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

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Part II

Life Stories

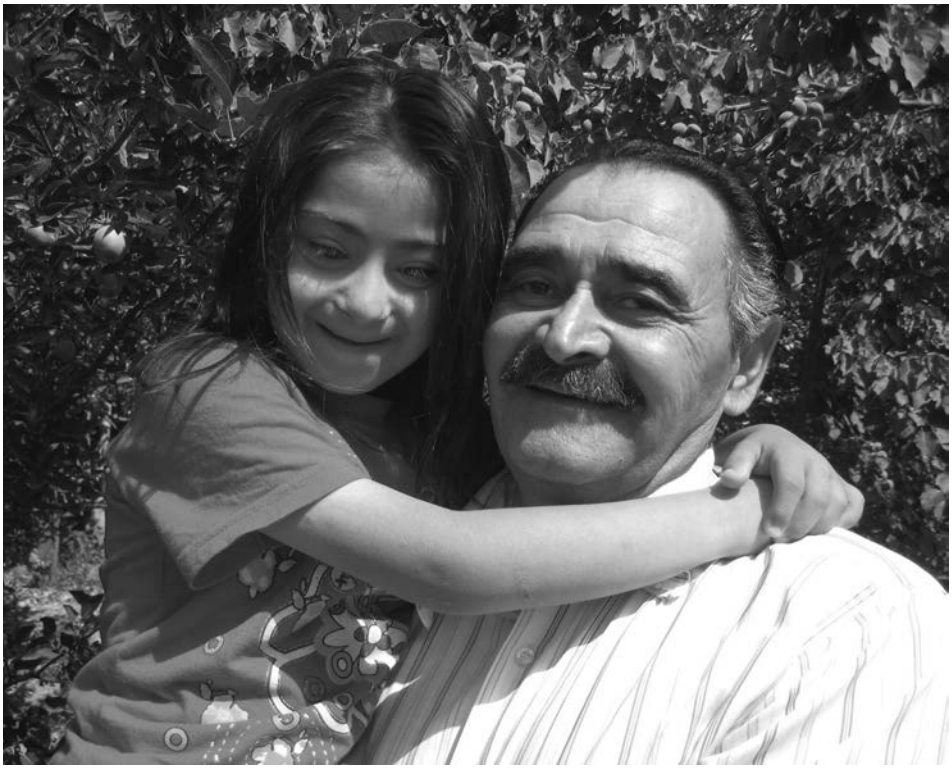

Figure 10. Dengbêj Ali with his daughter in Van. 2008.

Chapter 3

‘A language is a life,
and art is a bracelet.’
A landscape of silence.

Introduction

> Look, 1980 came.[247] On 12 September a coup took place in Turkey under Kenan Evren. All Kurdish was made forbidden. If someone had even one cassette with Kurdish in his house and was caught, he got sentenced. I had many cassettes in Kurdish from many dengbêjs, from everyone. I took them all and threw them in the river. From then on, from 1980 until.. until 2001, believe me I didn't open my mouth, I sang almost nothing. Sometimes I sang at home when I was bored. Sometimes, let me not forget this, in the evening I sat down and I said to my wife: 'make me some tea, and go to bed'. And I sat there the whole night alone and sang until the morning.[248]

With these few sentences dengbêj Mahmut summarized how his singing came to an abrupt end following the 1980 coup organized by General Kenan Evren and his supporters. The coup and its aftermath of harsh oppression and terror marked the starting point of the deep transformation of Kurdish society over thirty years. It also marked the virtual end of the dengbêj art. I start this chapter on silence with dengbêj Mahmut's story because he powerfully articulated what being silenced meant to him and what consequences it had for his art. While thinking through the other stories of this chapter, his story may help to remind us that the silencing of language and cultural production had deep and lasting consequences for Kurdish society.

The prohibitions on the Kurdish language caused dengbêj Mahmut to destroy his cassettes, testimony to the dengbêjs who had come before him. It also made him remain silent for almost two decades. His words spoke of fear, regret, submission and solitude, but also of resilience and perseverance. Dengbêj Mahmut was still young when the coup occurred. He had started learning the dengbêj art at a young age, and this took a great effort. From the stories he told about his young adulthood it appeared that he was a passionate singer, as he is today. Being a dengbêj was his pursuit and passion until the time that he did not dare to continue performing. He spoke of the prohibition on the Kurdish language one other time in my interview, after I had asked him if he really did not sing at all from 1980 until 2002, referring to an earlier comment he had made. He replied:

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

248 "Bak seksen geldi, seksen. 12 Eylül Türkiye'de inklap oldu. Bütün Kürtçe yasak etti. Kimin evinde bir Kürtçe kaseti, Kenan Evren o zaman inklap yaptı, kimin evinde bir Kürtçe kaset yakalasaydı, ondan sonra ceza verdiler. Benim bir çoğu kaseti vardı, Kürtçe kasetlerim vardı, böyle çeşit çeşitler dengbêjler vardı, herkesin. Ben hepsi götürdüm çaya attım. 1980'den 2001'e kadar inan ki ben hemen hemen yani doğru dürüst ağzımı açmadım. bazen evde sıkılınca şey dedim. Bazen, unutmayayım, akşamdan koltukta oturuyordum hanıma söylüyordum: 'çayımı yapsan getirsen git yat'. Ben tek başıma odada oturuyordum sabaha kadar söylüyordum."

> No I only sometimes sang at home, but not at weddings, or in public gatherings, very little, because the people were afraid (*başka hiç toplumda, cemaatte, düğünlerde.. ara sıra bir, millet korkuyordu, söyleyemiyorduk*). Occasionally, if a request came from the villages, I went there and sang. Sometimes we sang with two or three dengbêjs at a wedding, each in turn. But it was not like before. We could not sing every night, or once a week or once a month. That spirit was gone (*o neşe kalmadı*). Because it was forbidden, the government had forbidden it. It had disappeared, I gave up on it. But my father said to me: 'my son, a language is a life, whatever a person learns stays in his mind'. And he said: 'art is a golden bracelet, whatever happens, when someone knows an art, it is like a bracelet' (*bir lisan bir insandır. Insan ne bilse o kalır. Ondan sonra, sanat altın bileziktir. Ne olursa olsun insan bir sanati olursa bir bileziktir*).[249]

People were afraid to listen to performances. Once in a while he accepted an invitation, but these were exceptions and occurred much less frequently than before the coup. As a reaction to the disappearance of the language and public performances his father spoke to him about the importance of language and art. He said that language is rich, and when one has learned a language it never leaves one's mind and art is worth as much as a golden bracelet. In Kurdish society such bracelets are given to women as a wedding gift. Women wear them and also keep them for hard times, when they or their family need money. Whatever happens, the jewelry will always be there and have a permanent value.[250] The comparison of the dengbêj art with the bracelet for a woman's wedding shows the value the dengbêjs and other people attached to it. Dengbêj Mahmut illustrated the words of his father with a story:

> Believe me [one day] I went to Serhat, to Muş, it was snowing. I went with my father to a village, and we got lost, me and my father. I was still young at the time. There was one and a half meter snow. We ended up in another village, it was a Chechen village, a village from Chechen people. These are people who don't invite one inside. There were one hundred houses in that village. We went to all the houses but noone let us in. We would freeze to death from the cold. It was in the middle of the winter, there was 1,5 meter snow, there was ice. I sat down on a stone and began to sing:
>
> *Lo lo Faxriya's father.. Hey ey ey…*[251]
>
> That's how I began to sing, and I looked up, and across from me a door opened, over there a door opened, over there someone called me in, and over there. Four people

249 The title of this chapter is based on this quote. It is a free translation. '*Bir lisan bir insan*' is a proverb that means that with each language you learn you become, as it were, an extra person. It points to the wealth of language, and the power of knowing a different language. Since dengbêj Mahmut uses this expression to underline the importance of Kurdish, the language of his art, I felt that my English translation 'a language is a life' captures his intentions.

250 Scalbert Yücel also notes that dengbêjs compared their art with gold: 'Because of this repression, dengbêjî has tended to be represented as something 'hidden' [*tiştekî veşartî*], or as a 'buried treasure,' as one of the dengbêj said: 'The *dengbêj*, it is a treasure buried in the ground. The dengbêj is like gold.' As such dengbêjî needs to be discovered, cherished and protected' (ibid 2009: 17).

251 While telling the story he sang the first line of this kilam, without singing it in full. See chapter 1 for a full version of this kilam called *Bavê Faxriya*.

> came to invite us to be their guests! I said to my friends: 'look, my father has said to me: one day it will become necessary, preserve that art. Preserve it, the time will come, one day you will need it' (*ben arkadaşlar dedim: bak, babam bana söyledi bir gün lazım olur, o sanat sakla. Sakla, zamani gelir zamani. Bir gün lazım olur*). One of the men took us inside and gave us food, he lit the fireplace, and I started to sing. The whole village came [to his house]. If I wouldn't have been able to sing, really we would have died that night. (You didn't have any acquaintances in the village?) No really I didn't know anybody. It was the first time I came there. It was in 1976. I sang this song and it saved us. Really it is a nice art, the dengbêj art is a very nice art (*bu dengbêjlik çok güzel bir sanattır*).

Dengbêj Mahmut told me this story to illustrate the value of the dengbêj art: it meant life to him, life as opposed to death. His father had told him to preserve his knowledge, like a bracelet, because one day he would be able to use it. The story makes it also clear that one cannot underestimate the consequences of the prohibitions put in place after the coup. Most people did not have the means to buy a radio or a cassette player; possessing cassettes was like having a treasure. When people gathered in a house with a radio or a cassette player, they brought their cassettes and listened to them together. Therefore, when dengbêj Mahmut took his cassettes and threw them in the river, he lost a valuable treasure. It appears that this was a clean break with the dengbêj art, because he says 'I gave it up'. He decided to throw the cassettes away to be safe and to have some peace of mind. The policies of fear had succeeded in silencing and isolating him.

However, this silence was also occasionally broken. Dengbêj Mahmut indicated in the first quote that he sometimes asked his wife 'to bring tea and go to bed' and then he sang 'until the morning'. Although he had tried to radically and totally abandon his art, he also remembered the words of his father. At such moments he broke his silence, and enjoyed the words and sounds of the kilams. He sang to entertain himself, to find solace, and to forget his sorrow. Unfortunately, he could not share these moments with anyone, but only sing in hiding, in solitude, whereas the dengbêj art was something to be shared. Dengbêj Mahmut's effort to break his silence actually makes the silence more visible; a dengbêj without an audience is meaningless. Therefore, both acts, that of throwing away his cassettes and the lonely singing in the night suggest the emotional reaction to being silenced. At the same time, the act of singing in the night indicates that dengbêj Mahmut was not able to totally abandon his art. He kept a little hope alive that one day he would be able to sing again in front of an audience. The way he spoke about silence betrayed both his feelings of loss as well as the feeling of hope he tried to maintain.

In this chapter, that forms the central part of the dissertation, I discuss the duality of being silenced and breaking silence so clearly expressed in his and

other dengbêjs' narratives, and in that of one aşık. I focus on a number of individual narratives to examine this topic. What strategies did these individual dengbêjs develop to make a space for performance within the context of their lives, and in often confusing and painful circumstances? How did they speak of these experiences in the context of today's social and political climate? What social and moral narratives did they draw upon and how did they use such narratives to give meaning to their life experiences? The themes narrative and morality meet in the stories of individual performers. This chapter bridges the first with the third part by demonstrating what impact societal changes and new moral narratives had on individual lives.

I use the method of narrative analysis (Riessman 1993) to analyze interviews on their main themes and structure. All interviews discussed in this chapter were recorded on video, and I translated them in full. Instead of fracturing the stories by choosing quotes that fit my story, I read carefully through each interview to find out what were the main concerns of the people I spoke with. I also used Somers' narrative dimensions (see Introduction) to investigate how individuals incorporated social concerns in their personal life stories. Each life story can be read separately and the reader can pick and choose stories according to her interest. However, the range of topics that the stories convey are not chosen randomly, but according to themes that were and are important in contemporary Kurdish life in Turkey. By focusing, in detail, on the life stories of individuals we gain insight into the variety of lived experiences in the complex socio-political situation of Turkey. Many dengbêjs stopped performing or sang only occasionally between 1980 and 2000. The stories reflect important changes taking place in Turkish Kurdistan since the 1980s: the destruction of village life, rapid urbanization and migration that allowed little space for the dengbêjs to perform, and the politicization of Kurdishness and of Kurdish music. Many people of the elderly generation are not as connected to social narratives brought up by the Kurdish political movement, and dominant since the 1980s, as are the young generation that grew up during the armed conflict between the PKK and Turkey's goverment.[252] Their stories offer a diverse picture of performance opportunities and obstructions, and show more than just the politicized discourse on the dengbêj art as it developed over the last decade. I also included the story of one Kurdish aşık, since

252 This view is also often articulated in Turkey, for example in an interview with the co-mayor of Diyarbakır on the website of the newspaper 'Halkın Nabzı:' "Firat Anli claims that his generation is the last Kurdish generation that is open to peace, negotiation and living with Turks in Turkey. He believes that the new generation of the Kurds to come (those who lived their childhood in the 1990s) is too furious to negotiate peacefully, due to the state violence and oppression they have witnessed in the 1990s." (Translated from Turkish, March 28, 2014, http://www.maltepeninnabzi.com/?p=3148).

his life story gives important clues about shifting interests in music and musical instruments over the last decades among Kurds in Turkey.

While writing this chapter I realized that my own focus of attention sometimes blinded me to the focus of the people I spoke with. In earlier versions, I was preoccupied with political oppression, and I searched through the interviews for comments on this. But while reading and thinking through the interviews over and over again, I realized that the silences I was looking for (silence due to political oppression) were not necessarily the silences that the dengbêjs were talking about. I discovered other reasons that people felt silenced, which meant that I needed to broaden the topic of this chapter to include a *variety* of silences. Female dengbêjs were silenced by men and patriarchal structures of society; some dengbêjs were silenced because of religious reasons and others were prohibited from making the music they liked because of a prohibition on musical instruments. Destruction of villages and social structures, as well as migration to the cities of Western Turkey were other causes for a decline in interest and performance opportunities. A significant development after 1980 was that dengbêjs came to be seen by the Kurdish political movement as part of the feudal system it was fighting against. This made the dengbêjs unpopular, especially when they were compared to the young generation of musicians. Politicized music groups grew rapidly in popularity and replaced the music of dengbêjs. In short, throughout the lives of my respondents, individuals and groups of dengbêjs have been silenced for various reasons and by a number of actors or institutions.

When after 2000 a new space was created for the dengbêjs to perform, people who had kept silent for many years experienced a renewed interest in their art, and found new ways to express themselves. This became an important topic during the interviews. Dengbêjs looked back on their lives and recounted the heyday of their singing careers, the times that they could not sing, and how the situation is today. For some dengbêjs the silence and return was a central theme to which they returned often during the interview. For others it came up in less obvious ways, for example, when they spoke about their come-back on stage, about the perceived lack of attention to their singing, and about ideas of how and why the songs and stories of dengbêjs are important and should not be forgotten. As important reasons for their silence, the dengbêjs mentioned both the recent political transformations, as well as earlier obstructions in their singing careers. They described how the changes that took place played a role in their lives, and located themselves in this landscape of silence and the return of their voice. They *were able to speak* about this because so much had changed.

As I outlined in the introduction, in times of change, people feel the need to reposition themselves and refigure their personal narratives (Zigon 2008). Social narratives change, and stories that were previously normative and taken for granted are questioned or lose their value. As we will see in this chapter, dengbêjs often spoke of their experiences and choices in moral terms. They had clear ideas about why they made certain choices, and they explained them as being morally just and right, each in their own way. They connected to new social narratives about the meaning of their art, but they also expressed personal concerns: they made choices based on their specific life situations. The seven life stories discussed in this chapter demonstrate that people's personal experiences with a society in turmoil are multiple and complex, and are always related to their specific individual circumstances. Investigating their personal stories also makes any Orientalist categorization of dengbêjs as pre-modern impossible, as the variation of stories points to the multiple ways in which each of these dengbêjs were and are entangled in the larger picture of social change, urbanization, politicization, nationalism, and modernity.

Life story 1: politicization of Kurdish language and culture

Figure 11. The town Iğdır. Dengbêj Isa comes from a village nearby, and one of his stories is about this town. In the background the mount Ararat and Armenia. 2007.

'No one can wipe out a mother tongue'.[253]

Dengbêj Isa was born in a village close to the Armenian and Iranian borders. The nearest town is Iğdır, a small provincial town from which one can see the mountain Ararat. During Isa's childhood there were about sixty to seventy houses in his village, against four hundred today. The language of communication in the village was Kurdish, but Isa learned Turkish in primary school which he attended for five years. The villagers lived from agriculture (cotton, grain, sugar beets and vegetables), gardening (small vegetables and herbs for subsistence), and animal husbandry (goats, sheep and some cows). In summer they would go to the summer pastures with their animals, set up their black tents made of goatskin, and live for three months in the milder climate of the mountains. During the 1980s and 90s summer pastures became forbidden territory as many mountain areas became military zones occupied by the Turkish army. These measures were very disruptive for social and economic structures, as animal husbandry was an important source of income. As a result, dengbêj Isa went to work in the summer as a shepherd in pastures far away from the village, near Erzurum. In the 1990s, he and his family moved to the city Van.

In his life story dengbêj Isa focuses on his position as a dengbêj, and on the manner in which he received recognition for that position. He ascribes the authority he has as a dengbêj to two main reasons: his connection to older dengbêjs, and his fight against political oppression. As in the case of dengbêj Mahmut in chapter 2, his interview can also be seen as a performance in itself. In the second part of the interview he spoke at length about his village and tradition. In the first part he emphasized what value the dengbêj art has obtained due to its history of suffering and oppression. He began the interview as follows:

> The field of the dengbêj and the dengbêj art is very broad, how can I tell you. All the way from the time of the Ottoman Empire until today, and of course also before that time there were dengbêjs, at that time there was no reading and writing, it didn't exist. And this Kurdish people, from that time until today, grew up with the voice of the dengbêjs, with the tellings of the dengbêj, until our days.[254] And now you will say: then where did these dengbêjs come from? This dengbêj art from Serhat[255] is a culture coming from Evdalê Zeynikî. (..) Evdalê Zeynikî is very long ago, 400 or 500 years have passed.[256]

253 "Ana lisanımız kaybolmaz, kimse kaybedemez" (see below for full quote).

