have counted them. I was in prison for one year. I was arrested many times, I have stayed under arrest for forty-two days, for seventeen days, for one week, for fifteen days, and so on. The arrests after the torture. Intimidations, telephone intimidations, family intimidations, everything until 1992. (..) In 1991 I was imprisoned, the reason was singing songs in Kurdish. They gave me a sentence of eight years and four months. But after I had stayed in prison for one year the ban on Kurdish singing was lifted by law. You were allowed to sing Kurdish songs, but not with political content. I was released on parole: if you sing again political songs then you will finish the eight years and four-month sentence. (Osmanê Farqînî, interview in Turkish, Cologne 2007).

Persecution happened on a large and brutal scale, affecting many people in their daily lives.

When organizing a wedding, people needed to ask permission at the local police office or military station, and weddings were controlled and watched closely. It was easier to perform in villages than in cities, but depending on the region and the proximity of police or military to the village, there was control over weddings and singing there as well. Dengbêj Ahmed:

> I was the only dengbêj there [in a little town of several thousand inhabitants], and because it was a little town, not a village, of course you could not sing when there was police around, it was not a village. (So then where did you sing for a public?) That happened in the villages. In places where there was no police. In any case if there was police in a village, you couldn't gather for performance. If you wanted to organize a wedding, and it's still like that, you go to the police to get permission. And then they will say the conditions, how it should be done. For example they say: 'you are not going to sing any political words.' Eventually there is not much of that left now. Of course there is still some pressure, but actually people don't really listen to that anymore (dengbêj Ahmed, interview in Turkish, Batman 2007).

As many dengbêjs used to perform at weddings, the prohibition on singing deprived them of an important performance place. The heightened control and possible repercussions on issues as common as language use caused a general state of fear among people. People were afraid to speak Kurdish outside their homes. The arrests and even torture for singing in Kurdish are indicative of the state of terror the region was immersed in.

Another important reason why the dengbêjs kept silent after 1980 was that they were not connected to the new political ideology that was rising in popularity, especially among the young generation. New politicized music groups in favor of the Kurdish political movement came into existence in those years and to a large extent they began to replace the dengbêjs (chapter 4). Previously, good dengbêjs used to be under the protection of a landlord who provided them with basic needs in return for

performing. Although the landlord-system was in decay in the 1960s after the land reforms, it was still partially functioning until 1980. The dengbêjs were regarded by the new generation of political activists as part of the system of landlords, of tribes and intertribal conflicts; the system they despised and were fighting against. Many dengbêj songs relate conflicts between tribes or between people from various backgrounds and religions. Such songs were seen as not favorable for Kurdish unity the Kurdish movement wanted to create. A dengbêj from the region of Erzurum comments on this situation:

> In 1980 happened two things: there was a coup, and the Kurdish movement came into being. And now the dengbêj art was something a bit opposite to the Kurdish freedom movement. The reality is that dengbêjs are connected to feudalism. They sang for the landlord, for the sheikh, and they sang what the public liked. And this really didn't match with the freedom movement. [The latter] regarded it a bit negatively. They didn't do anything but they judged it negatively. And if the public doesn't want to listen, where will the dengbêjs sing? (dengbêj Osman, interview in Turkish, Istanbul 2007).

The Kurdish movement regarded feudalism as a way of hindering the development of Kurdish society. Old traditions were regarded as contaminated by centuries of oppression, and a new culture and a unified nation needed to be created. The Kurdish movement opposed the 'feudal' and tribal system which they accused of creating divisions and conflicts. Although not everyone gives equal importance to the anti-feudal ideology of the Kurdish movement as a reason for the disruption of the dengbêj art during the 1980s and 1990s, these views were influential at least to some extent. This can for example be seen in how many dengbêjs today are careful to emphasize that they do not support such feudal structures (chapter 2 and 4).

A third reason for the decrease of dengbêj performances was that modern Kurdish music, offering an increasing variety of styles and musical instruments, was on the rise and became an attractive alternative to the music of the dengbêjs. The owner of a music company in Istanbul (see also chapter 4):

> We liked other music more. When music became more accessible we as young people did not much listen to the dengbêjs. We as boys and children, we more appreciated colorful and authentic music. I listened more to that. I also listened to dengbêjs, because there was nothing else. But when other music came, I liked it more and I did not listen anymore to the dengbêjs (Murat Aslan, interview in Kurdish, Istanbul 2008).

Especially in the countryside, where little variety or choice was available, people had continued to listen to and enjoy dengbêj performances. But as soon as other musical

styles appeared, the youth in particular was quite receptive. Depending on the region and the family, traditional Kurdish music continued to be performed at weddings. But wedding bands performing in Turkish (and Kurdish, but this was marginal) became significantly more popular during this period, and pushed the function of the dengbêjs aside.

The Kurdish music scene that developed in Europe in the meantime also became increasingly influential in Turkey. Many of these musicians were in favor of the Kurdish movement and influenced by their ideology (Güneş 2012, Sarıtaş 2010). From the 1980s on the development of a more general and less locally oriented Kurdish culture, initiated by the radio stations, and stimulated by other media, was pursued by Kurds living abroad. In Europe migrants set up and developed Kurdish satellite television, Kurdish (political) organizations, and a modern Kurdish music scene.[50] These developments only sparsely reached Kurds in Turkey in those years,[51] but they became accessible after 1991 and on a much larger scale after 2000. The foundation of Kurdish cultural centers in Turkey's big cities, of local television programs, the production of cassettes and CDs, the publication of books, and propaganda of Kurdish political movements,[52] were very influential in promoting Kurdish language and culture and gave a stage to modern music groups which were at once mushrooming everywhere.[53] The new music groups on the one hand deprived the dengbêjs of the important position they had had previously, but on the other hand created opportunities. The dengbêjs only occasionally sing at weddings today, normally music groups are invited. Also in the villages, many of which were destroyed or lost an important part of their inhabitants during the 1990s,[54] dengbêjs do not sing as before. Nevertheless, over the last decade some new possibilities have emerged. Many dengbêjs perform on local or international Kurdish television and at local festivals. In many cities of eastern Turkey dengbêjs perform in cultural centers, or in a special Dengbêj House. The good ones sell cassettes or CDs, and a few are known in large parts of Kurdistan.

50 Romano 2006, White 2000, Van Bruinessen 1999

51 Due to political measures people did not have access to such media. Speaking about the OHAL (region operating under emergency law) in the 1980s and 1990s: "A raft of measures was employed to restrict political activities in the OHAL region during this period. In addition to routine military and police activities, freedom of press, freedom of expression, and freedom to organize were practically abolished in the Southeast" (Jongerden 2010: 87).

52 Among the Kurdish political organizations, many of which are small splinter groups, the PKK is by far the most dominant with a high level of support in the Kurdish region (Casier e.a. 2011). Following Casier, I will refer to the political complex close to the PKK, including the PKK, BDP and KCK, as 'the Kurdish movement'.

53 Sarıtaş 2010, Aksoy 2006

54 Jongerden 2010, 2007

i.3 Folklore, nationalism and (self-) Orientalism in Turkey

> Nationalism is a discourse that constantly shapes our consciousness and the way we constitute the meaning of the world. It determines our collective identity by producing and reproducing us as 'nationals'. It is a form of seeing and interpreting that conditions our daily speech, behaviors and attitudes (Özkırımlı 2000: 4).

This dissertation focuses on the dengbêj art as a phenomenon at a particular historical moment, namely when the dengbêjs returned into public life and were re-introduced to Kurdish and other possible audiences as an originally Kurdish, authentic, and national tradition. The mobilization of folklore in the service of nationalism is common; since the era of European nationalism songs and stories produced by ordinary people became political resources to support this ideology. In this section I shortly introduce the history of ideas on folklore and nationalism, and continue to discuss its use in Turkey. I then introduce the idea of Turkish and Kurdish self-Orientalism. Throughout the dissertation I develop the argument that the current understanding and representation of the dengbêj art by the Kurdish movement (see below for a definition) can be seen as a form of self-Orientalism. Based on the collected ethnographic material, I offer an alternative understanding of the dengbêj art, and of Kurdish society in general, than an Orientalist interpretation. The latter understands the dengbêjs and their art as pre-modern, as a trace of distant history, and some aspects of it as backwards and tribal. In this dissertation, the focus on specific performance contexts, on individual life stories, on the embodied experience of music, and on the dengbêj art as part of a new institutionalization of Kurdish activism in Turkey, offers a different understanding. It highlights contemporary Kurdish lived experience and shows how the dengbêjs and their art were and are influenced by and entangled in modernity, and how the self-Orientalist representation of the dengbêj art is part of that entanglement.

Before the era of nationalism, oral tradition and other cultural production often had a local political message; it was either used to praise and support local rulers, or as a means to express dissident views that could not be voiced directly, and was therefore disguised in 'hidden transcripts' (Scott 1990). Songs and stories could be mobilized as a direct tool to express certain political and social messages. But with the spirit of nationalism, the political enterpreneurs of nationalist ideology regarded the same songs and stories as a resource for mobilization of the 'masses'. In order to raise the ideological interest and support of the masses for the nation-state, nationalist thinkers focused on the idea of a common history and a common

language of people who previously did not define themselves as 'national'. The nation exists by virtue of a number of myths and imaginations, and by virtue of selective memory and forgetting[55]. It has an assumed historicity; nationalists claim that the nation is "rooted in the remotest antiquity" (Hobsbawm 1983: 14). Moreover, nationalism is based on the (often imagined) collective experience of having a common language. Since print capitalism, language became standardized and shared by a large imagined community (Anderson 1991). Nationalists saw oral traditions as useful tools for generating and mobilizing nationalist sentiments: they were owned by the 'masses', instead of by the elite; they demonstrated a common language; and they expressed shared ideas about history. Songs and stories were thus turned into 'folklore' that had to be collected and archived, as they were transmitted from 'history' and therefore contained the true and 'authentic' core of the 'nation's identity'[56]. The centrality of language in nationalist ideology as one of the main tools to unite people in other terms than religion, and over a vast territory, turned oral songs and stories into resources that could serve as unified cultural heritage in one language, for one people, with one history.

