



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

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

Hamelink, W.

Citation

Hamelink, W. (2014, October 9). *The sung home : narrative, morality, and the Kurdish nation*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/29088>

Version: Corrected Publisher's Version

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/29088>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Cover Page



Universiteit Leiden



The handle <http://hdl.handle.net/1887/29088> holds various files of this Leiden University dissertation.

Author: Hamelink, Akke Wendelmoet

Title: The Sung home : narrative, morality, and the Kurdish nation

Issue Date: 2014-10-09



Figure 6. The entrance of the Dengbêj House in Diyarbakır. Behind the gate the dengbêjs and some visitors sit in the courtyard of the House where they were often singing kilams. 2008.



Chapter 2

‘It would disappear within
a moment.’
Performing tradition.

Introduction

In everything [the dengbêjs] told was rhythm. The songs and epics were all on rhyme and music. And in addition to the rhythm in the words, they added a bodily rhythm. (..) The rhythm made it easier to remember the decorated words and the music that was connected to it. It was as if they knew that if they would not repeat their knowledge in a loud voice, it would disappear in a moment (Muhsin Kızılkaya¹⁹⁸ 2000: 23, translated from Turkish).

Diyarbakır, October 2008.¹⁹⁹ I awoke at 7.30 in the house of a friend. She lives in a quarter of the city that is inhabited by migrants who recently arrived from the villages. I heard the Kurdish voices of women and children outside. Many children were playing, even that early in the morning. Women talked with each other through open windows. The houses were old, a grayish brown, three or four storeys high, with little stairs outside climbing up each of them. On each floor there lived a family, two or three small rooms full of people. I left the house later in the morning, as I did on most days when I was there and took the minibus to Dağkapı. This is one of the large gates in the old city wall, built in antiquity and restored by Constantine in 349 CE. The beautiful city wall and the old restored houses and mosques give Diyarbakır the atmosphere of a distant past. From there I walked in the direction of the old bazaar, filled with people. The sun was burning hot, giving the streets and people a clear-cut sharpness. Small children followed me and tried to sell me packages of tissues or chewing gum. In front of the big mosque, built in the eleventh century by a Seljuk Sultan, old men sat on benches. Many of them wore small knitted caps with blue or red patterns.

I passed the mosque, the bazaar, turned right and walked until I saw the familiar brown sign saying 'Dengbêj House', in Kurdish, Turkish and English. To the left was the small shop of a music seller who played dengbêj music as if preparing the passersby for their visit to the House. When I approached the small entrance to the Dengbêj House I heard the voice of dengbêj Qadîr. His voice sounded old but was still amazingly loud. I could not stop being amazed by the volume, even after all that time. One man singing a cappella can be heard clearly from a distance of more than a hundred yards. I entered the courtyard of the old building with its typical grey basalt stones. The restoration of this old Armenian building took place the previous year and the opening of the Dengbêj House was in May 2007. Twenty to thirty people were sitting on wooden chairs, about ten of them dengbêjs. Most of them were over fifty years old, and all of them were men. They greeted me warmly

198 Muhsin Kızılkaya is a Kurdish journalist and writer currently living in Istanbul. He wrote a book about the dengbêj art, inspired by his brother who was a dengbêj.

199 this section is based on my field notes and video recordings.

and invited me to take a seat. Dengbêj Qadîr continued, his songs never ended, his voice never seemed to break down. In between the stanzas most people joined in humming a small tune, marking the end of the stanza. When he finished the kilam another dengbêj continued, and so on. While the dengbêjs sang, people sitting nearby remained silent. I put my small camera on the table, only pointing it in the right direction when another dengbêj began to sing. They allowed me to film because they knew me and because I had obtained permission. Without permission it was forbidden to make recordings. In this way, the organization of the House aimed to protect the dengbêjs from possible copyright abuses.

At the first sounds of the call for prayer, emanating from the big mosque just next to the House, the dengbêj stopped in the middle of his kilam. Most men stood up to attend the prayers. It was a natural break in the performance, a small movement in a day otherwise passed by in a chair. Often new visitors would enter right before or after the prayers. These were dengbêjs or audience members who had a break from work, who had something to do in the city center and quickly dropped by, dengbêjs coming from the villages around Diyarbakır, or sometimes from other towns and cities. They joined in the concert of voices, in the artistic expression of language, in the colorful play of imagination and recollection.

Dengbêjs do not need much for their performance, and most of what they need is already present in their body: their voice, memory, sense of rhythm, imagination, and social skills. Apart from this they might need a glass of tea with a sugar cube, so that they can take the sugar between their teeth and slowly sip the tea through it. And of course, they need an attentive public, people sitting around them and watching, listening, encouraging their dengbêj by joining in the wordless chorus, singing *ahiaaaaaaa*. Often performing alone in the village setting as it existed until about 1980, and without any other instruments than what they carried in their own bodies and minds, they were expected to entertain a large public for many long hours.

The most important instrument of the dengbêjs is their voice. Because of the lack of a musical instrument, and the solo performance, they train their voices until they are loud enough to keep even the listener who sits in the furthest corner or outside attentive. The second equally important instrument of the dengbêjs is their memory. A dengbêj performance is based on the principal of continuous repetition of sound and words that should not be forgotten. The transience of the oral word is crucial for grasping what it means to be a dengbêj. As in the quote above of Kızılkaya, “it was as if they knew that if they would not repeat their knowledge in a loud voice, it would disappear in a moment”. I use the meaning of this sentence here not only to

point to the nature of dengbêj art, but also to the village world and structure that for long formed the stage of the dengbêjs and that indeed did 'disappear in a moment', in a process of profound and rapid transformation that began in the 1980s. Today's performances evoke that 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. First, the dengbêjs are regarded as sources of history through their knowledge of kilams from old times. Second, they are seen as bearing the traces of an authentic Kurdish past life through their personal experiences with village life and former times. Seeing elderly people perform reminds people of a different life. Performances bring to mind an idealized Kurdish past, a different social structure, and the life world of the villages where most dengbêjs and many members of their audiences grew up. And third, 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 respond 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. The traditional life world to which the dengbêjs refer stands in contrast with the life world of the 'modern' Kurd. 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; the recollection that a dengbêj performance occasions forms a contested field. Through the manner of their performance the dengbêjs navigate this charged field of emotions.

I use performance here as a broad term that not only covers the act of singing and the way a stage or performance place is set up and decorated, but also the manner of (self-) presentation when relating to others at moments outside of the performance context proper. Most of the ethnographic material presented in this chapter is taken from performances and interviews that took place in the Dengbêj House in Diyarbakır. The point of departure here are the dengbêjs and their views, rather than those of the organizers of the House. Although the organizers and political activists encourage the dengbêjs to 'perform the nation' (Askew 2002), I understand the dengbêjs as 'performing tradition'. Both groups have different aims, and are therefore often in disagreement. These disagreements are the places where negotiations occur and where people articulate their respective viewpoints.

I focus on three layers of performance, first on the main performance location in Diyarbakır: the Dengbêj House. How does the dengbêj art take shape in and through the House, and how do the dengbêjs and their audiences feel about the performances that take place there? Second, I discuss the self-presentation of the dengbêjs; how do they present themselves to others? What do they say about their role, meaning and position, and how do they perform their role as dengbêjs? I demonstrate that the dengbêjs present Kurdish traditions and history, village life, and their experiences with this life world, as a central and heroic part of their identity. I also discuss how the dengbêjs deal with the part of their repertoire that is currently regarded as dangerous and backwards, that is, kilams about tribes and warfare. Third, I present the details of a performance in the Dengbêj House in which the dengbêjs sang many kilams and discussed them. I chose to focus on this particular performance because it touches upon many issues that were important for the dengbêjs during my research. The performance brings to life the topics discussed in the first half of this chapter. However, before going to the ethnography, I discuss the main theoretical approach that I use in this chapter, namely the ‘empersonment’ of Kurdishness.

2.1 The empersonment of Kurdishness

Singing and listening to singing is an activity that invokes the whole body. The repetition of melodies and movements that accompany music begin to be experienced in early childhood and give a sense of belonging that becomes deeply entrenched in (bodily) memory (Bilal 2006). They can therefore evoke strong emotions, both positive and negative, in later life. The way music is experienced in the body makes it into an especially powerful instrument for experiencing identity, whether national, religious, ethnic, or any other feeling of belonging. Since music in general, and folklore in particular, were mobilized for nationalist purposes, the performance of music and folklore also at times assumes a nationalist dimension. Bryant’s article about *saz*-learning (long-necked lute), an instrument regarded as a symbol of Turkishness, explores the bodily experience of music in relation to the creation of national identity. She argues that Turkish music students when they learn to play the *saz*, are involved in a “self-conscious molding of the self” (Bryant 2005: 224). The learning process involves more than mastering the technique of playing, it also involves learning how to “become a good Turk” (Bryant 2005: 224). Bryant emphasizes the self-conscious nature of this process, ‘empersonment’ instead of embodiment, the latter being a more unconscious

process. Embodiment and empersonment, both part of musical performance, can thus be seen as part of the process of shaping (national) identities.

Many Kurds feel ambivalent regarding these same processes, because they were taught to 'emperson' Turkishness and to see Kurdishness as a fraudulent and backward part of their identity. This is why in recent decades the Kurdish movement has put so much effort into representing and reinventing Kurdishness as a positive feature, as something to be proud of (see introduction). This is also why 'becoming a good Kurd' is a different process from that of 'becoming a good Turk.' The latter is a process through which one becomes at the same time a better Turkish citizen, a better nationalist, and a better person. Instead, 'becoming a good Kurd' means first that one becomes *less* Turkish, and that one's status as a Turkish citizen, a nationalist, and a 'good person', decreases, at least in the eyes of the Turkish establishment. From this 'outlaw' status one can then proceed to 'become a good Kurd.' However, also this Kurdish status is ambiguous in itself, insofar as it first needs to be cleansed of elements that are defined as backwards or contaminated by outside influences. Thus, the PKK emphasizes a conscious remodeling of the self in order to become a better person and a better Kurd, as they argue that Kurds lost their true identity following centuries of domination (see Introduction).

These two processes of becoming a good Kurd and of feeling the need to overcome backwardness and contamination are also prevalent in the representation of the dengbêj art. Dengbêjs are supposed to transmit a sense of authentic Kurdishness, of what a Kurd was in past times, when Kurds were still 'original'. They are presented as people who are in touch with some of the original Kurdish features, and can therefore play a part in recovering aspects of the essence of that lost identity. This can be identified in how certain gestures and bodily postures are seen as typical for dengbêjs, and are held to define their identity as Kurdish performers, for example, the placing of the hand to the ear while singing. The quality of the dengbêj voice (its pitch and strength) is perceived as being naturally shaped by the environment (mountains or plains) where s/he comes from. The often tragic sound of the kilams is seen as a natural expression of the deep suffering of the Kurdish people. Ideas about the dengbêjs as being somehow closer to nature, to history, to Kurdish suffering, and to origin, are repeated frequently in interviews, in TV programs, in CD booklets, and in books about the dengbêjs (examples follow in this and other chapters).

The celebration of tradition is done through the continuous repetition of figures and landscapes of past times, the accompanying sounds of the voices, the use of Kurdish and common phrases, and the performance setting. The dengbêj art is framed as a nostalgic activity in which both the performers as well as the content

of the songs and stories, are placed in a time and place outside of the contemporary. During a performance they evoke and emperson a life world that is lost or hidden, but needs to be recovered, revived, and remembered. The repetitive element of the dengbêj art connects the world of the imagination with bodily practice. Those who witnessed village performances in the past are reminded of former days through the presence, voices, and bodily movements of the dengbêjs. More than enjoying performances in the present, which they regard as poor substitutes of past experiences, dengbêjs and public alike enjoy the *remembrance* these performances bring about of past performances and the life world in which these performances were staged.

Dengbêj performances are thus seen as having the ability to trigger and symbolize ideas about Kurdishness, origin, authenticity, and the past. This is important, as many Kurds feel they have lost that direct connection to the Kurdish past. Many Kurds do not speak Kurdish, and did not grow up in a Kurdish environment. They feel they missed out on experiencing that Kurdish life world from within. Bilal (2006) argues that the loss of memories and experiences of Armenians in Turkey who were not allowed to remember produces feelings of a lost identity among the younger generation of Armenians; “the loss itself becomes the experience of being Armenian” (p. 67). Because the voices of the dengbêjs were silenced for so many years, and with them many other cultural expressions, hearing these voices may call up a similar feeling of a lost identity among the younger generation of Kurds who felt brainwashed by the Turkish education system. For other people, performing and listening to the dengbêj art may trigger memories of their past village life, often destroyed because of migration, resettlement or scorched earth policies, and now only existing in their memory.

But dengbêjs are also seen as representing the old traditional, tribal, and backwards Kurdish society, a past people do not like to be associated with. In the view of political activists that are dominant in the current representation of the dengbêjs, these less fortunate features need to be erased from the dengbêj art. Kurds need to ‘learn’ to become better moral persons, and the dengbêjs, together with everyone else in a public function, bear the task of educating the people in that. This means that activists expect from today’s dengbêjs that they focus on the positive features of Kurdishness, but omit those that are seen as negative. This is also why they expect the dengbêjs to dedicate themselves voluntarily to the Kurdish cause (see life story 3 in chapter 3). The self-Orientalism articulated by the activists and inspired by PKK ideology first accepts an Orientalist definition of Kurdishness as primordial, tribal, and backwards. Only after having thrown off these negative

elements, can one become a ‘modern Kurd’ who can be of use in building a modern Kurdish society. The dengbêjs and their kilams are in part perceived as exemplary of the tribal and backwards nature of Kurdish society, and can only be of use if they turn themselves into modern subjects, and if they recreate their tradition along wholly positive lines. However, at the time of my field research, not all dengbêjs subscribed, or felt connected, to these views. They used their newly established position to attract the attention of audiences, but did not necessarily follow the line of thought of the activists who had brought them there. Also, most of them did not share the ambivalent attitude towards their past or towards their rural, village background. They felt that the Kurdish past as they knew it from their kilams was not as problematic as it is portrayed in current narratives. They also were rather proud of the knowledge and experiences they had obtained in a village setting and wished to transmit this specific experience to the younger generation. In this chapter I investigate these dynamics from the perspective of the dengbêjs; in chapter 4 I turn to consider the perspective of political activists.

2.2 The Diyarbakır Dengbêj House and its dengbêjs

The story of the Dengbêj House that opened in 2007 in Diyarbakır begins with the *Navenda Çanda Mesopotamia* (Mesopotamia Cultural Center), a nationwide chain of Kurdish cultural centers in Turkey. These centers aim at educating Kurds about their cultural heritage, and at enhancing the visibility of Kurdish culture in Turkey’s public life (see chapter 4). In Diyarbakır, such a center was opened for the first time in 1994 with the symbolic name Dicle Firat, after the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.²⁰⁰ After its opening, the Dicle Firat center was closed and banned several times, and some of the people working at the center had been imprisoned. Since 2004 the center has enjoyed a relatively stable existence. The Dicle Firat cultural center has several functions that are comparable to the other centers I visited.²⁰¹ It is a meeting place for Kurds who are interested in Kurdish culture and language; cultural activities such as concerts and theater plays take place here; the cultural center supports its own music, dance and theater groups; and one can buy Kurdish books and music releases that are not easy to find elsewhere. In the early 2000s the interest in Kurdish tradition was on the rise and the managers of the center began looking for dengbêjs

²⁰⁰ The name emphasizes the old history of Kurdish habitation in the region, and the link with the empire of the Medes who are seen as the Kurds’ predecessors in social narratives.

²⁰¹ Apart from Diyarbakır I visited the centers in Van and Batman and two branches in Istanbul.

and inviting them to come to the center to perform there. The cultural center became a meeting place for the dengbêjs, who had not had such an opportunity before.

Although this was much to their pleasure, it appeared that it was not always easy to share the place with popular music groups who often practiced at the center as well. When they played their music, the dengbêjs could not continue their singing and felt overwhelmed by the louder music of the groups.²⁰² In the meantime the organizers of the center had been cooperating with the Diyarbakır municipality in setting up a plan for a heritage project. This resulted in the *Dengbêj ve Dengbêjlik Geleneği Projesi* (the Dengbêj and Dengbêj Tradition Project) funded by the European Union and the municipality of Diyarbakır. One of the aims of the project was to set up a Dengbêj House where the dengbêjs could have their own performance location. In chapter 4 I discuss the institutional aspects of this project and the House in detail. Here I focus on the activities of the dengbêjs and on the House as a place of performance.