254 "Dengbêj ve dengbêjlik alanı çok geniştir, ben sana nasıl diyeyim. Ta Osmanlılardan, Osmanlı Imparatorluktan, bu yani, tabii dahaönce de dengbêj varmış. O zaman okur yazar yok, kalem defter yok, bunlar yokmuş. Yani bu Kürt halkı o tarihten bu tarihe kadar dengbêjlerin sesiyle büyümüş, dengbêjlerin söyleşiyle büyümüş, günümüze kadar."

255 *Serhat* literally means 'upper country' and is used in Kurdish to refer to the region around Van and Muş.

256 Evdalê Zeynikê lived from approximately 1804-1914, see chapter 1.

> Evdalê Zeynikî was the dengbej of Zor Surmeli Memet Pasha, his private dengbej. If the pasha went to war, he sang about him. If there was a hero, if there was love, he sang about it (*karamanlık olsaydı, aşk olsaydı, üzerinde söylüyordu*). Among the Kurdish people, at this moment, there is the landlord system (*ağalık sistemi*), he also sang about that. Of course after him there have been many dengbêjs. For example Reso Mahacir, Mahmudê Celolî, I haven't seen them, but our forefathers (*ata dedelerimiz*) have listened to them. My father and my grandfather have listened to them. And they said that if they started to sing the people held their ears, the windows were moving, that rich were their voices (*söylediği zaman insan kulağını tutardı, camlar patlıyordu, o kadar gür bir sesi vardı*). I have an uncle and he has heard Mahmudê Celolî, and he says: 'really I have never heard someone reach such a voice. What is Şakir compared to him?' So that means that there were even stronger voices than that of Şakîro! [exited] (*Allah allah, demek ki Şakır'in sesinden güçlü sesler de varmış! Varmış demek ki, hakikaten varmış*).[257]

By mentioning the dengbêjs who lived before him and who were listened to by his father and grandfather, he establishes a line that leads towards former famous dengbêjs. These dengbêjs of the past are regarded as even stronger than the most famous dengbêj of recent times: Şakîro, who is known for his incredible voice. In this way he underscores the idea that the contemporary is less authentic and of less quality than the allegedly much more original and distinctive Kurdish past. He also connects his qualities to the fact that he comes from the province Serhat, where Evdalê Zeynikî also came from. By situating the latter in a far and distant past, instead of the nineteenth century in which he actually lived, dengbêj Isa shows again his concern with the assumed antiquity of this tradition.

He continues to speak of the dengbêjs he has witnessed, and about the way he learned to become a dengbêj:

> When I was eleven or twelve years old, a dengbêj came to our village. He was a guest of the village agha. They even came from other villages to listen to him. There was no place for us, I was not inside. I was next to my uncle and I said to him: 'uncle this voice comes to me, if I could just see this man, if I could just see what kind of person he is!' And my uncle lifted me up to look through the window. I couldn't see his eyes, because his hat was over his eyes. And I asked my uncle: 'uncle who is this?' And he said: 'this is Mihemed Salihê.' He came before Şakîro, he was older. And I sang in his style (*makam*), I became dengbêj because of him. (..) And I told you about the dengbêjs of the past, we let the stories of these dengbêjs live. For example I can tell you this: I can today sing in the style of Şakîro.[258] This man here [the man next to him] sings in the style of Zahir, and of Huseyno. So we let the past age live today. We bring them to life again in this way.

257 All quotes in this section are taken from an interview with dengbêj Îsa conducted in Van in 2007. The interview language was Turkish.

258 Şakiro, Zahiro and Huseyno are famous dengbêjs who are widely known. Şakiro and Huseyno passed away, but Zahiro is still active as a dengbêj today.

> (Only the style, or also the words?) The words and the style, and the kilams! We revive it so that it will not get lost.[259]

He mentioned that the dengbêjs today are continuing the work of former dengbêjs; today's dengbêjs embody the past through the kilams and voices of their masters. Then, with the words 'so that this culture will not get lost', he links his story to the moral narratives of the Kurdish movement. Since its revival, political activists (see chapter 4) who went actively searching for dengbêjs and invited them to sing in the cultural centers, on television and at festivals, have developed new narratives. The current generation of dengbêjs is understood as the last representatives of a tradition on the verge of disappearing, the last ones to have witnessed the dengbêjs of the past, and the only ones who can 'bring them back to life' today. Seen from this perspective the dengbêjs are granted an important moral position. The task of the current dengbêjs is to protect this tradition from being lost. This new social narrative about the function of the dengbêjs gives their knowledge and songs increased value.

Dengbêj Isa turned then to a situation in which ' this culture' almost *did* get lost, when Kurdish was forbidden. This is the second manner in which he authorizes and foregrounds his quality as a dengbêj: through his concern with Kurdish language and with political oppression. Dengbêjs generally did not talk much about their experiences with oppression. They spoke about such events only briefly and without detail, in a fragmented way in brief remarks scattered here and there in the interview. When explaining other events, they spoke in a story-telling manner, relating the event as a short story in the interview. We will see many such examples in this chapter. In the interview with dengbêj Isa, he focused on political oppression more than others, in that same story-telling manner he used for other parts of the interview, and told two stories in which he was subjected to unfair treatment. By telling these two stories he gives meaning to the years of silence, and to his personal come-back to public life. He illustrates a time when the dengbêjs were on the verge of disappearing from public life, and when he and his friend resisted abandoning their art.

> It was in 1982 in Iğdır in the Hotel 'Palace of the East'. At the time a dengbêj from Doğubeyazıt and I [went there]. There was a man who had bought a tape recorder, and he said, 'I had bought this recorder, but there are no dengbêjs'. So together we went to that hotel, and we started to sing. Then someone knocked on the door; it was two policemen. (Had they heard you?) Yes because our voices could be heard at the market.

259 "Biz o geçmiş dengbêjlerin öyküsünü biz bugün yaşatıyoruz. Ben bugün Şakır'ın makamında söylüyorum, bu adam Zahir makamında söylüyor, Hüseyno makamında söylüyor, yani biz geçmiş çağı bugün yaşatıyoruz. (Sadece makam, ya da sözler de?) Sözlerle makamlariyle birlikte bugün yaşatıyoruz. Kilamlarla beraber. Geri canlandırıyoruz, kaybolmasın diye."

> They said, 'what are you singing?' We said, 'we are singing kilams'. They said, 'what is kilam?' We said, 'how do you mean what is kilam? We are singing Kurdish kilams.'
> 'Don't you know that that is forbidden?'
> My friend, whose Turkish was more or less good, he said: 'how can it be forbidden to sing kilams? How can Kurdish be forbidden?'
> 'Don't you know that Kurdish is forbidden?'
> We said no. 'We don't sing political things, we sing from the region. It is not political. Our mother tongue is Kurdish. Even the world cannot forbid that.' (*Biz siyasi söylemiyoruz, yöreden söylüyoruz. Bunun bir siyasalı yok. Ha, anadilimiz Kürtçedir. Bunu dünya yasak edemez, dünya*).
> They said, 'okay then come to the police station, then you can tell your problems there. You can ask if it is forbidden or not.'
> So they brought us there. (And did you really not know about this law?) From 12 September onwards a big pressure came over the Kurdish people. Everybody who had Kurdish music cassettes in his house took them out and let them disappear. They burned them, they buried them under the ground, so that if there would be a house search, one would not be able to find any Kurdish cassettes. We have lived through such days,[260] [man sitting next to him during the interview: we have lived under such difficult circumstances]. So they brought us to the police station and they let us wait until the evening. In the end the police officer called us in and said,' you have sung kilam. What is that?' We said, 'we have sung indeed, it is our mother tongue, a mother tongue cannot get lost. No one can wipe out a mother tongue (*ana lisanımız kaybolmaz, kimse kaybedemez*)' He said, 'you have sung political things.' But there was no connection to politics. They let us wait for eight or ten hours. Then they let us go. And you remember that man who was the owner of the tape recorder. He felt so sorry for us, 'because of me these people have gone to the police station'. After that we left from there and went to someone else's house, and for them we filled two cassettes (*iki kaseti doldurduk*).

As he related later in the interview, it was customary to record dengbêjs on tapes for personal use. People borrowed such tapes from each other, or they were copied and distributed in small circles. After the 1980 coup this had become much more difficult. It is not clear what the man in the story intended to do with the recordings. He may have wanted to preserve the songs, something I heard from a number of people who collected and recorded songs during those years. The man who bought the tape recorder could not find a dengbêj; they were withdrawing from public performances. In spite of this, dengbêj Isa and his friend agreed to make recordings. When the police came by inquiring about the singing, because 'Kurdish is forbidden', the two dengbêjs replied that they were singing kilams. This can be understood as a provocation, as kilam is a Kurdish word that is not understood by Turkish speakers. It was clear that they had to have been aware of the political situation even though

260 "On-iki Eylülden sonra, Kürt halkın üzerine büyük bir baskı geldi. Ki, o kaset var ya, o Kürtçe kaseti kimin evinde vardı vatandaş kasetleri götürüp kaybediyordu. Yakıyordu. Yerin altına koyuyordu. Ki arama olacak, evimizde Kürtçe kaset bulunmazsin. Biz bu günleri geçirdik."

they pretended not to know about the prohibition on Kurdish. They tried to provoke the policemen by referring to their rights as human beings: 'our mother tongue is Kurdish, even the world cannot forbid that'. They emphasized that they were not singing political songs, but rather, songs 'from the region', meaning local songs without any political meaning. However, the policemen were not satisfied with the dengbêjs' explanation and brought them to the police station. They repeated the same argument to the officer: 'we have sung indeed, it is our mother tongue, a mother tongue cannot get lost, nobody can wipe it out'.

Prohibitions on basic aspects of daily life, such as a language, caused resentment and resistance among Kurdish people. Dengbêj Isa's story shows that the primary reason for resistance at that moment was not political ideology, but rather an effort to retain a basic freedom: the right to speak one's language. It also shows that the police, who could not understand the content of the songs, were afraid of political sentiments that could be expressed in that way. The police finally let the dengbêjs go, but the fact that one could be arrested singing in Kurdish made many dengbêjs decide to abandon their profession.

Dengbêj Isa continued with a story about his military service, which also underlines the atmosphere of those days, and the importance and centrality of language. Many dengbêjs had stories to tell about their military service. As young adults this was often the place where Kurdish men came in contact with the Turkish government system for the first time, and where their Kurdishness became at once much more significant than in the Kurdish environment they came from. He told:

> I became a soldier in 1982. In the Army I sang songs all the time. But for that reason they hit me all the time (*çok ta dayak yedim*). I can say that nobody has been hit so much in the Army as I was. When I was singing, I mean all the soldiers were Kurdish, in the Army two out of three are Kurdish.[261] That is for sure. On the weekends I would sing to let time pass by. And then they came, and said, are you a separatist (*bölümcülük mü yapıyorsun*)? But there was no connection to that. So they hit me, you will not sing again. But as much as they hit me, that much more I sang. I went to the advanced training (*usta birliği*).[262] And I sang at the goodbye party evenings (*veda geceleri*) that were organized for the officers and commanders, and I sang at those parties. At that time I had a most wonderful voice. They didn't pay much attention to the content of the songs, they only wanted to listen because of my voice. There was a certain officer, and he said: 'aren't you afraid of God?' He said: 'if you have such a wonderful voice, why don't you sing in Turkish?' He said: 'I will do everything for you if you will sing in Turkish, I will turn you into an artist.' I said: 'but I don't know Turkish.' He said 'even if you don't know Turkish you have to sing in Turkish'. We have lived such days.

261 In military service Kurds were often assigned together in one regiment.

262 The military service consists of a basic training, called the *acemi birliği*, and an advanced training, the *usta birliği*.

On the one hand, officers in the Army severely punished dengbêj Isa for singing in Kurdish, asking if he was a separatist. On the other hand, they turned a blind eye to his singing, because they liked to hear music and it was a good way of passing time. The officers focused on the quality of dengbêj Isa's voice and not on his language, 'they didn't pay much attention to the content of the songs, they only wanted to listen because of my voice'. Sometimes they asked him to sing in Turkish instead of Kurdish, as the seriousness of the offence (of singing in Kurdish) is illustrated by the words of the officer: 'aren't you afraid of God?'. Singing in Kurdish was understood as being equal to 'being a separatist'. Even before the PKK began its armed resistance, and before Turkey's government regarded them as a serious threat, the fear of separatism was clearly present. One officer voiced the social narrative about the Turkish language from a nationalist perspective: 'even if you don't know Turkish, you have to sing in Turkish'. But dengbêj Isa did not feel capable of singing in Turkish. His mother tongue was Kurdish, the singing style was quite distinct, and he would have needed to learn to sing in Turkish from the beginning.

As a conclusion to the two stories about restrictions he ends with the following words:

> Really, with my voice, if I would have known Turkish, I would have been a famous musician today (*ben bu sesi sahibiyken ben Türkçe söylemiş olsaydım, ben diyebilirdim ben büyük bir sanatçiydim*). (Did you learn Turkish in the Army?) No I knew Turkish very well already before that time. But I didn't know how to sing in Turkish. I am a Kurd, and my mother tongue is Kurdish. So I need to sing this to my people. (Did you never think: 'let me sing in Turkish, and I can become a famous musician'? I mean, such a thought could be there.) No such a thought has never crossed my mind. The people, my family, my brother, they have said this to me. They said, if you sing in Turkish you can go to other places. But I didn't do it. I said: 'I sing in Kurdish, let my people listen to me (*benim halkım beni dinlesin*).'

Dengbêj Isa knew Turkish well, but presents singing in Kurdish here as a conscious moral choice for 'his people'. He explains that, against all odds, he continued singing in Kurdish, although he could have become famous if he would just have changed the language of his performance. According to dengbêj Isa, this choice was based on his love for his people and his wish to sing to them in their own language. There may have been other reasons that prevented him from having a successful musical career in Turkish, which dengbêj Isa does not mention here. As he indicated earlier, it was difficult to sing in a language and musical style that was not Kurdish, and it was not easy for a dengbêj to learn a non-Kurdish style of singing. Still, presenting his choice in this way, gives moral value to his decision and to his life story. It also fits his current position as one of the founders of the Dengbêj House.

Although dengbêj Isa relates experiences when he, as a dengbêj, resisted giving up his profession, he also stopped singing for a long period of time:

> On 12 September [1980], we abandoned the dengbêj art totally (*biz dengbêjliği tamamen terk ettik*). It was not only that you couldn't sing kilam, you could also not speak Kurdish, such a system came over us (..). We took a break for 10/15 years until Özal gave us our freedom. We had forgotten what the dengbêj art was, what kilam was (*dengbêjlik nedir, kilam nedir, söyleyiş nedir, biz bunları unuttuk*). (And you also could not sing?) Yes I also didn't sing at that time. Our culture got lost, it was on the verge of disappearance (*kültürümüz kaybediyordu, kaybolmak üzerine gitti*).

So, although dengbêj Isa told stories about resisting the politics of oppression, he also did not continue singing and forgot much of his repertoire. The long silence of the dengbêjs had such a profound effect that 'we had forgotten what the dengbêj art and kilam was'. Many accounts bear witness to the disappearance of the dengbêj art from public life, to such an extent that people hardly knew that it had once existed. Like many others, dengbêj Isa attributes the silencing of the dengbêjs entirely to political oppression, 'Such a system came over us'. As one of the few remaining dengbêjs, he talks about the oppressive power of the state, executed by policemen and army officers. But they were not the only ones acting as an assimilating force. Even dengbêj Isa's relatives tried to convince him it would be better to sing in Turkish. Oppression led to self-censorship and self-assimilation in order to avoid problems and obtain access to better opportunities.

Dengbêj Isa says that the dengbêjs only started singing again after 'Özal gave us our freedom', meaning after the bans on Kurdish language and Kurdish music were lifted. Turgut Özal was Turkey's prime minister from 1983 to 1989, and president from 1991 to 1993. He was of Kurdish descent from the eastern town Malatya, and is praised by many Kurds as the one who supported the Kurdish cause. Although he was influential in instituting freer policies for Kurdish language and cultural expression, a harsh period of oppression occurred following his death. The ban on Kurdish music was indeed officially lifted, but it did not result in much freedom at the time. This situation also appears in dengbêj Isa's story, when he relates how the dengbêjs have only recently begun to feel free:

> We have opened here 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 only recently. It is something recent, before they didn't give us the chance. (Wasn't there more freedom at the end of the 90s? I thought that from then

> on it became freer.) Yes that's right, slowly there was more freedom, from 1993[263] until now it became freer and freer, but still we could not sing. The fear was still there (*o korku vardı*). If you were singing the police would come and take you to the [police] station. So we can only do this again since two years.

Dengbêj Isa's words show that events marked in people's minds as having initiated important changes were not always as successful as they are remembered. Özal made his name among the Kurds as a man of the Kurds and an advocate of their rights, but effective changes were only realized after 1999. Before 1999, 'we still could not sing, the fear was still there'. As we will see in chapter 4, political activists, and with them a politicized modern Kurdish music scene, were in the foreground of organized resistance in the second half of the 1990s. With great difficulty they managed to open cultural centers, published books and music, and organized political activities. Many Kurds suffered harsh consequences for their political involvement. They faced frequent police raids; destruction and closure of cultural centers, bookstores and music companies; and also torture and imprisonment. In such an atmosphere of terror many people gave up on open resistance.

Dengbêj Isa's story draws attention to the ongoing politicization of activities related to cultural expression and language, and to the intrusive presence of the police and military. Officers could decide about intimate matters such as language use in the private sphere, and arrest people who defied the prohibitions. In regions where Kurdish was spoken as the main language of communication, the prohibition of speaking the language in public, and of performing cultural expressions, led to general outrage over such unjustified measures. Dengbêj Isa connected his experiences of the 1980s with social narratives present at the time of my research, in which the dengbêjs were regarded as guardians of a uniform Kurdish heritage. By placing his experiences in the framework of the Kurdish movement, which speaks about resistance, heritage, and the right to speak your mother tongue, he gave authority to his position as a dengbêj and a leader of the House.