Influential in the development of nationalist thought, and in the way folklore is presented by nationalist ideology, is the grand narrative of tradition and modernity. Contrary to primordialist ideas that understand the nation as a natural feature of humanity, modernist thought regards nationalism as a product "of modern processes such as industrialization, capitalism, industrialism, the emergence of the bureaucratic state, urbanization and secularism" (Özkırımlı 2000: 85). Folklore is then presented as belonging to the pre-modern age in which people were not literate but oral, and untouched by the partly negative consequences of modernity. In folklore, so these thinkers argued, one can find the 'original' and 'unspoiled' features of the people of the nation, reflecting a time before modernity transformed them into modern citizens. Moreover, they felt that folklore could help one develop a more nationalist mindset. In Germany for example, "clubs for the preservation of (..) folk culture played a very large role in what has been called the 'nationalization of the masses' (..) they were a way to actively contribute to the building of new kinds of political communities" and "served as a means to mediate the transformations

55 "Ernest Renan cogently remarked in 1882 that 'forgetting, I would even go so far as to say historical error, is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation.' Homi Bhabha, in his discussion on the 'foundational fictions' upon which all nations are built, argues that the 'strange forgetting' Renan refers to 'constitutes the beginning of the nation's narrative.'" (Zeydanlıoğlu 2008: 162).

56 This also had its origins in enlightenment thinking, which sought for sources of authenticity other than religion. Herder was one of the strongest proponants of the search for authenticity in 'folklore' and in the 'folk'. "On the eve of an industrializing modernity, Herder's work solidified the modern invention of the 'folk' category" (Bendix 2009: 35).

wrought by industrialization and its concomitant social structural changes" (Bendix 2009: 101).

Influenced by developments in Europe, the late nineteenth century Ottoman Empire saw a transition from Ottoman multi-religious and multi-ethnic thinking, that embraced the diversity of languages and cultures, towards nationalist ideology. European ideas on modernization, civilization, and the nation-state spread. With the weakening of the Empire, amongst others by the nationalist rebellions in the Balkans, Ottoman politicians realized the old empire-structure lost ground, and they were forced to start thinking of different ways to make people loyal to a political unity. Gradually, Ottoman identity gave way to a new Turkish identity. Nationalist ideology challenged the disdain the Ottoman elite felt towards the majority of the Ottoman population living in the countryside; they needed them. The masses, seen as poor, uneducated and backwards, could no longer be entirely excluded from the political arena, because the idea of the nation-state requires a broad support base from its citizens. Instead, the masses had to be molded into civilized citizens. Nationalist ideology was thus accompanied by ideas about civilization and modernization. Turkish nationalism became more fully developed in the early years of the Turkish Republic, founded in 1923 under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal. The nationalist ideology and modernization policies developed under him are referred to as Kemalism.

Kemalism saw the common people as resources that had protected true Turkishness and the characteristics of the true Turkish race. It regarded the Ottoman elite with its court culture as a degenerate form of the real authentic Turkish culture. That culture had been preserved by the common people in the countryside who spoke Turkish instead of Ottoman and had their own oral traditions. Collection of oral tradition, with the aim of creating a national Turkish music, was an important spearhead of Kemalist cultural politics. "Music was central to the cultural policies of the early Kemalist State aimed at creating a new, Westernized identity" (Neyzi 2002: 96). The national music had to be 'pure' and 'authentic', and had to be separated from Ottoman cultural expression that was regarded as spoiled by Arabic, Byzantine and Islamic influences. These ideas were strengthened by the popularity of peasantist ideology at the time.[57]

According to this ideology, industrialisation and urbanisation led to degeneration (Karaömerlioğlu 1998a). The true Turkish culture and the pure Turkish race could be found in the villages. In line with peasantist ideology, the singer-poets of Anatolia were seen as a "folk elite, heroes whose living traditions embodied the

57 Turkish peasantists were influenced by American ideas of educating the peasants. "Many works by American specialists on village education were translated into Turkish" (Yüksel 2011: 86).

'Turkish ideal'" (Markoff 1990: 130), and as having a 'national spirit' which they expressed in their art.[58] They were "a major source of national pride (..) After all (..) they resisted the influence of Arabic and Persian and preserved the national language in their works" (Başgöz 1998: 46). Because of the Kemalist focus on Turkishness as the characteristic of the new nation, and the attempt to create a unified national culture, other ethnic or religious identities were denied in the hope they would soon disappear from the socio-political landscape of the Turkish Republic. Turkish nationalist ideology was spread through education: schools, village institutions, and the media. Throughout the twentieth century, Kemalist secularism and nationalism fundamentally shaped Turkish citizenship.

By its very existence, Kurdish music was thus opposing the Turkishness of the Republic. In order to create a national Turkish music, songs in other languages were prohibited and had to be translated into Turkish and standardized.[59] Politics of Turkification, prohibition and appropriation were characteristic of the Kemalist approach towards Kurdish cultural production (Yüksel 2011: 89). Specific records with a political message were banned from Turkey, and Kurdish dengbêjs were regarded a threat to Turkish unity. Some Kurdish singers and poets were forced to appropriate Kemalist ideology and sing Turkish nationalist songs. The early Kemalist approach shows that the Turkish authorities had a deliberate and conscious policy towards Kurdish cultural production, that they tracked the developments in Kurdish music, that they prohibited specific records, that they were anxious about nationalist incitement via Kurdish music, and that they tried to replace Kurdish with Turkish music. The dengbêjs were directly affected by these measures. Some of them were exiled or arrested, and others escaped to other countries.[60]

58 The idea of the national spirit in Turkish oral tradition stems from Fuat Köprülü, an important folklorist of the early 20th century, who followed Gokalps principles (Başgöz 1998).

59 Several people I spoke with had experiences with the collection of Kurdish songs for such aims. For example, Osmanê Farqînî, a popular singer from Silvan who escaped to Germany, told the following story: "When I was still a child I saw how those people from the TRT (Turkish Radio and Television coorporation) came to the village to collect songs. My father asked them once: 'why did you come?' He said: 'we collect what the dengbêjs sing at weddings.' 'So what will you do with it?' 'We will archive it.' 'What are you going to do with the archives, what kind of benefit do you have from it?' 'Well we are collecting it and we will broadcast it on the radio.' 'So will you broadcast it in Turkish or in Kurdish?' 'There's nothing like Kurdish broadcasts', they said, 'we will broadcast in Turkish.' I remember this very well. This conversation was happening in front of our house. I felt the contradiction. They had a tape recorder hanging on their shoulders. They were collecting, they went from village to village, they asked when weddings would happen, they made recordings at weddings" (interview in Turkish, Germany 2007).

60 "Celadet points out that following an armed clash between state forces and Kurds, approximately 10 singers were accused of provoking Kurdish national feelings through their singing of epic songs about Kurdish leaders were arrested and taken to the east" (Yüksel 2011: 66). He has this information from Celadet Alî Bedirxan's book *Kürt sorunu üzerine* republished by Avesta in 1997.

As various scholars have convincingly shown, Kurdish nationalism developed not before the last decades of the nineteenth century, and at that time was only a marginal movement (Van Bruinessen 1992, McDowall 1996, White 2000, O'Shea 2004), that consisted of intellectuals and people from noble families who lived mostly in Istanbul and cities abroad. (The same applies to nationalisms in the whole region, such as - most important in this context - Turkish nationalism.) The Islamic empires in the Middle East had unified their citizens in the name of Islam, not of ethnicity. "The diverse tribes under Ottoman control were unified politically through the medium of Islam. That is, their religion provided them with their primary identity" (White 2000: 55). The Kurdish nationalist position that Kurds have been struggling for the acquisition of an independent Kurdish state for centuries is therefore not supported by most scholars. Kurdish factions were too divided to be able to form a unity. Kurdish rulers often tried to expand their territory, but not with the aim of the establishment of a larger Kurdistan. Like the peoples around them, emphasis was on expanding territory on behalf of a powerful ruler.

In the late nineteenth century, Kurdish intellectuals began to show concern with the specific place of the Kurds among the other ethnic groups in the Ottoman Empire, although they still felt like Ottomans and part of the Empire. Özoğlu (2005) argues that Kurdish nationalism only developed after World War I.[61] The Society for Advancement of Kurdistan (SAK, Kürdistan Teali Cemiyeti) that was founded in 1918 can be seen as one of the first organizations that thought in nationalist terms. Not all of these early modernist thinkers had the same vision; some sought after independence, whereas others wanted to remain part of the Empire.[62] Çakır (2011) gives an overview of how the attitude of Kurdish nationalists towards oral tradition developed, by following Kurdish organizations that often also published a magazine or journal. The SAK published the Kurdish magazine *Jîn* (Life), that "started inventing national myths and symbols in order to create a national history, and the desire for a Kurdish state was expressed for the first time" (Çakır 2011: 19).

61 "Surely, Kurdish nationalists in the twentieth century made many attempts to provide their cause with historical depth by rethinking and romanticizing the nineteenth-century Kurdish movements as nationalist. However, this chapter will demonstrate that the cultural and militant activities of various Kurdish groups prior to the end of the Great War were not nationalistic." (Özoğlu 2004: 69).

62 Özoğlu (2004: 93) writes about the different views of two leading figures in the Society for the Advancement of Kurdistan (SAK). Its president Sayyid Abdulkadir said in an interview that he did not want to secede from the Ottoman Empire and establish an independent Kurdistan. Instead he wated to have autonomy in the Kurdish provinces. Vice president Emin Ali Bedirhani opposed this view and threw him out of the SAK. The Abdulkadir dissolved the SAK and called for a new election. He got broad support from the working class people. These differences, and the (dis)ability to gain a following among the common people, continued to be important issues in the evolvement of Kurdish nationalism.