The opening of the house happened to take place during my first fieldwork period. Before the opening, I visited and interviewed the dengbêjs in the cultural center. At that time, in spring 2007, the preparations for the new Dengbêj House were in full swing, and the dengbêjs were excited about the prospect. They regularly passed by to see how the renovation and construction work was coming along. Finally, during the seventh Diyarbakır Cultural Festival in June, the House was officially opened. A crowd of some two to three hundred people stood in the courtyard of the House. The opening speech was given by the Mayor of the Diyarbakır larger city municipality, Osman Baydemir. He said:

In every culture, in every region, there are some valuable things that become the reason for a culture and a language to live on, that become the reason for progress of the people. One of those are, in our region, the dengbêjs, for [the progress of] our culture and language. Indeed, we are very much indebted to the dengbêjs who have prevented from dying out this language I am now speaking, this language that today still exists.²⁰³

The Festival's host then introduced the new House to the people of Diyarbakır, and four dengbêjs, three men and a woman, were chosen to each sing a famous kilam.

²⁰² "When it is very crowded and there are people talking the dengbêj feels demoralized. Because when people don't listen, he feels demoralized and he will quit. For a dengbêj it needs to be quiet, when he sings, noone should raise his voice. That is the rule of the dengbêjs" (dengbêj Ramazan, interview in Turkish, Diyarbakır 2007).

²⁰³ "Di her çandî da, di her kulturî da, di her herêmî da, hinek tiştên giranbuha hene, ku dibin sêdem jibona jiyana çandê û jiyana zimên, û dibin sêdema pêşketina gela. Yek ji wan jî, li herema min, jibona çanda min, jibona zimanê min, dengbêj in, û dengbêjtî. Bi rastî, em gelekî dengdar in ji dengbêjan, ku bi rastî wunnebûna, dibik ev zimanek niha ez pê biaxivim, ev zimana îro nîm mana" (recorded speech by Osman Baydemir, May 2007, Diyarbakır Dengbêj House).

After this official opening, the dengbêjs moved from the cultural center to the House. The Dengbêj House is situated only 500 yards from the center, in the old city center. The building is surrounded by a wall and upon entering its only gate one finds oneself in a large courtyard. In the courtyard are tables and chairs for visitors and the dengbêjs to sit on, and a small building where tea is prepared for them. On the left side of the courtyard one sees a stage that is used on special occasions. On the right side there is a spare room where in 2008 the dengbêjs began to eat their lunch, provided by the municipality. There are also a few other spaces where the dengbêjs gather: two rooms with an official character which are beautifully decorated; and a large basement where the current performance took place, used on hot summer days. Upstairs are a few rooms that serve as offices for personnel from the municipality, among others the tourist office. Since its opening, the Dengbêj House has become an important tourist attraction of Diyarbakır.

Most of the twenty-four dengbêjs officially registered (see chapter 4) at the Dengbêj House grew up in villages near Diyarbakır. The twelve dengbêjs I interviewed were born between 1937 and 1966. They formed the core of the dengbêjs who often performed in the House. Two still lived in their villages and visited the House when they came in Diyarbakır for business or other purposes. The others had lived in the village until they were between twenty and fifty years old and then moved to the city for a variety of reasons. Some did not have their own fields which made it hard for them to make a living, others had to leave their village in the 1990s because of military operations, and still others continue to have a house and some fields in the village, but also found a job in Diyarbakır. The villages they come from are located in the surroundings of Muş, Kulp, Lice, Mardin and Batman. Two out of twelve dengbêjs attended primary school, others did not go to school at all. While in the village most dengbêjs made a living of farming, shepherding, and cattle breeding. Those who moved to the city had various occupations: trade, tailoring, construction, and some were again working as a farmer or shepherd. Although none of these twelve dengbêjs made a living from their art, three of them had released cassettes previously, and one of them had made one of the first Kurdish LP productions in Turkey in the 1960s. It was a marginal production but nonetheless important because of its unique character. Since the early 2000s, the dengbêjs of the House had been invited regularly to attend television programs and festivals. The Dengbêj Project had also contributed to their fame, as a CD was released with their voices, and an anthology of kilams in which sixty-six living dengbêjs are included, as well as the names and kilams of seventeen dengbêjs who passed away. The anthology consists of an introduction to the dengbêj art and a photograph and two kilams of each dengbêj. In a short time

the dengbêjs had thus gained much attention and interest from a large public spread across many regions. For most of them this was a new phenomenon, since in the past their audience had often been limited to people in their immediate environment.

In both places, the cultural center and the Dengbêj House, performances mostly took place in open air in the buildings' courtyards. After moving to the House they continued performing in more or less the same way as at the cultural center. At least some dengbêjs were present almost every day, varying from a few to a dozen at a time. When there were enough dengbêjs present (around five) they would sing and that could continue for hours. Most dengbêjs I spoke with had begun performing again as recently as one to five years before. There was still an atmosphere of surprise and delight among them about the sudden revival. The following quote is from a dengbêj whom I interviewed only shortly after the opening of the House:

I invite everybody to come to the Dengbêj House in Diyarbakır. To see what we are doing, to listen to us. That's what I say. (Is the Dengbêj House and the cultural center important for the dengbêjs?) Yes it is very important. Until now we had to do with a situation where the dengbêjs of our home regions (*memleket*) were unknown. Nobody knew them. But after the cultural center was opened, it was called the place of the dengbêjs. I only came here after they had told me about it. Dengbêjs didn't come together in any place, and no songs were sung. But after [the House] was opened, things expanded. Where ever there was a dengbêj, he came to this place. We got to know each other. It has become very nice" (dengbêj Silêman, interview in Turkish Diyarbakır 2007).

The dengbêjs had only recently realized that their art was being revived, and that they had their own special place to perform, 'the place of the dengbêjs'. After years of invisibility, 'nobody knew them', they were at once visible players in the public domain. When one approached the cultural center of Diyarbakır one could already hear their voices in the streets. A special program was made about them for local television and they were invited to festivals and cultural evenings. The Dengbêj House made their presence more established; the municipality, cultural center, and even foreign institutions (see chapter 4) gave them their official recognition for representing a tradition of importance. In newspapers and magazines they were presented as the guardians of Kurdish culture.²⁰⁴ They were not yet accustomed to this new visibility and audibility and were trying to define a new space for themselves within all these developments.

²⁰⁴ For example Salih Kevirbirî writes in an article published on Zaphaber.com: "Kurdish culture, literature and language have survived and were prevented from extinction because of the dengbêjs, like in the meantime hundreds of intellectuals and linguists also have stated. These 'word hunters', these 'speak wizards', or better said the 'hard discs' of Mesopotamian literature, constitute the origins of the history and culture of the soil where they were raised" (April 13, 2008, translated from Turkish).

At the same time, even though they felt inspired by the new attention, there was among most dengbêjs also a strong sense of dissatisfaction with the lack of genuine interest among their audiences. They had a place to perform, but often did not feel sufficiently appreciated. Among many dengbêjs there was a deep sense of difference between current performances and the memories of the past. Many dengbêjs felt that the audience lacked understanding, encouragement and appreciation. The audience, on the other hand, blamed this on the dengbêjs. I often heard the complaint that the current generation of dengbêjs lacked quality, or could not be called dengbêjs at all. People felt that the real dengbêjs had lived in the past and not today. Another reason for the lack of encouragement on the part of audiences was that most of them preferred to listen to other music in their daily lives than to that of the dengbêjs. Many people preferred to listen to musical groups, with their various instruments and voices. These groups were generally much more popular than the dengbêjs. The lack of appreciation was, of course, demotivating for the dengbêjs. The negative attitude of the audience meant that the dengbêjs could not recover the satisfaction and pleasure they had gotten out of performances in their younger years, notwithstanding the new platform they were being offered. I will demonstrate this more clearly below.

The feeling of being misunderstood and undervalued is related to the effort it takes to be a dengbêj. They often told me: 'being a dengbêj is not easy'; it requires much dedication and motivation to keep on memorizing their repertoire. None of the dengbêjs I spoke with had ever written their kilams down, and many were illiterate, or only literate in Turkish and not in Kurdish. They saw the oral character of the dengbêj art as its central quality. When I asked if they had ever written down a kilam, or if they would like to do so, they immediately rejected this idea. Apart from seeing it as unnatural and unnecessary, the dengbêj here also sees a spiritual dimension to the dengbêj art:

No! Nothing, no writing. The memory is strong. Dengbêjs do not write down. It is a kind of writing that has been given by God! Now, a lawyer gets a training, you get training as well. Now the dengbêj receives training by God. It is a training from God. There is no writing. Singing from the morning to the evening, it is an inspiration given by God, a training. We can sing from the morning to the evening and it does not finish (dengbêj Memo, interview in Turkish, Diyarbakır 2007).

The idea of writing down the kilams seemed to be entirely foreign to the perception they had of their art. Some even expressed the view that kilams *cannot* be written

because they are too long and complicated.²⁰⁵ And even if it were possible, it would not make any sense since the kilams are stored in their memories anyway:

(Did you ever write down your kilams?) No I didn't. (Why for example didn't you write it down?) Well, I of course know how to read and write, but I have never felt any need to write it down (*hiç merak etmedim*). It was not necessary, as it remained anyway in my memory. I have never found it necessary (dengbêj Îsa, interview in Turkish, Van 2007).

But the same dengbêj emphasized later in the interview that he needed to continuously rehearse the kilams in order not to forget them, and that, because of the decades in which the dengbêj art had almost passed into oblivion in public life, he and many others had already forgotten large portions of their repertoires:

We have opened here [the Dengbêj House in Van] in July 2005. But most of the dengbêjs have died. And most have forgotten what they knew. All of us, I am saying this also about myself. I have lost many things, I have forgotten many. If you cannot sing you forget. So what we are doing here, we are bringing it to life since only recently. Before that we didn't have the chance (dengbêj Îsa, interview in Turkish, Van 2007).

For many dengbêjs the time of silence could not make them hold on to the effort it takes to rehearse and remember in detail the many kilams they had once learned. Some dengbêjs expressed how they felt when they realized they would forget their repertoire. They described the process of forgetting as something causing emotional and physical pain and discomfort:

I didn't sing songs for twenty years. But at home also within those twenty years I continued singing. (Not to forget?) If I don't sing songs I have headaches, so I have no choice than to sing them. At home, when I sleep next to my wife, I sing songs. She says to me, 'what is this singing of yours?' And I say, 'if a song comes to mind I have to sing it'. She didn't want it, but I said, 'if I don't sing I have headaches, I become ill' (dengbêj Abdülqadir, interview in Turkish, Van 2007).

One of the people I worked with most intensively is dengbêj Cihan, an elderly dengbêj born in 1925, who lived in Istanbul with his son's family. His wife passed away and now in his old age he depends on the care of his children. As his children told me, and as I also witnessed during my frequent visits over the years, he has an insatiable desire to sing, even when no one in the house comes to listen. Often when

205 "He said to me, you sing it, and I will write it down. And I laughed and I said: 'you want to sing it from writing? It is impossible. Do you think you will be able to sing from what you have written?' He wanted a song about a tribal conflict, Silêmanê Mistê. And I started to sing and he wrote it down, and he wrote so much and he said: 'is it still not finished?' And I said: really [*vallah*], it is still not finished". Dengbêj Salih, interview in Turkish, Batman 2007.

he wakes up he starts singing, and also late at night before falling asleep he sings. He has a large repertoire and can, in spite of his old age, sing kilam after kilam. He attaches great importance to what he thinks is the correct version of a certain song, and hearing someone singing mistakes on television (such as mentioning incorrect place or person names) can upset him. During my visits, his sons were glad that he could sing for me so that he had the chance to express himself, saying 'it works as a therapy for him'. The continuous rehearsal of the songs is an emotional and physical need. Therefore, the time in which dengbêjs had abandoned singing in public life was a painful experience for many of them.

The current performance places are new opportunities for the dengbêjs to let their voices be heard, to take the time to remember old kilams which they had not sung for many years, and to discuss their kilams with each other. Most of them did not have the chance to meet with this many dengbêjs before; even when the dengbêj art was still popular only the most talented dengbêjs could travel to faraway places and meet many others (see Introduction). Another new development is the archiving of their songs in books, CDs and television archives. Although dengbêjs generally indicated that they did not feel the need to write down their kilams, they do appreciate seeing their kilams, names and pictures in anthologies and CDs. It gives them a sense of being respected and of contributing to the new visibility of Kurdish culture. Still, also these new opportunities cannot fully compensate for the disappointment the dengbêjs often feel. Dengbêj Osman for example, who lives in Istanbul and is an apprentice of the famous dengbêj Reso, voiced his ideas about the current atmosphere and audience as follows:

There are no meetings (*cemaat*) as in the past, no places where people come together and dengbêjs sing songs. Not like today with wedding dances and wedding songs, but dengbêj like in the past, sitting down. I do not see such kind of meeting. (..) When a dengbêj does not feel affected (*duygulanmazsa*), he cannot sing. If in such a place dengbêjs can sit down and feel affected, in that case he can sing nicely. But now if it is only to yourself, to whom are you going to sing? (dengbêj Osman, interview in Turkish, Istanbul 2007).

Dengbêj Osman says the meetings of the past cannot be found anymore today. He makes a distinction between such meetings, and wedding dances and songs. At past weddings there would be a separate place apart from the dancing crowd, where people gathered to listen to the performance of one or more dengbêjs. Such a gathering is called *dîwan*, and the group of people who gathered is called *cemaat*. Instead of the rhythmic wedding songs, *stran*, the dengbêjs would perform the longer kilams to which one cannot dance, but one needs to listen to attentively. Those were the times

when dengbêjs had interaction with the audience. Without this dimension dengbêj Osman feels there is no place where the dengbêjs can show their abilities:

For that reason according to me there is not much dengbêj art at the moment. They are not affected, they cannot sing. (There is not much in Istanbul, but..) In the home regions there is nothing at all! (But what about the Dengbêj House in Diyarbakır?) Yes that is what I mean, those are institutions. Institutions (*kurum*), institutions, there are also institutions in Istanbul. They indeed call them Dengbêj House, but there is nothing like the old meeting places where one felt affected, there is no such mechanism. (*Yani mala dengbêja diyorlar, yani eski cemaat duygulanıp öyle birşey yok, bir mekanizma yok*) (Because...? People don't listen?) Yes. That's why dengbêjs... Look for example at me, they call me, I sing, but I do not feel affected (*beni çağırıyorlar, ben söylüyorum, ben duygulanmıyorum*). They do not give me support, they don't say things like 'you sing well'. They don't feel affected. For that reason I also become, I become cold (*Onun için ben de şey oluyorum, ben soğuyorum*). (dengbêj Osman, interview in Turkish, Istanbul 2007).

Despite the new places and performance opportunities, this dengbêj felt that the public is still different from the past, he does not feel affected by them. He dissociates himself from the Dengbêj Houses by saying 'they call them Dengbêj Houses'. There are 'so-called' Dengbêj Houses, but they do not come near to past experiences. He also emphasizes that they are *institutions*. It seems he feels the institutions cannot replace the places and experiences of past performances. Even when they invite him to sing, he does not feel they are really supporting him, and he does not feel inspired to give his best. He describes the past interaction between the dengbêjs and the public as a kind of mechanism that got lost. Because of the lack of that mechanism, he feels that he is 'becoming cold'. It is not only about the people present, but about the manner in which they are present, about how they encourage the dengbêjs and take part in their performance. According to the dengbêjs the current atmosphere has lost its taste and color.

Both the dengbêjs and their audiences remember a time when performances were more special and appreciated than today. Every dengbêj had stories to tell about performances he attended of his masters, and special memories of own performances. Memories of the joyful atmosphere present when a dengbêj visited a village, of the high expectations of the public, and of the gifts they received as signs of respect and appreciation. Also elderly people I spoke with who were not dengbêj often had vivid memories about dengbêj performances they had attended in the past. For example Fatih Kılıç (born appr. 1950) from the region of Maraş who remembered dengbêjs performing when he was a child:

“Generally the things that I have heard were old songs. (...) There are differences in interpretation (*yorum*). According to me the best was Kurêş, and the second Salmanê Adul. Memik has a very good knowledge, but if it is for the style the others were much better. When I listened to Salmanê Adul I experienced the event, it was one of the enjoyments of my childhood. I felt as if I myself was present at that war [he sang about]. (...) He performed the dengbêj art and accompanied himself with the saz, he also lived in the summer pastures. With his voice he could imitate soldiers in war, the sounds of the soldiers’ swords, he hit the saz, he held his plectrum upside down and in that way he could produce the strangest sounds. When you listened to him it was as if two armies were in battle; as if Sinan Pasha came from Baghdad; you would feel as if Shah Ismail and Yavuz Sultan Selim²⁰⁶ were in battle”²⁰⁷ (Fatih Kılıç, interview in Turkish, Pazarcık 2007).

Experience and imagination are central to a dengbêj performance. For Fatih Kılıç this feature of the dengbêj art made it into one of the enjoyments of his childhood. Listening to a performance could make him feel present at the event that was sung about; it gave him an embodied sense of being in another time and place. For him dengbêj performances were all about creating that experience, which made him judge Salmanê Adul as the best one as he was most successful in that respect. The details with which the story was told, the special use of his voice, and the way he played his saz, were the elements that brought about such vivid experiences. But also for Fatih Kılıç, it is a memory of a past experience that cannot be relived today.