When I asked him after this episode how he had met Şakîro, whom he called his master, he continued:

> There is a village in the region of Horasan with the name Idari. Şakîro had gone to that village. The people were recording his songs on tape. And the village headman said to him: 'I know somebody who sings exactly in your style' (*makam*). And [Şakîro] was really surprised and wanted to know who it was. And he told him about me, that I was from Iğdır, that I had come to their summer pasture the year before, that I had filled some cassettes for them. And there was one man there who had a cassette of

263 Dengbêj Isa says 1983, but he most probably means 1993.

> mine. So [Şakîro][264] listens to the cassette, and he was surprised. He said: 'how old is this man?' And they said: 'he is about twenty-five years old.' And he wanted to see me.
> There were aghas, there was my master, and I was young, so I felt ashamed. I felt so much under stress and pressure, I broke out into sweat, I sang of course, but I could not sing like normally.[265] (..) I sang the same song that I had sung on the cassette he had heard. He said at the end: you will become a dengbêj. And he said: 'I know this very well, if I will die, and you are continuing like this to become a dengbêj, then some people will say: 'okay, this is the style of Şakîro.' And it is really like that.[266]
> I went to many places, I cannot tell all about it, but in Erzurum, in the region of Şakîro, there is the lake of Hayrangol. I went there, and a friend was singing there, I went to this place and when I came in, there was no space left anymore to sit. It was a very rich village. And someone said to Bekir, who was the dengbêj from there: 'Bekir you have sung very well, it was very good, but I would be so happy if I could hear something from Şakîro, if it would be only one or two stanzas in his style.' I was young, I was not married yet, I sang one song, and he said to a boy: 'get the cassette recorder, you need to fill a cassette.'

Also in this part of his story, dengbêj Isa focuses on making clear where his authority as a dengbêj comes from. He was called by Şakîro himself, one of the greatest master dengbêj, and because of his ability to sing in Şakîro's style, he became famous.

When we look again at the various elements of his story, it becomes clear that both elements, that of being a dengbêj in the line of the great masters, and of being someone who resists political oppression, mark his own position as meaningful and important, and also as morally just. The stories became part of his personal narrative, in which he is a very qualified dengbêj who reminds people of Şakîro, but also someone who dared to resist the regime and to stand up for his people. He tells how he was taken to the police office for singing Kurdish songs; how he challenged the policemen when he said that he did not know about prohibitions on Kurdish singing, and how he sang Kurdish in the Army and was beaten for doing so. Even though he also says he abandoned singing for most of the years of oppression, these examples provide a reflection of his efforts to defend Kurdish heritage. Dengbêj Isa presents himself as someone who transmits Kurdish culture and language through his training by the great masters, and as someone who courageously resisted prohibitions. This makes him into a person who stands up for the culture and

264 He said here *rahmetli*, the deceased.

265 "Tabii ağalar oturmuşlar, hem benim ustam benim yanımda, hem de ağalar oturmuş, yaşım genç, yani utanıyorum biliyor musun? Öyle bir ter beni bastı, öyle bir sıkıntı bir stres beni bastı, tabii söyledim ama kendi dediğim gibi söyleyemedim."

266 "Sen dengbêj olursun, ama dedi, ben bunu iyice biliyorum, ben dedi öldüğüm zaman, eğer sen, dedi, devam edersense, bazı cemaatte bazı divanlarda oturduğun zaman söylediğin zaman, o insanlar diyecekler ki: 'tamam, bu Şakır'ın makamıdır.' Hakikaten aynen öyledir, arkadaşlar biliyorlar."

language of the Kurdish people as a whole. His story culminates in the opening of the new Dengbêj House where he and the other dengbêjs 'bring to life' the old dengbêjs of the past, 'we let the past age live today.' Because most dengbêjs did not put their encounters with political oppression on display by speaking about them, the story of dengbêj Isa stands out. He transformed these experiences into a meaningful story in which he presents himself as a true guardian of the dengbêj art.

Life story 2: a female dengbêj

Figure 12. Dengbêj Zano Reşik in her village near Hazro, 2008. She is not the person who told this life story.

'Brother, don't open the eyes of women'.[267]

Someone who had a different relationship to the political developments compared to dengbêj Isa is dengbêj Bêrîvan, who I met for the first time at the festive opening of the Dengbêj House in Diyarbakir in 2007. She was one of the four performers who sang at the opening celebration, a tall woman with a powerful voice. At other times I did not see her in the Dengbêj House, where normally only men were present. Much later, when I interviewed her for the second time, she came to the House for our appointment. When she entered through the gate, I saw her coming and walked toward her to greet her. We sat down together in the courtyard, in the midst of the other dengbêjs. They greeted her, but the atmosphere was uncomfortable, and dengbêj Bêrîvan did not seem at ease. She did not perform at that time, and apart from the 2007 opening ceremony performance, I never heard a woman performing in the Dengbêj House in Diyarbakır.

I interviewed dengbêj Bêrîvan twice, the first time with a translator, the second time alone.[268] Both times her story struck me as significant, because it was so different from the stories of the other dengbêjs. The main topic she discussed in both interviews was silence, the way she was silenced as a woman for performing the dengbêj art, and the way she liberated herself from these prohibitions. Her experiences were quite different from the life experiences of the other dengbêjs; her story is an important counter voice to the stories of male dengbêjs that dominate my ethnography. As we will come to see on the basis of her story, the silence of the female voice, among the dengbêjs as well as in my own material, is significant for what it reveals of the experiences of many female dengbêjs and women more generally in eastern Turkey.

In this section, I pay attention to dengbêj Bêrîvan's life story, most of which she told in the first interview. The emphasis is on the way she described her experiences of being silenced as a female dengbêj, mainly before the year 2000. In chapter 4 I return to her story and present her opinions on the role of women in eastern Turkey and the transformations that took place in her life after 2000. In that chapter, we will see how dengbêj Bêrîvan located her experiences, and those of other women, in a political framework. I argue there that the way in which dengbêj Bêrîvan tells her story, namely as a process of awakening, is typical of how political activists

267 "Bira çava jinê veneve" (see below for the full quote).

268 Dengbêj Bêrîvan did not speak Turkish fluently and felt more comfortable in Kurdish. In the first fieldwork period I therefore made use of a translator. During the interview she mostly communicated in Kurdish with the translator, but sometimes she spoke directly to me in Turkish. In the second fieldwork period I spoke with her and interviewed her in Kurdish.

talk about the new Kurdish personhood (see Introduction). The part I discuss in this chapter also needs to be seen in this light: she regards herself in her younger years as not yet aware of or awakened to the Kurdish cause, as well as not yet aware of the degraded position that women are considered to have had in traditional Kurdish society.

Dengbêj Bêrîvan was born in 1963 in a small village in the region of Muş. Her father passed away when she was quite young, and she has no memories of him. He had been married to four wives, and she was the last of his seven children. His first two wives had died. Dengbêj Bêrîvan lived with her mother, and her two brothers and a sister who were the children of the same mother. The three other children lived with her father's fourth wife, and they did not live in the same house. When she was ten years old, her mother passed away as well. The four children were left on their own:

> I lived together with my brothers and sisters. (Wasn't that very difficult?) Yes, but we looked after ourselves, we raised ourselves. I had two elder brothers, and one elder sister. I was the fourth, (But how could you survive?) and we as village children, we were very diligent. We did all the work that had to be done. I had one little brother, and I looked after him. We looked after our smaller brothers and sisters.[269]

As a young child, she liked to sing and repeat[270] the songs of the women of the village. Until she was 17 years old, when she married, she had relative freedom to sing songs, but the opportunities were limited. Women did not have much chance to sing, and even less to perform in public:

> I started singing kilams when I was still young, when I was about 9 or 10 years old. Dengbêjs came and sang, for example when there was a mourning (*dengbêja dihat, digo, mesela şîn çêdibû*). As a child you can learn easily, so I learned many songs from the women. I tried to repeat their style [maqam] and rhythm. But how often could we sing freely? For example when we, women, went to the spring, went to the fields, or when we went to the forest, we sang songs together (*em biçûna çolê, pincarê, em biçûna bêriyê, veya em biçûna kaniyê, me wan ji xwe re digotin*). Or when we milked the cows, we sang many songs. Young girls did not get permission to go to weddings. I went to a few weddings and sang songs, but they were angry with me and they hit me. For example I sang songs when the bride was taken from her house to the house of the groom. Sometimes they invited us, if there was nobody else to sing, to sing at the weddings, some girls together. But when we did this, we were hit by people from our village.

269 All quotes in this section are taken from an interview with dengbêj Bêrîvan conducted in Diyarbakır in 2007, with the help of a translator who spoke in Kurdish with miss Bêrîvan, and in English to me. Sometimes we also spoke in Turkish or mixed, as can be seen in some of the original quotes given.

270 At places where people sing songs together it is usual that a few (wo)men who are known as good singers sing one line, which is then repeated by the whole group.

When the women were together, without men, they often sang during work. Women worked hard and did not have much time for leisure or pleasure. Not only adult women, but also young girls were excluded from many activities boys could do, such as education, celebrations, and public gatherings. When dengbêjs came to the village and performed in one of the homes, women had to stay outside. They could wait at the door, like the children, and listen from there.

Obviously there was no general agreement in the village regarding the level of freedom girls were allowed. It might happen that Dengbêj Bêrîvan was invited to sing at a wedding with other girls, but afterwards punished for the same activity. She told me that adult women were only allowed to attend weddings while wearing a black *çarşaf*,[271] 'nobody should see your face, and no man should hear your voice'. She was obliged to wear the *çarşaf* at her brother's wedding, when she was fifteen. But she didn't like it, 'I had a *çarşaf* when I came in, but I had thrown it away, so I came out without *çarşaf*'. This was the first time she's worn the *çarşaf*, and she could not get used to it. It seems that, while speaking of these issues, she linked these memories to current moral narratives in which such rules are regarded as unjust by many, especially so following the narratives of the Kurdish movement.

Until she was seventeen years old, dengbêj Bêrîvan had some limited freedom to perform at weddings, together with other girls. She finds significance in the fact that she had no parents to take care for her:

> When I was a young girl, I didn't have my father and mother, so there was no pressure. I only had my elder brother who put some pressure, not the eldest one, but the second one. And after I married they also pressurized me (*evlendiğim zaman tekrar baskı yaptılar*). (And if your parents would have been alive, would that have meant that you would not have been able to become a dengbêj?) Well, maybe if my parents or my father had been alive, they would have been able to support me. Maybe it would have been better. I have a little sister, and my father had taught her a song, and all the time he said to her: come to me and sing that song.

Because she did not know how it would have been if her parents had lived, she speculated about such a situation. On the one hand, there was no parental control that could obstruct her activities. On the other hand, there were also no parents who could support and defend her. She argued that her father encouraged her sister to sing, and that he would possibly have been supportive of her being a dengbêj. Without parents, she was helpless against the social control of other villagers, who hit her or prohibited her from singing.

271 The Turkish name for a body and face covering veil is *kara çarşaf*, lit. black sheet. Dengbêj Bêrîvan uses the same name in Kurdish.

When Bêrîvan was about sixteen years old, she knew many songs and was old enough to sing at weddings and be taken seriously. She had a certain amount of freedom because she was still a young girl and unmarried. But after she married her situation changed drastically:

> When I was fifteen, sixteen or seventeen years old I got some more freedom, before I married. But just at the moment I got some more freedom, I got married. So again I couldn't sing. (Because your husband didn't let you?) Yes he never let me, my brother-in-law also didn't let me. My husband was not so much against it, mostly my brother-in-law. It was because I was a bride, I was young, it was a shame. A woman shouldn't pass in front of men. Men shouldn't see her, because she was still young. For example when we had guests coming to our house, they came into our house but I did not see them (*mesela mêvan dihatin malê, diçûn hundirê malê me. Me mêvanê me nedît*), it was absolutely out of the question that I could see their faces. Not only with me, it was like that with everybody, with all the young girls. The old women would go to welcome the guests (*diçûn digo bi xêr hatin*), but the young girls did not see anyone, who they were, where they came from. It was forbidden to go to the men, to go to the gatherings.

Being a married woman changed dengbêj Bêrîvan's position radically. She was now dependent on the permission of her husband and her husband's family, and judged by social rules regarding appropriate behavior for married women. This meant that she abandoned her singing entirely. For years, she did not sing at all because 'they did not give me permission anymore to go to weddings'. To my question as to whether she sang in private, she replied with a decisive 'no'. As a consequence of her marriage, she moved from her own village to her husband's village where she was a stranger. As Yücel (2006) describes in his book *Berdel*, women who left the village of their childhood to go live in their husband's village often felt lonely and alienated from everything that was dear to them. A clear expression of the pain that goes with this transition is found in the songs sung on the *hennah* night of the bride, before the wedding. The songs are called lamentations, and have the same form as lamentations for the dead. The bride is about to leave her family, and this causes pain for her and her relatives who will miss her. In the new village, she is not amongst her own kin, rules may be different than at home, and the position of the new bride as a married woman means she loses the liberties of her childhood. The sad songs express the feelings of the bride and her closest relatives, from whom she will live separately from now on.

After her marriage, dengbêj Bêrîvan lost the limited freedom she had to sing songs. She had also fewer chances to hear the voices of other dengbêjs. Before she married, she occasionally listened to a cassette of a dengbêj, or to dengbêjs who come to weddings in her or other villages. But after she was married she had less

access to such events and had to search for other opportunities to hear the voices of dengbêjs:

> I knew the broadcast time of the program of radio Yerevan, it was about 6.30pm, I don't remember it exactly anymore, and when my husband, or father-in-law, or brother-in-law were not at home, I switched it on and listened, and I loved it. In the village we used to have a guest room in the house, and the radio was in the guest room. So I could not get to the radio to listen (*odayê misafir hebû her malekî de, oda mêvana. Radyo jî di oda mêvana de bû. Me negihîştina guhdarî bikin*). But when sometimes there were no guests I went to that room and I switched on the radio and listened. Mostly I did not have any time to sit, because there was so much work to do in the house (*zamanê me em rûniştin tunebû, ji ber ku kar hebû*).

She could only listen in secret, when the men were not at home and when there were no guests. Also, she did not have much time to spend outside the hard work at home.

Dengbêj Bêrîvan often returned to the topic of women's oppression. She felt oppressed and humiliated by the way men treated her and other women. When I asked whether there were any dengbêjs who came to her village when she was young, she replied:

> Yes they came. (Was there a village house or *dîwan*?) If there was one, we could not enter. We stayed outside at the door, and we listened by putting our ear to the door (*olsaydı biz gitmiyorduk, giremiyorduk. Dış kapıda bekliyorduk, kulağımız kapıya veriyorduk*). [explanation translator: the women couldn't go inside. Inside were the men, the brides couldn't go in. The father-in-law was there, the elders of the village were there]. Women didn't count as people! They didn't count at all! The work of women was within the house (*Kesî jin insan say nedikir. Yok, hayatta saymazdı. Kadınların işi evin içinde*). For example we had sheep, women cared for the animals, and men sold them. And sometimes we asked our husbands: for how much did you sell the sheep, and to whom? Because I had cared for the animals. And then they immediately hit us and said: you are a woman, what do you know about that, go inside! That is the truth, they did not count women as human beings! (*yani doğru odur. Bê xizmeta xwe kirine. Jin insan olarak say nedikir!*).

At first Dengbêj Bêrîvan explained that women could not enter places where the dengbêjs sang, they could only listen outside by putting their ear to the door or the walls. It seems that the translator, who interrupted her story to translate into Turkish which Bêrîvan understood, provoked Bêrîvan's indignation about the way they were treated. She cut the translator off by saying in Kurdish with excitement: 'women didn't count as human beings!'. As we will see in chapter 4 when I return to her story, expressing herself in this way became possible partly because of the writings of Öcalan on the position of women in Kurdish society, but even more because of the women's organizations that were founded along, or independently

of, the Kurdish political movement.[272] Dengbêj Bêrîvan connected her story to the newly formed social narratives of these organizations. Looking back on her life she retold and revalued her experiences, which in the past had felt like the natural order of things that she could not oppose.

Dengbêj Bêrîvan said that the position of female dengbêjs improved over time, as it became more acceptable for women to attend weddings together with men, and they no longer needed to hide. She talked about this transition as follows:

> Women did not do the dengbêj art, they did not come close to it, it was forbidden. But later folk dances became free [for women] and then we could join, after that our women sang a lot. For example nine or ten women sang together. But later, we sang together with the men. For example ten women and five men sang together, were singing. We obtained freedom. Men and women danced and sang together at weddings. But if it is about the [real] dengbêj art.. Women can go to weddings but they still cannot perform the dengbêj art, as it is seen as shameful. It is as if the dengbêj art is only for men, you can still not sing, as if it's shameful.[273]

Although dengbêjs often performed together by singing songs in turn, the focus of the performance was on the individual dengbêj and on his knowledge and qualities. This individual focus did not fit the role of women; it was considered shameful for women to be the focus of attention, especially of men. For that reason, even when with time it became more accepted to see women dancing and singing together with men, women could perform only in a group with other women, but never alone. This may explain dengbêj Bêrîvan's discomfort when she came to the Dengbêj House and sat among the men in the courtyard. Had she been with other women she would have had the protection of the group, but alone men could easily regard her as shameless, as someone without honor. It is interesting that dengbêj Bêrîvan indicated in this quote that she saw an improvement in the role of women over time, although it is not clear to me what the specific timeframe was. Did she feel this before she married, or was she speaking about the time after her marriage when she did not sing at all?

Despite the limited role women had as dengbêj, and in spite of the fact that women could not perform in public, Bêrîvan argued that women had left their mark on the dengbêj art. As we will see in the next quote, she regarded women as the source

272 Women often see Öcalan as their hero, and present him as the one who liberated Kurdish women from centuries of oppression. Çağlayan (2007) shows how Kurdish political parties try to actively change the role of women in Kurdish society and use a similar discourse as Abdullah Öcalan.