Like Turkish nationalists, they focused on the need of educating and awakening the common people, who were seen as ignorant and backwards (Strohmeier 2003, Klein 2000). In publications[63] they presented the Kurds as living in 'terrible darkness'. They pointed towards the conflicts between various tribes and felt this was hindering progress among the Kurds. The lack of a standardized language and of a corpus of written literature was seen as the main obstacle in educating the masses.[64] At the time the focus was on written literature which was seen as superior to oral literature,[65] and oral tradition was even seen as possibly leading to mistaken knowledge about Kurdish society.[66] The intellectuals tried to prove that Kurdish culture, like the surrounding cultures, also had a 'high culture' by pointing to important works of literature in Kurdish history, such as the written poem *Mem û Zîn* by Ehmedê Xanî.

However, there was a growing interest in cultural production of ordinary people among Kurdish intellectuals. During the founding years of the Republic, the growth of nationalist ideology, and the increasing distance towards Turkish nationalism, the intellectuals became more positive about the Kurdish common people, who were now regarded as having protected Kurdish heritage against the age-old enemy, the Turks. Oral tradition came to be seen in terms of heritage: the intellectuals "aimed at overcoming the deep divisions between tribal and urban society by propagating a common Kurdish cultural heritage. Part of this heritage was the oral tradition of tales and myths" (Strohmeier 2003: 95). Following upon the failure of the Kurdish rebellions of the 1920s and 30s in the newly founded Turkish Republic, cultural activism grew in importance. The magazine *Hawar* (the Call), published in Damascus in 1932 by Cedalet Ali Bedirxan, had the specific aim to focus on Kurdish language and culture, which it called *qurdanî* and *qurdîtî* ('Kurdism' or 'Kurdishness'), and it left politics to the "compatriot organizations" (*civatên welatî*) (Çakır 2011: 22). However, as we will see below, in modern Kurdish nationalism, and especially in PKK ideology, Kurdish traditions were initially viewed with suspicion, as they were seen as hindering the Kurds from developing towards a

63 Strohmeier (2003) analyzed Kurdish journals and newspapers published between 1898 and 1937.

64 "Kurdish nationalists of the late Ottoman Empire suggested that Kurdish folklore should be written down in order to 'justify' the existence of Kurdish nationhood" (Yüksel 2011: 63).

65 "Educated Kurds would have felt that (..) products of the oral tradition were inferior to written works" (Strohmeier 2003: 30).

66 Çakır (2011) quotes Abdurrahman Bedirxan, a leading Kurdish intellectual, who wrote to the Orientalist scholar Hugo Makas: "I must also tell you that all these [oral] poems are not very famous. I find it unnecessary, perhaps even harmful for you to deal with such poetry because it could lead you to major errors. It is better to deal with the poems of good poets, such as Ehmedê Xanî, the author of Mem û Zîn, etc" (pp.17)

modern Kurdish society. White (2000) and Bozarslan (1992) both locate the start of this modern Kurdish nationalism in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

While in the early stages of nationalism in Turkey the state had a decisive role in developing its contours, in later decades nationalism became increasingly shared and negotiated by its citizens. Within the theorizing on nationalism the nation state has often been understood as a coherent unified entity. But as Askew shows in her book on the use of music in the creation of national identities in Tanzania "nationalism ought to be conceptualized as a series of continually negotiated relationships between people who share occupancy in a defined geographic, political, or ideological space." (Askew 2002: 12). Nationalism is negotiated and performed by people living within state borders, rather than being a one-sided activity of the state's bureaucracy. This vision leaves room for investigating the various ways in which nationalism is experienced and performed by various groups of people within a state. In the context of Turkey Çınar (2005) argues that "throughout the twentieth century the official secular Turkish nationalism of the state was continually challenged by (..) rival projects, including Islamists, Kurdish, and Marxist movements that produced alternative projects of modernity and nationalism" (Çınar 2005: 18). Nationalism in Turkey as well as elsewhere is thus not a stable, one-sided ideology, but negotiated by the citizens of a nation state. Nationalist and counter identities are performed in daily life, in culture, in music, and in storytelling.

Kurdish and Turkish nationalism thus became shared by common people rather than only by a small group of politicians or intellectuals. In both cases, music came to be utilized by musicians to express nationalist identities, and performers of oral traditions developed ideas about their meaning within the context of the nation-state. Folklore as well not only remained a topic of nationalist theory, but was in various ways adopted by performers in their music practice in which they consciously incorporated ideas about nationalism and Turkishness or Kurdishness.[67] Among others, oral tradition remained important as what people refer to as the origin, source or basis of later musical developments.

Neyzi (2002) demonstrates that identity in Turkey is often fragmented, individuals switching between multiple identities with regional, religious, linguistic and ethnic components. In her article on the musicians Metin and Kemal Kahraman she discusses the music of the two brothers. They originate from Dersim (Tunceli), are of Alevi, Zaza-speaking origin, and live in Turkey and Germany. Their music

67 In the dissertation I use the term Kurdishness, Turkishness and Armenianness to refer to all practices that are perceived as part of belonging to, and as producing, a Kurdish, Turkish or Armenian identity.

is based on music of the Dersim region, and "represents not a singular counter identity, but rather the experience of fractured and multiple selves in the modern present" (Neyzi 2002: 91). The various components of one's identity can be shown or hidden according to the circumstances.

> Performing Turkish in the public sphere, each individual may embody a rich ethnic/religious heritage, which may be expressed in particular contexts or remain unknown or denied altogether. (…) thus performing national identity is as much a function of taking up an identity as giving up or *seeming to give up* others, particularly in the public sphere." (Ibid,: 92, emphasis by author).

Some individuals or groups of people identify with state nationalism, whereas others feel alienated and left out from such a project and identify with 'rival projects'. People often identify with various projects at the same time, and emphasize or perform different identities in different contexts.

Within this more dynamic and negotiable understanding of nationalism there was also an increasing focus on the influence of power structures by scholars, and Anderson's concept of the imagined community (1983) became criticized for not recognizing this sufficiently. In her study of television serials in Egypt, Abu Lughod asked attention for inequality and hegemony in how such serials are produced and in what work they subsequently do; "studying television serials in Egypt necessarily entails examining a 'national space' rife with tensions, inequalities, and regionally configured power systems" (Abu Lughod 2005: 9).[68] Power struggles are crucial for understanding the way nationalism is negotiated, produced and experienced among various groups of people in Turkey. In the case of music, it can serve to empower people, when they are able to perform identities they wish to perform, and to dominate others, when music of a dominant group is imposed on them and when the right to perform and produce their identities in music is denied.[69] It thus can serve as an identity-marker for different groups of people in different ways. In Turkey, Kurdish music was banned from all official channels and non-existent in public life throughout most of the twentieth century. Singing in Kurdish was long seen as an overt expression of resistance and could be severely punished. The Turkish nationalist oppression of non-Turkish cultural production within Turkey has

68 About power issues in the Turkish situation Houston notes: "Nation-states such as Turkey are still massively involved in this creation and propagation of a national culture, which includes of course the constant censoring of its 'non-national' forms" (2009: 31).

69 Saada-Ophir (2006) shows in his auto-ethnographic article on borderland music in Israel that people can feel alienated when their identity is left out from the musical scene, "a sense of 'homelessness' is felt by some of the ethnic groups who inhabit the borderland. Such is the case of the Libyan Jews, whose unique musical style has remained largely invisible" (Saada-Ophir 2006: 217).

resulted in its politicization, and caused the activities of performing and listening to the dengbêj art and other Kurdish music to be almost naturally associated with politics and a Kurdish national identity. Hearing Kurdish language and music in the media can retrieve an embodied sense of Kurdishness, and adds to the power of music as an icon capable of rallying a larger Kurdish public.[70]

The Kurdish movement has strived towards a redefinition of Kurdishness as a positive trait that is worthy of being embraced instead of rejected. Music played a crucial role in this redefinition, in what I call, following Bryant (2005), the 'empersonment' of Kurdishness through music (chapter 2). Although initially the dengbêjs were not included in this project, they followed in the last decades and were mobilized for specific parts of it (chapter 4). The village plays a central role in what it means to be a dengbêj, and in the reception of the dengbêj art by the audiences. Attending a dengbêj performance reminds people of village life and connects to experiences they have had in the village. Therefore, I will also pay attention to the embodied experience of music in village life (chapter 5); to how Kurdish media anticipated such experiences (chapter 4 and 5); and to the meaning musical memories carry for people whose lives are characterized by loss, conflict and escape (chapter 3 and 5). In the next section I investigate the experience of Kurdishness through the lens of Orientalism, and discuss the application of this concept to the context of present-day Turkey.

Turkish and Kurdish self-Orientalism

We can regard the approach towards 'folklore' and 'the folk' by Kurdish and Turkish nationalists as a form of self-Orientalism, in which part of the nation is seen as backwards, traditional, and in need of modernization and civilization. I find it important to introduce and stress these different forms of self-Orientalism, for two reasons. First, because it explains the processes at work in bringing the dengbêjs back in public, and how their art was understood and negotiated during the period of my field research. Second, it gives insight into how global meta narratives influence and shape specific national ideologies. What makes ideas about nationalism, tradition and modernity so powerful is their ability to connect to people's imaginations by offering clear and ready-made stories about the increasingly confusing world of flows of people, goods and images (Appadurai 1996). It makes people believe they

70 Governments of nation states have been aware of the fact that "visual and musical iconicities have been especially effective in rallying entire populations" (Herzfeld 2005: 28). This awareness has driven national governments to utilize such iconicities to create a feeling of national identity among their citizens, and to fear the use of such icons by counter movements.

are or can possibly be part of a better world in which they are included in the story of modernity. Because of their easy to understand explanations they are attractive to us when we feel overwhelmed by the rapid transformations we are confronted with.