2.3 Performing the village

When I was young, being a dengbêj was very valuable. When you were a dengbêj, there was no one as valuable as a dengbêj in the world, at that time [*dünya’da dengbêj kadar kimse kıymetli yoktu o zaman*], thirty to thirty-five years ago. And before that it was even more valuable. There was no television, no radio, no cassette player. There was no electricity. Only dengbêjs. (...) What is the dengbêj art? For example you plant a tree. The tree gives apricots, or peaches. Look, everyone benefits from that tree.

206 These are all figures in the Ottoman-Safavid wars in the 16th century. These wars carry special meaning for the Alevi. They originate from rebel groups that were affiliated with the Safavids.

207 Fatih Kılıç (pseudonym) is a Kurdish Alevi. He was one of the people who showed me examples of the musical exchange between Alevi Aşiks and Sunni Kurdish dengbêjs, see Introduction. In the regions where Alevi and Sunni Kurds meet (for example Adiyaman, Elazığ, Malatya and Maraş), dengbêj and aşık styles are sometimes mixed. I recorded some performances where the performer sang in dengbêj-style, but accompanied himself with the saz. The dengbêj Fatih Kılıç tells about seems to have had a similar mixture of styles. He played the saz, but sang in dengbêj style. The song topics he mentions are taken from Alevi tradition. Additional research in these regions is needed to understand the dynamics of the exchange between Alevi and Kurdish performance styles.

Next to its fruits, the tree also gives shadow. The dengbêj art is like a flower, like a lake, like a garden, like a fruit tree.²⁰⁸

Dengbêjs often presented the past, when the dengbêj art flourished, as a time that has been lost. They described this lost past as a time of small villages, few opportunities, a lack of education and health care, bad roads and difficult transportation, and a different attitude among the people. In this small-scale life world the dengbêjs fulfilled a crucial role and were therefore highly respected. In this section I present the story of dengbêj Mahmut (see also chapter 3) in which the nuances of the nostalgic framing of past performances in a village context become particularly clear. His story also reveals how the dengbêjs and others detect a difference between people from the past and today's Kurds, and between people living in villages and those living in the city. I consider the interview as a performance in itself, and therefore call this section 'performing the village'. Dengbêj Mahmut is relatively well-known and has been interviewed before. He is a good story-teller who presented his life story as a developed storyline rather than as a purely personal account. Later on I discovered that he had used some phrases almost exactly the same elsewhere in a newspaper interview.²⁰⁹ Speaking of his art and his position is a presentation that I came to see as part of the overall performance he and other dengbêjs give. They perform not only by singing, but also by being present in the House, by talking about their art, and by their whole self-presentation.

I conducted the interview in 2007 in Turkish at the cultural center in Diyarbakır, just before the opening of the Dengbêj House. In order to give a good impression of how dengbêj Mahmut elaborately talked about his art as something belonging to another time and to a different type of people, I cite relatively large portions from the interview. Although I present the story of only one dengbêj here, others expressed similar views, and the story therefore conveys a sense of how many dengbêjs spoke about the value of their art.

Dengbêj Mahmut was born in 1956. During the Russian-Ottoman war his forefathers came to inhabit a former Armenian village²¹⁰ where dengbêj Mahmut lives until today. He makes a living from farming and trade. Dengbêj Mahmut

208 This and the other quotes in this section are taken from an interview with dengbêj Mahmut conducted in May 2007 in Diyarbakır. Interview in Turkish.

209 Unfortunately later on I could not remember where I read his interview and have not been able to trace it. However, I do remember well to have read it because initially I felt disappointed that my interview with him was not 'unique'. Later on I realized that I could also see it in a different way; not as reducing the value of the interview, but as seeing the whole interview as a performance. This is why it fits well in this chapter on performance: it is not just a personal story, but a performance in itself.

210 See life story 4 in chapter 3 for context information about Armenian villages and the Armenian presence and absence in Turkey.



Figure 7. Dengbêj Ûsivê Farê performing in the courtyard of the Cultural Center in Diyarbakır. 2007.

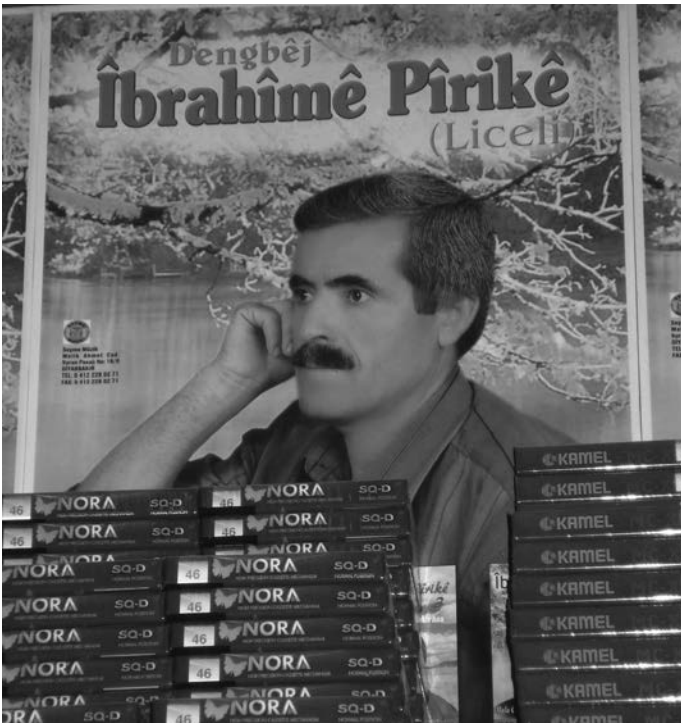


Figure 8. Advertisement in a music shop in Diyarbakır for a cassette of dengbêj İbrahimê Pîrikê. 2007.

began the interview with the above quote about the high value of the dengbêj art in society when he was young, and added: “and before that it was even more valuable.” With this last phrase he creates the imaginary of a far away past, further back in time than his own youth, an origin, in which things were different than today. He connects the value of the dengbêjs at the time to the lack of other media like radio and television: there were “only dengbêjs,” whom he compares to a fruit tree “from which everybody can eat and sit in its shadow.” He saw dengbêjs thus as having a very important role in feeding, entertaining, and reviving people. But, he felt, the dengbêjs lost this central position because of new media and electricity that came to the villages. Herewith he presents a direct connection between technological progress and the dengbêj art. Dengbêj Mahmut continues speaking about his early interest in the dengbêj art:

When I was about twelve years old, I let my shoes be polished in front of the café. I gave some extra money so that the shoe polisher would sing me a song. I was young and had a bright mind. (..) At that time there was a Dengbêj Café (*dengbêjler kahvesi*) in Diyarbakır. Like we now have the cultural center, there was a Dengbêj Café thirty five to forty years ago. It belonged to Mihemedê Hazroyê. The dengbêj came there often, they all went there. He played LPs, it was the only LP-player at that time in Diyarbakır. At that time I was very keen [on getting to know more] (*o zaman çok meraklıydım*). I traveled ten km by foot to go there. I came there and all the dengbêjs came there and I saw them all alive (*hepsi gördüm, canlılar gördüm*). Believe me I recorded everything in my mind (*beynimde kaydedildim*) at the time they were singing. And then I said to myself: I wish that I could also be a dengbêj, that I could also sing in society (*keşke bir gün olursa ben de böyle dengbêj olayım, ben de toplum davaya bir yerde söyleyim*).²¹¹

Living close to the city dengbêj Mahmut had the opportunity to see famous dengbêjs performing from nearby, and to learn from them. The examples of the dengbêjs in the Café gave him the wish to be a dengbêj as well, and to ‘sing in society’. This phrase refers to the task the dengbêjs feel they have. They are not only performers, but also feel they serve the people by bringing them historical and other knowledge, and by voicing their experiences, emotions and complaints. Subsequently Dengbêj Mahmut summarized what has changed since that time:

Şakîro and the other old ones have died. The only one left is Zahiro (..). And in Diyarbakır Seydxan Boyaxçî, and in Batman Salihê Qubînî. [Apart from them] the dengbêj art had vanished from the market (*dengbêjlik piyasada kalmadı*), nothing was left. But one day when I was at home, somebody called me, and said: ‘you have to sing on television’. I said: ‘if I come on television, what can I do? I have not sung for ten to fifteen years, I have abandoned it, I have forgotten.’ But he said that I definitely had to come, he said: ‘if you say once more that you don’t come then I will come and

211 All quotes in this section are taken from an interview with dengbêj Mahmut conducted in Diyarbakır in 2007. The interview language was Turkish.

bring you by force. You have to sing' (When did this happen?) Two years ago, in 2004 or 2005. So I went there, and there were six dengbêjs who had gathered. All of us sang one song. After that everybody had seen us on television. They said, look there are dengbêjs again in the market (*dengbêj gene piyasada çıktı*). After that we started to sing two or three times every week, and it was sent to the television. And after that [dengbêjs] came from the small towns, from the villages. There are now fifteen or sixteen dengbêjs here, who are connected to the Dicle Fırat cultural center in Diyarbakır. But there are dengbêjs who are even more famous than us, and who have an even better voice and sing nicer (*ama fakat bizden daha fazla, bizden daha üstün, bizden daha namlı veya fazla güzel söyleyen var*). But they feel embarrassed and don't come, because no one attaches value to it (*utanıyor gelmiyor. Kıymet vermiyorlar ki!*). Not the government, not the municipality, not the people.

In this part dengbêj Mahmut gives an overview of what happened with the dengbêjs over the years: most of the old generation of dengbêjs died, only a few good ones are still alive; the dengbêj art had 'vanished from the market'; recently they were invited to sing on television; the dengbêjs are back in the public domain; but still he concludes that 'no one attaches value to it'. This summary works as a counterpoint to what he tells subsequently. From the overview of what happened to the dengbêj art, dengbêj Mahmut returns to his own life story, and to the time when he was learning to become a dengbêj:

When I was around twelve to fifteen years old, first I went secretly. We had a lot of animals, and a lot of work. In the morning I hid myself, and then I escaped and ran all the ten km way to Diyarbakır. The gate was closed at seven in the evening, and opened at six in the morning. I came and the Dağkapı gate was not opened yet. As soon as the gate opened I went to the Café. I listened there to a few songs, maybe two or three, not much, I listened and then I ran back home. During the time that I was running the kilometers home, I memorized (*ezberledim*) those two or three songs. One day my father said to me: 'my son, every time you get lost. What should come of the animals? Where are you going?' So I told him that I was learning kilams. My father also knew it, sometimes he would sing. When I told him this I said to myself: 'he will hit me now.' But he was very happy. He said: 'my son, now that you have started you have to learn it'. He said: 'show me, sing one for me'. I sat down next to him and sang a kilam. Of course people feel embarrassed in front of their father (*tabii insan babandan utanıyor, babandan çekiniyor*). The first kilam I sang not so well, because I was nervous (*heyecanlandım*). The second kilam went a little bit better. Then my father said: 'either don't sing at all, or if you sing, don't feel ashamed towards anyone (*ya söyleme, ya söylediğin zaman hiç kimseden utanma*). You even feel shame in front of your father'. After that he was very happy and he kissed me. He said: 'my son, when you sing, do it in the right way (*dürüst söyle*), without mistakes. Learn one song [at a time] in a very good way, and sing it in a very good way'. From that time until my father died, he gave me money every day. At that time a father would not give money. I was the youngest of the family, my father loved me very much. From that time onwards my father sent me. He sent me to places where

dengbêjs were, ten dengbêjs together, and said: ‘learn it’. In that way I went there and learned it, I was ‘opened’ (*açıldım*).²¹²

He depicts himself as a young hero who was very keen on learning, and who made great efforts to reach his goals (running 10 km back and forth from his village to Diyarbakır, being at the gate before 6 am). When his father found out why he was often missing in the morning, he received his full support and love, “he loved me very much”. Because of his father’s support, he could devote himself to learning. Dengbêjs often contrast their commitment and dedication to the little efforts of the current generation of youth. Later in the interview Dengbêj Mahmut remarked how small the effort of learning is today, now that he can record songs on his phone and repeatedly listen to them whenever he likes. The past world he describes is one untouched by technological progress, when he did not take a car to the city, but just ran there.

In the next section he demonstrates that he gained recognition from a large public when he started singing during a stopover in the town Muş:

Once when I was in Muş at the station I was waiting for the train to set off. But the train didn’t go. We went out and I stayed at the train station of Muş. There were five hundred people at least, everyone had to go to other places. And we were all waiting together. I was eighteen years old. I started singing a song, and one more. An old man stood up and said [to someone who was talking]: ‘don’t speak, it is disturbing for the man. If you want to speak, go outside’. But of course no one wanted to leave because it was snowing and in the train station it was warm. He said to me: ‘okay uncle, continue, I am sorry’ (*tamam dedi amca ben özürlülerim*). I sang for five hours. There were girls, women, men, young people, old people, and no one spoke a word. I would give something to have that time back, really at that time it was better than now (*o zamana kurban olayım, o zaman şimdiki zaman iyi gibi değildi?*).

Although he was only eighteen years old, someone asked for silence and called him uncle, a sign of respect for his function as a dengbêj. Different from today, “no one spoke a word. Really at that time it was better than now.” In the next section he spells out this difference by focusing on the importance of research on the dengbêj art:

For researchers like you I would like to say that it is good that you collect this information, let the people hear about us, because after us no dengbêjs will remain (*bizden sonra dengbêj kalkmaz, mümkün değil bu kırimdan sonra*). I am here [in the

212 Dengbêjs use this phrase for the experience that their voice and mind are ready to sing. At the beginning of a performance, they still feel a bit ill at ease. Their voice and access to their repertoire are not yet ‘opened’. They say that, after some time of singing, they have the experience of ‘opening up’, and can continue for hours without a break. (In Kurdish they say: *dengê min lê vebû/germ bû* or *ez lê vebûm/germ bûm*). In this case dengbêj Mahmut used this expression for the beginning of his singing career, for his ‘opening up’ for the dengbêj art.

cultural center] since four years, but unfortunately until now there hasn't been even one young person who came to me and asked me to sing a song to learn it. (..) This means that after us no dengbêjs will remain in Turkey or in the world. But the dengbêjs have a very old history and are a very old culture (*çok eski bir tarihtir, çok eski bir kültüredür*). I told you before about Abdulhadî and Huseyno. If they came to a village, the ten or twenty neighboring villages would also come to listen. But if a dengbêj is singing nowadays, people say: 'what is that man over there screaming?' (*bu adam ne bağıyor ya?*).²¹³

According to dengbêj Mahmut it is important to collect and archive kilams, because after this generation "no dengbêjs will remain in Turkey". He emphasizes that this is caused by the lack of interest of the youth, in spite of the fact that dengbêjs are so important. He clearly feels people have a total lack of respect and understanding, saying "what is that man over there screaming?". They do not recognize him as a respected elder, as someone with a special talent and knowledge, and have no idea about his art. He then mentioned other examples of his motivation and of past experiences in which he was recognized as a great performer:

This is what it is to be a dengbêj: it is interest (*dengbêjlik meraktır*). I was so motivated that I would sit in a corner when the dengbêjs were singing, and when someone finished a song I went outside to practice. Sometimes I did not have time for that, but still it remained in my head and I would sing it in my sleep. My family is my witness. When I awoke the next morning my wife said to me: 'what are you doing, are you growing crazy, you keep me from my sleep with your songs'. She said: 'go to another room'. (..)

Often I sang at weddings. I was young. When they went to fetch the bride,²¹⁴ with her black dress and red headscarf, I sang this song [he sings it]. Two girls took the hands of the bride, they got a horse, this song was sung and they led the bride to mount the horse. The girls sang this song, and the boys fired their guns, and they continued to do so for the whole way, sometimes the road was long between the villages of the bride and the groom. Today with the car it takes five or ten minutes and it is finished. I wish that people from today could see how it was, believe me, now that it comes to my mind I could cry. It was that [special]. The people loved each other. The cheerfulness of those weddings was so different from nowadays. And for the

213 In the interview dengbêj Mahmut several times used phrases that seem to belong to the life story of Evdalê Zeynikê (see chapter 1). Once, when the latter was making a journey on horseback and meanwhile singing kilam, he overheard a girl saying "who is that old miserable man on horseback? Goodness, when he starts screaming, you think either he is a madman or a jinn" (*ew kale şerpezê li ser piştâ hespê ki ye? Malxirabo ku dike qîrîn, meriv dibê qey dîn e yan cinnû ye?*) A friend who is with her reprimands her and tells her the passer-by is actually a famous dengbêj (Aras 1996: 148). By using such phrases it seems that dengbêj Mahmut situates himself within the dengbêj tradition by connecting his own life experiences to those of the famous master dengbêj.