273 "Dengbêjî jina nedikir, nedigihîştin, qedexe bû. Ama govendê paşê serbest bû em dihatin gihîştin, jina me pir digo. Mesela neh deh hev jina bi hevre digot. Ama sonra sonra biz erkekle beraber söyledik. Mesela on tane kadın desin, dört beş tane erkek beraber söylüyordu. Özgürcülügü girt. Erkekler ve kadınlar beraber o dîlanda oynuyordu, hem söylüyordu. Ama o dengbêjlik... Dengbêjlik hala kadınlar düğüne gidiyordu fakat dengbêjlik yapamıyor, dedi ayıp. Dengbêjlik sanki erkeklerin şeyidir, hala söyleyemezsin, sanki ayıptır."

of this art, a view that is put forward by many male dengbêjs as well (see also chapter 1). According to this social narrative, the dengbêj art originated with women, as they are the ones who have suffered the most and composed songs out of this suffering. They sang songs about their husbands, fathers, or sons who had died; about the boy they were in love with, but could not reach, and about their unhappy marriages. Women created such songs because of the pain they felt. Dengbêj Bêrîvan told a long and detailed story about the suffering of women and the many ways women were sacrificed, which made them create songs about their unhappy destinies:

> I can say that the culture of dengbêj was invented by women, but because of pressure women cannot perform it (*ez dikarim bêjim dengbêjlik jina icra dikiriye, ama jin ji ser baski nikare wi bêje*). For women... there are for example three kinds of love. The woman dengbêj falls in love with a man or a boy but she cannot marry him because of economic problems and her family wants her to marry a rich person. For example if you look at a Kurdish girl or a Kurdish woman, none of the Kurdish women in the past married the men they liked. Because all that time, men sacrificed the women for themselves, as I said before, women did not count as human beings. Just like an animal was sacrificed, women were also sacrificed (*em bêjin, tim bu daima, mêra jin ji xwe re kirine kurban, min pêşê go jin insan say nedikir. Çawa weke heywanekî neçeşit qurban, ayni jin kirina qurban*). For example in the past when you ask the people how many children they had, they only counted the boys. You know that in the past there were fights between tribes, and only men were killed in these fights and if these two tribes wanted to make a negotiation, the tribe who lost a man from their family would get a girl from the opposite tribe aged fourteen or fifteen. The girl goes to the other tribe and marries someone who was sometimes aged fifty or seventy to stop the fighting between the two tribes. So the woman becomes the sacrifice. They sacrifice their lives for their family. And also the tribe who took the girl doesn't leave her in peace, because they say, 'you remind us of the blood of our relative who has been killed'. So still she was under pressure. And there was no support or help for this woman, and she could not get her freedom. And especially these kind of women make songs about their situation. (...) And for example in Serhat they are still selling their women. If the wife of an old man dies, he gives money to the parents of a young girl, who is maybe 15 or 17 years old, they give for example 20.000 or 30.000 [lira], and the father sells her. It still happens.

Dengbêj Bêrîvan detailed the various destinies a Kurdish woman could experience in the past. A woman could not marry by choice if her family wanted to 'sell her' to a rich family. Or a woman was given to an enemy tribe as compensation for their lost kin during tribal fights. As a result, the woman could be pestered by relatives who said she reminded them of the lost relative. Young girls were married to men who were three times their age. 'Men sacrificed the women for themselves' is a topic dengbêj Bêrîvan returns to time and again. She felt that women 'did not count as human beings'.

Since many kilams are songs sung from the subject position of a woman, women are regarded as the true source of the dengbêj art. Male dengbêjs are said to have heard women sing songs, to have adopted them, and transformed them into more artistic pieces of work. Like male dengbêjs, dengbêj Bêrîvan also articulates this social narrative in the interview:

> The invention of dengbêjs comes from women. Only, because the women did not have the right to do it by herself, to do an apprenticeship, and to perform, she could not be active in this field (*Dengbêjlik.. Icata dengbêjî ji jina derketiye, yalniz mafê jinê ewê, ji xwe re li ser bisekine, mamostasiye bike, bêje, bi ser keve, ew gineviye*). For example, the male dengbêjs, they go to a region and they hear about a certain song in that region, from a woman who has made a song about her son or her husband, then he takes that song and he refigures it. I was the witness of an event. Sometimes men go to a funeral, and they come back and they say: the women there were screaming so much, they sang the songs in such a way, that we were burned inside, and we cannot forget it.

In her opinion, male dengbêjs could be so impressed by the lamentations of women that they could not forget them, and transformed these lamentations into dengbêj songs. Because women did not have the right to perform in public, they were not able to make their voices heard in public; this was something that only men could do for women. Dengbêj Bêrîvan explains how, over time, the position of women changed and it became more acceptable for women to sing in public places:

> (Did I understand it well, that during your youth it became more possible for women to sing together with men?) Yes, we went there [to weddings] and we started to sing together with the men. And the men found out that some women had beautiful voices. They gave up on putting us under pressure. Because they understood that they couldn't do it without the women.

With these words dengbêj Bêrîvan referred to something she argues later in the interview: the war transformed the position of women to that of being almost equal to men. I return to this narrative in chapter 4.

It wasn't until the year 2000 that dengbêj Bêrîvan began to sing again, and became active as one of the few female dengbêj who sing in front of an audience in eastern Turkey. This was long after she had moved with her family from their village to Diyarbakir in 1986. Living in the city changed her life. She found the first years quite difficult:

> It was difficult, I felt strange. Women who came from the village lived their lives between four walls [in the city]. They lived their lives between four walls. There was more pressure from the men to live as slaves and servants at home, women didn't know anything how to do things. (Was the pressure worse in the city?) When I came

> to the city, I was new. I didn't know anything. I did not know Turkish, I didn't know how to read and write, I didn't dare to go out, I didn't even go alone to the neighbors. I couldn't go, a woman could not go out alone. I didn't go out by myself. I couldn't do it. I thought, how can I go anywhere? What if someone will betray me? So I didn't go. But slowly there came more freedom, I got to know some places, I developed myself. And now, after that everything became free, you don't need to ask anymore.

In the village women could go out alone. They could visit neighbors or relatives, and they did some of their work together. In the cities women were more dependent on their husbands and other male relatives, especially at first. She told me that she did not know where to go, and could not express herself in Turkish when necessary. She could not read signs and did not feel safe walking around alone, nor did her husband and relatives allow her to. While in the village, she had had the freedom to go to other places, visit people, and do work by herself, in the city she felt like a slave, a servant, who had to remain within four walls. The helplessness she felt at that time is clearly expressed by her story about a hospital visit that she repeated several times during the interview:

> I told you, I cannot read and write, I did not go to school and don't know Turkish. When I went to the hospital they said to me, 'what is your problem?' But I could not speak Turkish. I didn't know Turkish, and when I said something they threw me out. They said, 'get out, get out, get away from here, you don't know anything'. I could not express myself and I came back home. (Really?) Yes it went like that. I have experienced those things myself.

In the city, dengbêj Bêrîvan had to communicate in Turkish, a language she had not learned. Turkish was a prerequisite for all bureaucratic situations and for getting anything done. Employees of hospitals and other public places did not understand Kurdish, and in this case insulted people who spoke other languages. She related how she felt ashamed by the reaction of the hospital personnel:

> I did not know what to say, I did not know Turkish, and Kurdish was forbidden. I could not express myself and because of that I felt embarrassed. (..) Because they prohibited us from expressing ourselves in Kurdish, I felt embarrassed and I said to myself, why don't I speak Turkish, why do they offend me?

The offensive reaction of the hospital personnel, who blamed dengbêj Bêrîvan for not speaking Turkish and chased her away, embarrassed her, even though she had never been given the opportunity to learn the language. It shows how she too had internalized the social narrative of the Turkish state about the backwardness of Kurdish as a language, and people who did not speak Turkish. The propaganda machine of the state reached far, even to women who did not know Turkish and thus could not be directly influenced by Turkish propaganda. Of course, dengbêj Bêrîvan

knew about the propaganda from other people, and she understood well the reaction of the hospital personnel to her 'backwardness'. Over time she got used to city life, and learned to understand Turkish, even though she does not feel comfortable speaking the language. She also became active as a dengbêj and began placing her experiences in a political framework, something I will return to in the next chapter.

Dengbêj Bêrîvan had a different story to tell than male dengbêjs. As a woman, she did not experience obstacles from the state to her singing career, but rather from her family:

> (I heard that for a long time dengbêjs did not sing songs and people did not know anything about them. Because it was forbidden they could not..) The prohibitions were not because of the state. They were because of the family and the tribe. I can say that, concerning the dengbêj art, the dengbêj who performed in Serhat, there was not a lot of oppression, no there was not. I could not perform as a dengbêj because it was forbidden for me by the family, the tribe and the environment. (Because you are a woman?) yes. Because for women it is a shame to let her voice be heard in front of men. Women were deceived in everything. They always deceived women, they said: 'brother, don't open the eyes of women, let them not see anything, let them not know anything'.[274]

She located silence in a different place than male dengbêjs do: not in state oppression, but rather in the 'family and the tribe'. It seems dengbêj Bêrîvan did not witness much state pressure on the dengbêj art in her close environment. State oppression may not have been present at the same level in her life as in that of some other dengbêjs since villages were often less targeted than towns and cities.[275] Also, it is probable that state oppression was less influential for the position of female dengbêjs, since they did not perform outside of the family circle. Still, when she spoke about another famous female dengbêj, she did emphasize a double oppression: that of the state and of the kin and village environment. When I asked her whether the famous female dengbêjs Meryem Khan and Ayşe Şan had been an example for her, she replied:

> They were very successful Kurdish women. Since Meryem Khan is from Iraq, we couldn't listen to her very well. But Ayşe Şan is from here so it was possible for us to listen to her. And we are proud of them. Ayşe Şan is a master for all of us, for all the dengbêjs. Because she was under pressure both from her family, and from the

274 "Yani ev yasaxa em bêjin ne ji ber dewletê bû. Ji ber malbatê û aşîrê bû yasaxa bûne. Ewqas em bêjin dengbêjên me welatê Serhadê dengbêjî kirine, baski li ser van pir tunebûye yani, tunebûye. Na. Ew dengbêjîya bi me nedikir ji bo ji me re yasax bû ji ber malbatê û eşîrê û ortamê yasax bû. (Ji ber ku tu jin î?) Ee. Ji ber ku jinên dengê wê tiştê mêra ayibe, bila nebêje. Jina her tim.. jina xapandine. Her tim jina xapandine wisa kirine, gotina: 'bira çava jinê veneve, jin tiştekî nebînin, nizanibin'."

275 "Repression, however, varied depending on where one was located. Outside towns, for instance, authorities showed more tolerance for the use of the Kurdish language" Scalbert Yücel 2009: 16.

> government. Despite all this pressure she continued singing songs. She was exiled and even in that situation she continued. But now everybody can be a dengbêj, because it is free".

Dengbêj Bêrîvan regarded Ayşe Şan as an example 'for all of us', because of the difficult situation she had to endure. The latter suffered double marginalization; both her family and the government did not accept her, and she went into exile. But today, said dengbêj Bêrîvan, both forms of oppression have been lifted; anyone can be a dengbêj. The current freedom is also apparent at the end of her first interview. She finished by commenting on the interview process and the positive consequences of interviews in general:

> (Thank you, I am very happy that we could do this interview) Thank you, I am also happy. Because of all the attention for us, from television, from newspapers and from the municipality, these all have had a good result for Kurdish women. So I am also happy that you have come to do this interview. It is good for us. For example in France they invited me as a Kurdish woman to sing. I cannot read and write, I don't speak other languages, but they praised me so much, it was a very big event for me. Women are inviting women. I mean, there are a hundred male dengbêjs here, but they invited me [and not them]. I believe in this, that women will support women (*kadın kadınlara destek verecek, sahip çikacak*). Female dengbêjs have a special influence on the people, they are more influential. And men are jealous, I can see that, I am in that situation. Because people want female dengbêjs more, female dengbêjs attract more attention, and male dengbêjs are jealous. For example in August there is the festival in Tunceli, and in the program most attention is paid to women. They have two days for women activities.

Dengbêj Bêrîvan is not only present in the interview as an individual singer, but even more as a Kurdish woman and representative of Kurdish women. Her female identity is more evident than her identity as a singer. She regarded the attention for her position not as an opportunity for individual gain, but rather as a benefit for Kurdish women in general. She emphasized this by talking about her performance in France. She was invited *because* she is a woman, and she was invited by other women. The encouragement she received because of that experience lay in the fact that she was accepted as a woman; she felt accepted for what she was. It is significant that she adds that she was accepted even though she did not have an education. This shows her lack of confidence due to her lack of education.

The way dengbêj Bêrîvan spoke of women who support women shows her involvement in the women's organizations that developed such narratives. She placed female dengbêjs in opposition to male dengbêjs, who were jealous of the success of female dengbêjs. Her example of being invited to France instead of a male dengbêj, indicates that women have been able to firmly establish a position

among the more successful dengbêjs, and that she has managed to escape from her previously marginalized role. She used her previously marginalized role to move to the center of attention.

In this first interview, dengbêj Bêrîvan emphasized how being a woman had had a profound impact on her life. The social conventions were such that women were not allowed to operate freely and to sing wherever they liked. But when she was younger, she did not have the words, the means, or the environment to speak of these prohibitions in the way she could at the time of our interview. In the past, she took it as the natural order of things, whereas over time she developed a new perspective. After she moved to the city, being Kurdish became an additional restrictive factor. She was a stranger, someone who could not express herself in public places, and who was humiliated for that. She felt she was looked down upon as someone who did not have the knowledge that others had. When dengbêj Bêrîvan went to France she felt rehabilitated because even though she was in a strange country where she did not know the language, she was important for who she was - a Kurdish woman and a singer. The way she spoke of that experience tells us that her lack of education made her feel *rightly* marginalized. In France, however, she realized that it was not her fault that she did not know the language (French), and that not knowing the language did not mean she was of less value. What she experienced in France may have been an ethical moment in which she realized that one could also look at things differently.

Specific aspects of her identity—being a woman, Kurdish, and uneducated—interacted in distinct ways during her life and added to her marginalized position. However, she was able to creatively refigure this process after gaining access to new opinions and organizations. She could now make use of the same factors that had previously marginalized her. As a female dengbêj she felt she was now more interesting than a male dengbêj. As a Kurdish woman (with limited Turkish skills) she was a member of the large group of Kurdish women who are seen today as guardians of the language and culture, and this increased her status over someone who speaks Turkish fluently. Dengbêj Bêrîvan transformed previous obstructions in her life into resources that helped her build a new life. She broke her silence with the same tools that had previously silenced her, and reworked her personal story to overcome limitations by viewing her life story in a new light. I will discuss her current position and views in chapter 4, when I look in detail at her second interview. In that interview her transformation became particularly clear and she strongly emphasized her political ideas.

Life story 3: landlords and support

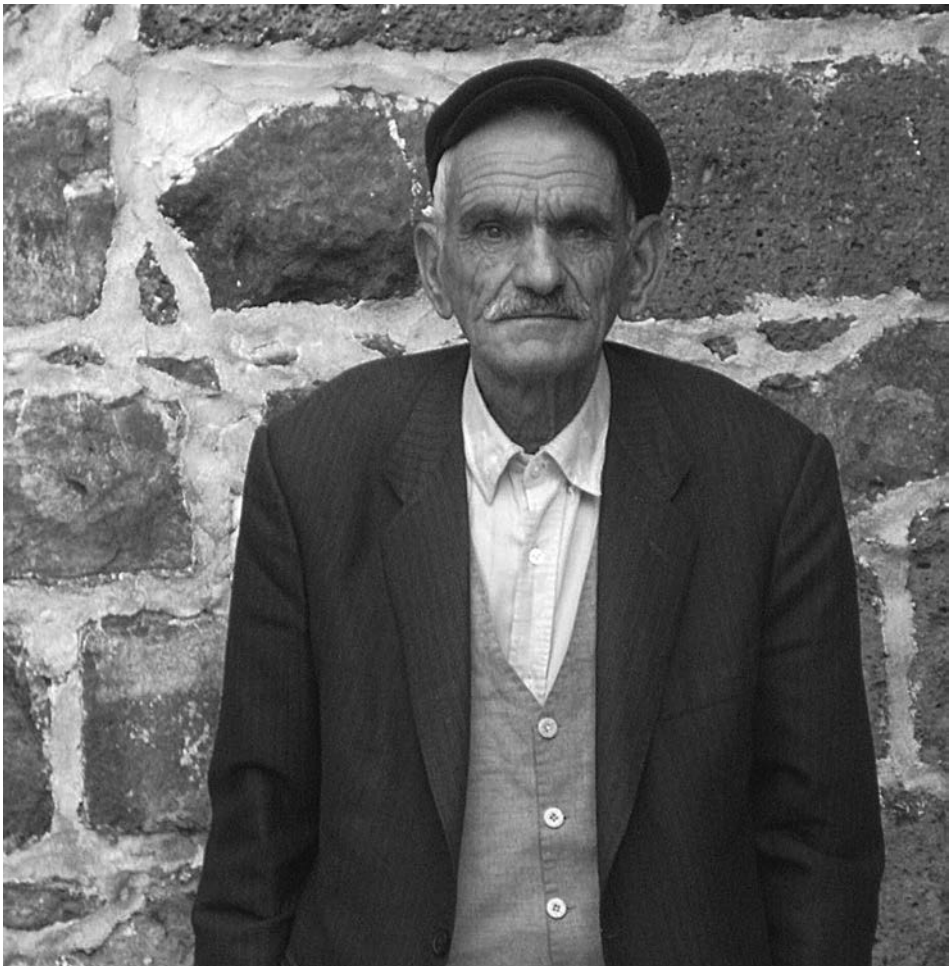

Figure 13. Dengbêj Seydxanê Boyaxci at the Dengbêj House in Diyarbakir, 2008. He is not the person who told this life story.

'Is there no one who wants to help the dengbêjs?'

Dengbêj Hamîd was born in 1949 in a small village near the Iranian border. In the first half of the 1980s, he and his family moved to Van where they have stayed ever since, gaining a livelihood from animal husbandry, gardens and fields on the outskirts of the city. Dengbêj Hamîd's house and his brother's house, plus the houses of his two sons and their families, were built on a single large plot of land. When I visited them, they seemed to be relatively well-off, since they owned houses, cars, gardens and land. The focus of dengbêj Hamîd throughout the interview, to which he returned time and again, was the lack of attention and support for the dengbêjs. He could not understand why there was no serious support for this important tradition: "why doesn't the world help the dengbêjs?"

I understand his disappointment as related to recurring experiences of being silenced. In order to counter these experiences he tried to mobilize two opposing moral narratives to generate new support for the dengbêj art. The first, namely the value of the landlord system, was valid in his younger years. The second, namely the disgrace of the landlord system as something dark, undemocratic and pre-modern, had gained in popularity under the influence of the Kurdish movement. At the outset of the interview he spoke extensively about the poverty of the dengbêjs, which he regarded as a reason why they were and are entitled to receive support:

> You have to know that.. -maybe others have told you this as well, of course we haven't seen Evdalê Zeynikî and Eyas[276] who came before him, but we have seen the others- you have to know that they all died in poverty. Not one dengbêj had a shop, a position, an office, or some wealth. Until today it is told that the dengbêjs of the past always remained poor. They always stayed in poverty. Why? Why isn't this people interested? (..) Look, dengbêj means the master of the voice. Everything comes from his heart. His brain works like a computer. He sings everything without taking it from its place. (..) They sing like a computer (*bilgisayar gibi söylüyor*). Why doesn't the world help these dengbêjs (*niye bu dünya buna el atmıyor bu dengbêjlere, her kim olursa olsun*)? Whoever it may be. Look my father learned from Mihamed, Mihamed from his father Mirêdê Cano, he learned from Evdalê Zeynî, and Evdalê Zeynî for sure also learned it from somebody else. These dengbêjs have come until today. What will happen if I don't sing, if my son will not sing? Our culture that comes from our forefathers in the form of the dengbêj art, that history is a history (*bizim kültürümüz, bizim o ata babalardan gelen kültürü dengbêjlikte, o tarih bir*

276 See for Evdalê Zeynikî chapter 1. Eyas was his master.

> *tarihtir*). And what will happen with that history? We will lose it. Is there no one in the world who will help?[277]

Dengbêj Hamîd argued that the specialized knowledge of the dengbêjs, who are poor by definition, needs to be protected by someone other than the dengbêjs. He explained that this culture that has been transmitted from bygone times until today is in danger of becoming lost if it does not receive the support it needs. Although dengbêj Hamîd did not seem to be particularly poor, but rather quite well-off, he did see poverty as a general characteristic for most dengbêjs.[278] In this way, he places himself with other dengbêjs in the social class of the poor, who cannot provide for themselves or preserve this tradition financially.