The simple character of these stories may be attractive to clarify rapid transformations, but also blurs much of the complexity of today's world, and they conceal what power mechanism are at work (Dabashi 2011). The 'rural', 'traditional', and 'backwards' people of this world may even more realize than their 'urban', 'modern', and 'progressive' neighbors that they are part of the story of modernity, day by day experiencing the deprivation of living at the downside of global inequality. Countering (self-)Orientalist models in this dissertation, I attempt to deconstruct easy solutions for understanding the dengbêjs and their socio-political environment, and to give insight into the complexity and impalpability of everyday life in the confusing and painful circumstances of oppression and violent conflict, of loss and the destruction of a society. By investigating in detail both social and personal narratives, and by locating them in specific moral narratives that have their origin in Orientalism, it becomes possible to gain a deeper understanding of the multiplicity of processes of identity formation in Turkey, related to specific histories and times.

Turkey's self-Orientalizing project

The connection between Turkey and Orientalism is ambivalent in that the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic were on the one hand objects of Orientalist thinking, and on the other hand adopted this discursive model for their own power structures.[71] One of the ways in which the Ottomans in the late Ottoman period[72] mobilized Orientalist thought was by presenting the Arab provinces of the empire as in need of progress, civilization and Ottomanization. They perceived the center of the empire as 'western', progressive, well organized, urban and civilized, whereas they regarded the margins of the empire as 'eastern', lawless, rural, and inhabited by people living "in a state of nomadism and savagery" (Deringil 2003: 311). Their self-definition was thus shaped by and created through the image of the uncivilized Other modeled after European Orientalist thought. Contrary to European imaginations, the late Ottomans presented themselves as equal to Europe, "the Ottoman Empire sought to define itself as an equal player on a world stage

71 Makdisi (2002) said about what he calls Ottoman Orientalism: "it discredited Western representations of Ottoman indolence by contrasting Ottoman modernity with the unreformed and stagnant landscape of the empire. In effect, it de-Orientalized the empire by Orientalizing it" (pp. 773).

72 During the Tanzimat reforms starting in 1839, although "much of what was synthesized into the Ottoman modernity project was the result of historical processes and trends which were taking place already in the eighteenth century" (Deringil 2003: 316).

of civilization" (Makdisi 2002: 778). Although the mechanisms of Ottoman power were different from the European colonial powers, the Ottomans did rely on their discourses and "drew inspiration from the methods of Western European colonial administrative machineries" (Üngör 2008a: 23). For example, they sent researchers to the eastern provinces in order to record all the different ethnic and religious groups and tribes[73], with the purpose of gearing their policies accordingly. In what Deringil (2003) calls 'borrowed colonialism', namely conceiving "its periphery as a colonial setting" (pp. 311), and conflating "the ideas of modernity and colonialism" (pp. 312) the late Ottoman Empire attempted to compete with the European powers at a time when the empire was strongly in decline.

Criticizing Said for not having sufficiently recognized the share 'Orientals' had in shaping Orientalism, postcolonial scholars have argued that "through an acceptance of the notion of 'modernity', the basis of colonial dominance, 'Eastern' nationalisms have themselves strengthened and sustained the Orientalist legacy" (Zeydanlıoğlu 2008: 157). They argue that through such discursive models, the hegemony of Western imperialism continued to exist after the independence of the colonies. As the Ottoman Empire never was a colony of Western powers its situation is not immediately comparable. However, since the Empire was the object of Orientalist imaginations, and the late Ottomans and early Republicans adopted Western Orientalist models and performed for an "imagined Western audience" (Ahıska in Zeydanlıoğlu 2008), one can clearly see the Orientalist legacy at work in the discursive space of Ottoman and Turkish political thought.

The post 1923 Kemalist modernization project had its roots in Ottoman Orientalism, but was fundamentally different from it because of its nationalist character. Nationalism "facilitated the introduction of the political culture of European modernity to those outside of the West" (Zeydanlıoğlu 2008: 156). Zeydanlıoğlu shows how the Turkish Republic was built on Orientalist ideas about the uncivilized Other.[74] He quotes Mustafa Kemal who said in a speech in 1925: "Gentlemen, uncivilised people are doomed to be trodden under the feet of civilised people". The Anatolian peasants living in the countryside, which was the majority of the population, were depicted as backward and traditional, child-like and primitive,

73 "In the end, the CUP research programme produced thousands of pages of documented research and commentary detailing various ethnic groups, most of whom were inhavitants of the easteren provinces" (Üngor 2008: 23).

74 Building on Chatterjee (1986) and Bhabha (1994), Zeydanlıoğlu concludes: "Postcolonial nationalist elites in the Muslim world and elsewhere have largely operated on Orientalist assumptions in the realization of their nationalist and authoritarian internal civilizing missions, which often amounted to murderous ethnic cleansing, through the justification derived from the teleology of progress and modernity" (2008: 157).

having remained behind in the evolutionary process because of the negative impact of Islam and the backwardness of the Ottoman past. "The Kemalist elite took on the paternalistic Orientalist view that they must, as the rightful teachers, educate Islamic, ethnic, tribal and rural Others deemed to be outside the sphere of Western modernity" (Zeydanlıoğlu 2008: 159). The new regime organized fieldwork trips meant to collect local knowledge about people living in the countryside. Unlike their Ottoman equivalents, these trips were nationalist in character, as they did not have the sole purpose of deciding how to rule the margins, but also to create a nationalist consciousness among a highly heterogeneous peasant population. This is also where anthropology came in, as the collection of oral tradition and information about peasant culture was done by anthropologists who shared ideas about "authenticity and indigeneity, social boundedness and autochthonic cultural production" (Houston 2009: 31) with nationalist ideology. Houston argues that anthropology has overestimated the power of the West by often defining the discipline in relation to colonialism, and therewith largely overlooked the production of anthropological knowledge in the service of non-Western nationalisms.[75]

Anthropological knowledge production about the Kurds became a Turkish project, meant to define Kurdish culture as a degenerate form of Turkishness.[76] The Kurds were regarded as "insufficiently civilized", as "mountain Turks" who forgot their Turkish origins, their language was a "degenerate language mixed with Persian", and Kurds were fined for speaking Kurdish (Zeydanlıoğlu 2008: 162). Self-Orientalism that presented the eastern part of Turkey as traditional and backwards contrasting with the modern and progressive western part was and is doing important work to maintain, perform, and reproduce the existing power relations of the nationalist and modernist project of the Turkish State.

Kurdish self-Orientalism, and the 'new Kurdish personality'

Building on the arguments of Zeydanlıoğlu (2008) and Ahıska (2003) who present the Turkish modernity project as self-Orientalist, I suggest similar processes are at work in Kurdish political thought and Kurdish activism. First, PKK ideology is partly inspired by European nationalist thought, and partly performed for an

75 "My polemical claim is that the nation-state as an 'institution of government producing culture' (Ong 1999: 50) has been a neglected influence in many narratives tracing the historical development of the discipline" (Houston 2009: 32).

76 People opposing these views were silenced, like Ismail Beşikçi who stayed in prison for seventeen years because of his academic research and writing about the Kurds. "The odyssey of Beşikçi's encounters with Turkey's legal system shows (..) what is wrong with the system, and it demonstrates effectively how the officially proclaimed human rights and democratic values become null and void where the Kurdish question is involved" (van Bruinessen 1997b: 1).

imagined 'Western' audience. According to this ideology Kurdish society needs to be modernized and nationalized and have its own place within or outside the Turkish nationalist realm. Second, this ideology presents the Kurds as having lived under the yoke of oppression for decades and even centuries by three enemies: Islam, the Turkish state, and the Kurdish elite. The liberation of Kurdish society has the aim of freeing the Kurds from these oppressors.

In this section I will give an analysis of PKK ideology, as it has been the most dominant voice in the Kurdish political field until today, and been called the 'hegemonic myth of Kurdish modernity' (Güneş 2012). Since these views are central to the manner in which the dengbêjs returned to the public domain in the 2000s I discuss them here in some detail, and at the end return to my argument concerning the self-Orientalizing nature of such views. The introduction into PKK thought is crucial because it forms an important moral source for the current interpretation of the dengbêj art. Political activists and some of the dengbêjs, implicitly or explicitly referred to PKK ideology. However, the PKK is not the only influential Kurdish organization. In the dissertation I use the term Kurdish movement to refer to the shared goals of a number of different actors. Casier e.a. (2011) use the term Kurdish movement to refer to the 'pro-Kurdish' organizations including the PKK, BDP (or DTP at the time of my research) and KCK. On the one hand, these actors have a variety of visions and political positions, ranging from violent action to electoral politics, but, on the other hand, they operate in some ways as a unified voice promoting and supporting Kurdish emancipation in Turkey, and, as such, have managed to "reinforce their presence" (Casier et al. 2011: 104). I will elaborate on this in chapter 4. In this section I trace the ideas that political activists articulated during my field research to PKK ideology, but in the rest of the dissertation I will use the term Kurdish movement to refer to the more diverse set of Kurdish actors that together occupied the cultural and political arena.

The PKK has analyzed the Kurdish question not only in opposition to the Turkish state, but also to internal enemies. It presents Kurdish society as corrupted by those oppressors who destroyed the original and unique traits of the Kurds. In this context the dengbêjs are regarded as still carrying some of the original Kurdish traits, although in part corrupted as well (see chapter 2 and 4). Therefore, they need to be 'awakened' and reformed into a Kurdish tradition in which its essence is recovered, and where degenerate parts are removed. Since these views are central to the manner in which the dengbêjs returned to public life in the 2000s I discuss them here in some detail, and at the end return to my argument concerning the self-Orientalizing nature of such views. In the following chapters I will not only show

these references, but I will also pay attention to what moral narratives existed before PKK ideology became the hegemonic myth of Kurdish modernity (Güneş 2012).

During the 1960s and 1970s[77] the foundation had been laid for a stronger awareness of Kurdish identity and protest[78] against government restrictions. The 1960s saw enormous social change, it was "a decade of the development of the social movement in Turkey and of its extremely rapid radicalization" (Bozarslan 1992: 97). Migration, industrialization, better communication, the presence of thousands of Kurdish students in the big cities, and the general rise of leftist movements in the context of a multi-party system in Turkey, had radically changed the character of Kurdish resistance.[79] However, those mainly involved in organizing this resistance continued to be tribal chiefs, religious leaders, and intellectuals (Bozarslan 1992).