214 It was common practice that on the morning of the wedding the groom's family would go the house of the bride, which could be in another village, and take her to the house of the groom on horseback. A variety of songs was sung to guide the process. The dengbêj had an important role in this ceremony as a song leader.

dengbêjs the same is true. (*keşke bir film ya birşey olaydı, şimdiki insana dinletseydi. Inan ki, ben şimdi ağlayım, aklıma geldi, ben ağlayım. O kadar.. İnsan birbirlerini çok seviyordu. Millet, gençler, kızlar, ne diyeyim, o zaman düğünlerin neşesi şimdiki bambaşkadır. Dengbêjler gene öyle, gene öyle*).

He draws attention to the special character of past weddings which were unforgettable events. He connects this again to progress: people today cannot understand the deep experience of former weddings, when the road was long because there were no cars. The emergence of technology has erased the opportunity to experience things as they were in the past. Dengbêj Mahmut makes a direct link between technology and emotions: 'I wish that people today could see how it was. It was very special. The people loved each other. The cheerfulness of those weddings was so different from nowadays'. He speaks first about bringing the bride on horseback instead of by car, and subsequently about the love of those days, the love and joy. He regards these deep emotions as out of reach for the current generation. Many dengbêjs expressed the same sentiment: people today do not know what love is. They feel that the deep love of former times is, as it were, hidden in their experience and knowledge, and that they are still capable of capturing that love.

The value of the dengbêjs lies thus not only in their factual knowledge, but also in their emotions and embodied experiences. The act of performing means testifying to the deeply felt love, pain, anger, jealousy, and joy of a time that no longer exists. The dengbêjs feel they bear the knowledge and experiences of people living in that time, and have also, in the past, experienced such deep emotions themselves. This turns them into living witnesses of a lost but precious era. They see this era as characterized by hardship: the suffering caused by the lack of many things that are taken for granted today. They feel that the lack of education, media and technology, and the hardship of village life, made people more appreciative of the good things of life, and made them live in terms of a deeper level of emotional experience that is hard to grasp for people today.

In the last section of this part of the interview dengbêj Mahmut points out that not everything is yet lost. He gives an example of some recent experiences he had in a village setting in which he did feel appreciated for his efforts, as in the past:

I went to a village near Karacadağ, for a wedding, and they took me to the dîwan, and no one stayed at the wedding, everyone came to listen. That much value (*o kadar değer ve kıymeti vardı*) was attached [to the dengbêjs]. It was about ten years ago when I went there. I said that I had abandoned it, that I didn't sing (*ben terk etmişim, ben söylemiyorum*), but some elders of the village came to fetch me, they said: 'just sing whatever comes to your mind' (*ne aklıma gelirse illahi söyleyeceksin*). So I started singing and nobody remained at the wedding. And the drum (*dahol*) and

oboe (*zirna*) players came to me and said: 'Agha, nobody has stayed'. They wanted to earn something, but the people said: 'a dengbêj has come', so they listened [to me], some from outside, and some came inside.

When dengbêj Mahmut started singing in the *dîwan*, he says people left the drum and oboe players to listen to him.²¹⁵ The latter complained about this, afraid they would miss out on earnings. He was proud of the public he managed to attract as an elderly dengbêj. His success continued that day when he left the wedding:

After that I got in my car and went to another village where I had a friend. I knocked at the door and he asked me where I came from and I told him that I came from a wedding and that I had sung there. Immediately he slaughtered a lamb. I said: 'don't do that my brother'. But he continued and he called various people with his mobile phone and said: 'come here, our brother Mahmut has come. He says that he comes from a wedding'. You know it was already twelve o'clock in the night. He said to me: 'really Agha, you cannot go to sleep now, really you have to sing'. So I started to sing and to sing. I had escaped from the wedding where they had not left me alone, and now I was here and they didn't leave me (*yine bırakmadılar*). Half of the village had come. It became morning and we had forgotten about the lamb, I said: 'I want to pray and sleep, bring our food' (*namaz kılacağım yatacağım, yemeğimizi getir*).

Coming from the wedding dengbêj Mahmut was tired and went to a friend to rest. However, when he arrived his host was already slaughtering a lamb, a sign of respect and recognition that forced him to start performing again. In both cases the recent signs of respect and joy given to a dengbêj performance stemmed from village people. Dengbêj Mahmut feels that some of them still know how to appreciate him.

According to the dengbêjs, for city people the dengbêj art became history, as they lost their ability to understand the deep emotions and experiences stemming from the hardship of Kurdish village life and expressed in the kilams. What remains for them is nostalgia for a lost world they have never known themselves. Acknowledging the disability of today's city Kurds to understand the real quality of their art, the dengbêjs try instead to connect to their sentiments of nostalgia. They feel that by attending a dengbêj performance people can get a sense and taste of past experiences, and that a dengbêj performance can retrieve hidden memories by

215 In the past there were often two types of musicians performing at weddings: in some regions there were *dahol-zirna* players (drum and oboe played by Roma) and the dengbêjs. The *dahol-zirna* players accompanied folk dances, stirring up people to dance on the loud sound of the *zirna* and the fast rhythms of the *dahol*. Young dengbêjs at the start of their career would also accompany wedding dances and take on the role of song leader. People danced thus partly on the music of the *dahol* and *zirna*, and partly on the sound of voices. The elder and more established dengbêjs would sit in the *dîwan* (a large gathering) and perform there. Usually the dancing would attract more visitors than the *dîwan*. Nowadays the most prominently present performers are modern Kurdish music group; second come the *dahol-zirna* players; and third the dengbêjs, who perform only rarely at current weddings.

connecting to bodily memories people have of performances they witnessed in the village in former days. Also, they see their deeply felt love and emotions as moral qualities that make them examples for other people. Celebration of, and nostalgia for, village life, can be seen as a strategy that the dengbêjs mobilize to increase the value of dengbêjs as bearers and transmitters of a lost past that cannot be experienced other than through their intervention. However, it is not only a strategy. The dengbêjs also genuinely value the memories of past times in which the dengbêj art had a different position than today.

The story of dengbêj Mahmut does not refer to the social narratives of the Kurdish movement. He does not speak in the terms the political activists do in their presentations of the dengbêj art. He does not refer to the PKK's new morality of enlightenment, of the awakening of the Kurdish people, or to Kurdish nationalism in general. He also does not speak in terms of a personal development, a personal turn in which one discovers one's national identity, like political activists do (see chapter 4). Dengbêj Mahmut and most other dengbêjs I spoke with did not frame their activities as political or nationalist but instead felt that they had another strength, a quality that other Kurds, including political activists, missed: the embodied experiences of village life.

2.4 Tribes and battles

As we saw in chapter 1, songs about tribes and their leaders form an important part of the dengbêj repertoire. The legendary dengbêj Evdalê Zeynikê stood in the service of Surmeli Memed Pasha, and many kilams concern tribal leaders such as Filîte Qûto and Bişarê Çeto. The many songs about tribal battles, and the former position of dengbêjs as praise singers of their tribal lords, meant that the dengbêjs were associated with the tribal past. The tribal history of the Kurds has been a topic of imagination and debate since Ottoman times. Both Turkish and Kurdish educated elites equalized tribalism to being backwards, savage and uncivilized. Until today the association of Kurds with tribalism plays an important role in how the Kurds are depicted. The assumed tribal nature of the Kurds, which is associated with irrational killings, honor crimes and internal rivalries, is a frequent topic that comes up in the Turkish media and in Turkish television serials. The latter often use characters situated in 'the east' and understood by the public as Kurdish, but not labeled as such. Tribalism is seen by many as the keyword and evidence of the backwardness of Kurdish societal structures. Tribal fights, blood revenge, and the oppressive power

of aghas were and are seen as the central problems that hindered the Kurds from following the road towards development and modernity. The labels of tribalism and blood revenge assist in creating the image of Kurds as backwards, and make the modern Turkish citizen feel that the underdevelopment of 'the east' is due to Kurdish mistakes, rather than part and parcel of Turkey's internal power struggles.

As outlined in the Introduction, breaking down the tribal structure and incorporating tribal people into non-tribal Turkish communities was one of the spear points of late Ottoman and early Republican policies.²¹⁶ Not only in Turkish nationalist thought, also among Kurds, has the tribal and feudal character of Kurdish society been a continuing worry. Early Kurdish nationalists opposed tribal rivalries and saw the tribal divisions in Kurdish society as one of the main obstructions towards forming a (national) unity. They associated the tribal system with primordial ties and the inability to think in terms of nationhood. The PKK continued this line by not only fighting the Turkish state, but also the Kurdish tribal elite. From its start PKK leaders said they opposed the tribal structure of Kurdish society.²¹⁷ They said that they refused to lean on it, and that they attempted to mobilize the working class that, so they hoped, would eventually overthrow both the oppression of the Turkish state and of the Kurdish elite.²¹⁸ The lack of unity of the Kurdish rebellions in the 1920s (see below), which partly undermined the successes these rebellions could have become, became a trauma for Kurdish activists who tried at all costs to reconcile all Kurdish factions. Therefore, the *dengbêjs*, who sang about disagreements between tribes, about betrayal, bloodshed and revenge, were seen as disturbing for the revival of Kurdish nationalism in the 1980s. They were associated with tribalism because they were often in the service of aghas, praising them, and singing *kilams* that could awaken rivalry.

216 For example, "In April 1916, the CUP ordered the mass deportation of Kurds from the eastern provinces through a sweeping quadripartite decree. For the Kurds 'not to live their tribal lives and preserve their nationalities where they are sent' the CUP deemed it 'absolutely necessary to separate the tribal chieftains from their people' (Üngör 2008a: 25)."

217 In its founding years the PKK has deliberately tried to mobilize tribal sentiments for their own gain. There are cases known where they stirred up tribal rivalries in order to win tribes over to their side.

218 "With this style of war the PKK has brought about a change in the Kurdish revolutionary tradition and shown that, rather than relying on a particular tribe or tribal leader or this or that foreign power in the traditional way, it can continue to exist on the basis of its own resources (Öcalan 1999: 56).

During my fieldwork I understood soon enough that referring to the tribes was a taboo topic and could be interpreted as stirring up divisions.²¹⁹ Therefore, I did not often ask questions about this topic. Only later on in my fieldwork I began to ask whether dengbêjs knew kilams about their tribes and if they could sing them for me. Once I asked a well-known dengbêj whether he could sing some songs for me about his tribe. I had met him several times, and the year before I had been a guest at his home where I had met his children and other relatives. We had thus built up a certain degree of trust. He agreed to sing a few songs for me about his tribe, but only after I had switched off the video recorder. When he finished he motioned me to switch it on again, and continued with other kilams. He said such kilams could bring trouble and should therefore not be sung in public. Obviously, self-censorship about the topic of tribes had become quite strong. Also the organizers of the Dengbêj House encouraged the dengbêjs to leave out such songs. For example, in the dengbêj anthology published in 2007 by the Diyarbakır municipality and the House, most kilams are love songs. The anthology gives the impression that the dengbêj art consists predominantly of love songs, even though this is far from true. Apart from avoiding kilams that sing about tribal divisions, the focus on love songs in itself also has a political dimension. As we saw in chapter 1, many love songs tell the story of the impossibility of two lovers to be united, caused by traditional societal structures. Since PKK ideology strongly opposed the traditional ruling class, a focus on the negativity of these structures supports their ideas.²²⁰

I encountered another example of the avoidance of battle songs when watching a television program on dengbêjs, made by the local television channel Gün TV in Diyarbakır. I had interviewed the program's host and he offered me some copies of his programs. During the show, one or several dengbêjs were interviewed and invited to sing some kilams. The audience could also contact the program, as it was broadcast live, and ask for certain songs to be sung, or to give a comment. In

219 An example of the type of responses I encountered when I asked about tribal affiliation is the following interview quote, from a dengbêj who lives in a village near Van: "(Do you also have a tribe?) Our tribe is the Brukî tribe, it is a large tribe. But nowadays tribes have not remained. Nowadays, wherever you see a Kurd you love him and he loves you. (So everyone is the same?) Everyone is the same. Our tribe has between five and seven hundred villages. It is a large tribe. But we do not anymore follow tribal customs (*biz aşiretin ayakından gitmiyoruz*) I don't say: 'I have a village, I am the owner of a tribe, go that way, I will hit you etc.' No, we don't say such things. We live like normal civilians, like you and me." (dengbêj Nejat, interview in Turkish, Van 2007).

220 Çakır (2011) makes the following comment about a series of love songs that were published in the monthly newspaper *Dicle-Fırat* (1962-?): "their subject matters were the suffering of lovers on the hands of the rules of the traditional society, which in some of the stories made it impossible for lovers to be together (...). Given that one of the main themes of Kurdish nationalism at the time is the critique of the traditional ruling classes, especially the *axas* (...) this selection of folk tales does not seem to be done haphazardly" (pp.24).

one of the programs I watched, a well-known dengbêj was invited in the TV program on the World Peace Day (Dünya Barış Günü).²²¹ The host introduced the program as follows:²²²

This week we have a very valuable dengbêj in our program who is also often seen in festivals and programs. He is from the region of Karapetê Xaco, that is famous for its loves and its bloody fights, we are welcoming dengbêj [Fatih] in our program. With him we will speak Kurdish as he doesn't know Turkish. I greet everyone and I wish everyone a world without killings and without blood, peace for everyone.

Listeners sent text messages to ask for particular songs. It appeared however difficult for them to avoid battle songs and to stick to the topic of the day; they kept asking for songs that were seen as inappropriate by the program's host. The following exchange took place between the dengbêj (D) and the host (H), after listeners, through phone calls and text messages, had already several times requested battle instead of love songs:

H: Many songs of the Xerzan region are about battles and wars.

D: This song [requested by a listener] is from the region of Farqînî, I can sing it.

H: Is there killing in it? Yes. Unfortunately we cannot sing it, let us ask for love songs valuable friends! (..)

D: I don't want to sing about war, I will sing about love.

H: Yes because today is the Day of Peace.

D: I hope that in the whole world the wars will stop, the killings and blood. This is our wish.

In this short conversation the host recognizes the fact that many songs of the region where the dengbêj comes from are battle songs. The dengbêj at first agrees to sing a song, obviously without realizing straightaway that the song would be disapproved off. The host however, who was an expert on the kilams, knew the requested kilam as a battle song, which made it undesirable for the program. This short conversation also demonstrates the influence of the host on the dengbêj. Although the dengbêj first wanted to sing the song, the host decided the contrary. After this decision the dengbêj followed the discourse of the host by stating his wish to sing about love rather than war. This is one of the many instances in which a (young) political activists 'corrects' the agenda of a dengbêj.

In a long interview with the host (in Diyarbakır in 2007, interview in Turkish), he explained to me why the dengbêjs nowadays avoid singing battle and rebel songs. In the first place, he said, "they avoid singing about tribal battles and

221 Turkey holds September 1 (the invasion of Poland by Germany in 1939) as the World Day of Peace, although in other countries around the world September 21 is recognized as such.

222 Broadcast September 1st, 2007 by Gün TV, translated from Kurdish.

personal controversies because battles are still lived by their children and the next generation. It may plant a seed of hatred to sing that between them and it may stir them up again". In the second place, he said that the many songs about "deportations, exile and massacres that happened to the Armenians and Yezidi on this soil before 1914" were prohibited, and many were therefore forgotten. He also said that in case such (often anti-government) songs are sung in the program it will be closed down by the government. Because of these reasons he said, dengbêjs nowadays prefer love songs: "since love songs are more sung today, and since Kurdish life has modernized, the emphasis is on love songs".

Another time I asked for songs about tribes I was working with a group of dengbêjs in the Dengbêj House in Diyarbakır and recorded their performance. It was in the final days of my fieldwork and we had got to know each other well. I had postponed the topic until that day, and when I asked for tribal songs the reaction was clear: they refused to sing them. One of the dengbêjs of the House gave an interesting and lengthy explanation of their refusal, which was met with agreement by the other dengbêjs. In spite of the length of the quote it is advisable to read it through because it gives much background for understanding the next section. It also gives a good impression of the moralistic character of such utterings.

Dear friend Wendy, our kilams from the past, about the tribes that fought with each other, now show that there was grave ignorance (*gelek nezanî bûne*). Why? Because they oppressed, you know, their friends, their fellow men, they did bad things to their neighboring tribes (*zordestîyê hevala xwe kiriye, li merwêya xwe kiriye, li aşîre keleka xwe kiriye*), to become stronger and become the sovereigns of their region. The struggle for power should have been abandoned, but they could not abandon it. Therefore, you must not show any interest in them. The songs of our time, now, for instance those about the House of Seydxanê Ker, you know they rebelled, the state oppressed them, the state killed their babies (*kilamên a niha, ewê wek mala Seydxanê Ker, tu dizanî, ku rabûne, dewletê li wan zilmê kirine, tu dizanî, sepiyê wan qatîl kirine*). Even their pregnant women were stabbed and killed; they killed the babies in their mother's womb. You should be interested and concerned about those [kilams], because they are not like the kilams that involve tribal fights in which we fought with each other, it was ignorance.