Because dengbêj Hamîd continued to talk about the lack of support for the dengbêjs, I decided to ask him about the kind of material support dengbêjs enjoyed in the past:

> (You traveled from village to village, you went to weddings, did you get support [*destek*] at that time?) In the past it wasn't like this. In the villages I can say that everything was for free. People [helped] each other, the rich.., everybody had a basic.., a tribe, a potential [safety-net], everybody had people he knew. People helped each other. I was dengbêj in my village. In my environment there were twenty villages, and that these twenty villages supported me. (Really?) Yes of course! They sent to me grain, money, they took care [of me]. For example dengbêj Eyas was the dengbêj of Uzunşibikî. (Is that the name of a village?) It is around Antep. There were twelve villages, twelve villages were in the region of Uzunşibikî. The income of twelve villages was theirs. Their dengbêj was Eyas. They gave fields, they gave him food, even a horse. (Did the agha give him this?) Yes, the agha. He looked after him, he was a dengbêj with income [*maaşlı bir dengbêjdi*]. (...)
> But today who will give something to the dengbêjs? Times have changed. We are in the city. Everyone only looks after himself. What do the rich understand of our situation? There are some people who gave support. Some bring sugar, somebody brought a television, but it isn't enough. It is necessary to let the dengbêj art live'.

277 "Bunu bilin ki, belki başkası da anlatmış, dengbêjlerin.. Tabii Evdalê Zeynikî, daha önceki o Eyas falan biz görmedik, babam anlatıyordu, diğerlerini biz gördük. Bunlar hepsi fakirlikte öldü. Hepsi yoksullukta. Hiçbir dengbêj kendi ne bir dükkanı, ne bir geliri, ne bir memurati, ne bir zenginliği yoktu. Dengbêjler ezildi, bugüne kadar anlatılıyor, hep fakir kalmış. Hep yoksullukta kalmış. Neden? Niye? Peki bu millet niye ilgi göstermiyor?" All quotes in this section are taken from an interview with dengbêj Hamîd conducted in Van in 2007. The interview language was Turkish.

278 Yüksel (2011) writes that the famous dengbêj Şakîro related the poverty of the dengbêjs also to the lack of institutional support by the Turkish state. Şakîro compared the poor situation of the Kurdish dengbêj Reso to that of the Turkish aşık Veysel who was celebrated as an important national figure. "Indeed, Veysel and Reso provide a fruitful comparative case of the Kurdish and Turkish oral poets in the same country: while the former is promoted and rewarded, the latter 'died hungry.' This comparison shows the crucial role of the state in the different courses that the Turkish and Kurdish oral poetry have taken: one is collected, studied and researched systematically through different state institutions, while the other owes its survival solely to amateur recordings" (Yüksel 2011: 88). Other dengbêjs also made this connection. They blamed both the state as well as 'the Kurdish people' for the lack of recognition and support.

This quotation clarifies dengbêj Hamîd's frame of reference and the moral institutions he felt connected to. When he was young, he was supported by the surrounding villages, and, he said, everyone had a safety net, people took care of each other. At first he spoke about his own situation, but then he switched to speak about dengbêj Eyas, to reinforce his argument. Dengbêj Eyas was supported by his agha and the surrounding villages, he received an income and even a horse. He was the master of Evdalê Zeynikî (see chapter 1), and presumably lived in the 19th century. Dengbêj Hamîd is not speaking specifically about himself or dengbêj Eyas, but about the historical dengbêj *model*. He referred to the moral institution of the landlord class, and the social narratives that must have circulated when he was young, when it was still common for good dengbêjs to receive the support of landlords. This system was already under severe pressure because of land reforms and the declining power of the aghas, but dengbêj Hamîd still had a source of income at the time. He lost this income when he moved to the city; a different social structure deprived him of previous possibilities.

He built his argument by first defining the social class of dengbêjs as poor and not rich. Subsequently he felt that belonging to that social class, and the special knowledge they possess, legitimized the dengbêjs' request for support. He presented the landlord system as the support system for the dengbêjs, at a time when people took care of each other and shared their possessions. This is a moral claim that he derived from considering the landlord class as a moral institution to which certain obligations were ascribed. Of course, this system of support should not be overestimated. Dengbêj Hamîd himself stated earlier that 'all dengbêjs died in poverty'. The fact that they were poor necessitated support from the rich; even so they remained poor and dependent on others. Dengbêj Hamîd's argued that at least the dengbêjs received some form of support and were therefore also recognized as dengbêjs, whereas 'today who will give something' and 'who will understand their situation?'. He continued:

> (You said that you were the dengbêj of twenty villages, isn't it? What did this mean? Was there one agha of these twenty villages?) These twenty villages were in the surroundings of our village. If there was a wedding, they called me. They also invited me for entertainment, there was no television, nothing. So they invited me to sing songs. The dengbêj art is very hard. Not everybody is able to sing. (But were there also other dengbêjs coming to these twenty villages?) Of course, there were also others coming. (Was there only one agha of these twenty villages, or more?) No there were more, there were many. For example five villages had one agha, or sometimes one village had an agha, or six villages. At that time it was like that. At this moment the agha-system has disappeared. (So your village doesn't have an agha now?) No, not anymore. Not only our village, in the whole of Turkey it almost doesn't exist

> anymore. Democracy came, it disappeared, the people became educated, their eyes were opened, they saw the world, they saw what happened in Europe, the television came. The people came to themselves a bit. The era of the agha system (*ağalık*) has passed. There may still be a few, but in general it is over'.

Here dengbêj Hamîd described the turning point that caused the agha's support system to collapse. This is interesting, because it shows that he referred to differing, opposing moral narratives and he adhered to all of them in some way. The social narrative of the agha system originated from his childhood and young adulthood, but it had disappeared from most parts of Turkey. Why? Dengbêj Hamîd said it was because of democracy, education, the opening of Kurdish society to a wider world. With these words he referred to three moral narratives and institutions: the social narrative of the Kurdish movement on the landlord system, which is also similar to the Turkish state's social narrative, and more generally, to the international meta-narrative of democracy and education. These narratives relate how the landlord or 'feudal' system belonged to a time before democracy, before people were educated. 'Their eyes were opened' and 'people came to themselves' are phrases fitting this moral narrative. Dengbêj Hamîd's remarks show how people have internalized such narratives, adopted them as their own, and use them as justifications for social developments they have witnessed, or for what happens in their lives. Although the landlord system seems to have been at least partly beneficial for dengbêj Hamîd, he nevertheless described its abolishment as positive.

Whereas dengbêj Hamîd seemed to endorse the ideas coming from the Kurdish political movement and 'Europe', at the same time, he was quite displeased with the current situation in which 'the times have changed' and 'everybody only looks out for himself'. His memories about the support system that benefited him when he was young, and which he believed had benefited all dengbêjs in the past ('dengbêjs with an income'), collided with the currently accepted social narrative of the same system perceived as undemocratic and enslaving of people. Therefore, I suggest that his (and other dengbêjs') complaints about the lack of support for the dengbêj is more than just a quest for money or a 'commercialization' of the dengbêj art, as it is sometimes understood by political activists (chapter 4). Instead, I believe it countered the social narrative of the Kurdish political movement which demands that every Kurd, including the dengbêjs, dedicate themselves fully and voluntarily to the Kurdish people. Most dengbêjs do not see why they should be volunteers for the Kurdish cause. They feel connected to the narrative they learned in their younger days, when the dengbêjs were supported by a landlord and the villages they served. Today the dengbêjs serve the people coming to the House, 'we serve the guests who come here', which means that

nowadays the guests of the House are the people from whom they expect financial or material support. While the Kurdish movement emphasized the political value of the dengbêj art as an authentic Kurdish tradition, and the responsibility of every Kurd to serve his/her people, dengbêj Hamîd saw this as a world turned upside down; *they* are the poor who need to be supported, they possess knowledge that should be valued and protected, and it is not their responsibility to act as protectors of the dengbêj art.

After dengbêj Hamîd spoke about the abolishment of the agha-system, he continued:

> So the agha system is behind us. There may be still a few, but in general it is finished.. I didn't sing for thirty-one years. (Why?) We migrated and some things happened. I didn't sing at all. (Why didn't you sing?) I didn't feel like it. That's why in the end I have only this much in my memory. The others I forgot. (oh.. because you didn't sing..) yes if you don't sing for thirty-one years, what happens? If you don't water a tree for thirty years it will dry out and die.

Because dengbêj Hamîd mentioned that he stopped singing immediately after he spoke of the abolishment of the landlord system, he seemed to make a connection between the two events. After he had migrated to Van, the support of the aghas naturally came to an end. He moved away from the village life he was used to, and moved to a city, beyond the circle of the agha's influence. In his new location, it was not easy to continue with the dengbêj art. But there seems to have been other reasons for his silence, because he says 'and some things happened':

> (So during thirty years you didn't sing..) I didn't sing at all. (And at weddings?) No, I didn't sing at all. (Not at all?) No. Since two years I remember some things and sing them, but everything... (does it slowly return to your mind?) Yes.

Dengbêj Hamîd answered my question why he abandoned singing evasively, and did not say much about that period of his life. Still, he returned to the topic a few sentences later:

> (Did you listen to the radio? To radio Yerevan?) At that time there was no television yet, we listened to radio Yerevan. Birê sang, Karapetê Xaco sang, Haci Xosro from Iran, the people gathered and listened so intensely. Later of course the tape came. (Did you also learn songs from the radio?) Sure, I learned some from radio Iran. I learned from there as well. But now the situation is good. Knowledge has increased a lot. Yet what a pity that there is no importance given to dengbêjs. They are not extended a hand, and they are not helped in seeing their opportunities. Of course it is also because.. As you know the dengbêjs sing in Kurdish. Because they sing in Kurdish Turkey obstructed them, they don't help, no they actually really obstruct them. They forbid it. (Have these laws also hindered you personally at that time?) I was at that time caught in the coup of Kenan Evren. He organized a coup. They

> shut me away for a while. And I was tortured for twenty-eight days. (Because of the dengbêj art, or for other reasons?) No I didn't have any other things, it was because of the dengbêj art, because of Kurdishness (kürtçülük). But nothing resulted from that, they let me go. Also look at that…

Dengbêj Hamîd's comment about the radio makes clear how limited the opportunities for hearing Kurdish in the media were at the time. 'People listened so intensely', because they had nothing else to listen to. He spoke here about the transition from a time with little options, first the radio, later the tape, until today. Today 'knowledge has increased a lot'. It is not as in the past, when people listened to a few hours of radio broadcast with an eagerness that stemmed from the limited opportunities to hear Kurdish in public. From the time that the cassette player was introduced, until today with CDs, video recordings and television, the situation has improved dramatically. However, dengbêj Hamîd said that unfortunately now that so many opportunities exist for the dengbêjs, they do not know how to use them, and no one gives them a hand to help them learn how to use these new opportunities.

It seems that, now that he was talking about the dengbêjs' limitations, he suddenly remembered other prior limitations. Because dengbêjs sing in Kurdish, the government obstructs them, he said. Instead of helping them, something he would have liked to receive from several directions, they impede them. To my question as to whether this also applied to him, he confided for the first time something about his personal experiences with oppression. He was arrested and jailed, and tortured for twenty-eight days. Before turning to that experience, here is the final part of this section of his interview:

> (Nowadays you know thirty to forty kilams. But you have forgotten many, isn't it?) I forgot most of them. (How many did you know in the past approximately, do you remember that?) Thirty-one years ago I knew many. Just as water boils, songs came to me one after another. I knew many. I cannot say how many I exactly knew, but really there were many. I was young and I listened a lot to dengbêjs. I was motivated. If I would have sung for two nights and two days, my voice wouldn't break and also [my repertoire] wouldn't finish.

The way dengbêj Hamîd spoke about his being tortured was almost impersonal, as if he had not been there, as if he was talking about another person. Yet, what he clearly expressed was the number of days he was tortured, as well as the number of years he kept silent: twenty-eight days, and thirty-one years. Thirty-one years ago he knew many songs, they rose up in him just like boiling water. He was motivated, and he would never run out of songs. But the twenty-eight days of torture, which he endured

because of being a dengbêj and a Kurd, silenced him, and erased much of what he had known and treasured. 'Also look at that…'.

Dengbêj Hamîd was a victim of the wave of arrests, oppression, terror and torture following the 1980 coup. During and after the coup, 650.000 people were detained, and most of them tortured, and more than 1,5 million people were officially registered as suspects (Imset 1996). It is important to note the enormous scale on which these practices took place, because it makes clear how many people were directly or indirectly affected by them, or afraid to suffer the same fate sooner or later. The brutalities after the coup are often mentioned as one of the most significant reasons why the PKK was able to gain mass support. Additionally, apart from the coup, torture was and is a systematic part of imprisonment in Turkey.[279] According to Zeydanlıoğlu (2009), it has been an integral part of the nation building process of the Turkish Republic. The most infamous inhuman treatment took place in Diyarbakır prison, on which the article of Zeydanlıoğlu is focused:

> What has been called 'the period of barbarity' (vahşet dönemi) or 'the hell of Diyarbakır' (Diyarbakır cehennemi), refers approximately to the early and mid-1980s (in particular the years between 1981-1984) where the prisoners in the newly built Diyarbakır Military Prison No. 5 in the Kurdish region were exposed to horrific acts of systematic torture. (Ibid: 8).

Zeydanlıoğlu enumerates the horrible torture practices perpetrated in this prison, which included severe beating; sleep, water and food deprivation; sexual humiliation and assault; and many other methods. In addition to physical torture, there was systematic psychological torture aimed at the turkification (*türkleştirmek*) of Kurdish prisoners, many of whom were illiterate and did not speak Turkish. They were forced to memorize Turkish songs and slogans as a form of a 'turkifying' education. Zeydanlıoğlu cites a prisoner who spoke about this psychological torture:

> What we were forced to do aimed at destroying our personalities. Despite us not being Turks, they used to make us shout 'I am a Turk, I am right.' I think they made us learn fifty to sixty nationalist songs by heart. It might have been more. These songs are nothing you would sing in your daily life. When you consider the limits of the human memory, learning this amount of songs by heart is very difficult. There is not a worse way of torturing, especially when you consider the fact that some of these

279 'Torture in Turkey is not a problem limited to the period of detention. Torture is systematically applied in Turkey as an administrative practice. Whoever is deprived of his/her freedom is under permanent threat of torture from the very minute of detention…The very existence of threat of torture is itself a method of torture…Torture is not just a method of obtaining information. It is at the same time an arbitrary way of punishment. One of the main purposes of torture is to punish the criticisms and political activities, and to frighten and manipulate the whole society through terrorism..' (Medical foundation, London, 1999, quoted in Zeydanlıoğlu 2009).

> people were illiterate. A person is already under the pressure of facing torture that will be impossible to endure in case these songs are not learnt by heart. You get the truncheon even when you know them by heart. At least hundred times (Mavioğlu in Ibid: 10).

It is hard to imagine how this form of torture must have felt for a dengbêj. Learning fifty to sixty new songs by heart in Turkish meant literally erasing at least parts of his repertoire. Dengbêjs undergoing torture must have felt like tapes being overwritten, the most important gift they had slipping away from them. Even the person cited above, who was neither a dengbêj or illiterate, described this in terms of: 'there is not a worse way of torturing'. This must have held even more for dengbêjs. Turkification as a form of torture was and is usual in prisons in Eastern Turkey, and such policies formed a central part of the modernization project of the Turkish state. Without a doubt, dengbêj Hamîd also became a victim of turkification measures that were carried out as psychological torture.

Returning now to dengbêj Hamîd's story let us look first at the moment in the interview when he spoke of being imprisoned and tortured. He mentioned it when speaking of the radio and the limited opportunities that the dengbêjs had at the time. Of course, he said, it was not only a lack of support, there was also oppression, the government obstructed them. When he talked about restrictions, it reminded him of the current situation: most restrictions have been lifted. Theoretically, there should be many options for him and other dengbêjs to perform. But instead he felt he was still limited and that the dengbêjs could still not count on an extended hand. For someone who had lived through torture and imprisonment, decades of war and government suppression, and who lost most of his repertoire, the current more open environment offered hope for new opportunities. He assisted in founding the Dengbêj House and became one of its most dedicated members. But the initial enthusiasm quickly turned into disappointment because of a renewed neglect of their performance. The recent revival did not bring what he had hoped for. The neglect of their current performances reinforced his earlier experiences of being silenced, first through the downfall of the landlord system and his move to the city Van, and later through his imprisonment and torture.

Life story 4: Armenian voices

Figure 14. Dengbêj Cîhan's village. In the past there were no mosques in this region, only churches. Mosques were built during the life time of dengbêj Cîhan, about 50-60 years ago. Picture made by Cîhan's son, 2011.

'I am a Kurd and a Muslim, not a Fileh'.[280]

Since the Armenian genocide in 1915,[281] the previously strong Armenian presence in Kurdistan has been virtually wiped out. The Kurds had played a large role in the assassination and deportation of the Armenians and other Christian groups from eastern Turkey. Survivors who did not escape from these horrors to other countries were forced to totally assimilate to Kurdish culture, and to hide their Armenian identity as much as they could. Seemingly, nothing remained of their previous identity and of the culture they belonged to. However, in spite of the brutality of the '1915 events', as they are often referred to within Turkey in an attempt to avoid naming them, the Armenian voice can clearly be heard today, especially among Kurds. As Bruinessen remarks, "the Armenians are very much present today in people's memories, in fact even more so than I found to be the case thirty years ago" (in Jongerden 2007: xxiii). Although Turkey's government until now has strongly opposed recognizing the size, horror, and planned and deliberate character of the mass killings, Kurds in Turkey have made steps towards an increasing recognition, and the acknowledgement of their own share in it.[282] Notwithstanding these positive steps, being Armenian is still something one would rather hide than bring out into the open due to discrimination and prejudices experienced in daily life, and the unlawful treatment by the government.[283]

280 "Ez Kurd im, ez Misilman im, ne Fileh me," see below for the full quote. *Fileh* is a Kurdish word used to refer to Christians, or to Christian ethnicities in the Kurdish region (the main ones the Armenians and Assyrians). One can often understand from the context, or the region spoken about, which type of '*Fileh*' is meant.