The *Apocular* (followers of Apo, Abdullah Öcalan), "were unlike all previous Kurdish groups in Turkey in that they were drawn almost exclusively from Turkey's growing proletariat" (McDowall 1996: 420). Marcus (2006) describes Öcalan as a 'nobody' who did not have a powerful family to support him as other political leading figures had. He was born in 1948 and grew up in poor conditions in a village in the Şanlıurfa region where most people were poor apart from the landlord. He was influenced by the growing resentment among the rural population against wealthy landlord families. He became active in leftist political movements in the 1970s, and founded the PKK, the Kurdistan Workers' Party, in 1979 together with friends. They had prepared this moment for several years trying to build a network of supporters for their ideas of Kurdish independence founded on Marxist-Leninist ideas. The PKK wanted to be a movement of 'the people' and not of the landlords and sheikhs, and they recruited actively from the countryside.[80] Benefiting from the 1980 coup

77 The first Kurdish political party founded since the 1938 Dersim massacres was the DPTK (Democratic Party of Turkish Kurdistan). This party was modeled on the Iraqi Kurdish KDP. However, the DPTK did not manage to mobilize sufficient support, mainly because of its intellectual basis and its failure to reach the masses of the Kurdish population (White 2000).

78 According to White, Kurdish resistance had been crushed so heavily in the 1920s and 30s, that it took two decades to recover (White 2000). Kurdish organizations vanished, but "opposition continued in the countryside in the form of civil resistance" (Bozarslan 1992).

79 In 1967, as a reaction on publications denying the existence of the Kurds, or accusing them of separatism, the first Kurdish mass protests since 1938 were organized, the so called 'Eastern Meetings' (*Doğu Mitingleri*). People gathered by thousands in 7 different cities and towns in Eastern Turkey and in Ankara., organized by socialist Kurdish members of the TIP (Turkish Labor Party) and Kurdish nationalists of the DPTK (Democratic Party of Turkish Kurdistan) (Gündoğan 2005). These meetings are an example of collaboration between Kurdish and Turkish leftist protest, but also of protest directed at specific Kurdish problems "instead of the class-based politics of the Turkish left which remained indifferent to the ethnic dimension of the Kurdish problem" (Gündoğan 2005: 2).

80 The *Apocular* "identified the enemies of the Kurdish people as the fascists ..; agents of the state and those who supported them; the Turkish left which subordinated the Kurdish question to the leftist revolution and finally the exploitative Kurdish landlord class" (McDowall 1996: 421).

with its harsh state persecution, they gained by far the most dominant position in the Kurdish political field during the 1980s and 90s.[81] As the initial name *Apocular* suggests, Abdullah Öcalan became a crucial person in the organization, ideology, and policymaking of the movement, "the PKK (..) has always been dominated by Öcalan" (Imset 1992: 9 in Özcan 2006, see also White 2000, Romano 2006).[82] Over the years, Öcalan communicated his ideology through books and manifests he wrote, through his numerous party speeches, and through interviews. Central to his approach is convincing other people of his ideas in public meetings or other face-to-face contact.[83]

In 1978, the PKK defined itself in the first *Manifesto* as "a 'political organization under the guidance of scientific socialism' (..) pursuing the 'holy and historical task' of leading the 'Kurdistan Revolution'" (Özcan 2006: 100). The *Manifesto* analyzes the Kurdish question within a larger political framework as the colonization of working class people in Marxist terms, and from a local perspective as the colonization of Kurdistan by the Turkish state and Kurdish elite.[84] In the first half of the 1980s three books were published with collected teachings of Öcalan, in which he remained "within the boundaries of orthodox Marxism" (Özcan 2006: 105). The third[85] book, *The question of the individual's personality*, is about the 'degeneration' of the Kurdish personality by decades of foreign domination. Because of this degeneration, every Kurd needs to undergo a process of individual transformation, following the example of Öcalan himself who went through the same process. According to Özcan, "the 'question of personality' is of primary importance in the PKK's organizational development" (2006: 106).

---

81 The 1980 coup resulted in an increase of support for the PKK, but the coup had also hit hard; 1790 suspected PKK members were arrested (McDowall 1996). In the early 1980s PKK activities were limited to occasional attacks in the border area. In 1983 the PKK was able to establish bases across Turkey's borders after Barzani agreed on a protocol. From 1984 the number of ambushes and raids on soldiers and landlords was increasing.

82 "Öcalan has since [1976] been the 'indisputable' and 'indispensable' acting leader of the movement, to the extent that he was again elected as the 'general president' (...) while he was in a one-man prison in Turkey [since 1999]" (Özcan 2006: 94).

83 "I give a precise opinion; then I do not step back until I convert that opinion into the opinion of the person I am in contact with. This is another secret of my success" (Öcalan in dialogue with Kürkçü in 1995, in Özcan 2006: 95).

84 It describes the main *features* of the revolution as a "national liberation struggle", and a "national and democratic revolution" leading to a "socialist revolution"; the *objective* is to "establish an independent, united and democratic Kurdistan"; the *targets* of the revolution are "the conquerors of Kurdistan (the Turkish state) and its native feudal-collaborators, and the imperialist powers behind them"; and the *manner* the revolution should be carried out is through "the all-in-all use of ideological, political and military forms" (Özcan 2006: 100-101).

85 In the first book, *The role of coercion in Kurdistan*, Öcalan argues that there is no other way to fight the 'Turkish oppressors' than through the use of war. Until 1999 he kept defending this standpoint. In the second book, *About organization*, he outlines a total reorganization of Kurdish society by establishing democratic grassroots 'atoms' in order to change its current top-down structure.

Öcalan's ideology changed considerably over time. During the 1990s, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, he distanced himself from 'world socialism' and his approach became less influenced by Stalinist features.[86] He increasingly focused on the need for individual change, "socialism of the genuine liberation of mankind must 'infiltrate into the spiritual structure of the individual'" (Özcan 2006: 109). Instead of being mainly occupied with national liberation, Öcalan strives for change from within society and the individual. He regards this as the peculiar character of the PKK, which is not only valuable for the Kurds.[87] He thus broadens the scope of the Kurdish struggle to a struggle of humanity[88], in need of a democratic system that wins from nationalist or religious ideologies.[89] This can be reached through self-analysis. Öcalan regards himself as the initiator of the process of remaking the individual (White 2000). Through self-analysis, he discovered his 'lack of ideology', and remade himself into the desired democratic, socialist, ideological and moral personality.[90] The 'work of remaking the self' (Foucault 1988, see below) is thus a conscious process and tool of PKK ideology.[91]

In the task of humanizing all mankind Öcalan sees a special role for the Kurds. This stems from his view that the Kurds, living in the Euphrates-Tigris basin, are descendants of the first human beings. He argues that those who stood at the cradle of civilization can now initiate another important process: the change of societies from within. They need to rediscover the original traits of their personalities, good in essence, but degraded because of foreign domination (White 2000). They lost their ideology and "descended to the level of bestiality because of being deprived of these

86 While the PKK had the 'classical organizational structure of communist parties' in its first decades, it has changed considerably (Akkaya e.a. 2010: 147).

87 "The PKK leader began to globalize the theory of the revolution. On occasion he defines the PKK as a 'Humanization Movement' (Öcalan 1994a; Whilte and Logan 1997) and its aim as founding a 'Republic of humanity" (Özcan 2006: 116).

88 "Materialization of these traits of our movement in the form of a national liberation or a freedom movement will bring out the strength to overcome the problems of the humanity which both capitalism and socialism could not [overcome]… In our case, the nature of development is not a mere nationalization of Kurdistan. The reality of Kurdishness in fact, to a considerable degree, represents the fusion of other nations" (Öcalan 1993 in Özcan 2006).

89 Öcalan 1999: 56.

90 "Why then can I be so effective? I am currently considered to be a miracle; this is because I revealed the state of ideologyness and absence of morale in the Kurdish existence within the framework of my personality, and the extent of my own self-realization through this very unveiling corresponded quite easily with the concrete circumstances of this phenomenal social and political existence" (Öcalan 1998 in Özcan 2006: 120).

91 "The PKK ultimately seeks change through the personal transformation of its followers into 'new men' or 'new women'—that is, men and women dedicated to the PKK's 'revolution' for liberty and socialism, for whom following the PKK's ideology is considered the means to free themselves from their subordinate position" (Casier et al 2011: 121).

basic concepts" (Öcalan 1998 in Özcan 2006: 120). The task of the PKK cadres is to be an example of the new Kurdish personhood,[92] and subsequently to awaken the people and encourage them to rediscover their original characteristics and remake themselves into morally good persons.[93] The PKK trains its cadres in the precise character such a remaking of Kurdish personhood should assume (White 2000). New trainees need to acquire certain habits, and cure themselves from other habits, regarded as stemming from the traditional, feudal and degenerate character of Kurdish society.[94] An important part of the guerilla struggle is to bring the positive traits back to the people and to educate them. According to the PKK, their ideological struggle has resulted in remarkable changes over the last decades,[95] "Kurdishness converted from an entity from which everyone ran away, to an identity of which everyone is proud because of its contribution to freedom, democracy and humanity" (Özcan 2006: 128).

The PKK also developed specific ideas regarding Kurdish culture, art and music. In a speech in the early 1990s, published in his book *Kültür ve sanat devrimi üzerine*,[96] Öcalan (2008) presents the PKK as the key domain for the creation of cultural expression, and notes that there would be "no Kurdish folk songs, no academy, nor any enthusiasm for making art" without the PKK (Saritaş 2010: 66). It is worth giving a substantial quote of this book, as it provides a good impression of Öcalan's ideas and style:

> PKK action as a whole is an artistic action. PKK action is the focus and source of the new art for Kurdistan, and harbors almost all properties of arts in its body. In a Kurdistan without the PKK art is dead, and what would remain cannot be called art. The art of the Turkish Republic is an act of invasion. (..) It is an act of suffocation, assimilation and clearance of the existing traditions and activities of people in Kurdistan by the bourgeois. So, art is dead. Therefore, the emergence of the PKK is the resurrection of art. It is the source of art, and it is the lay-down of its foundation (Öcalan 2008: 11 in Saritaş 2010, English as in original)

92 From the accounts of guerrilla fighters appears they are consciously striving to remake themselves and Kurdish society. In a newspaper article on female guerillas a guerilla states : "We are opening the eyes of Kurdish society", and another woman: "We are not just an example for the women of the Middle East but for women the world over" (source: AFP 2006).