Between me and you, do not show any interest in those [tribal] kilams, give more importance to those kilams which refer to the oppression of the state of us, which tell the story of the oppression we have gone through (*gelek li ser wan a pir neseकिन, yê ku zilm û zor, xast li ser me hebû negire, em pir wi li ser wan bisekine, em ê aşîretîyê wê derê pêk da mesela*). For example, there were some tribes like the House of Seydxanê Ker, like the House of Yusuf Seydo, like the House of Ali son of Yunus who had taken refuge in the mountains, for instance, you know, the war in Dersîm and Wan, those people rebelled against the state, they demanded rights and fought for their cause, they struggled for decades (*bi hevsala mucadele kirine*).

Because the corruption was inside our community, our people were corrupt (*kurmîti di nava insane me de hebûye*), there were people who allied with the state, some of us took the side of the state (*hebûne ku hevaltiye bi dewletê kirine*), you know, because of their alignment and friendship with the state agents and powers, others had to struggle again and again, they had to fight with the state once more for decades, many people were killed and perished, but again the struggle had managed to gain a lot of new people (*cardine wê dane alîkarî berfireh bûye*).

Now, we want to give importance to those good people, we want to cherish the memory of those people who stood up against the state and fought for Kurdistan, who fought for a cause, who fought for human rights, who fought for humanity (*Îca em dixwazin ku li ser van insanên baş, insanên derlî ku rabûne, dawa Kurdistanê kirine, dawa haqqakî kirine, dawa haqqa insana kirine, insaniyetê kirine*). Now, we would like to sing and talk about these sorts of things. Yes, the kilams about revenge and fights between us, which has done nothing good to our people, should remain there [i.e. should not be paid attention] (*Belê klamên heyfa heyf û yên berê me bi xwe bi xwe eva kiriye gelê ma na alîkarî, em wê derê bihêlin*). We leave them there. (Another dengbêj interrupts and repeats: We don't sing them!). We don't sing them, we leave them there, and we want to sing about those (other) things (dengbêj Silêman, interview in Kurdish, Diyarbakır 2008).

This dengbêj urged me to concern myself with the right type of kilams in my research and not to ask for tribal songs, I “should not show any interest in them”. Instead, I should focus on rebel songs, on the courage shown by those people who were fighting the government and fought “for a cause, for human rights, for humanity”. Some dengbêjs, like the one in this quote and others performing at the House where these issues were often discussed, were well-informed about the ideology of the Kurdish movement and adopted their narratives. Many others were less interested or did not agree, and continued to sing battle songs.

Also in the past, battle songs had been a topic of debate. Although not immediately relevant for dengbêjs in Turkey, I present the following part because it demonstrates how large a proportion battle songs used to be of the repertoire of a dengbêj, and it shows that in the past, love songs were considered inappropriate to sing in front of a general audience. Kevirbirî (2005) interviewed the famous Armenian dengbêj Karapetê Xaco²²³ about his performances on radio Yerevan that broadcast a daily Kurmanji Kurdish program starting in the 1950s. Although at that time the communist regime in Armenia tolerated and even stimulated minority languages and cultures, radio broadcasts were bound by certain regulations. Everything that could incite separatism instead of communism was banned. Xaco mentions that he was

²²³ Karapetê Xaco (1903-2005) was 7 years old when the Armenian genocide took place, and he was adopted in the family of the son of Filitê Quto, a famous tribal leader (see chapter 1). He learned the dengbêj art in this Kurdish family and continued performing in Kurdish after he migrated to Armenia.

not allowed to sing battle songs, and instead was asked to sing love songs.²²⁴ This confronted him with a dilemma, because he felt that love songs were not meant to be sung in public:

They said, ‘sing love songs, songs about girls’. I don’t understand anything about communism. Whatever song I sang, they said all the time ‘not this one, take another’. Whatever I did, it didn’t become what they wanted. So what on earth could I sing? Next to me sat an Arab boy who spoke Arabic. He said to me in Arabic, ‘uncle Karapet, do you know this or that song?’ And I said to him: ‘I swear my son, I sang that song in 1915 on the mountains and slopes when I worked as a shepherd [meaning that he sang those songs in isolation, when no one was around]. I felt embarrassed to sing this song in front of the people. And I also feel embarrassed here in this place. It’s a shame to sing this song’.

[I said to them:] ‘Do you know what a kilam is? A kilam is what a dengbêj sings about a heroic person (*tu dizanî kilam çi ye? Zilamekî mêrxas e xelk li serî dibêje*)’. (...) That day again I sang my songs on the radio and returned home. In the village they said to me, ‘We said to you, sing this kilam and that *stran* [song]. Why didn’t you sing the songs that we wanted you to sing?’ I said to them, ‘they don’t let me, what can I do? I am just gods poor slave, how can I resist a whole government?’ (...) Now we are free. Now we can sing whatever song we like (Karapetê Xaco in Kevirbirî 2005: 54-55, my translation from Turkish).

As it appears from Xaco’s story, battle songs formed a significant part of the dengbêj repertoire, and were the first he would choose for a performance. These were the songs he was proud of and wished to sing for the radio. When he explained to the radio program’s host what a kilam is, he gives as a definition “what a dengbêj sings about a heroic person”. Obviously he saw battle songs as the main form of kilams, and as the most desirable type of kilam to sing in public. Also people in his environment were used to asking for battle songs and criticized him when he did not sing the requested songs.

Thus, while battle songs were regarded by the dengbêjs as the most important part of their repertoire, today they feel discouraged from singing them, which also means they cannot show their full potential. Although some dengbêjs ascribed to the current social narratives about the undesirability of such songs, there were still many dengbêjs who did not want to be limited by others in their choice of kilams. In the next section I elaborate on how this topic emerged in a particular performance.

224 Çakır (2011) notes that in the 1970s Kurdish intellectuals escaping to Europe came in contact with Soviet Kurdish intellectuals. The Celil family, a sister and two brothers who studied and published Kurdish folk music, was active in this field. Cemîla Celil wrote a section called *Stran û Leylan* (Songs and melodies) in the monthly magazine *Azadî*. Çakır: “the selection of the songs published in this section is also curious. They are all dance (*govend*) songs, performed in weddings or other celebrations. (...) The selection of such songs over, for instance, historical songs, which accommodate elements of the structures and power holders of Kurdish traditional life, is not surprising” (pp.27). So also in this case, songs that referred to tribes and traditional power structures were avoided.

2.5 Rebellions and tribes in performance

The performance context

It was the beginning of June 2007, a few days after the opening of the Dengbêj House, when I was again visiting the House. Because of the extreme heat, the dengbêjs had gathered in the cool basement that was decorated as a *dîwan*. Benches were placed along the four walls, and had embroidered pillows to sit on. Along each of the two longest walls sat around twelve men, some were dengbêjs, others were visitors. I came in when they had just started singing, and sat down in a corner to record two hours of their performance. The (elderly) men present were all trained listeners and enjoyed listening to the elaborate kilams. During the performance, they encouraged the dengbêjs to continue singing by joining with the chorus and by saying encouraging phrases such as “may you be healthy” (*seheta te xweş be*). Before turning to the performance itself, I provide some information on the events happening in the weeks and days preceding the performance that will help to understand its meanings. The analysis shows the connection between the topics of the kilams that we examined in chapter 1 and current events and discussions, and it shows some of the exchanges between the dengbêjs during a performance.

The festive opening of the House two days earlier, which I introduced above, had occasioned much discussion among the dengbêjs and the organizers of the festival. The dengbêjs felt the organizers did not give them space to do it their way, whereas the organizers felt the dengbêjs were not capable of understanding what a festival performance should look like. The dengbêjs wanted to invite dengbêjs from other regions, so that each regional style would be represented. By contrast, the organizers invited only four dengbêjs from nearby, which the dengbêjs understood as a way of avoiding paying for transport money and accommodation. The dengbêjs also felt dissatisfied with their choice of people, as one of them was a dengbêj not often present at the House, and one of them a female dengbêj who was not held in high esteem by most dengbêjs. If the organizers wanted to save money, the dengbêjs had at least wanted to perform together in a big *dîwan*, each of them getting their turn. Another reason for dissatisfaction was that the dengbêjs had heard that some of the famous singers who would give a concert at the festival received huge amounts of money for their performance, whereas the dengbêjs would not receive anything. They felt this was a clear expression of the lesser respect for their art, whereas as elders and trained dengbêjs they should be more rather than less respected for their efforts. They expressed the opinion that, whereas the dengbêj art was a much harder task than the ‘simple’ songs of popular music groups, the latter received more

support, praise and attention, at the cost of the position of the dengbêjs. The weeks before the opening they therefore often complained about the injustice of all this²²⁵ and some even refused to attend the festivities.



Figure 9. People listening to a dengbêj performance in the basement of the Dengbêj House in Diyarbakır. The basement is decorated in the style of a diwan, a traditional guestroom.

The start of the performance

But during this performance the atmosphere was cheerful and the hard feelings seemed to have softened a bit. The dengbêjs were delighted to have their own place, and despite the frustration of some who had not performed at the opening ceremony there was still a general feeling of pride because of the increased recognition and visibility. Even the most offended dengbêjs were present that day and seemed to be in good spirits. Following the formalities of the opening, and without the interference of the managers of the House, there was also a feeling of being among friends. This is an important point. As I argued before in this chapter,

²²⁵ For example: "Really, it cannot satisfy me. There is something lacking. The municipality is organizing a festival here. The one who organizes it should do it well. But what do they do? They get people from all over the world and give them lots of money, and those people give concerts here in the city. But if a dengbêj sings he gets only very little money. (...) I have said to them, invite dengbêjs from every region. Record it on video and show it to the world. Let them do some effort, let them pay some attention. But no they only take some four dengbêjs from here. I mean is this a real opening? I don't like it". Dengbêj Mahmut, interview in Turkish, Diyarbakır 2007.

the dengbêjs often felt misunderstood in their efforts. They have different aims than the modern Kurdish public which is often more interested in the display of nostalgia and authenticity than in the qualities of the dengbêjs. In the performance I discuss here, the dengbêjs were surrounded by elderly men who were all experienced listeners who enjoyed listening to the elaborate kilams.

The eldest dengbêj present, dengbêj Nejat, was a respected person, and there was some talk of him becoming their official spokesperson. I had not seen him performing before with the other dengbêjs, but now he acted as the leader of the performance.²²⁶ When I entered²²⁷ he was singing a song about his old age, about the hardships of being old. He may have chosen this song for several reasons. The opening of the House in some ways emphasized the elderly age of the dengbêjs, because it separated young and old from each other. Now that they moved to the House they would no longer be disturbed by the younger people, but at the same time were also more clearly set apart as elderly people who did not fit in the popular music scene. Another reason for this song may have been the emphasis during the opening on the dengbêj art as an old tradition, with performers testifying to old times. In this context old age was a positive feature that enhanced knowledge of the distant past. Also, dengbêj Nejat may have wanted to reassert his position as the oldest person and therewith as the leader of the dengbêjs. Dengbêj Nejat is not regarded as a real dengbêj by everyone. He was one of the first to be involved in the modern Kurdish music scene and he changed the character of the kilams considerably. He sang short songs that would not 'bore the public', as he claimed in the interview we had, and composed some songs by himself. These self-composed short songs are in a rather atypical style for a dengbêj kilam. Throughout the performance he urged the dengbêjs to keep their songs short, something I did not witness during other performances, where he was never present.

After his kilam, dengbêj Nejat gave the turn to dengbêj Fatih, the second oldest of the dengbêjs present. I discussed the kilam he sang, *qîza tucar axa* (the daughter of the trader), in chapter 1. At the end of the kilam, the crowd applauded, someone commenting: 'you have so many nice kilams and you did not sing them that night we were together!', referring to a previous performance. And already the next dengbêj began to sing. With him a series of four kilams started about a single topic: the Kurdish rebellions against the Turkish government in the late 1920s, just after the foundation of the Turkish Republic.

226 Depending on the people present, sometimes one dengbêj would take the lead and direct the others.

227 I had just recorded songs of an individual dengbêj whom I had interviewed the previous day. After the recording we walked together to the other dengbêjs who had already started.

It is not easy to give a good description of a dengbêj performance, since the main activity taking place is the singing itself. Often there is not much discussion in between the kilams; this performance was even somewhat of an exception in that respect. Usually the dengbêjs sing each in turn, and people listen silently to the performer. The performer is most often seated, and focused on the activity of singing itself, on the sound of his voice, and on holding his breath as long as he can. The content of the kilams, and the sound of the voice, is what matters most to a performance. Therefore, the only way to explain what a performance is about, is by presenting in detail the content of the kilams, as that is what the dengbêjs are focused on, and that is how they respond to each other. By singing kilams with similar topics or similar formulas, they reply to the previous performer and in that way together bring to life a certain event. However, apart from the content of the kilams, I also wish to convey the discussions among the dengbêjs and the audience that took place between the kilams. Because of these two aims I place the four kilams discussed here in tables. By reading the tables one can understand how the dengbêjs responded to each other in content. The parts of normal text, outside of the tables, forms the debate that unfolded between the dengbêjs and the audience. That part is meant to convey the atmosphere of this particular performance, and the debate that was related to the kilams and to the newly opened Dengbêj House.

Four songs about rebellions and betrayal

The dengbêjs were responding to each other by selecting kilams about events in the 1920s: the Sheikh Said rebellion and its aftermath. Kilams about the rebellions are popular among current Kurdish audiences. Such kilams are much preferred over the many kilams about tribal fights, because they emphasize the unity of the Kurds, fighting together against one common enemy, the Turkish government.

The Sheikh Said rebellion was the first rebellion in the young Turkish republic. It was initiated by the new clandestine organisation ‘Azadî’ (freedom), founded by people from the ruling families and by Kurds who had been in the Hamidiya special forces.²²⁸ The latter were far more nationalist than the former, but felt that a religiously inspired revolt would be more successful, and therefore

²²⁸ In 1891 Sultan Abd Al-Hamid established the Hamidiya special forces, consisting of Kurdish horsemen who got a special training in Istanbul. The Sultan wanted to create a buffer zone between Russia and the Ottoman Empire, and at the same time win the Kurds for his own case, as some Kurds had been supporting the czar in the recent past. For the Kurds, it was attractive to serve in these forces receiving many privileges. They were always drawn from already existing Sunni Kurdish tribes, leaving the social structure intact. In the mid-1890s the Hamidiya numbered about 47,000 men, in 1910 about 53,000 (Olson 1989 in White 2000: 61).

supported a prominent role for the sheikhs.²²⁹ The uprising began prematurely and was not supported by enough people to have the effect the organisers had hoped for. It was suppressed by the Turkish army that sent 35,000 well-armed troops, supported by air bombings (Van Bruinessen 1992: 290). After the revolt was crushed, reprisals began. Many villages were destroyed and inhabitants killed. Revolt leaders were executed and “large numbers of Kurds, more than 20,000 in all, were deported from the southeast and forcibly settled in the west of the country”.²³⁰ Many rebels tried to escape to Syria.

The first kilam of this part of the performance was sung by dengbêj Îzzet, and is called *Bavê Salih*, Salih’s father. It is a well-known kilam that I discussed later with my eldest respondent, dengbêj Cîhan. The latter was born in 1926 and well-informed about the events.²³¹ According to Cîhan, the group of rebels of whom Salih’s father was part was from the Zîlan valley. They were fugitives from the Agirî rebellion which took place from 1926-1930, and survivors of the twenty-five villages in the Zîlan valley that were destroyed by the Turkish army. They had settled in the village Talorî, south from Muş. Bavê Salih had been one of the leaders of the rebellion. Many of his fellow men had escaped. In the aftermath of the rebellion the Turkish army was searching for specific individuals who they believed had played an important role during the fighting. However, as the army was afraid of instigating more unrest when they would openly search for those men, they attempted to motivate local agha’s to go after the rebels. In this case they were some leaders of the Badika tribe, and all of the Xiya tribe, among whom was also an agha with the name Emerê Mihê. The latter

229 “By their very participation the shaikhs would give the rebellion a religious appearance, and it was expected that they would thereby attract support or even participation from much wider circles than their personal following alone” (Van Bruinessen 1992: 282). Sheikh Said was one of the powerful religious leaders of that moment, and was chosen to lead the revolt. He started a tour to raise support, visiting many aga’s personally. However, his largest following was among Zaza-speaking Kurds.

230 “From now on, the existence of a Kurdish identity was officially denied.” (Zürcher 2004: 172). Although the Sheikh Said rebellion did not reach its goals, it became a legendary event in Kurdish nationalist history (Van Bruinessen 1992: 266). And the brutal way in which the revolt was crushed, and especially the deportation to western Turkey, caused more, not less resistance (McDowall 1996: 199).