281 This was not the first massacre of Armenians. About the differences with earlier massacres, and about the nature of the genocide, Suny notes: "Though there was a continuity between the brutal policies of massacre and deportation that earlier regimes used to keep order, the very scale of the Armenian Genocide and its intended effects – to rid eastern Anatolia of a whole people – make it a far more radical, indeed revolutionary, transformation of the imperial setup" (Suny 2002: 98).

282 A recent example was the inauguration of the 'monument of common conscience' on September 12, 2013, in Diyarbakir. The monument is "dedicated to all peoples and religious groups who were subjected to massacres in these lands", the mayor Abdullah Demirbaş declared in his opening speech. He also said: "We Kurds, in the name of our ancestors, apologize for the massacres and deportations of the Armenians and Assyrians in 1915. We will continue our struggle to secure atonement and compensation for them." (in the *Armenian Weekly*, September 12 2013).

283 On the one hand there are positive signs such as Armenians winning court cases on land tenure. On the other hand Armenians are still often discriminated against. For instance, Armenian public figures such as journalists and writers who come out in the open in daily life are subject to acts of violence, such as intimidation, threats, and in excessive cases murder and assassination. The Hrant Dink case is one but a prominent example of such violence, in which Hrant Dink, the editor general of the Armenian newspaper *Agos* who was born and raised in Turkey, was assassinated. Six years after the assassination, the case remains dark and some of the bureaucrats that were investigated after the murder for their involvement in the assassination have been promoted to even higher ranks in bureaucracy, instead of being held accountable for their role in, or negligence of, the assassination.

In the case of the dengbêj art, Armenians frequently emerge in kilams; in chapter 1 I discussed the role of Armenians in kilams through the figure of the Armenian woman. The kilams *Evdal û Gulê*, in which a Kurdish dengbêj competes with an Armenian female dengbêj (chapter 1), and *Metran Isa* about an Armenian woman who marries to a Kurdish man, are among the most well-known. Another way in which Armenians are present in the dengbêj art is through 'Karapetê Xaco' (his kurdified name), an Armenian who became one of the most famous voices of the dengbêj art. He was born in 1902 as Karapet Khatchadourian, in the village Bilhêder near Batman, at that time still an Armenian village. When most of his family was killed during the genocide he grew up among Kurds and learned to sing in Kurdish. Later in his life he moved to Armenia and became famous because of his activities on radio Yerevan. His voice, broadcast from abroad, was listened to attentively by many Kurds in eastern Turkey, who had no other access to Kurdish media than through this radio station, and he became a symbol of Kurdish resistance.

Although there are not many Armenian dengbêjs today, coincidentally the first dengbêj I happened to speak with was Armenian. He lived in Istanbul, and I met him through a friend. He was not connected to any of the Dengbêj Houses, and did not perform anymore today apart from his singing at home within his family circle. Born in 1925, he was also the oldest among the people I spoke with. He could understand some Turkish, but did not speak it. Most of his adult life he lived in a village in the Sasun region, close to where Karapetê Xaço came from. Dengbêj Cîhan made a living from farming, with tobacco as the main subsistence crop. Since 2004 he lives in Istanbul with one of his children, although he still regularly returns to his home region to visit the village and his other children. His life story is rich in memories and stories, of which I explore some parts in this section. I got to know him and his relatives well, and visited them often over the years. On my visits I often recorded again some other stories or songs, or asked him a few more questions. In this section, instead of investigating the line of thought, connections and coherence within a single long interview, I look at four interviews simultaneously and offer citations from all of them. This has the virtue of demonstrating the way this dengbêj talked: each question or story reminded him of yet another story and led us to new places and memories.

The first sentence of the first interview we had, in which I asked him to speak about his life, was as follows:

> My mother and father.. My father became a Muslim in the time of the torment of the Christians (*terqa fileh*) and came to his aunt. His aunt Hela, she was in Hewrê. The father of my mother was from the Derxanê [tribe], they were Arabs.[284]

Dengbêj Cîhan first defined his father, and therewith also himself, as a Muslim. I return to this point later on. He refers to the genocide as 'the time of torment of the Christians', as it is usually referred to in Kurdish.[285] His father was born and raised in the Armenian village Parmis. He spoke Armenian and was a Christian. The village was in the Sasun region in eastern Turkey, about 50 km from the town Silvan. This region was a mixture of Armenian, Arabic and Kurdish villages.

Dengbêj Cîhan knows much about the history of the region, of his father, and of his village. He told how, when Parmis was attacked, the men were gathered and sent to a prison in the town Pasûr (Kulp), about 70 km from Parmis. Later on all these men were killed by the Ottoman army. Aram managed to escape from that prison. In the meantime, the soldiers who had attacked their village had also gathered all the old people, women and children, and driven them into the church. They set fire to the church, and to all the people who had taken refuge there. Later on he said about the village:

> At the time of the torment of the Christians some became Muslims. In Parmis there were 1050 people registered. Of those 1050 people 50 people were left. Some remained in Turkey and some went to Yerevan. 1000 people were killed (*hezar nifusî hatî kuştin winda bûn*). My father had three brothers. My grandfather was arrested by soldiers for army duty and never came back, that was before the time of the massacres. No one knows what happened to him. Six months later the torment of the Christians began. One of my uncles was killed in a village. Then there were two who got lost. One of them was young, unmarried; one of them was married and had a child. No one knows if he could reach to Yerevan with his children. Some fellows have been in Yerevan and they asked for my uncles, but they had no information about my uncles. The uncle of my father, his name was Romo, they asked him in Yerevan but they could not find information about him.

His father Aram thus remained behind on his own: first Aram's father left and did not return. Then during the massacres one of his brothers was killed, and the two others went missing. The Armenian genocide of 1915 had been preceded by other massacres and persecutions and thus did not stand on its own. The fact that his

284 The quotes in this section are taken from four interviews with dengbêj Cîhan conducted in Istanbul between 2007 and 2010. The interview language was Kurdish. In the first interview, mister Cîhan's son translated between us in Kurdish and English.

285 There are two expressions in Kurdish that refer to the Armenian genocide. The one is *terqa fileh*, *terq* meaning that a group of people needs to escape immediately under pressing conditions. The other one is *fermanê fileh*, *ferman* meaning a law or decree. The latter refers to the decision by the central authority at the time to deport the Armenians from Ottoman soil.

father went missing may have been related to this; persecution of Christians had already begun. Another time, dengbêj Cîhan related a story he had heard about Aram's grandfather from an Armenian friend who came from the same region:

> Before the torment of the Christians, before that happened [there was another story] about Cerco. He was the grandfather of my father. Qolaxasî (a rank equivalent to Captain in the Ottoman army)[286] and a regiment of soldiers went there, in that time they said Qolaxasî to the commander of the regiment. He went there and he said to the village chief: 'either I will burn your village, or one of you will come out and I will fight with him. If he cannot win from me I will burn the village, but if he can win from me I will not burn the village. They had a fight and he won. (He won from Qolaxasî?) Yes he killed Qolaxasî. They didn't burn Parmis and the regiment of soldiers left. This happened before the torment of the Christians.

This was an example of an intervention of Ottoman soldiers in the village long before the 1915 genocide.

After his escape from the church, Aram went to his aunt Hela who was married to a Muslim and lived in the Kurdish village Hewrê. Aram lived with them for some years. Kurds and Armenians had been living close to, but often separated from, each other before the genocide. It seems that intermarriages did take place, but often not with consent of the parents. The few Armenian survivors who were left, mixed with the local population and had to conceal their Armenian identity. In that village he met a woman from the Derxane tribe, one of the largest Arab tribes in the Sasun region. She and her brother came from another village but had settled in Hewrê after they had been involved in a dispute. Someone got killed, and they had to leave their village. The fact that they had a conflict with their relatives and were not living with them anymore may have been the reason why Aram managed to marry her; if she still would have been living in her village it might have been difficult for Aram to marry a Muslim. Even though he had converted, people did not forget his background and it seems likely that it was more difficult for former Christian men to find a marriage partner. The couple had two children, two boys of which the first passed away when he was still a baby. Cîhan would remain their only living child. However, the marriage did not last long; when Cîhan was about eight years old his mother left his father for another man and moved to another village in the same region.

Cîhan stayed with his father. His father then managed to reclaim some land in their former village Parmis, through his cousin who had lived there after the genocide but had then passed away. They went there together with his father's sister

286 Derived from Turkish *Kolağası*.

Hela. Parmis was now inhabited by Kurds, as often happened after the genocide: Armenian villages were seized by Kurds who took over their lands, and also their houses and possessions if they had not been burnt down.[287] When they went to Parmis they renovated the house of the cousin and moved there. The villagers granted them farmland as well. But in the year that they settled there his father died, when Cîhan was only ten years old. He was still too young to take up the farm work, and he and his aunt were forced to return to Hewrê.

Dengbêj Cîhan never learned any Armenian, as his father did not speak Armenian with him: "my father didn't speak Armenian. The kilams of the Armenians were all in Kurmanji, they sang kilams in Kurmanji."[288] As eastern Turkey was dominated by Kurds, Kurmanji was the lingua franca at the time, at least after the genocide. Both Arabs and Armenians spoke it well and communicated in Kurmanji when talking with the Kurds, or with other minorities.[289] Also other people told me that after the genocide their parents stopped speaking Armenian out of fear for repercussions, and tried in all possible ways to hide their Christian and Armenian identity. The children of survivors thus grew up as Kurds: they spoke their language, had converted to their religion, and often married with them, as there were only few other Armenians left. What remained were only the memories, the stories, and the people around who would continue to remind them of their being *Fileh*.

Left without his father to take care of him, Cîhan continued for some time to move from place to place before he finally settled down in a village where he would stay and which would become his home. First, for reasons unknown to me he left with his aunt and her husband for Cewzîk, a village near Kozluk, not far from Hewrê. As a shepherd Cîhan herded the animals of his uncle, a job many village children would do. They stayed there for two years and returned. In that village he met a sheikh whom he liked, and who escaped from there to Syria. At the time, sheikhs were persecuted.[290] Cîhan liked this sheikh, and when he returned from Cewzîk to his hometown, he decided to visit the sheikh in Syria:

287 I heard many such cases from dengbêjs and other people I spoke with. They talked openly about the fact that their village had been Armenian in the past. Many villages also kept their Armenian names, and were only renamed after the government renamed all villages in eastern Turkey into Turkish names.

288 "Bavê min nizanibû xaber neda. Kilamên Ermenî tev Kurmancî bûn. Ermenî jî kilamên Kurmancî digotin."

289 When I did research among Armenians from Sasun currently living in Istanbul I visited a café that functioned as their meeting place. They did not know Armenian, but spoke either Kurmanji or the local Arabic dialect among each other. They had migrated to Istanbul in the 1990s and were not used to speaking in Turkish with each other.

290 The persecution of sheikhs and religious authorities not supported by the state was a measurement implemented after the foundation of the Turkish Republic.

> I was still a child. I went to the sheikh, I was a follower of his (*em mirîdê mala wî şêxî bûn*), [I prayed and joined their ritual].[291] I went with someone else who was also a child. (On foot?) We went to Syria (*binxetê*), it was in the year of the famine (*sala xela bû*). We went on foot, we were children, we went on our own feet. (But it was very far?) It was three days. From my place to there was three days. We had leather shoes but they were torn apart and no one gave us new ones. Who could give? On foot. (..) They were in two villages, two brothers and they both stayed in a village. The villages were near to each other, it was half an hour from one to the other. Sheikh Mihemed and Sheikh Abdulqidus. (Two sheikhs?) Yes they were brothers. They had another brother who migrated as well with his father, to a place in Sasun. In Turkey.

While he stayed with the sheikh for two months, he assisted him with household tasks and sang for him. It must have been around the year 1939, when he was about fourteen years old. He told how he learned about the heroic deeds of the sheikh, who had revolted against the government, and how he sang about these events as entertainment for the sheikh. These were his first singing activities.

> I went to that sheikh. I used to sing for him, the kilams of his battle with a regiment of soldiers and militias from the Badika and Xiya tribes (*Ez çûm cem wî şêx. Me kilam digo, şerê wî hêriya ku kiribû, alayekî esker tevî milîsîyê yê Xîya û ê Badika*). There were only nine armed men with rifles, including the sheikh. Sheikh Mihemedê Zilî's daughter was also with them. She had a child with her, and she could not carry her child [anymore]. Hence, [in addition to fighting] two men carried the woman and the child. There were only seven men [in total]; for about two hours they fought with their rifles with all the regiment and militias, in a place without any chance to hide themselves. But they managed to escape to the mountains during that battle, and that is how he escaped to Syria.

This is a nice example of a kilam that was made about an event that took place not long before Cîhan sang it for him. He must have learned the kilam from people in the house of the sheikh, and because he had a nice voice and a good memory, he sang them for the sheikh. This episode also demonstrates that he was totally immersed in Kurdish culture, even though his father and aunt with whom he grew up were Armenian. Still, he also felt connected to his Armenian background as becomes clear from what he said immediately after the above quote:

> At that time there were French in Syria, no Arabs. In the time that I went it was French. Their soldiers were also Kurmanj, they were *Fileh*. Like us they also spoke Kurmanji. The soldiers of the French. They knew Kurmanji. They were all *Fileh* who came from Turkey. Like dengbêj Karapetê Xaço, he was from a village of Batman, from Bilhêder. He said that he had been a soldier for the French for fifteen years.

291 "Me jî zikir dikirin, zikirê wana dikirin." I inserted the last part of the sentence from a place later in the interview, as it exemplifies what he means with 'I was adherent of him'.

> After two years he could not leave. He also had a horse on which he mounted and rode around. He had a wife and family also. He got food for himself and his family and a horse from the French government. He was their soldier for 15 years. He died when he was hundred and three years old. (Did you meet him?) I didn't meet him but I have heard his fame. He was a dengbêj. (How do you know those things about him?) He said it himself. (In an interview?) Yes.

Dengbêj Cîhan often showed interest in his Armenian roots at moments in the interview when that topic came to mind. From the sentence about the sheikh escaping to Syria, he seemed to remember some things about Syria that were relevant to him. Syria had become a French mandate during WWI. Some of the Armenians who crossed the Turkish border and entered Syria were employed by the French as soldiers. Cîhan remembers how they spoke his language, Kurmanji Kurdish, and that they were 'all *Fileh* who came from Turkey.' This reminded him of dengbêj Karapetê Xaço who also enrolled as a soldier for the French. It seems, in spite of not seeing himself as an Armenian, he recognized something in these people that made him feel connected. Karapetê Xaço was like himself a dengbêj with Armenian roots, who became assimilated to Kurdish culture to such an extent that he became a famous dengbêj. The soldiers who he met in Syria obviously also caught his attention because they spoke Kurmanji, like himself, but were also *Fileh*, and he repeated "they were all *Fileh* who came from Turkey." Apart from recognition, another reason for his interest may have been that he suspected there could be relatives among those who had escaped from the atrocities. At another moment in the interview he said:

> The uncle of my father, his name was Romo, some men asked for him in Yerevan but they could not find any information about him. (So maybe in Yerevan there live relatives of yours?) Yes. Fifty years ago a letter came with the name of my father. (Really?) It said: 'come,' but I did not go. Yeah, I didn't go. (Why?) Really I didn't go. I [lived] with my father in law, I didn't go. (Of course it is something difficult..) I didn't have children yet. (It was very early..) Yes around fifty years ago. (Did you send them a letter?) No the letter came with the name of my father, and with someone else's name. I didn't care about it. (You didn't reply?) No I didn't. There were some people who said: 'come let's go', but I said I could not go. (You had his address?) Yes. I myself didn't see that letter. But someone said to me that the letter had come to a man in the village Beksê, he was also an Armenian-Muslim (*musilmîn*), it came to his house and it was with the name of my father. I myself didn't see the letter, nor the address.

Here again we see that dengbêj Cîhan on the one hand distanced himself from the relatives he appeared to have in Yerevan. He seems to have been too occupied with the life he lived, and obviously also satisfied with it. He already lived with his future father-in-law by then, and may already have known he that would marry his daughter. Whatever the exact reasons, it is clear from his account that he did not feel

the slightest interest to go there. On the other hand, he shows that he identified with the man who had received the letter, someone in a nearby village who was, as he said, "also a *misilmîn*", like himself. This term is used for Armenians who became Muslims. It seems that dengbêj Cîhan reconciled himself to this identity and decided to live with it, rather than to leave and go to Yerevan when he had the option.

After his visit to the sheikh in Syria, Cîhan returned home because he had heard that his aunt missed him and cried for him. In the years that followed he lived for some time with his aunt, and some more time with his mother who had come to ask him to stay with her. In both places there were conflicts: his aunt's husband had sold Cîhan's cow, and in his mother's village he fell in love with the Imam's daughter and wanted to marry her, but his mother and stepfather did not give their permission for the marriage. He therefore left their house and stayed with friends in Hewrê, and went to work in a village called Qaweçî, near Kozluk. At this time he became acquainted with an agha of a neighboring village, agha Hamo, or Haji Hamo. The agha turned out to be a distant relative, he was the son of Cîhan's cousin (father's brother's daughter) who had been kidnapped by a Kurd. The agha thus had an Armenian mother and a Kurdish father. Possibly because of this kinship, the agha invited him to stay at his house and work for him, and also promised him one of his daughters. It was around 1946 when he moved to the agha's village Holê, he was about twenty years old. He worked for him as a farm laborer and as a shepherd. His wife to be was only seven years old, so he agreed to wait until she had grown up.