93 "The PKK is primarily the movement of inventing the ideology and morale of the reality of a people whose ideology and morale has totally collapsed" (Öcalan 1998 in Özcan 2006: 121).

94 "The 'democratic revolution' eliminated the tribal-feudal social structure apart from 'some remnants and traditional customs' (Programme 2000)" (Özcan 2006: 128).

95 "The Kurdish people no longer resemble the earlier Kurdish people; 'Kurdistan is no more early Kurdistan' (Beşikçi 1990)" (Özcan 2006: 128).

96 As I unfortunately did not manage to get hold on this book, this part is based on the discussion Sarıtaş (2010) gives of the book and its meaning.

Saritaş notes that Öcalan was still quite influenced by socialist discourse at the time of this speech, which he largely abandoned later on. She also notes how Öcalan regarded art as a means through which the Kurds could regain their beauty that had been spoiled by the colonial powers. The seeds of this beauty are still there, only they need to be advanced and "completed by the revolution. Without the war, political and militaristic activities, arts and cultural activities would mean nothing. (..) [Art] has become a concrete need for the enhancement of the war" (Saritaş 2010: 66/7). According to Öcalan, art works thus two ways; it is an instrument that serves the war by mobilizing Kurds, and it is the seed of Kurdish beauty that needs to be advanced by the spirit of the PKK.

Over the years the PKK transformed from a movement primarily focused on an independent Kurdistan, into a 'humanizing' movement that believes it is changing society from within. The moral appeal of the PKK is meant for all Kurds, and ultimately for all human beings, who are expected to remold their personalities. Opposed to this moral appeal stands the morality of the Turkish state striving to remake individuals into Turkish citizens who feel part of a united Turkish nation. Subsequently PKK ideology comes to differ from the Turkish nationalist approach in the sense that it presents its ideology as transcending the borders of Kurdistan, of Turkey, and of the Kurdish-Turkish conflict.

Why and how would it make sense to understand PKK thought as self-Orientalist? First because of its direction towards an "imagined Western audience" and its reliance on Western and Turkish Orientalist thought concerning the backwardness of 'traditional societies' and their need for progress, civilization and modernization. But Orientalism is also about power structures and domination, and about the mobilization of knowledge for power. I suggest that this combination of factors is present in the way the PKK have dominated the discursive field of Kurdish society since the 1980s. This (often violent) domination has decreased since the 2000s as the Kurdish movement has become an increasingly common undertaking of various parties (see chapter 4), but PKK narratives have long lasting effects on Kurdish narratives and were very present during my fieldwork.

The difference with Turkish and other Orientalisms is what I call a 'reversed process of Othering'. The PKK has created an ideology which presents the entire Kurdish population as backwards and in need of modernization. This is different from Turkish self-Orientalism which locates backwardness in only a segment of its population: the east (i.e. the Kurds) and the countryside. However, this rejection of traits internally present within its own population is done through a definition of external enemies that have contaminated and colonized the originally good Kurdish

society. These external Others would have penetrated Kurdish society and caused destruction from within. By defining Kurdish modernity as a project exceeding the immediate local political conflict and as a solution valid for all humanity, but originating in Kurdish society, the PKK ultimately attempts to de-Orientalize itself.

As we will see in chapter 2 and 4, both the narratives about the exploitation of the Kurds by the Turkish government, Islam and the Kurdish elite, and the moral appeal to remake oneself into a new Kurdish personality, have influenced the way the dengbêjs and their art have been understood and are presented by political activists. In dialogue with this ideology, chapter 1 presents dengbêj kilams that display different moral narratives, from another time and perspective. Chapter 3 present life stories and experiences of individual dengbêjs who have their own way of understanding and negotiating the range of moral narratives that are and were circulating today and in the past. Chapter 5 focuses on the embodied experiences of village life, lack of education, and new performance opportunities.

Studying the particularities of historical moments, and of individual and social situations, is one of the most important ways in which we can avoid Orientalist thinking or othering.[97] Thus, I do not regard the dengbêjs as *the* expression of a unified Kurdish culture, but as one possible expression of Kurdishness at particular historical moments.[98] Moreover, I do not approach the dengbêj art itself as a singular phenomenon, but as understood, experienced, negotiated and performed by various actors in various ways. Throughout the dissertation I use theory and methods that assist in focusing on particular people and moments. The next section gives some notes on this theory.

i.4 Narrative and morality

> Storytelling is never simply a matter of creating either personal or social meanings, but an aspect of "the subjective in-between" in which a multiplicity of private and public interests are always problematically in play. (..) For every story that sees the light of day untold others remain in the shadows, censored or suppressed (Michael Jackson 2002: 11).

97 "Generalization can make these 'others' seem simultaneously more coherent, self-coherent and different from ourselves than they might be. Generalization, however useful for other projects, helps make concepts like 'culture' and 'cultures' seem sensible. This in turn allows for the fixing of boundaries between self and other." (Abu-Lughod 1993: 7).

98 "In anthropology, folklore, and history, discoveries of invented traditions, fraudulent tribes, and nationalistic imaginations undermined notions of cultural authenticity while fueling studies devoted to such politics of culture." (Bendix 1997: 4).

The turmoil that overran the Kurdish regions since the 1980s required new stories, fitting new circumstances. It formed the breeding ground on which Kurdish nationalism grew into a widely supported movement that developed new ideas about Kurdish society. The dengbêjs, most of them elderly people, stand as it were in the midst of a variety of storylines. They are producers and transmitters of stories of 'the old times', but also became the subject and producers of stories about their meaning and value for today's Kurds in Turkey. The various types of narratives of and about the dengbêjs that I encountered during my fieldwork can be seen as a means to negotiate old and new moral narratives. This happens to be so because the dengbêjs were one of the main pre-1980s institutions producing and spreading moral ideas about the order of society. The current by far most influential institution producing moral ideas about Kurdish society is the Kurdish movement. In the changes Kurdish society in Turkey went through after 1980, the old institution of the dengbêjs, and the new Kurdish movement, clashed. As we will see, it took time for them to find a way of cooperation.

My preoccupation with narrative and nationalism connects to a recent increasing interest within Turkey in oral history in the context of the nation-state, in academic as well as in journalistic publications. Academic examples are Leyla Neyzi and Esra Özyürek who, both in different ways, analyzed individual stories countering or supporting official discourses. Such alternative voices are not received without resistance. In the nationalist academic journal *Millî Folklor* for example, Öztürk (2010) criticizes Neyzi for presenting oral history as an 'alternative history', and for generalizing from using only one person's story. But Neyzi (2008, 2005, 2004, 2002) has a story to tell, as each of her articles makes painstakingly clear. Her focus on individuals is so powerful because most of such stories remained hidden from a larger public, or remained untold entirely, until recently. As Özyürek (2006) has shown, people were conditioned to believe they were all part of the nationalist, secularist and modernist project of the Turkish state in which only a limited range of stories were acceptable. Neyzi's attention to individual stories therefore connects with the neglect and rejection that many people have experienced as part of their identity. Her approach has encouraged a more general attention to and openness towards these untold stories, and made people more aware of the diversity within their society. Neyzi gained support within and outside of academia, and her academic articles were followed up by newspaper articles and projects more accessible to the mainstream public (for example the recently launched oral history project www.gencleranlatiyor.org). Independently of academia, newspapers now also often publish articles presenting the life story of someone from a minority, therewith

asking attention for 'hidden' stories of Turkish citizens who could not, or did not dare to, speak up.[99]

My dissertation joins this trend by calling attention to the variety of narratives that have been produced in Turkey, by more people and through more institutions than those that generally have reached the public domain. Through the topic of the dengbêj art, I aim to gain a better insight into the diversity and development of ideas about being Kurdish or Turkish within the context of the nation-state. In the following I outline the two main theories I use in the dissertation: narrative and morality.

Narrative

> Narrative is a social form of speech. This is so not only because narrative is done with others, but also because it is ripe with shared values and meanings. But sociality is not simply sharing; it is a dialogue within a range of possibilities of understanding. It is often through narrative that persons negotiate this understanding, in doing so they navigate the potentially dangerous semiotic waters of difference and similarity. In other words, through narrative persons perform sociality. They can also perform and articulate their moral conceptions, and do so in ways that are both personal and socially recognizable (Zigon 2008: 156).

The narrative approach (Jackson 2002, Somers 1994, Ricoeur 1991) assumes that people narrate their lives in order to make sense of what happens to them.[100] Narration is not purely individual; we always borrow ideas and concepts from others. By linking our own stories to social narratives, we locate ourselves in the narratives that circulate in society at a particular moment. Narrative is one of the important means through which people and institutions negotiate their identities and the relationship between various identities. Although in theory the number of narratives is endless, in practice a limited number of narratives are available at any given time and place. Which narratives prevail at any given time depends on the existing power relations. If meaningful narratives are not available for a given group of people, this may lead to experiences of exclusion, powerlessness and despair. In situations where people feel suppressed and excluded, often powerful counter narratives develop in order to be able to maintain certain values and resist domination. In *The politics of storytelling* (2002), Jackson calls storytelling a 'vital human strategy for

99 One of the numerous examples was the article titled 'Dersim'in kayıp Ermeni kızı' (A lost Armenian girl from Dersim), in the newspaper Radikal about a woman who only in 2010 told her children that she was Armenian and was a genocide survivor (Radikal, May 15, 2012).