231 Dengbêj Cîhan learned much about the aftermath of the rebellions through the contact of an uncle who told him about the events and taught him many kilams. Moreover, he belongs to the Xiya tribe that is spoken about in this kilam, and he knows about their history. See life story 4 in chapter 3.

features in several other songs as well. These leaders had the order to kill Bavê Salih, and were thus collaborating with the Turkish army in hunting the rebels.

When Bavê Salih hears about the conspiracy he decides to fight. His brother, nephew and son had already escaped to Syria. During the battle Bavê Salih got killed, and the survivors followed their relatives to Syria. This kilam starts with a common opening for kilams about war and fighting, *rebenim* (poor me), a lament.

Rebeniiiiiiim²³²

Ez ê bi rebena bavê Salih
peyayê mala Ûsivê Seydo
Li welatê xerîb ji xwe re
bê piştîmêrî maye
keko dikesiriyê de aaaaî
Hedo bi sê denga fikir gazî
Digo Têlo rebenê sibe ye
şereke li me çêbû
qaleke li me qewimî
li çemê Xezaliyê
li pîra Batmanê
Bi kûra Seyida dikete bi kendale
Dema ku bavê Salih li hespa xwe siwar be
Bi sonda qesemê, bi navê Qur'anê,
bi telaqê jin berdanê
Heta îro li orta meydanê
ne kushtinê
Li ser oxirê nazivere lo keko nayê malê

Poor me, poor me
I feel pity for Bavê Salih
the man of the house of Ûsivê Seydo
He is in foreign lands
without any support of his fellow men
in despair, my brother.
Hedo was calling over and over again, saying:
Poor Têlo it is morning
a fight came upon us
an incident occurred.
[It started] at the river of Xezaliyê,
[it went from there] to the bridge of Batman,
[continued] to the valley of Seyida and climbed the hill.
When Bavê Salih mounted his horse
I swear to God, to the name of the Qur'an
to the holy bond of marriage
until today he has not been killed
in the middle of the battle field.
He is on his way and he does not return, my brother.

The kilam starts by informing us about its topic: Bavê Salih is caught in an emergency situation. He is involved in a battle in foreign lands, *welatê xerîb*, a term used when one is not at home or in one's place of origin. Next to being far from his home region, his relatives are in Syria, which means Bavê Salih is left behind without support. The narrator is called Hedo, who probably is Bavê Salih's wife. She describes the situation to Têlo, who might be a relative or friend. This first part of the kilam presents Hedo as if standing on the battle field, sketching the situation of Bavê Salih, and the place of the battle: where it started and how it developed. She describes Bavê Salih as a good fighter who has been strong until now. She continues:

Dengê tivingan li ser sere egîtê
mala bavê min de
Kale kale, nale nale

The sounds of rifles are banging
upon the head of the hero of my father's house
Bang bang, poof poof

232 Transcribed and translated by Hanifi Barış and myself.

Kesekî xwedanê xêra tune
 cihabekî bişîne binxetê cem bavê Silho
 birayê dişewitî
 Ez ê bi Tirkî nizanîm
 Bi Kurmanji reqamam ra
 dibêje Seydxanî kale
 Dibê mala te xera bibê
 Agirê kulê bikeve
 mala Emerê Mihê lawê Perîxanê
 Eşîna Xiya, giregirê Badika
 Derbek dane li bejn û bala Bavê Salih
 peyayê mala Ûsivê Seydo
 Di mala de mêr nemane
 Çend rojên dina
 ji peyayên mala bavê min
 Evdalê xwedê re keko
 bibe baliv û berpale²³³
 Çend rojên dina
 darê tivinga xwe bij.. li çiya û baniya
 Li hewar û gaziya
 peyayê mala bavê min here

There is no one of good will
 to send a call beyond the border to Silho's father
 the brother who cares and supports
 -I do not know Turkish,
 and I cannot write in Kurdish
 says the old Seydxan-
 She [Hedo] says may God destroy your house
 May the fire of devastation
 besiege the house of Emerê Mihê, the son of Pêrixan
 And also the Xiya tribe and the leaders of the Badika
 They shot Bavê Salih
 the man of the house of Ûsivê Seydo
 No men remained in the house, oh brother,
 Who some days later
 For the men of my family
 for me, poor creature
 could become a pillow and support
 When the day comes he would
 take up his rifle and go to the mountains and heights
 Go after the call for help
 of the men of my father's house

Bavê Salih is involved in a fierce battle, bullets whiz past his ears. As he was hiding alone in this foreign place there is no one who can come to his rescue. Hedo explains that help should come from across the border, where Silho's (Silhadîn) father stays, who is Bavê Salih's brother. But neither can she find anyone who wants to go to give notice, nor can she write him a letter. After we have learned that Bavê Salih does not receive any support, Hedo returns to the reality of his death and starts cursing the tribes that have killed him. Now he is dead, she says, and who can take care of the family? Who can now become a support for her and her relatives?

When the kilam ends the public thanks dengbêj Fatih with the words: may you be healthy '*seheta te xweş be*'. One of the visitors, who seemed to be there for the first time, remarked: "I said to my friends here before that I am not a dengbêj but a poet". With these words he attempted to find a space during the performance to recite some poems, but the public seemed to feel the behavior of the man is inappropriate and laughable, and they mocked him now and then. Dengbêj Nejat told him he will have the chance to recite his poems later on, and first invited dengbêj Fadil to sing.

233 After this line he repeats the first two stanzas, and finishes the kilam with the below four lines.

Dengbêj Fadil sings the second kilam of this series, *Ha dayê* (Oh mother) telling what happened after the events of the previous kilam, in which Salih's father got killed. He selects this kilam thus as a reaction on the previous one, and therewith contributes to the picture the dengbêjs sketch of the events of that time. It is a kilam about a group of thirteen men who came from Syria to carry out revenge for people killed during the rebellions. One of these thirteen men is Silhadînê Dibendîn, Bavê Salih's nephew, who is also mentioned briefly in the above kilam. His personal aim of joining the thirteen men is to revenge his uncle. The kilam's narrator is a man who laments the death of the thirteen companions, and in particular of Sheikh Ahmed who was probably the youngest of the men, 'the newcomer in the wheat fields'.

Dibê ha dayêêêê, ha dayêêêê²³⁴
 Hetanî ez sax bîm
 li dem û dewrana dinyayê
 min digo
 xwîna Şêx Ahmedê delal,
 xortê nû hatî roja nava genima giran e
 min digo ji dilê min dernayê
 Dibê ha dayê..
 Sibeye tu bala xwe bidê
 mini dît dibê ji xwe ra,
 Silêmanê Edilpadir, Emera Koperiyê,
 Êsivê Rehîmê
 Min dît rabûne berê xwe didan qereqolê
 Min dît bi sê denga dibê
 li başçawîş dikirin qîrîne
 Digotin başçawîşo tu zani
 sêzdeh peya vegeyriyane ji binê xetê
 Wanê li gola Emo çûn jin û mêr
 Li rasta Mirêdare, li çola Perîşanê
 Ji xwe re dibên
 wane di nava da'le de derbas bûne
 Divên wanê di nava genima de
 di xewê de ne

He says: oh mother, oh mother
 As long as I am alive
 On the times and histories of the world
 I said, the heavy feeling
 about the blood of my dear Şêx Ahmed
 Who was the newcomer that day in the wheat fields
 I said will never leave my heart
 He says: oh mother, oh mother
 It is morning, watch carefully
 what I said to myself:
 Silêman the son of Edilpadir, Emer the son of Koperiyê
 Êsiv the son of Rehîmê
 I realized they were heading to the military post
 And they were calling
 upon the commander
 They were saying: oh commander, do you know
 That 13 men have returned from beyond the border
 They are at the lake of Emo (..)
 At the plain of Mirêdar, at the desert of Perîşanê
 They say to themselves
 they passed through the bushes and say
 They are in the wheat fields
 where they are asleep

The kilam starts with 'oh mother', meaning a lament will follow. Again the narrator is presented as a witness of what happened, as if standing at the sideline of the events. He describes how in the morning three men, mentioned by their full names, went to the military post to betray the thirteen companions. The three men told the commander their exact location, where they are hiding in the wheat fields. They are asleep and can thus easily be caught. The thirteen men "have returned from beyond the border", from Syria where they had escaped to.

234 Transcribed and translated by Hanifi Barış and myself.

The commander reacts by asking information about the four most sought after of these thirteen men:

Min dit başçawîş dikire qîrîne digot
 Silêmanê Evdîlqadîr, Emera Koperiyê,
 Ûsivê Rehîmê
 Win zanin di ve sivingê
 ji wan sêzdeh mahkûman
 Çarhevê wan kî û kî ne?
 Yekê re dibên Şerîf
 ew torinê mala Şêx Ûsiv e
 Peyayê didoya jê re dibêjin
 Cemilê Seydo
 Bavê Evdîlbahrî ji xwe ra li cîh ye
 Peyayê sêyan jê re dibêjin
 birê Şêx Seid Efendî Şêx Silheddîne
 dibên li dawa dîn
 digere serê xwe li ber datîne
 Peyayê çaran jê re dibêjin
 berxê mala Ûsivê Seydo
 Dibê Silheddîne Dibendîne
 Li heyfa apê xwe digire
 li kuştina Emerê Mihê
 Mire digo daima duca'dîne

I saw that the commander was shouting, saying:
 Silêmanê Evdîlqadîr, Emerê Koperiyê,
 Ûsivê Rehîmê
 Do you know who this morning,
 who of these 13 men,
 are the four men [we are looking for]?
 They call one of them Şerîf,
 he is the grandson of the house of Şêx Ûsiv
 They call the second one
 Cemil, son of Seydo,
 he is the father of Evdîlbahrî among them
 They call the third man
 the brother of Şêx Seid Efendi, Şêx Silhadîn
 He is fighting for the cause of religion
 and he sacrifices his head for that
 They call the fourth man
 the lamb²³⁵ of the house of Ûsivê Seydo
 They say to him Silhaddîn the two wings
 He seeks to revenge his uncle,
 the killing of Emerê Mihê
 which he has always been pursuing

We now learn the names of the four men who the commander wants to find most urgently. The third is the brother of Sheikh Said, Sheikh Silhadîn, and the fourth is another person also named Silhadîn, the nephew of Bavê Salih. The latter “wants to revenge his uncle”, but like his uncle he becomes victim to betrayal and does not succeed in his wish for revenge.

Were ha dayê..
 Tu bala xwe bidê min dît xeberekî hat
 Dibê qolordiya Diyarbekir
 ve şeveqa sibê
 Di jêr da di jor da min dît
 Dibê ji xwe re halan dane
 Kele kela nava rojê tîna Hezîranê
 Sêzdeh peya kirine nava genîma
 Min digot ji xwe girtine
 bi saxîtiagîr berdanê

Come and see oh mother, see oh mother..
 Are you aware that I saw how news arrived
 Saying that this dawn they saw
 how the whole battalion of Diyarbekir
 Came from the plains and the highlands
 Shouting and intimidating
 It is noon and the June sun heat is boiling
 They surrounded the thirteen men in the wheat field
 I said, they captured them alive
 and set them on fire

The commander apparently requested help from the military forces in Diyarbakır, who sent a whole battalion. The narrator describes the movement of the soldiers coming from several sides, surrounding the thirteen men in the

235 Berx (lamb) is used for a young man rising to power

wheat field and setting them on fire in the June sun heat. The description of the movement of the soldiers to the wheat field creates a vivid imaginary of the events leading to the heroes' deaths. From the description of the capture and killing of the companions, the narrator again laments their deaths. As in the previous kilam, he shouts for help in retrospect, help that will not come. After that, in an imaginary turn, he describes visiting a graveyard and so connects the current deaths with those who died before them.

Bêje hewar hewar heware lawo	Say help! Help! Help! My son
Wele gazî kirin lo îmdat nayê	They pleaded for rescue but help would not come
Kesekî xwedanî xêrê tunîne rabe bilezîne	There was no one of good will to set out quickly
Xeberê bi axê mezêlan	To take the news
û kendalan re bigîne	to the soil of the graves and heights
Bi Tewfiq û Elişan û Seyidxan re	There where Tewfiq, Elişan and Seyidxan lay
Bêje mala we xera nebûya	Say: may god bless your house
Serê xwe rakîn ji axa mezelan	Lift up your heads from your grave
Û bala xwe bidinê	And take a good look
Li ser serên xortan bûye	At the heads of these young people
Rokî ji roja qiyametê	It is a day like the day of the last judgment
Bêje ha dayê ha dayê..	Say oh mother, oh mother
Wele gazî kirin lo îmdat nayê	They called but no one is coming

The kilam is about a time of rebellion, fighting and destruction. One death is followed by the next. It seems there is no place anymore to go to for help. As the possibility of asking help from the living is exhausted, the narrator imagines now turning his attention to the dead. They are the ones whom the thirteen companions came to revenge, and whom he calls upon to see the sacrifice the young men brought for them. He calls upon the dead to 'lift up your heads from the grave' to see how these young men have fought in their place, showed courage, but unfortunately lost the battle.

When dengbêj Fadil finished and the public applauded for him, a young dengbêj took over, someone who was still learning and nervous to sing in the group of experienced masters. He started a song about Evdilqadîr, maybe the one mentioned in the previous song, but after a few lines he had a blackout and could not remember the song anymore. He gave up and said that he was singing about Evdilqadîr, but that the man across from him had the same name and this made him laugh. Everyone started laughing. Now the poet, who had asked for attention before the previous kilam, began with a short speech. Therewith he interrupted the course of the performance. Although not welcomed by the dengbêjs and the public, his speech is interesting for the aim of this chapter.

Dear listeners, if you allow me I want to recite to you some poems. If you ask an educated person to lead even animals, he could [manage to] educate them. But if you ask an uneducated person to lead an educated society he would make them uneducated. I am a poet. The kilams that I sing, the poems I recite, a few are about the past but I composed all of them myself. I myself, and I am confident about this, have made thousands of poems. This is the first thing. The second thing is that our culture and art (çand û hunera me) is like a sea. (..) If you ask an educated person to lead even animals, he could [manage to] educate them. But if you ask an uneducated person to lead an educated society he would make them uneducated.

Dengbêj Nejat, who continued having the lead of the performance, interfered by saying: ‘can you *do* something now?’, urging him to start with his poems instead of giving a speech. There was some commotion among the people present and they laughed a bit, but the poet stubbornly continued:

Yes.. now a kilam.. the dengbêj and the poet are different from each other (*dengbêj û şair ji hev cudane*). How are they different? The dengbêj is the voice of the people (*dengbêj dengê xelkê dibêje*). For example Apê Nejat made a poem and I learned it from him. He is a dengbêj. And now the poet, he makes poems by himself. He composes poems. Now me personally, I don’t want to sing kilams that are about Kurds, about Kurmanc, who fight and kill each other (*ez bi xwe, ez li ser kurmanca ku li hevdane, ku hev kûştine, ez bi xwe van kilaman naxwazim bêjim*). Maybe you will ask why I don’t want to sing them. It is not a good thing. Until when will we continue killing each other?

The poet was an outsider who was only listened to out of politeness, as he was a visitor and should be given an ear. Clearly most people present felt that it should be over quickly. He was an elderly man and looked unkempt. They did not take him seriously and were waiting and urging him to finish with his speech and poems. For us, the speech of the poet is interesting as he voices a commonly heard discourse about dengbêj kilams.

He began his speech with an expression that means: someone with education could make the dumbest society wise, but an uneducated person could make the smartest society dumb. Then he spoke of his own position; he is a poet, and obviously feels he is someone belonging to the ‘educated’ category. He gave proof of his skills by saying he composed ‘thousands of poems’, and he repeated the same expression about wisdom. He tried to command respect, sensing that the public was mocking him. Even though he was interrupted, he continued as he had not yet made his point. There is a difference, so he said, between the dengbêj and the poet. The dengbêj is ‘the voice of the people’, but the poet makes poems himself. He implied, -although carefully by first praising the skills of the performance leader- that just being the voice of the people is not always a sign of wisdom. He himself, so he said, did not

want to follow their example of singing kilams about Kurds killing Kurds: “it is not a good thing, until when will we continue killing each other?” This is a crucial sentence articulating the view according to which dengbêjs would belong to the old feudal structure as I discussed above.