These first years of his stay with Hamo was also the time when he got the chance to learn the dengbêj art. As an agha, Hamo received many guests, and also many dengbêjs. Hamo agha was a Haji, he had made the pilgrimage to Mecca. According to Cîhan he was an important man, a leader who had other people work for him. He himself did not work on the lands, but instead rode on his horse "and traveled through all of Kurdistan." He must have been a man of importance, judging from the many dengbêjs who visited his house, and who he was obviously capable of rewarding with presents. Dengbêj Cîhan told me how, in the years that he stayed with Hamo, he got to see dengbêjs from many places:

> They came from every place, from the lands of Serhat until Barava, through the villages of Diyarbekir. They came and sang. When they left, the agha gave them a sheep or a lamb or a gift like that. They performed and they left again (*Ji her derî hatin, yên welatî Serhadî heta Barava, hata gundên Diyarbekir. Tev dihatin. Çiqas dengbêj.. dihat, carina dihatî mal paz diyar kir, di vana çûn. Dengbêjî kirine diçûn*). From Silvan there was Saidê Osman. Then Sedîqê Sextî, also from Silvan. Camîlê Zerbîya from Muş. The dengbêj of Ali agha came from the highlands, from Serhat. He always walked from here to there and sang (*ji piya diçû kilama digo*). Then there was Cemîlê Zerbîya, also

> from Farqîn. Then there was Ahmedê Xazo from Batman, from the Reşqota tribe. And there was another from the Reşqota, from the Batman region, his name was Avdilrahmanê Havdê. Emîn of Xano Serî, of the village Barava. And Sadiq of the house of Şeşo. (June 2007).

All these dengbêjs visited agha Hamo, and probably also other aghas in the region. This demonstrates that in the 1940s the dengbêj art was still very much alive, and connected to the landlord system.

Although Cîhan was present at many performances and learned kilams from them, he emphasized that he learned most of his songs from someone else. The dengbêjs I spoke with often regarded one dengbêj as their main master. For dengbêj Cîhan this was the uncle of his wife, uncle Ramazan. Uncle Ramazan had learned his kilams from 'the dengbêj of Alî agha' mentioned above. During the First World War, for some time a certain Alî agha had stayed in the house of agha Hamo. He came from Muş, a town more to the north, and seems to have been a war refugee who had escaped from the advancing Russians in 1914. One of the people he came with was his dengbêj. As the agha and his following stayed under the protection of Hamo agha, the dengbêj of Alî agha often sang kilams for them. This is how uncle Ramazan had learned the repertoire of this dengbêj, and also the stories that corresponded to these kilams.

Dengbêj Cîhan was eager to learn from him. From the interview he appears to have been an energetic young man with keen good memory who absorbed any information he came across. He already had some singing experience from his time in Syria, and now that he got to know uncle Ramazan had a chance to learn more. During the interview he often mentioned that he had learned all his kilams some fifty to sixty years ago from uncle Ramazan who, in turn, had learned them from the dengbêj of Alî agha. When I asked him on what occasions he sang these kilams, he said that he often sang them during his long wanderings as a shepherd, when he was alone and did not have much else to do. Later on he also sang at weddings and was invited by people of his own and the surrounding villages. He was not a famous dengbêj, and in spite of the many kilams he knows, he was very modest about his knowledge. He did not regard himself or uncle Ramazan as a real dengbêj. He felt that the real dengbêj had been the dengbêj of Alî agha, from whom they had learned the kilams.[292]

292 Dengbêj Cîhan's son Aram told me that dengbêj Ramazan did not perform in public and was not known as a dengbêj by more people than his father and his close relatives. According to Aram, this was because he was the brother of agha Hamo, and therefore it was expected from him to behave as a part of the elite class. This also meant that he could not perform as a dengbêj, as this would mean he would lose his dignity.

When, after speaking of the many dengbêjs he named above, I asked him if he also remembered any female dengbêjs from that time, he replied:

> There was a female dengbêj from Herendê (*dengbêjê jin yek Herendî bû*). (Was she Christian or Muslim?)[293] Well she became Muslim but first she was Christian (*hat misilman bû care çû fileh bû*). There was a Muslim, the brother of Îsa, he was her lover (*dergistî*). He was the son of Mihemedê Alî Keleş. And when she came back from him she became a Christian again. (She was kidnapped isn't it?) Yes she was (*wê revand anî*). She stayed with him for a year. (Did you see her?) Yes I did, because she came to our house and stayed for a month with us, at the house of my wife's father. Her name was Xemê, Xemixiştî, she had a wonderful voice. They said Xemêxitî to her, she was an amazing dengbêj. (..) Her Christian name (*navê wê filetî*) was Xemê, and her Muslim name was Henîfe. She was from the village Herendê,[294] they were all Christians. When she escaped she came to the house of Hamo because he protected people when they were kidnapped. She stayed for one month and in this time she sang songs. (Did she sing in Kurdish?) Yes in Kurmanji. (Did she also know Armenian?) yes she knew Armenian, but usually she spoke Kurmanji. (And how did she learn the songs?) There was a dengbêj in her village, his name was Amo, and he was also Armenian. He sang songs in Armenian and Kurmanji. He also became Muslim and changed his name to Amer.

This is interesting for several reasons. It is possible that Armenian women were more often known as dengbêjs than Kurdish women. It seems that it was easier for them to sing in front of a public and to be known by many people, which in Kurdish circles would have been understood as shameful for the husband and woman's relatives. Like many other Armenian women she fell victim to being kidnapped by a Kurd. However, she managed to escape from him and to return to her home village, become a Christian again, and to marry a Christian man. She must have been an independent woman to have managed to change her fate in this way. This might be because she came from Herendê, a village still inhabited solely by Armenians, which meant she would have had more support than other Armenian women who were left without social connections to protect them. But first, before returning to Herendê, she was hosted for a month by Hamo agha who most probably arranged her return to the village. The Armenian roots of Hamo agha may have incited him to use his position to protect women like Xemê.

293 This was one of the interviews we did in 2007, and Cîhan's son was translating for me at that time. He knew that the village Herendê was Christian, so for that reason he asked if she was a Christian.

294 The village Herendê was the only Armenian village that was saved from the genocide in its entirety. I spoke with people from this village, and they told that the village was saved because the villagers were blacksmiths. As there were no other blacksmiths in the region they were needed, and thus saved.

Another interesting fact is that Xemê had learned her songs from dengbêj Amo, an Armenian himself, who sang in Kurdish and Armenian. He had also converted to Islam. This example demonstrates how Armenian knowledge ceased abruptly: Amo had still sung in Kurdish and Armenian, but Xemê, who learned kilams from him, sang only in Kurdish. Dengbêj Cîhan himself had seen only Kurdish dengbêjs, apart from one Armenian woman. Within one generation Armenian culture and language had been wiped out almost entirely. Cîhan's story also demonstrates that the recollection of Armenian identity was still there, as he knew which people in the surrounding villages had an Armenian background. The contacts he had eventually helped him to find a job, a village and a marriage partner. For better or worse, (former) Armenians supported each other and made use of each other's networks.[295]

After Cîhan lived for some years with Hamo agha, Hamo agha's daughter was considered to be marriageable, and they married when Cîhan was about twenty-five years old. Helîme was only twelve. Although her parents had married her to him, she was, said Cîhan, "not yet a woman but still a child." Soon after they married Cîhan was summoned to serve in the army. He fulfilled the two obligatory years of military service and returned home. He had been stationed in Thrace in western Turkey, far from his region of origin. When he came back, he and his wife remained living with Hamo agha for another four years before they moved to their own house in the same village. After six years of marriage, when Helîme was about eighteen years old, she became pregnant.

Although this story is told by dengbêj Cîhan, the silence of Helîme speaks through his words. She passed away in 2005, a year before I became acquainted with dengbêj Cîhan. Later Cîhan's son, Aram, told me more about her. It was no secret to her children that she had married their father against her will and that she was not happy in her marriage. She bore eleven children and lived the harsh village life many women of her generation lived. They lived in a house with only one large room. In the evening the matrasses that, during the day, were piled up against one of the walls were taken down, and everyone slept in that room. Both parents and children worked hard to make a living. They had fields and some animals, and lived mainly from tobacco trade. The children went to school, but helped with this work after school time and during their holidays. They were not well off, Aram remembers times when they did not have enough to eat, and he recalls the cold winters when they

295 This was confirmed by the interviews I held with five other people from the Sasun region. They were from other villages: one from Herendê and the others from villages where Kurds and Arabs lived mixed. In these villages individual Armenians were adopted by Kurdish tribes, and lived with them as if they were Kurds. However, they kept in touch with people who had Armenian roots.

froze due to a lack of proper clothing and shoes. Helîme had a strong personality, she followed the news of the village and had a voice in conflicts. As the daughter of the agha she was raised with a knowledge of local politics. People came to her for advice or with complaints, and also from other people from their village I heard that she was known for her wisdom.

Just like dengbêj Cîhan, as a child Helîme had also been present when dengbêjs came to sing in her father's dîwan. Like him, she learned many songs from them and from her uncle Ramazan and developed a strong interest in the dengbêj art. Cîhan told the following about his wife's knowledge:

> She learned in the same way [as I did], but she didn't sing for other men. She only sang for her family and for her friends. She learned the kilams that I know but she also learned other songs. She knew many weddings songs, and she knew also the women's songs (*kilamên din jî dizanibû. Kilamên daweta tev dizanibû. Kilamên jin jî dizanibû*) (June 2007).

But even though she knew many kilams, and liked to sing, she hardly used her talents. Cîhan's son Aram said that he had almost forgotten that she could sing, and realized it only when he was an adult. He said:

> There were songs that my mother knew better than my father. And my mother also composed songs herself. About her life, about her father, about her family, about her children. She didn't sing only laments.[296] For example she didn't want to marry my father and she made many songs about that. And she also sang about the other things that have affected her. I actually didn't know that she could sing. But once by chance I heard her singing and I asked: 'do you also sing songs?' And she said: 'yes I know many,' and then we bought a tape recorder and we recorded many songs. But she couldn't use it a lot, because the terrain where she could sing was small. She would for example sing at a mourning or a wedding. But even many of her relatives didn't know that she could sing.[297]

The silence of Helîme can be explained in two ways. It can be seen as yet another example of the limited access that women had to perform in public places. However, her son Aram explained her silence in a different way. Since she was the daughter of an agha, she was an important and influential woman in her village, and she used her position to exercise power. It would have been inappropriate for a (wo)man of her status to perform as a dengbêj. Performing was a task of the commoners not of the elite, and performing frequently as a dengbêj would have been damaging for her

296 Aram says this because laments were the common female repertoire, and it would not have been special if his mother used to sing only them. With this sentence he thus emphasizes that she was not 'only' singing laments, but also sang other types of songs at other occasions.

297 Aram told me this during the interview we had with his father. He translated for us, and we spoke English with each other. The quote thus was in English and is not a translation.

reputation and that of her family. Aram recalled that she occasionally performed at weddings or funerals. He said she only did so if her authority was needed. She would step forward if there were no other people present who knew the right song to sing at a particular moment, or the right thing to do following tradition. On such occasions, Helîme demonstrated her authority and knowledge in matters of dengbêj art and tradition. This was appropriate for her elite position, whereas at other moments it would have meant she was behaving like a commoner.

But aside from her public position, Helîme also liked to sing songs in private, and composed songs about situations she had been through. Aram believed that the songs had served her as an important form of self-expression. Among others, it had once served as a strong act of resistance against her forced marriage. When we communicated later by email about his mother's position, Aram wrote about her in a poetic way:

> My mother sang and composed songs to express her grief, to protest her destiny, but she accepted it anyway. She found solace in the words and rhythms of the songs she composed and sang in her privacy, one of the very few ways open to women of that kind of culture and environment. The songs were sometimes the sole refuge for them to hide, and at the same time to scream loudly by expressing their stories in words and lyrics. They were an escape from the pains and hardships of social life, or of their destiny as they would put it. They knew that they were trapped for a life time in that destiny, and that there was no way to be freed from it (English as in original email, October 2013).

This explanation of his mother's experiences fits the song examples which I gave in chapter 1 in which women and men record strong feelings of anger and frustration about their inability to change their situation. The songs offered a place to express these emotions and to criticize those who had caused them. It is unfortunate that I did not have the opportunity to meet Helîme in person in order to hear more of her own views about her life and what singing had meant to her.[298]

Today, the eleven children of Cîhan and Helîme are all adults. Two daughters continue to live in the village in the Sason region, where they married and had children. Two other daughters and a son moved to towns not far from their home village and have families. Three sons live in Istanbul with their families, and one lives abroad. All siblings fiercely support the Kurdish movement. They watch Kurdish satellite television, and often discuss politics at home. They are strict in speaking Kurdish instead of Turkish with their children. One of the sons in Istanbul is a singer

298 Although I asked Aram, who had made the recordings of Helîme's songs, if I could listen to them, he was reluctant to do so. Understandably, he felt too emotional about her recent death and felt he would be overwhelmed by his emotions had we listened together to these recordings.

in a wedding band. He performs in Kurdish, and much of his repertoire consists of politicized songs about the struggle for Kurdish freedom. Another son, the youngest of the family, married in 2008. I attended his wedding with some friends, who happened to be Turkish. They said they had never been to a wedding like this, which looked more like a political meeting than a wedding. The wedding band expressed their overtly political message both in songs and pronouncements all in Kurdish.

But Cîhan's children do not only see themselves as Kurdish. The youngest also began to discover their Armenian identity. Aram told me that as a child he found out he had Armenian roots through other children. When they fought, they insulted him by calling him *Bafileh*, and since he did not know that word he asked his parents about it. *Bafileh* (from *bav*, father, and *fileh*, Christian) means that one's ancestors are Christians, and it has a derogative connotation. Obviously, even though Cîhan did not consider himself a *Fileh*, other people saw him as such. And not only him, but also his children, who did not even know its meaning, and who spoke Kurdish, were Muslims, and had a Kurdish mother. During his student years, Aram, who officially has a Muslim name, chose to be adhered by an Armenian name. He follows both the Kurdish and Armenian issue closely. He told me that he also discussed these things with his father, and tried to explain to him that being Armenian does not automatically mean that one is also Christian; that there is a difference between ethnicity and religion. It was in one of our first interviews when I asked Cîhan with which identity he feels most connected. I did not yet speak Kurdish, and Aram translated for us. When I posed the question Aram first refused to translate it. He said that his father anyways did not feel Armenian. But when I insisted on asking him, Cîhan's reply was: "I am a Kurd and a Muslim, not a *Fileh*."

Cîhan's life story is telling for what it reveals of how Armenian identity disappeared almost entirely on the one hand, but on the other could not be forgotten. He had reconciled himself to his identity of being *Musilmîn*, of a Muslim with a Christian background. In chapter 1 I already introduced him when speaking of the kilam *Metran Îsa*. When I asked him if the end of the kilam, in which the bishop converts to Islam, was indeed the correct version, he assured me that this was the proper ending. To him, the bishop's conversion to Islam was not problematic, instead it was an identity he felt connected to and it supported his own life story. This does not mean that he denied the genocide, the flight of his father, or the prior Christian identity of the region he came from. Instead, he spoke openly and in detail about these issues and would refer to them whenever he recalled such memories. To illustrate this point, I end this section with the way Cîhan spoke about the Christian heritage of the Sasun region. By ending this story with his voice I also wish to

emphasize that despite the systematic erasure of Armenian identity in Turkey, the Armenian voice cannot be silenced, and continues to resonate through the words of a now Kurdish dengbêj.

> (Uncle, I heard that there is a very high mountain [in your region] with a church?) Yes the high mountain is the Mereto. There is a church on top of the mountain, on top of the Mereto there is a church. In the time of the *Fileh* they brought a number of Shamaz (monastery students) to this church. They placed twenty Shamaz in the church and they stayed there all winter. When spring came, they found out that they were all dead. Before they died, they had written on a paper that they did not die because of the shortage of bread or water, but because of the wind and the fear of God. That is the hearsay about the church on the Mereto. I haven't seen it and I didn't go there, but that's how we heard it from our elders.

Life story 5: the religious class

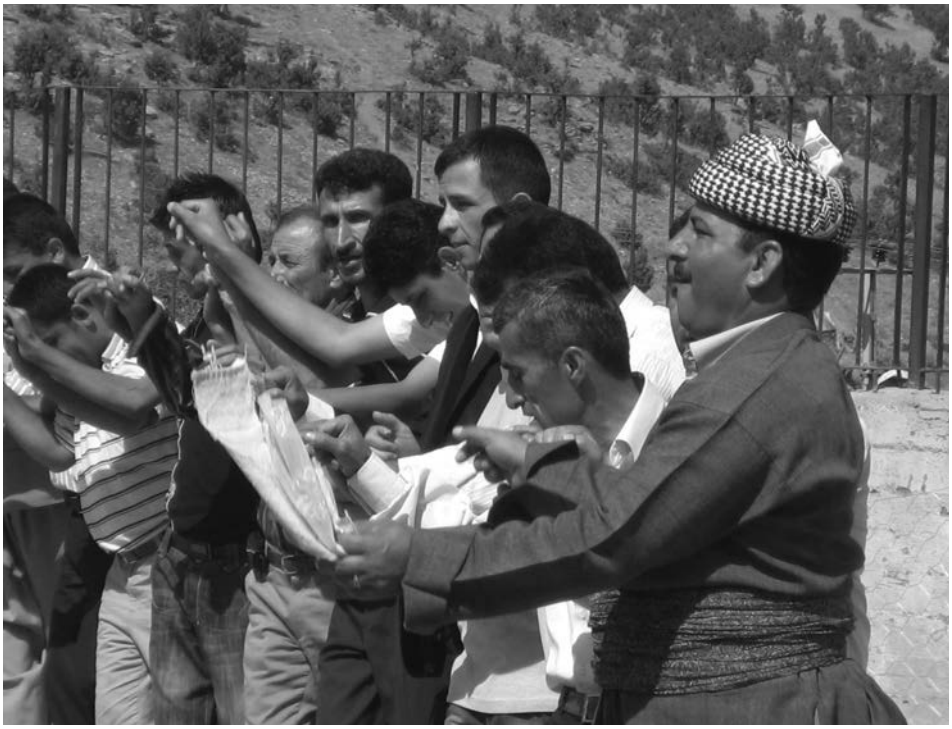

Figure 15. Men dancing at a village wedding near Hakkari. 2008.

'Everyone looked at me in surprise: why is a feqî singing?'

I will call the dengbêj who told me this story dengbêj Seyda, after his religious title. He had been a *feqî* (a madrasa[299] student) in his younger years, and he spoke about the relationship between the religious class and the cultural practices of the 'laymen'. Generally religious and social oppression did not affect male dengbêjs who wanted to sing in the traditional way, without music instruments (see life story 7 for information on the prohibitions on instruments). However, some could face prejudices and prohibitions depending on their region and family. The religious class did not always appreciate the dengbêj art even though it was a widespread tradition with considerable prestige. But the religious class regarded the dengbêj art as distracting people from religious matters, and possibly leading them astray into sinful behavior mentioned in the songs and stories. Dengbêjs sang about love, adultery, young couples eloping and running away from their families to together, and often in openly erotic descriptions. Their kilams expressed the secret desires many people had but could not act on due to societal norms. These unsettling observations of peoples' experiences as they struggled with problems they faced in daily life, were felt to threaten the religious establishment and its representatives, who were sometimes openly criticized in the kilams. It is therefore significant that dengbêj Seyda emphasized his religious identity in relation to being a dengbêj, and even regarded this as having additional value.