100 Following Ricoeur, narrative can be defined as the interpretation and imitation of a past action by selecting and ordering a multiplicity of events into a meaningful unity.

sustaining a sense of agency in the face of disempowering circumstances' (2002: 15). Recreating life through storytelling gives one a sense of control: "to reconstitute events in a story is no longer to live those events in passivity, but to actively rework them, both in dialogue with others and within one's own imagination" (*Ibid*: 15). Even if existing power relations remain in place, the alternative narrative may alter the experience of powerlessness. Counter narratives may seem incapable of changing actual circumstances, but do important work for people belonging to minority groups. Those in power are not without a reason often anxious enough for their consequences, and make every effort to silence and suppress them.

When a society lives through a period of deep transformation, new institutions are created, new narratives arise, and both individuals and groups need to position themselves anew in relation to these institutions and narratives. Narratives are one place where meaning is shaped as people negotiate and rework views of themselves, their immediate environment, and society generally. People thus create their own unique stories linked to social narratives, 'narratives are the articulation of the interaction between a person and her social world' (Zigon 2007: 147). The histories of other people's experiences saturate the various worlds in which we live; and it is with regard to the limits of the narratable that we build our lives and our stories (Steedly 1993: 23). It is through the 'continual negotiation of experience and representation in narrative that subjectivity is produced' (Steedly 1993: 30).

Narratives show the complex intersection of the various ideas people relate to, and this is exactly what makes the narrative approach so useful for my topic. Because of the politicized character of Kurdish society in Turkey, one is tempted to portray the dengbêjs as one category operating as a group with a single aim. Instead I found that the narratives that the dengbêjs tell, show the complexity of their daily lives and experiences. Their life stories show how individual dengbêjs create meaning and order in their lives, each one giving meaning to their particular situation and personal history. Using a narrative approach from the start of my research, I conducted lengthy interviews with dengbêjs. I wanted to gain insight into how what was currently happening affected individual dengbêjs in how they viewed themselves and their art. The focus in every interview was always on the dengbêj art: how they had learned to sing, what it meant to them, and how this meaning had changed during their lives. While analyzing my interviews I noticed two phenomena. First, a number of dengbêjs had a particular point they wanted to make, something that occupied them and to which they frequently returned. Their interviews were arguments that they built up and would not leave until complete. Second, the dengbêjs linked their stories to social narratives, but did so *selectively*;

they only used aspects of social narratives that they saw as meaningful for their own lives. I chose to show the narrative character of the interviews, instead of using the interviews as 'scattered quotations' (as in Malkki 1995). I present lengthy quotations to show how individual dengbêjs construct their story and argument, in order to make the reader understand how they situated themselves in the complex of narratives that were circulating in Kurdish society during the time of my research (2007/8).

In order to use the narrative approach for my data, I use four narrative dimensions distinguished by Somers (1994), although under different names.[101] The four dimensions are personal, social, meta, and conceptual narratives. Personal narratives are about who we are and become, how we situate ourselves, how we define ourselves and define our lives as individuals. Although we often use language that expresses being (I am a student, I am a Muslim etc.), these narratives incorporate time and place and are narratives of becoming, of the ongoing process of our lives. Although told by individuals, personal narratives are still social and interpersonal; they are formed by the society we live in.

Social narratives are narratives 'attached to cultural and institutional formations larger than the single individual, to intersubjective networks or institutions' (Somers 1994: 619). They are webs of narratives of various people who relate to each other, what Charles Taylor calls 'webs of interlocution'. There are innumerable public narratives and they can be short or quite lengthy; for example narratives about one's family, the workplace, government, or nation (Somers 1994: 619).

Meta-narratives are the grand narratives of a specific time, such as narratives about modernization, capitalism, globalization, progress, etc. We are so accustomed to these narratives that we consider them as the natural way to explain society and humanity. Thus people and institutions refer to these narratives as if they were self-evident. Somers argues that meta-narratives have the quality of denarrativization, i.e. they are built on abstractions, taken for granted, and tend to become fixed.

These three types of narratives interact and intersect when we narrate our lives. The fourth type of narrative is the conceptual narrative. Conceptual narratives are the narratives we create as social scientists. In order to explain social reality, we cannot only build on personal, social and meta-narratives. We also need to take into account social forces such as 'market patterns, institutional practices, organizational

101 Somers used the terms *ontological* and *public* narratives for the first two dimensions. For the sake of clarity, I preferred to rename them into *personal* and *social* narratives.

constraints'.[102] Conceptual narratives are how scholars analyze the social forces that create certain personal, public and meta-narratives. Thus, in this dissertation I place a variety of narratives in a social and historical context, and look at the ways they are interconnected.

The narrative approach is quite useful for tracing several levels of narrative, but it lacks the conceptual framework needed to investigate how people manage changes in their lives. To explore this, I use Zigon's ideas about morality (Zigon 2007). The idea of ethical moments addresses how individuals manage moral choices in times of transition. The idea of moral institutions will help locate narratives in specific places, such as institutions or historical processes, and to understand how narratives are established and maintained.

Morality and ethical moments

Ricoeur (1991) said that narrating our lives is a basis for inner understanding, as well as a guide for action; people act on the basis of the narratives they have in mind. I extend this idea by using Zigon's work on morality and ethics. There are two reasons why I felt the need to draw on this theory. First, as I explained above, the ideology of the Kurdish movement, which had a significant influence on the dengbêjs' return to the stage, makes a strong appeal to morality. The discourse the Kurdish movement employs sees dengbêjs as not 'just' oral performers, but as guardians of Kurdish heritage, and as such they have a more elevated task than only singing songs. Thus, the dengbêjs and cultural workers redefined the dengbêj art according to current moral narratives. Second, in times of change, people need to reposition themselves and rework their individual stories. This reworking is clearly present in the life stories of dengbêjs. The interviews I had with the dengbêjs often show, in one way or another, that they felt the need to explain and justify the choices they made and the changes they have lived through. They chose to connect their personal stories to certain social narratives. They tried to give insight into the reasons for their choices, and showed how they had come to certain decisions. Therefore, in order to do justice to the moral side of the stories of dengbêjs, and to the moral appeal of the Kurdish movement, I use Zigon's re-worked and more open-ended concept of Foucault's notion of 'working on the self' (2009: 261).

102 We need 'to devise a vocabulary that we can use to reconstruct and plot over time and space the personal narratives and relationships of historical actors, the public and cultural narratives that inform their lives, and the crucial intersection of these narratives with the other relevant social forces' (Somers 1994: 620).

So what is morality? Building on Foucault, Zigon defines morality as "the code or the rules that a society, or to be more precise, social institutions claim and attempt to impose on its members" (Zigon 2008: 42). In every society there is a range of moralities in distinct forms, articulated by political and religious institutions, media, literature, art, music, and protest, for example. This variety is important, because anthropologists have often equated morality with 'culture', or 'socially approved habits', which gives the impression that people's "role in morality is limited to that of following rules" (2008: 16). Instead, by doing justice to society's complexity and fragmentation and by defining morality as a *practice*, it is possible to study how people navigate among various forms of morality. A fundamental characteristic of human beings is that they are capable of reflecting and reexamining their attitudes and practices. There is space for individual moral choices, albeit within certain limits. People choose from 'a range of possibilities' as Zigon calls it, meaning there are a (limited) number of moral options available in every society, 'structured by a socio-historic-cultural context' (Zigon 2008: 18).

Zigon (2009) distinguishes three aspects of morality. The first is institutional—all (in)formal organizations that wield power over individuals and claim some kind of truth. They often have real influence and power, but should not be understood as totalizing. Although institutions tend to give the impression that their morality is unquestioned and that their members follow them in a united fashion, this is rarely the case. Still, institutional morality is a discourse people often refer to, and which can have significant influence on the moral views of an individual. Second is public discourse, which I call social narratives; all public articulation of beliefs that are not directly related to institutions, but interact with them. Social narratives are "the result of everyday dialogical interactions between persons" (2008: 163). These narratives are in interaction with articulated beliefs of institutions, but lead a life of their own because of their continuous negotiation when people talk about them and support or undermine parts of these beliefs. Third are embodied dispositions—the non-reflective and often unconscious ways of being in the world; people are able to generally behave in a socially acceptable manner without thinking about it.

Although this last aspect is valid in general, there are situations in which individuals are forced to take a step back and think 'how to act morally appropriate' (Zigon 2009: 260). It is these moments that Zigon labels as 'moral breakdowns' or

'ethical moments'[103], and in which he distinguishes morality from ethics: 'Ethics, then, is a conscious acting on oneself either in isolation or with others so as to make oneself into a more morally appropriate and acceptable social person not only in the eyes of others but also for oneself' (2009: 261). It is a creative moment that is put in motion by an event causing conflict with something one previously perceived as morally appropriate, 'the range of possible moralities available do not adequately fit the context' (2009: 263). By seeing ethical moments as a dynamic process that occurs regularly, Zigon redefines Foucault's notion of 'working on the self': "For Foucault this ethical process is aimed at self-mastery and authenticity. In contrast to this, I see the ethical process of working on the self as always open-ended and situational, and therefore as a recurring personal moment throughout one's life that can never end in self-mastery or authenticity" (2009: 261). Zigon also emphasizes that these are moments of freedom and creativity, because people have, even though limited, a choice.

People will always experience ethical moments, simply because their lives are not stable over the years. At such moments, a range of possibilities is present 'to overcome moral questioning'. People can connect to new moral institutions or social narratives and thus reposition themselves in the moral field. An ethical moment can be an individual process, for example, when going through important changes in one's individual life such as a divorce or a job change. But it can also be a societal process, in which a large group of people or a whole society experiences a period of transition. Zigon calls this a 'societal-wide breakdown'. Such moments are especially interesting for investigation because they are moments of reflection during which people create new moral personhoods (Zigon 2009: 262). For both the individual and society, societal ethical moments imply that they are flexible, creative, ambiguous and contradictory moments, and that morality is negotiated.