After these last words the youngest dengbêj present, who tried to sing a kilam but could not remember the words, interrupted him by asking for a poem. His question distracted the poet from his speech, and he abandoned the topic, asking how many poems he should recite. Several people reacted, saying that one was enough, and the performance leader warned him not to make it long. He started by reciting a poem about love. Then he sang a song:²³⁶

Oh my mother, oh my mother, Gulê was saying:
The Turkish soldiers came and killed us,
If we have a memory and belief,
If we are a unity we cannot be defeated.
This evening my father did not come home.
No one brought good news.
Gulê showed her green and red and yellow
To the people who are around her family.
She says to the people in the village:
Look at this spilled blood of the hero of my family.
I am calling out to the patriots.
Let the blood of our hero not remain without revenge

This is a recent political song, speaking of a woman named Gulê who laments the death of her father by Turkish soldiers. She calls upon the people in her village, upon their “memory and belief”, upon the “green, red and yellow” of the Kurdish flag, to form a unity that can stand strong against Turkish attacks. Calling upon the death of her father, she asks for revenge. With this song the poet reacted to the kilams that were sung previously, and he enforced the argument of his speech. The dengbêjs were singing kilams about betrayal; Kurds betraying Kurds. Such kilams are, so he wanted to say, destroying the unity of the Kurds who should instead make common cause against the Turks. With his speech, he clearly connected to the social narratives of the Kurdish movement that condemned such kilams. He openly tried to educate the dengbêjs, whom he accused of being uneducated. And he sang a recent political song, making clear that this is what counts nowadays, and not the old kilams of the dengbêjs that are about battles, blood, and division.

²³⁶ At the time Hanifi Barış and I worked on this performance we did not transcribe, only translated the song into English, as I did not expect that I would include this song in my dissertation.

The performance leader cut the poet short in the middle of his song, saying that it is not necessary to sing kilams in total, and that ‘we keep it short’. The next dengbêj began to sing before the poet could continue; the third kilam of the row. His kilam connected again to the kilams that were sung before. No one responded to the arguments of the poet, and no one seemed to be surprised about what he was saying. They were used to this discussion, did not see the poet as a serious discussion partner, and quickly continued with their own program.

The third kilam is about the death of Bavê Heyder Beg and his two companions, who joined in the Sheikh Said rebellion and were killed by the Turkish army.

Lo mîro...mîro
Heylo dayê rebenê sibe ye
Min dît Kewê bi sê denga dikir gazî
Digot Zeynebê mala bavê te xera bibe
Welatê me yê Serhedê wezê bi diyarê
Kela Milazgirê şewitî ketime
sere vê payiza rengîne
Tuyê bala xwe bide
ji kil û kedera dilê min
Û te re vê sibê li min dîsa berfê lêkir

Oh king, oh king..
Oh poor mother it is sunrise
I saw how Kewê was calling
Telling to Zeynep, may God destroy your house
I have been wandering all around the lands of Serhat,
Around the doomed castle of Milazgir
at the beginning of this colorful autumn
Look carefully around
look around for my sake
how well and nicely it is snowing at this very morning

Kilams starting with ‘oh king’ are usually about battles, either among tribes or with the state. The kilam’s narrator is Kewê, who is telling her story to Zeynep. Kewê is probably the wife or daughter of Bavê Heyder Beg, who is the king in this kilam. Zeynep might be another relative or friend. It is a colorful autumn morning at sunrise, it is snowing lightly, but it is clear that despite this seemingly peaceful landscape a disaster has happened. Kewê says she is ‘wandering around the lands of Serhat, around the doomed castle of Milazgir’. This way of telling is more often used in laments, and expresses the misery and pain of the narrator. In her imagination, Kewê is wandering around the places where the battle took place and where her heroes have died. They are desolate places, ‘doomed’ because of the recent fighting, and they only recall loss and death. It would be better, so Kewê feels, if these places would not exist anymore, if they would be destroyed, so that she will not be reminded continuously of the agonizing pain that she can hardly bear. The colors of autumn and the white of the snow contrast strongly with the destruction.

In her imagination, Kewê goes back to the moment before the battle started, and tries to redo the event in order to forge a different ending.

De wezê cilê bavê Heyder Begê xwe hilînim Berê xwe bidim Şêrima Şêxa Cilê Keremê qolaxasî Berxê mala Musema Begê hilînim Ezê berê xwe bidim çemê Hevrenge Cilê Silêmanê Mihemed Bavê Kanemîrê zirav hilînim Ezê berê xwe bidim çarşiyê keleşê kopê Mûşa birengîne Cilê van egît û efada bidim ser dikanê Van terziya ji kul û kedera dilê xwe re ji bejn û bala wan re çêkim	I will pick up the fabric for the clothes of Heyder Beg's father I set off to the village Şêrima Şêxa where I will pick up those of commander Kerem, the lamb of the tribe of Musema Beg I will set off to the river Hevrenge where I will pick up the fabric of Silêman the son of Mihemed, the father of tall Kanemîr I will set off to the useless market of colorful Muş where I will give the fabrics of these heroic warriors To the tailor shops, and I will have them made up perfectly Fit to make them look very good
---	--

Kewê introduces the three heroes about whom she laments. They are Bavê Heyder Beg, the commander Kerem, and Silêman of Mihemed, the father of Kanemîr. She imagines ordering beautiful tailor-made clothes that will fit them well and make them look like brave warriors.

Heyla Kewê bi sê denga fikir gazî Digot Zeynebê bila bavê te xera bibe Lê wezê cilê van egît û efada ji bejna wan re çêkim bigrim li bejnê kim Berê van egîta bidim kurê Egrîd Axayê şewitî Lo derbaz bikim hidûdê Îranê bi mahkûmî Bi firarî sitû xwarî lo bavo Çima bi nava Ecema de birê kim	Oh Kewê was telling over and over again Saying to Zeynep, may God destroy your father's house I will collect the clothes of these heroic warriors And have them dressed up perfectly And I will direct these heroes to the son of doomed Egrîd Agha And have them pass the Iranian border like fugitives Like criminals on the run with their heads dropped in shame oh my father Why didn't I have them sent among the Persians?
Heyla dayê wezê çi bikim Heyfa min li kuştina egît û xweşmêran Lê heyfa tê li we heyfê wezê bi diyarê Kela Milazgirê ketime çi bikim Şemseddîn Zarûk e Ez ê temîniya cotê xanima komê xutam û xizmetkaran Û a dîwana mezin ji kul û kedera dilê xwe re li kê û kê kim	Oh mother what can I do? I don't pity the murdering of these great warriors But I pity that I have to wander throughout The castle of Malazgir what could I do, Şemseddîn is only a child To whom could I give the care of two wives and a group of servants And the great dîwan To whom could I give that responsibility ²³⁷ ?

After having them dressed up like heroes, Kewê imagines sending these three men to Egrîd Agha, someone obviously capable of helping them cross the border. She strongly wishes she could have sent them to safety before the battle took place, even

237 The meaning of the last sentence is not totally clear, and the translation is a guess.

though it would have felt like a failure, as if they were criminals. They would have been embarrassed by their retreat, but in retrospect she wishes she could have sent them there. After this regret, she turns back to the reality of the ‘murdering of these great warriors’. The expression ‘I do not pity the death of.., but I do pity..’ (*heyfa min li kuştina .. naye, lê heyfa tê li we heyfe ku..*) is common in laments for warriors. The death of a warrior is regarded as a possible consequence of a heroic battle that is naturally very painful, but can in a way be accepted. What is harder to accept is when women or children die in battles, when houses or villages are burned down or destroyed, or when as in this case, the household of the hero is left behind in disorder. The only man in the family, Şemsedîn, is still a child who cannot take care of the house. Bavê Heyder Beg’s wives and servants are left behind without care, and the ‘great dîwan’, his guesthouse where people used to gather, is now empty. The kilam ends with praise for Bavê Heyder Beg, and some criticism:

Heyla Bavê Heyder Begê min
wele tu sultan î
Tu gula Eshediyan î
tu milûkê Kurdistan î
Ji xwedayê min re
aza û besir e
roja şer û cengê giran
li orta meydanê tu yê
Mêrek î bîkefil
û şert û bi deman î
Ez ê çi bikim e Maqûlo
bila mala te xera bibe

Oh father of my Heyder Beg
you are surely the sultan
You are the flower of Eshedî²³⁸
you are the king of Kurdistan
It is well known by my God
who sees and understands everything
That on the day of the great war
you were in the middle of the battle field
You are a man worthy of ages
and many men can testify to your greatness in war
But what can I do, my wise man
may God destroy your house

Lê roja Şerê Şikefta
Bêngana şewitî mal xerabo
Tu yê li pêşiya qanûne
Hikûmata Romê
Eskerê Cumhûriyetê lo mil hilnanî

On the day of the battle
at the cave of doomed Begane
You didn’t stand up against the rule
of the Turkish government
And against the soldiers of the Republic

Kewê praises his heroism, his bravery in the battle field, and his experience. The last lines seem to be sung out of pain, cursing him because he was not able to beat the ‘rule of the Turkish government and the soldiers of the Republic’.

The public had listened quietly, joined with the humming refrain after each stanza, and applauded after the last sounds fade away. Two men stood up to leave, the performance leader asked ‘who is next?’, and the next dengbêj began to sing the fourth kilam.

²³⁸ Other name for Serhat, the name for the highlands around Muş and Van.

The fourth kilam is about the arrest of Sheikh Said during the rebellion, which in time took place before the three previous kilams.

De lê lê, Qudretê bi sê denga bang dikirî	Hey hey, ²³⁹ Qudretê was telling over and over
De lê lê Muhbetê lê xwê	Hey hey Muhbet, my sister
Wezê biketama bi Kelê,	I wish I would have wandered all around Kelê
bi Kopê, bi Milazgirê	Around Kopê and Milazgir
Bi Muşê, bi Vartoyê, bi Xûnûsê	Around Muş, Varto and Xûnûs
xwedê bi sere me da xera bike	may God let them collapse on our heads ²⁴⁰
Lê li şerê, li qewgê,	Look at the war, at the battle,
li qotikê, li qotînê	look at the massacres and the destruction
Li vê zilmê, li vê zîlametê	look at the oppression and cruelty
Bila kula xwedê bi kul be	May God's diseases and troubles
bikeve beyta mala	fall on the house and family
Misto Kemal Qumandarê Cûmhûriyetê	of Misto Kemal, the commander of the Republic

This kilam begins in a manner similar to some parts of the previous kilam, which may have triggered the memory of the dengbêj about this particular song. The narrator Qudretê's lament is addressed to her sister. She says that she wishes to see the destruction of the places where the rebellion took place, mentioning all the place names. She feels in shock because of what happened, because of all the people who died, and she hopes that the places which remind her of the cruelties will be destroyed. She wants to die with them, as after all this destruction living seems useless and cruel. She also curses Mustafa Kemal, the leader of the young Turkish Republic, whom she holds responsible for the catastrophe and the arrest of Sheikh Said. In the following lines she turns back to what happened before their death.

Min dît destê bavê Şêx Elî Riza,	I saw that the hands of Şêx Elî Riza's father,
Bi tevî sed siwara kiriye dare kelemçe	Along with one hundred cavalry, were handcuffed,
Haniye kavila Diyarbekir daye	brought to the ruins of Diyarbekir
ber daraxacî	and placed next to the [hanging poles]
Lo lo bira min dît êvarê ji xwe re girt	Brother I saw how in the evening they were arrested
Û bê sûc û xeta	Without any crime or misdeed
avêtiye kaxila nezaretê	and he [Mustafa Kemal] put them in custody
Ax nemînim	Ah, I don't want to live anymore
Weyla Axao wezê nizanîm nemîne	Hey my Agha, I don't know how to survive
Li pey kîyan û kê ra	with whom and for whom
Wezê nemînim li pey Şêx Seid Efendî	I don't want to survive after [the death of] Şêx Seid Ef.
Bavê Şêx Elî Riza,	The father of Şêx Elî Riza [Sheikh Said's son]
ortaqê Şêx Evdîlayê	the companion of Şêx Evdîlayê
Meleka berxê mala Şêx Eliyê Palûyê	The great warrior of the house of Şêx Elî from Palû
Bavê Pakîzê ra dewrane	The father of Pakîzê [Sheikh Said's daughter]
mire min dewran e	my king it is doomsday

239 In Kurdish this exclamation addresses a woman

240 These places are known to the people, they live there, and after what happened it is like torture to see the places and continue living there. So they say let them collapse on our heads, and let us also be dead with them. Your beloved one is gone so what is the use of staying alive.

Sheikh Said was arrested and handcuffed together with hundred cavalry. Qudretê praises him, calling him by the names of his most important relatives and connections, and says she cannot survive after his death. After this lament she gives some more information about the circumstances of the arrest.

Bila kula xwedê bi kul be bikeve	May the wrath of God befall upon the houses
Beyta mala fesad û şeytanên	of the devilish snitches
me Kurmanca	among us the Kurds
De dîsa çûne Kavila Diyarbekirê rûniştine	They have gathered again in the ruins of Diyarbekir
Mîn dît de dîsa	I saw how again they reported
şikayeta bavê Şêx Elî Rîza	about the father of Şêx Elî Rîza
Kalê Nûranî Qutvê çiyayê Bîngolê	The Divine Elder, Wise Man of the Bingol mountains
Teyrê Sipî, Şêxê Îrşadê	The White Eagle, the Sheikh of Divine Enlightenment
De wanê ji xwe re	They reported about the father of Pakîze
şikayeta Bavê Pakîzê kiribûn, wan gilîkir	and informed his whereabouts [to the authorities]

Despite the complaints of the poet that the dengbêjs were singing kilams about the division and fights among the Kurds, this kilam continues in the same vein. It talks about the ‘devilish snitches among us the Kurds’ who betrayed Sheikh Said and ‘informed his whereabouts’ to the authorities. The kilam implies that he could have conquered the Turkish army, if not for the betrayers who repeatedly did not side with him but with the enemy. The words the dengbêj uses to praise Sheikh Said refer to his religious position and to the religious meaning the narrator attaches to him. He was the Divine elder, the Wise man, the White Eagle, the Sheikh of Divine Enlightenment. This way of praising Sheikh Said is not common in the discourse of the Kurdish movement, let alone in PKK thought. The kilam instead praises his religious qualities and thus combines Kurdish nationalist and religious sentiments in ways one would not usually hear from political activists.

Lê kesekî xêrxwaz tune	But there was no one of good will
kaxezekî yazîbike	to write a letter
Bişîne ba Seydayê Nêriyê	and send it to Seyda of Nêriyê
Seydayo bila mala te mîrat be	Seyda may your house be destroyed
Mîn dît Bavê Şêx Elî Rîza,	I saw the father of Şêx Elî Rîza
Kalê Nûranî, Qutvê Çiyayê Bîngolê,	The Divine Elder, the Wise Man of the Bingol mountains
Teyrê Sipî, Şêxê Îrşadê	The White Eagle, the Sheikh of Divine Enlightenment,
Berê xwe dibû riya Îranê	Set off to Iran,
Rêka xwe bi nivî kir	he was half way
Bila kula xwedê bi kul be	May God's diseases
Bikeve mala fesada û Şeytana	befall upon the houses of these devilish snitches
Mîn dît destê Bavê Şêx Elî Rîza kirin	I saw how they handcuffed the father of Şêx Elî Rîza
Darê kelepça bi tevî sed siwarî	Along with one hundred cavalry
berê wî da bûn	and brought them
Kavila Diyarbekir ber daraxacî	to the ruins of Diyarbekir

According to the kilam Sheikh Said was on his way to Iran to escape, but was intercepted by soldiers who, following the directions of the betrayers, arrested him and his men and brought them to Diyarbakır.

Min dît dused siwarên me sirgûn kirin	I saw how 200 of our cavalries were sent in exile
Berê wan dane nava Lazan û Tatan	sent towards the Laz and Tat
De min dît dîsa serê Şêx û Melên me	I saw how they captured all our Sheikhs and Imams
Tenami girtin ji xwe re bi baltê jêkirin	And they beheaded them with axes
Ax nemînim nemînim nemînim	Ah I don't want to live anymore
Ezê nizanîm nemînim	I don't want to survive
Li pey kîyan îs kîyan	with whom and for whom?
Wezê nemînim li pey Şêx Seid Efendî	I cannot survive after Sheikh Seid Efendi
Bavê Şêx Elî Rîza	the father of Sheikh Elî Rîza
De dîsa ortaqê mi da Şêx Evdîlayê Meleka	The companion of Sheikh Evdila of Meleka
De Kekê Xiyasedîn Bavê Pakîzê re	the brother of Xiyasedîn, the father of Pakîze
Dewrane dewrane	Nothing will ever be the same

The narrator saw him as the great hope for victory, and therefore after his death living did not seem to make sense anymore. The Sheikh Said rebellion was indeed put down harshly and had enormous consequences due to the large number of people killed, exiled, and displaced.

Freedom in their own House

At the end of the performance the public praised the dengbêj, and discussed who would sing next. The previous topic was abandoned and a new series started: they collectively decided the next kilam should be *Silêmanê Mistê*, a well-known and frequently performed kilam about a battle between the Pencînar and Elîkan tribes (see chapter 1). Someone in the public opposed this choice, saying it is 'too long'. For some minutes they discussed:

- A: Sing *Silêmanê Mistê*!
- B: No, *Silêmanê Mistê* is too long!
- C: It is not necessary to make it long, long and short is in our hands!
- D: It is in my mother's hands to make more buttermilk!
- E: I won't give up singing kilams until the end!

This short exchange points to the presence of dengbêj Nejat who had the lead of the performance. The dengbêjs knew his preference for short songs, which he had already stated several times before. Some felt they should continue singing full versions, whereas others wanted to follow the line of dengbêj Nejat.

After the interruption dengbêj Mahmut starts singing about the battle between the house of Faro of the Elîkan tribe and the house of Dîbo of the Pencînar tribe. *Silêman* son of *Mistê* of the house of Dîbo wants to revenge the livestock theft,

eventually leading to a war between the two clans, in which Silêman gets killed (chapter 1). The narrator of the song is the mother of Silêmanê Mistê who laments the death of her son. But in this version she also laments the death of the enemy hero, and sings about both of them when Bişarê Çeto asks her to do so. Following the topic of this kilam, the next dengbêj sang *Bişarê Çeto*, which I also discussed in chapter 1. It is followed by another kilam about tribal battle. The dengbêj began to sing, but after the introductory *way way* he interrupted himself. There was some noise coming from outside that was disturbing the performance, some people in the courtyard talking to each other. Dengbêj Mahmut reacted to the fact that previously they were disturbed by other musicians, whereas in the new Dengbêj House they are the ones in charge:

Dengbêj Mahmut:	This is our house and no one can stop us! So shall I sing at the top of my voice or not? Do you dare to sing at the top of your voice [directed to the other dengbêjs]?
The public:	Sing! Sing!
Dengbêj Mahmut:	Oh of course, sing! Sing at the top of your voice, you are free!

Enjoying the freedom of having their own House instead of feeling like guests at the cultural center, the dengbêj continued his kilam at his loudest volume and thus drowned out the voices outside. After the kilam finished there was some discussion between the two oldest dengbêjs present about their position and about a performance of the second oldest on television. But dengbêj Mahmut tried to interrupt them, he was not finished, he had something more to say:

I had a shepherd²⁴¹ and he left his home after he married. And he said to me: 'you didn't tell me how nice it is to live apart [from my family]. My father cannot tell me anymore what to do. He cannot wake me up in the morning. He cannot send me to work'. His father had kicked him out of the village. Sometime later I saw him again with a handcar and he looked so poor and I asked him: 'how are you doing?' And he said to me:²⁴² 'Brother, brother, you fucked my mother. You didn't tell me how hard it is to live apart from my family. One of them wants trousers, the other one wants shoes, the next sugar, oil, tea.. I became a beggar. Can you ask my father Hacı Ramazan if he can take me back to the village?' This is our house, we can sing loudly and no one can say anything to us. We are seven meters under the ground! Let's sing, sing! When you are at home you are at ease and free, and you can do whatever you like!²⁴³

241 Farmers often hire a shepherd to take care of their herds (often several farmers do so collectively). This dengbêj lives in a village outside of Diyarbakir and owns land and livestock.

242 At that moment he turned into my direction and said to the others: 'yes there is of course a woman present here', as to excuse himself for the words he was going to say. But it was my first fieldwork period and I did not understand much Kurdish. He apparently felt he could continue without feeling awkward, as everyone knew I would not understand. This is a nice example of cultural coding. He feels he can only use such a sentence in the presence of men, and even though a woman is present, my inability to understand excuses him for using it.

243 Literally he uses the expression "this is the neighborhood of Koroğlu", which comes to this meaning.

The public was laughing, and someone reacted: ‘we are under the earth, as in Istanbul!’.²⁴⁴ The story was meant to illustrate how comfortable one feels when one is at home. To the shepherd it seemed pleasant initially to be far from the obligations of home, but eventually he had to admit that he would rather live at home with his father interfering than to have to carry the load of his family on his own. At home one feels supported, free, and at ease, and that is how the dengbêjs felt that day in the new Dengbêj House. They could sing as loud as they wished because it was their own home and no one could interrupt them or drown them out.

I hope that this rather lengthy and detailed account of one performance was useful first in gaining an impression of the structure of a dengbêj performance, and second in highlighting a number of issues that are central to understanding current performances. I conclude this section by discussing each of these in turn.

The newly opened Dengbêj House provoked comments on the new location and organization. The dengbêjs saw this as a new start in which they had a place of their own and a new visibility in public life. They were no longer sitting in the courtyard of the cultural center where they had felt outnumbered and drowned out by the modern Kurdish music groups. Having their own House made them feel more at home and more able to define their performances as they saw fit.

At the same time, their separation from the cultural center and the pleasure they felt at having their own place underscores the opposing interests and views between the dengbêjs and other musicians (see also chapter 4). They now have their own house, spoken of by dengbêj Mahmut who told the story of the shepherd who wanted to return to his father’s home. The story emphasizes the importance of one’s own place, and is a good example of the way in which the dengbêjs ‘perform tradition.’ They feel connected to the village imaginary of the shepherd story and more at home in a place that is not dominated by people by whom they do not feel understood.

The interaction between the dengbêjs in the four kilams presented above demonstrates in how they construct the imaginary of an event, one that takes place at a specific time and place beyond current circumstances. Each dengbêj remembered a different song about the same event and repeated some phrases and expressions voiced by the previous dengbêj, in this way connecting themselves to each other, both in song topic and in vocabulary. Each kilam provided additional information and additional images about the unfolding events. The opening of the Dengbêj House some days before had, due to its political character, most likely triggered their

²⁴⁴ He probably refers to the Basilica cistern of Istanbul, a famous ancient cistern beneath the old city center.

interest in singing these songs at this moment. Songs about the rebellions linked the dengbêjs to the primarily political interests of the activists who had facilitated the new House. They knew that such kilams were popular among the activists, and could bring them some name and fame. However, although the topic of the kilams was indeed connected to the interests of the activists, their actual content was less so. The poet, who interrupted their enthusiasm, pointed towards some of the tensions present in the kilams.

The kilams concern a significant event in Kurdish political history, but they are based on local alliances and loyalties rather than on nationalist ideology (see chapter 1). Even though the Sheikh Said rebellion was the most important Kurdish rebellion of the early Republican time and became symbolic of the Kurdish struggle for freedom, the kilams paint a different picture than the social narratives about Kurdishness and unity would like to stress. The kilams do not conceal the obvious tensions that existed among Kurdish tribes and which prevented them from uniting against one enemy. They recover rather than hide the betrayal and disharmony among different Kurdish factions and do not point towards the so sought-after Kurdish unity.

The dengbêjs are therefore caught in a trap: they emphasize their knowledge of Kurdish culture and traditions which is regarded as positive today. But in doing so, elements come up that do not fit today's dominant ideology and that are condemned by political activists. Although the poet is clearly not a person of authority for the dengbêjs, his speech does demonstrate that the dengbêjs are seen as in need of education and change. They are expected to connect to current narratives of patriotism, Kurdish unity, and the condemnation of internal rivalry. However, during this performance the dengbêjs continued to sing their kilams. The second kilam sung after the speech of the poet was *Silêmanê Mistê*, which is a kilam not about rebellion but about tribal conflict. Obviously, at that time the dengbêjs did not feel they should modify their repertoire in line with the ideals of the Kurdish movement.

Conclusion

“Apê Qado (uncle Qado) was my first dengbêj, if I do not count my grandfather who had a decorated long *bilûr* and a *kaval* [both shepherd's flutes], or my father who told me epics of the old times on sparkling evenings in the summer months when the sky was filled with stars. Apê Qado was one of those shadowy faces of my childhood, now and then popping up. From time to time he visited our house or my grandfather's. (..) He was dressed in ordinary clothes like the local people.

With his clothes and behavior he was exactly someone from older times, a storyteller belonging to the old era. (...) Most of the things he told, as far as I can remember, belonged to old times. But there was always something in the story that would be of interest today and to today's people. The stories of Apê Qado, whatever time they belonged to, were not told without reason and there was always a connection with today, a message, a reference, a reason, openly or hidden" (Uzun²⁴⁵ 2005 [1998]: 17-18, translated from Turkish, my emphasis).

In this chapter I focused on the performance manner of dengbêjs registered at the Dengbêj House in Diyarbakır. They present their art as an important historical source, as a tradition that speaks from the past and conveys authentic experiences of Kurdish village life that cannot be located easily today. Many Kurds would classify the dengbêjs as traditional people, as voices from the past, and contrast them with modern Kurds living in the cities. As Mehmed Uzun says in the quote above, the quality of a performance for him depends on the connection one could feel between former times and today. He experienced uncle Qado, the dengbêj who regularly visited their house in his childhood, as someone offering a glimpse of a past life. But does the fact, as some seem to think, that the dengbêjs are often uneducated in Turkey's education system and that they are trained in an old tradition mean that they are pre-modern or not yet entirely taken up by modernity? The divide between tradition and modernity has troubled anthropology since its onset, and has been instrumental in denying coevalness to others (Fabian 1983: 31) and in the creation of an Other far from the life world of the anthropologist. As I outlined in the introduction, the same narrative has been used to reinforce and justify the power and oppression of the (colonial) state by making groups of people look as if they are in need of a civilizing mission of the state. As this global narrative is so present in Turkey and elsewhere, and engrained in our thinking, I think it is important to deconstruct its underlying assumptions and to investigate in detail what implications it has in the specific case of the dengbêjs.

In this chapter we have seen that the dengbêj art has the image of being a village tradition. Dengbêj Mahmut, for example, emphasized his village background and the qualities corresponding to such a life. The dengbêjs feel and are presented as possessing knowledge, experience and attitudes that they achieved through growing up and being trained in the Kurdish countryside where they lived in an environment dominated by Kurdish language and culture. As such they are seen as different from Kurds who grew up in cities, who lived through different experiences, and who were

²⁴⁵ Mehmed Uzun (1953-2007) was a Kurdish novelist and activist for Kurdish language rights in Turkey. His books were banned in Turkey and he lost his citizenship, after which he lived in exile in Sweden. He is regarded as one of the most important Kurdish authors of recent times.

much more in touch with Turkish language and culture. Village life is regarded as connected to pre-modern times, before the era of progress, where people still live as they used to in the past. In short, the village is often seen as a source of knowledge about true Kurdish culture.

However, when looking at the reality of the lives of the dengbêjs, presenting them as people unaware of, untouched by, or on the road towards, modern life, would be mistaken (see chapter 3 for individual stories). As we saw in the Introduction, over the last century the dengbêj art has developed against the backdrop of the emerging Turkish nation-state, of growing oppression, of Kurdish nationalism, and of a recent opening for Kurdish cultural expression. Some dengbêjs were persecuted, their art was prohibited, and others escaped Turkey to other countries from where they continued to develop their art in exile. Radio and television broadcast set up by Kurds living abroad assisted in raising awareness about the existence and importance of Kurdish language and culture. Although villages further removed from government control were less prone to direct oppression of culture and language, it is hardly possible to see any place within Turkey's borders as untouched by national (and global) politics or by modernity. Also remote villages were deeply influenced by the developments of the increasing power and interference of the state in local matters (see chapter 5). People living in villages who may have looked pure or pristine from an outsider's perspective were well aware of developments happening on a larger scale, if only because of their lack of access to them.

To give one example: good dengbêjs were people with an interest in music and performance. Many would have liked to have had more opportunities for this in their younger years, but performing in Kurdish was just not possible on a professional level and scale (see chapter 3). Since the dengbêjs were consciously preoccupied with the learning and rehearsing of kilams, something that took years of practice, they must have been, even more than others, convinced of the value of Kurdish language and culture. They were also painfully aware of the fact that they could not develop their art in a way congruent with other musical expressions in Turkey. In short, the fact that they lived in rural and often poor conditions did not mean that they were not aware of developments in other places, or that they were behind on some evolutionary road towards progress. Rather, they knew what was going on, they realized they had no access to things they wished to have, and, sooner or later, they often tried out a number of strategies to gain access to the professional music scene or to music education. Therefore, classifying these people as traditional, backwards, uneducated or ignorant, does not make sense when we investigate the stories of particular individuals and performances. It only makes sense when we group

them together and make a story about them that fits our perception but has little connection to the reality of life as lived on the margins of the Turkish nation-state. Indeed, the dengbêj art was pushed out of the cities and larger towns to the villages precisely as a consequence of modernity and nationalism. The modern dominance of nationalist ideology in Turkey turned the dengbêjs and their art into adversaries of the republican ideology of ‘one people, one flag, one language, one nation.’

If under the Ottoman Empire the Kurds also did not belong to the Empire’s center, they had their own political and social structure that had a place within the Empire, even if it was on its margins. Within this limited space Kurdish culture and language could continue to thrive without major obstructions. The dengbêjs sang in the service of Kurdish mîrs and aghas, but were marginalized when the Kurdish emirate system was destroyed by Ottoman centralization policies. These policies were the foreboding of the modern nation-state, and this first marginalization of the dengbêjs can thus be seen as a first consequence of modernity. After the foundation of the Republic, the increasing oppression of the Kurds meant that Kurdish language could only be spoken in private, beyond the reach of police and soldier’s ears.²⁴⁶ Unlike those dengbêjs who migrated abroad and began to use musical instruments, who were broadcast on the radio, and whose recorded music is still around today, the dengbêjs in Turkey were pushed to the margins, where they could only continue their art in the safety of the home and of smaller villages that were under less scrutiny than the larger towns and cities. Indeed, the dengbêj art was predominantly a village tradition, but as the consequence of modernity, rather than as something that preceded it.

The dengbêjs discussed in this chapter were connected to the House already some years, and were actively involved in the daily performances. The political activists who managed the House often talked with them and tried to transmit their ideological ideas to the dengbêjs (see chapter 4). The latter were thus quite aware of the new narratives about their societal function and significance. Nevertheless, only a few of the dengbêjs I interviewed spoke in terms of learning to become better Kurds, as for example dengbêj Silêman did in the extensive quote on the tribal nature of kilams in this chapter. Several other examples follow in chapters 3 and 4. Generally, however, dengbêjs did not speak in such terms and had different narratives. They emphasized their deep knowledge of Kurdish history, language, past village life, and traditions, without directly framing this knowledge as nationalist. I propose, built on the ethnographic material presented in this chapter, that this was not a matter of ignorance, but rather a conscious choice to stay connected to a different morality

246 “Villages functioned as the home for Kurdish folklore, precisely because most of the time the villages remained outside the state control” (Yüksel 2011: 52).

than that of the Kurdish movement. Although most dengbêjs did feel connected to (some of) the future ideals of the Kurdish movement, they did not share the latter's view on the past. In that sense, the dengbêjs "inhabited different kinds of time simultaneously" (Asad 2003: 223):

When settled cultural assumptions cease to be viable, agents consciously inhabit different kinds of time simultaneously and try to straddle the gap between what Reinhart Koselleck, speaking of 'modernity,' calls experience and expectation, an aspect of the contemporaneity of the noncontemporaneous. (...) Modern history clearly links time past to time present, and orients its narratives to the future. But present experience is also, as Koselleck points out, a reencounter with what was once imagined as the future. The disappointment or delight this may occasion therefore prompts a reorientation to the past that is more complex than the notion of 'invented tradition' allows.

In this chapter we have seen this "reencounter with what was once imagined as the future" taking place. The dengbêjs did not feel there was a problem with the stories of a Kurdish past in which small-scale alliances and loyalties were much more important and present than the longing for a united Kurdistan.

This brings us to the empersonment of Kurdishness with which I started the chapter. From the self-Orientalist viewpoint of political activists, the dengbêjs are in need of personal change in order to be proper representatives of the modern Kurdish nation. They need to acquire the good Kurdish traits that are traced back to the distant past of a pristine Kurdistan, and they need to shed the bad habits of tribal loyalties, blood revenge, and religious conservativeness. They need to relinquish primordial ties and open their eyes to nationalist and democratic values. For the activists, the empersonment of Kurdishness entails a conscious remaking of the self into better moral and nationalist persons. However, most dengbêjs I spoke with did not express a similar ambivalence towards their Kurdish identity. They did not regard the Kurdish past about which they sing in their kilams as problematic.

Most of them did not go to Turkish schools and were therefore less influenced by, and less immersed in, a Turkish dominated environment. In their younger years they had embraced the kilams they learned from their masters as valuable and important sources of knowledge, culture, language, and history, and they continued to see them as such. Rather than feeling the need for a deliberate recreation of a Kurdish identity, they wished to perform in the way they had learned in the past, and to be valued for their knowledge. The Dengbêj House offered a new and visible space of recognition for their art, and it gave them the opportunity to demonstrate their qualities to new audiences. They emphasized the specific knowledge that they could offer to today's audiences: the emotions and embodied experiences of village

life and a Kurdish past that had “disappeared within a moment.” With their presence and singing they felt that they could recall hidden memories for Kurds who had once lived that life, or recover a lost past for those who had not. The Sung Home that the dengbêjs imagined was therefore a different home than the political activists wished to create with the new institution of the Dengbêj House.