I see the following connection between both theoretical models. As we have seen morality is negotiated by people and groups of people. An important negotiation is performed through narrative, because through narrative 'speaking individuals negotiate, construct, and come to agree on their moral ways of being' (Zigon 2008: 136), and 'through narrative [people] negotiate the tension between personal and shared experiences of living-through a particular socio-historic-cultural world' (Ibid 156). When we re-examine the various types of narratives as distinguished by

103 I prefer using the term 'ethical moments' above 'moral breakdown'. The latter term suggests a radical, dramatic and problematic turning point, a severe psychological crisis, whereas the moments Zigon refers to do not need to be crisis situations. Ethical moments can be a more subtle transformation into a different viewpoint than the term 'moral breakdown' suggests.

Somers, we can think of the personal narrative as the place where this negotiation takes place on an individual level. In personal narratives, people give meaning to their experiences, negotiate moral tensions that exist among the various moralities they feel connected to, and work on their subjectivity. Next to these personal narratives, in social narratives we can find clues regarding what moral choices are negotiated on a societal wide level. Thus, personal and social narratives provide insight into personal moral choices, but also reveal the range of possibilities existing in a society, and the tensions existing between various moral institutions.

With this in mind, in the dissertation I examine the variety of moral narratives circulating at the particular moment of my field research. In chapter 1 I regard the dengbêj kilams as an older form of morality that reflects a different way of understanding Kurdish society than the more recent moral narratives of the Kurdish movement. In chapter 2 I demonstrate how dengbêjs negotiated different moral views and narratives in performances in the Dengbêj House in Diyarbakır. In chapter 3 I present the life stories of seven individual performers, and show how these individuals talk about important decisions they made during their lives, how they present these as morally just, and how they relate in different ways to older and more recent social narratives. In chapter 4 I focus on how political activists talked about the dengbêj art during the time of my research, and tried to fit this art into their moral narratives. In this chapter I situate the production of these narratives in certain institutions and places, and show what work these places did in the increasing importance of Kurdish cultural activism in Turkey. In chapter 5 I present the songs and stories of three members of one family whose lives were deeply influenced by the ongoing Kurdish conflict. The moral views of cultural activism that redefines the songs they know from their village as knowledge that needs to be protected and archived, gave them a new sense of worth and meaning. Also, their new position in the field of cultural activism made them rework their moral views on the position of women.

In short, in the collected ethnographic material I investigate how larger social and historical processes of nationalism, Orientalism, and conflict manifest themselves in particular places, stories, moments, and individuals. This focus on the particular does not need to prevent us from gaining insight into larger social processes;[104] rather, it assists us in countering generalizations and Othering. The variety of particular stories emphasizes both the different ways in which individuals

104 "Attending to the particulars of individuals' lives need not imply disregard for forces and dynamics that are not locally based; the effects of extralocal or long-term processes are always manifested locally and specifically" (Abu-Lughod 1993: 8).

connect to their environment, as well as the common themes and moral views that bind these narratives together in the different articulation .

i.5 Engaged writing

Following Lila Abu-Lughod (2005), Leyla Neyzi, and Ronald Suny (2001) I hope with my work to be able to engage with current debates in Turkey on nationalism, modernization, minority issues and the Kurdish question. This is not in the first place because I feel that I have something to contribute to the public debate (although I naturally hope so), but because I feel that such engaged writing is the only possible way of writing about this topic. During the writing process I often felt hesitation about whether my analyses would be understood as a support for one or another opinion. For example, when writing about the tensions between the dengbêjs and the organizers of the Dengbêj House; about the 'myths' of Kurdish unity; or about the *kilams* on tribal battles, one could easily understand my analyses as attempts to crush the efforts of the Kurdish movement to create a visible Kurdish culture; to downplay the importance of Kurdish counter narratives; or to enhance internal tension by writing about rivalries belonging to the past. Others could understand the whole undertaking of my research and the representation of the material in my dissertation as an impudent interference in Turkish internal politics, enhancing internal division which according to such views, support European political and economic interests. In order to counter such misunderstandings I decided it would be more fruitful to clearly express my intentions and concerns. I hope this will open up the opportunity to engage in debates with Kurdish and Turkish colleagues and non-academic readership living in Turkey. And although I hope first to gain the interest of people in Turkey, I also wish to contribute to the larger global debate on modernity, nationalism, and Orientalism, as I have outlined above.

The style in which I have written this dissertation and the order of the chapters is related to the choice of engaged writing. Even though my study will probably be far from what the dengbêjs and others I spoke with imagined it to be, I did feel a responsibility towards them in capturing what they found important and what they valued. Therefore, in addition to its theoretical goals, I hope to have written a work that depicts the life world of the dengbêjs in many of its colors and variety, and that does some justice to the value the dengbêjs attach to their art. It was my aim to write an ethnographic account of narrative, in which the variety of narratives circulating in a society at a particular time and place are presented, discussed and analyzed.

Instead of trying to capture everything in academic language, which could possibly break down the (artistic) quality of the work of the dengbêjs and the individual stories people told me, I present first of all literal translations of many of the stories I heard. I alternate conceptual narratives – i.e. my academic understanding and analysis of the various topics – with these (personal) encounters with the dengbêjs. Most chapters start with a story, event, or example that immerses the reader into the material. Although the material presented is naturally always my own selection and interpretation, I have tried to stay close to what the people I spoke, worked and lived with found important and central at the moment of the research. As the dengbêjs are the central figures of my dissertation, their voices are most present. Others I spoke with, such as television makers, journalists, writers, musicians, political activists and cultural workers, also appear in the chapters and sometimes play a central role because of their importance in inviting the dengbêjs back into public life, and in understanding what the dengbêjs and their art mean in present day Turkey.

i.6 Chapter outline

In chapter 1 I investigate a corpus of kilams that I collected during my research based on a number of selected 'figures' such as 'the mourning woman', 'the caravan trader', or 'the local leader'. I will use these figures to highlight the main themes I found in the kilams. The figures convey a (sometimes idealized) social landscape of Kurdish life in the past. The majority of these kilams are about a specific time and character. Many of the events they speak of can be situated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and the characters that are described in the kilams are often Sunni Kurdish men and women who lived in the Kurdish region in present-day Turkey. Placed in this specific timing, the kilams give shape to ideas about Kurdishness, identity and belonging. What are the main concerns, dependencies, and loyalties that speak from the kilams? By focusing on the presentation of home and foreign we will see that the kilams demonstrate predominantly local and small-scale attachments and alliances. Although in the kilams the Kurds are presented as a distinct group that differs from surrounding groups, smaller alliances carry more importance in the kilams than the Kurdish identity, and they do not reflect ideas about a larger Kurdistan. Rather, the kilams show the complexities of everyday life in a society in turmoil, in which loyalties and enmities crosscut simple divisions between self and other. I regard the kilams as a source of moral ideas about Kurdish society that differs from current moral views.

In chapter 2 I understand the activities of the dengbêjs as 'performing tradition'. Today's performances evoke a lost village world and try to revive and recall it. And with it, not only the village but also other characteristics that are seen as traditional and as the essence of Kurdishness are revived. I suggest that the celebration of tradition is done through several means. The dengbêjs are regarded as sources of history through their knowledge of kilams from old times. They are seen as bearing the traces of an authentic Kurdish past life through their personal experiences with village life and former times; performances bring to mind an idealized Kurdish past. However, this tradition can only be valued positively by neglecting part of the repertoire. The many kilams that refer to the tribal character of Kurdish society are today often left out of performances. By discarding these kilams the dengbêjs react to current narratives that emphasize the divisive nature of the tribes and the need for Kurdish unity. The anti-tribal sentiments are related to how many Kurds today feel about their Kurdishness. Many Kurds feel partly alienated from their village background and embarrassed because of some of its implications. At the same time they also increasingly feel the need for a recovery and rediscovery of forgotten folk traditions. Performing tradition is thus an act of nostalgia, but one that does not go unchallenged.

Chapter 3 presents seven life stories of individual dengbêjs. This chapter forms the central part of the dissertation and discusses the duality of being silenced and breaking silence so clearly expressed in the interviews of many dengbêjs. What strategies did these individual dengbêjs develop to make a space for performance within the context of their lives? How did they speak of these experiences in the today's social and political climate? What social and moral narratives did they draw upon and how did they use such narratives to give meaning to their life experiences? The themes narrative and morality meet in the stories of individual performers. This chapter bridges the first with the third part by demonstrating what impact societal changes and new moral narratives had on individual lives. The stories reflect important changes taking place in the Kurdish region in Turkey since the 1980s. Many people of the elderly generation are not as connected to social narratives dominant since the 1980s, as are the young generation who grew up during the PKK-government conflict. Their stories offer a diverse picture of performance opportunities and obstructions, and show more than just the politicized discourse on the dengbêj art as it developed over the last decade.

Chapter 4 discusses the reemergence of the dengbêjs in public life after two decades of collective silence. The various sites where the dengbêjs returned on stage became important spaces where Kurdishness was displayed (audio-)visually, and

contested the dominant presence of Turkish nationalism. I argue that central to these sites was, more than the dengbêj art in itself, cultural activism. The chapter also investigates the position of various political activists, mainly through the narratives they tell about the dengbêjs and Kurdish culture, and argues that the reemergence of the dengbêjs was predominantly guided by them, and not by the dengbêjs. I situate these narratives in the context of their lives and recent history, and in the context of the development of Kurdish and Turkish nationalist thought and cultural activism.

In chapter 5 I focus on the life stories and songs of three members of one family, a couple and their eldest daughter who perform regularly in a television program on the dengbêj art, broadcast from Europe. The songs they know traveled with them from their village of origin in Iraq, back to Turkey, to Iran, again to Iraq, and finally to Germany where they have lived since 1997. The embodied experience of oral tradition in the context of (a lost) village life is central to this chapter. What does the performance of the songs bring about for the people involved? I suggest that the act of performing the songs they know, and working on archiving them, helps them to recall their village past in a positive way, and in piecing together the shattered experiences of lives marked by war, violence and escape. This applies especially to women, who gained a different position and visibility through their performance on television.