I interviewed dengbêj Seyda in his home not far from Van's city center, where he had kindly invited me to join him and his family for a late afternoon dinner. I had never seen him in the Dengbêj House in Van, and was introduced to him by a friend. After I started the video recording, my first question was whether I could write his name down. He availed himself of this question to offer the following introduction:

> In our dengbêj culture my name is Seyda. It means someone who is very civilized and knows a lot in his own field. They use this name for example for university teachers. Some dengbêjs only know the songs from the surroundings of Van. But mine is not like that, I know [songs] from the west, east, north and south. Whichever place you mention, I know at least five or six songs from there. That's why the Dengbêj House calls me Seyda. When I go there and someone next to me sings a song, then

299 Madrasa: religious school (see glossary)

> they ask me: is it right? They ask my advice. If I tell them that it is right then they are satisfied. That is my specialty. You can ask them if this is true.[300]

The word *seyda* literally means 'teacher' or 'tutor', but is also used for a religious leader, a mullah (*mele* in Kurdish). The latter leads the community and practices religious rituals and ceremonies, and at the same time is a teacher who educates children in the Quran. Before the founding of the Turkish Republic, most education in the Kurdish region was given in religious schools, the *madrasas*. The mullah was the main teacher. Dengbêj Seyda did not function as a mullah after he finished his education at the madrasa, but by calling himself *seyda*, he refers to his education and the status he derives from that.

Like many dengbêjs, he began the interview by trying to give authority to his position. Whereas other dengbêjs referred to the long line of dengbêjs before them from whom they had learned their art, dengbêj Seyda mentioned his title and the resulting status. Obviously he felt that the title *seyda*, which shows he was well-educated at a religious school, is more significant than his place in the genealogy of dengbêjs. He only referred to his genealogy later in the interview, when he mentioned his father and other dengbêjs from whom he learned songs. His religious education was something unusual that placed him apart from other dengbêjs and situated him favorably in relation to them.

Dengbêj Seyda's position distinguished him from the other dengbêjs of the House, most of whom only had a few years of primary school at best, or did not have any education at all. Because of his education, he felt he could have contributed to transforming the dengbêj art into a tradition with a standard that would be more respectable. Although in the above quote he said he is a respected person at the Dengbêj House, he said that he does not often go there because he feels his advice is not taken seriously:

> The only thing that separates me from them is that what I want has not happened. I wanted that young people, girls and boys, would come and that we would teach them for two hours a day so that the dengbêj art will continue and not disappear. They play and sing at weddings, but they don't sing anything right. They destroy it. So I said to them, I won't take any money, you sing, but you don't sing it right. The person after you will sing it in your way, and then it is destroyed.

He wanted to improve the position of the dengbêjs by educating young people about the dengbêj art in a structured manner. By institutionalizing the dengbêj art he hoped to generate an income. He offered his help to educate students, but he felt

300 All quotes in this section are taken from an interview with dengbêj Seyda conducted in Van in 2007. The interview language was Turkish.

that no serious effort had been undertaken by the members of the Dengbêj House to reach this goal. He concluded:

> I said to them [the dengbêjs of the House], let's do it like this: we will tell the story of the song in a detailed way, we will do it thoroughly and we will earn money. But they couldn't do this neither. And after trying these things I dried out, I thought, do whatever you want. (...) So I only sing for my wife (laughing). She listens a bit and then falls asleep.

After his disappointing experiences with the Dengbêj House, he rarely goes there. In fact, his identity as a *seyda* seems to work against him. Because of his education and his status, it is difficult for him to be assimilated into the group of dengbêjs at the House and to accept being just one of them. He has a vision for the House, and not being able to implement his plans makes him feel that his authority is in question, and, in the end, made him withdraw from the House. Dengbêj Seyda's experiences of performing as a dengbêj belonged mostly to the past and he had many stories to tell about important dengbêjs he had met, weddings he had performed at, and his position as a *feqî*.

Dengbêj Seyda learned songs from his father when he was still a child. However, his father wanted him to study and become an educated and religious person.

> When I was about seven years old I learned from my father. My father was very civilized. He knew many songs, but he didn't have a strong voice. But when he stayed with us he sang slowly to us and I listened. I learned many songs from him. He told me fairy tales like Mem û Zîn, Xecê û Siyabend, this story happened here on the mountain, and also Cembelî from Hakkari. The name of his lover was Binevş. They fell in love, the story is very long. And I learned from him others in the same way, half of it a story, half of it a song. When I was ten years old my father said to me: 'you have to study the Quran'. My father is a religious person. So I went to the Imams and learned the Quran. After that I wanted to continue to study books and I went to Iraq. There are very many madrasas there. I went there and stayed for four to five years. I learned Arabic. Of course if people travel a lot they see a lot. I returned to Turkey and went to Cizre, there are many Imams there, and I stayed with them. (Really? You have traveled a lot). Yes. There is the famous Kurdish writer Melayê Cizîrî who has written the Dîwan, a great book[301]. I read it and got a lot of inspiration from it. It's about love, about mountains, plains, water, nice people, beautiful women, and slowly I began to understand. It was literature, I became professional.

Here, dengbêj Seyda explained that his early education consisted of songs and stories, and the Quran. He seems to have been a motivated student who continued

301 Melayê Cizîrî is a famous writer and Imam from the 16th century who is one of the first known authors to write in Kurdish. Although his Dîwan is in the first place a religious book, Dengbêj Seyda emphasized the non-religiously marked dimensions. The poems about love, nature, people, and women, all inspired him.

studying voluntarily after finishing an elementary Quranic education. In addition to the religious content of his madrasa education, he was also interested in written literature in general. He was a good storyteller who constructed his life story in a professional way; the portions of his life story have a clear beginning and end: he started with his first learning experiences of the dengbêj art, continued with his madrasa education, and ended with the words: 'I became professional'.

He then discussed the combination of his two professions: being a dengbêj and a madrasa student at the same time:

> My life continued. I studied and at the same time I performed as a dengbêj. I didn't interrupt it. At the madrasa my friends asked me to sing. I sang and recite poems. I got some criticism, people who said, how can you be a *hoca* (religious teacher) and at the same time a dengbêj? These radical religious people say, you are a man of religion. For example in your country, if a priest would sing songs, then he would be criticized. So they said to me, you are educated and at the same time you sing songs. But they didn't influence me. If someone likes me he can like it, if someone doesn't like it then good luck. What is important is that I like myself in this way.

Dengbêj Seyda saw his religious education and being a dengbêj as two aspects of his identity that are both important. He continued to sing while he was engaged in his religious education. This was not without controversy, and we see that he was criticized for it. He referred here to some of the religious narratives circulating at the time in his community: one cannot be a man of religion and a dengbêj simultaneously; being educated and singing songs were seen as incompatible. A dengbêj was regarded as a secular singer who was not seen as a particularly pious person. Singing songs was something that corresponded to illiterate and uneducated people. Despite this criticism, dengbêj Seyda decided to ignore these 'radical religious people', and to follow his own judgment. At the same time, his father wanted him to study at the madrasa, and he valued the education more than the dengbêj art, as he illustrated with the following story:

> I have seen many of the old dengbêjs. When I was in Iraq I met the famous Mihemed Arif Cizîrî, I got to know him. He sang in a hotel and I listened and later I talked with him. He asked me what I was doing there. I said that I studied at the madrasa and that I liked him very much. Then he said to me, do you know some of my songs? I said, yes I know them. He said, in that case sing one of them, let me hear how you sing them. So I did and he liked it very much. He said to me, leave the madrasa and become my student, join me. I will raise you. But I was afraid because of my father, as he had said: you have to study. I didn't break his wish. I said to him, I am studying. Then he told me to continue, he said that my talent and my voice were good. That's how I met him.

Dengbêj Seyda's father was a 'very religious person' who wanted him to study and not to dedicate his life to being a dengbêj. He could be both a dengbêj and a madrasa student, but he had to give priority to one. His religious education became his priority, partly because of his father's wish. Still, he felt supported by his family in his position as a dengbêj:

> When I was still a bachelor I sang at the head of wedding dances. I was sang and the people danced. They invited me from faraway villages. If I wasn't there it was not as nice, but if I was there the young people liked it very much. Until today there are many people who like me. My family is very large and I have a special place in it. Everybody loves me. I don't want to boast about myself, that's perhaps a sin, but my character is such that everybody likes and respects me.

The acceptance and respect he experienced from his family and kin may have helped him to remain loyal to traditions that were often judged negatively by religious people, and may have helped him to continue with the dengbêj art thus fulfilling his father's wish. Since it is he who raises this topic, this indicates that it was an issue for him when he was at the madrasa. This becomes clearer later in the interview.

When later in the interview dengbêj Seyda returned to the discussion of his combining being a dengbêj with his religious education, it becomes clear that it took some time for him to accomplish this. It appears to have been less straightforward than he initially suggested. He struggled to reconcile these two parts of his identity, but was able to overcome this inner conflict. He told me that at the beginning of his madrasa education, he hid the fact that he was a dengbêj. But when attending a wedding during his student days, he felt comfortable enough to reveal this hidden part of his identity based on his madrasa teacher's encouragement. He told the following story about the day he revealed to this teacher that he actually was a dengbêj:

> (You studied at the madrasa isn't it? Has religion influenced you as a dengbêj?) 'I had a very nice *hoca*. He was a widower, his wife had passed away. Then he married again. Being his pupil I also went to his wedding. We went to get the bride, she was a widow as well. The villagers started to dance. He [the Imam] looked at me and said to me, 'do you know how to dance?' I said, 'yes I know it'. He said, 'do you want to dance at the head of the line?' And it is really so that it was a shame to go to a wedding together with your pupils. It was an ugly event. (..) He said to me, 'do you want to dance?' I said, 'if you give permission'. He said, 'I give permission, go ahead. Go dance at the wedding'. I attended the dances but after some songs they stopped singing and started to discuss who had to continue. As nobody sang I started to sing myself. Everybody looked at me in surprise. Why is a *feqî* singing? But when they started to understand my singing style they became very happy and didn't leave me alone anymore. I continued singing one song after the other. They pointed to me and said, 'watch that *feqî*, that man sings wonderful! From where does he know all the songs?' Even my *hoca* was surprised'.

This wedding was a special occasion; it was the wedding of one of dengbêj Seyda's teachers, who was a widow and marrying for the second time. The Imam encouraged the young student to join the dances, which are a major activity of every Kurdish wedding. Dengbêj Seyda was clearly surprised by this encouragement, because 'it was a shame to attend a wedding together with your pupils, it was an ugly event'. This is a strong expression of disapproval, showing how seriously the religious class condemned such allegedly frivolous behavior. The public's astonished reaction also supports the general view that *feqî's* were not supposed to behave like the general public, and that the moral institution of religion had considerable influence on this behavior. According to dengbêj Seyda, even attending a wedding together with a religious teacher was seen as embarrassing. But the teacher reacted differently from what he expected:

> When the wedding was finished he said to me: 'how could you know all of this? I apparently didn't know you. You are a different person, tell me the truth, what did you do before you came here [to the madrasa]?' I said: 'I will tell the truth, whatever you will do with me. I am a dengbêj. I do this job since I was seven years old'. He said, 'why didn't you tell me?' I said, 'I didn't tell you because as far as I knew there is no place for a dengbêj in this kind of public, in a madrasa. That's why I was afraid and didn't mention it'. He said to me, 'no, you are wrong. There is a place for you everywhere. From now on you are free. Only don't hold the hands of women'. After that I became famous, in that foreign country. Whenever there was a wedding I was ready to go. (Really? So that was in Iraq?) Yes in Iraq. In the places that are now Zakho and Duhok. In that way it became a habit. Because of me other pupils also started to do it. I have experienced many things.

Dengbêj Seyda was surprised by his teacher's attitude, he had not expected to dance and sing in his presence. His fear at having misbehaved is evident in his words: 'I will tell the truth, whatever you will do with me'. He also explained why he hid his dengbêj identity: 'because as far as I knew there was no place for a dengbêj in this kind of public, in a madrasa'. Clearly, the dengbêjs knew that the religious class did not usually appreciate their art. But his teacher, who seems to have been an open-minded person, gave him permission to perform everywhere on one condition, 'only don't hold the hands of women'. While performing at weddings he needed to observe the religious obligation of not touching a woman—a rule observed by Shafa'i Muslims. Otherwise, he was free to perform as a dengbêj, and he regarded himself as an example for other students who felt the same pressure to abandon the allegedly frivolous activities of dancing and singing. This wedding encouraged dengbêj Seyda to overcome his moral questioning and to express both aspects of his identity: his eagerness to be educated in the Quran and in literature, and his love for the dengbêj art.

Dengbêj Seyda remained in Iraq for four or five years, after which he went to Cizre in Turkey and studied at a madrasa. He spent many years on his education, which turned him into a respected and knowledgeable person within Kurdish society.[302] But his life of studies came to an end and he returned to Van.

> We came to Van, by fate. I didn't have children yet, I was newlywed. The madrasa life was finished. (Why?) Because at a certain moment I had to do other things. I had to enter military service. When I returned my father told me to marry. And after that I started working. I had to earn an income. I have done many different jobs. I have suffered a lot. But also that has finished. (..) If I talk about my life in Van.. here I was again involved in the dengbêj art. I sang in many different places. I have seen many of the old dengbêjs.

His education was finished and he returned to his family. From Beytuşşebab they migrated to Van, the nearest large city, and normal life began: military service, family life, and work. Dengbêj Seyda did not start working as a mullah for reasons I do not know. Not every madrasa student becomes a mullah. It is not clear whether he would have continued performing as a dengbêj if he had become a mullah. After he returned from the madrasa and lived in Van, he continued being a dengbêj. Most of the remainder of his interview is about the dengbêj art, about his experiences as a dengbêj, and about the songs and stories he knows. He returned to the topic of the combination of religion and music once more during the interview, when I asked him if it was *haram* (religiously forbidden) in his region to play an instrument:

> No it was not haram, but there were no possibilities for that. There was no one who played an instrument. I have never thought such things, nor accepted them. If you say that the singing of songs and the playing of instruments is haram then this is very backwards. (..) What God wants from you is that you have a good character. That humanity and nature won't be harmed by you. That you try to be useful and helpful. That's what God wants. To say, playing instruments is haram, to sing this is haram, these things were added to religion by some fraudulent persons at a later stage. If the time for worship has come, worship. If it's time to work, work. If it's time for singing, sing and play. Why would it be haram? But unfortunately they said this and have obstructed many people. They have also obstructed me. But I didn't enter too much into their thing, it didn't have much influence. I sang at weddings, I sang everywhere. My wife also knows it.

Although he at first denied that playing an instrument was *haram*, later on he said that 'they said this and obstructed many people, also myself'. He called people who regard instruments and singing as *haram* 'backwards'. His argument was the result

302 '[B]eing a mullah is a distinctive social and educational status acquired by many years of study in the centuries old madrasa education. Becoming a mullah requires a great investment of time' (Yüksel 2011: 163).

and conclusion of the ethical moment he had earlier in his life when he tried to combine his religious life with being a dengbêj. He had come to his own conclusions and is convinced by his decisions. He no longer felt the need to conceal his activities as a dengbêj and went on to successfully combine his religious status with being a dengbêj.

In the personal narrative of dengbêj Seyda, his religious education has a significant place. This education distinguishes him from the other dengbêjs, and turned him into a knowledgeable person who knows the right versions of the songs and who can correct other dengbêjs (at least from his own perspective). In this way, he tried to creatively combine his religious education with the dengbêj art. Before he was able to do so, he had to overcome a number of obstacles such as prevalent social narratives of the religious class about the position of a *feqî*, and a dengbêj. A *feqî* was supposed to study and to conduct himself in a pious manner, and not be involved in frivolous behaviors like dancing, music making, and singing. In the presence of his teachers, he had to conform to decent behavior. A dengbêj, on the other hand, was regarded as a secular performer whose activities did not fit the madrasa climate and the religious class. It was therefore difficult for him to combine these two opposed functions. Only when his teacher encouraged him to participate in the dancing at the teacher's own wedding, did dengbêj Seyda have the courage to reveal his hidden identity. The wedding functioned as a stage on which he could break his silence and sing song after song. The fact that he was a religious student made his performance all the more impressive, since people did not expect a *feqî* to sing and dance. In the discussion with his teacher after this event his teacher authorized his position as a dengbêj by saying 'from now on you are free'. From that moment on, he did not hide his dengbêj talents anymore. He managed to overcome the obstruction of the social narratives produced by the religious class about pious *feqîs* and secular, not-pious dengbêjs. His relationship with an open-minded teacher, the support of his family for the practice of the dengbêj art, and his own courage and attitude, helped him to construct a narrative in which the two normatively opposed positions were not mutually exclusive.

Dengbêj Seyda was still somewhat restricted; he could not be the student of a famous dengbêj because of his obligations as a *feqî*. But in other ways, he could use his religious education to his advantage. He had significant knowledge of both oral and literate Kurdish traditions, and his status as an educated man enhanced his performance opportunities. However, in recent years, after the foundation of the Dengbêj House, he was less successful in making this combination work. His knowledge and status made him feel capable of transforming the dengbêj art into

an institution that could be taken seriously by outsiders. He would help to educate students in 'singing the songs right', and in that way they would be able to 'generate an income'. When his efforts failed he was disillusioned and he withdrew from the Dengbêj House. At times, the combination of his two identities silenced him, at other times he was able to turn this to his advantage.

By being a madrasa student in northern Iraq and eastern Turkey, dengbêj Seyda had been immersed in a predominantly Kurdish environment for many years. Other dengbêjs however had tried to escape from the Kurdish east and traveled or migrated to western Turkey. I turn in the next section to such a story.

Life story 6: Turkish experiences

Figure 16. Kurdish migrants from Urfa in their house in Istanbul. 2007.

Turkish experiences: military service and seasonal labor

Many dengbêjs worked or lived outside of their home region for some period of their life. They entered military service and often worked as seasonal laborers in different places in western Turkey. During this time they were exposed to Turkish language, music and culture, and were influenced by that experience. They improved their Turkish, learned Turkish songs and sometimes learned to play a musical instrument. The story of dengbêj Silêman shows how he abandoned the narrow confines of Kurdish village life, escaped to a large city, learned to sing and perform in Turkish, and eventually returned to his village where he had a family and became an active dengbêj. During this period, he transformed himself from being a village boy into an experienced migrant laborer, a trader who trafficked between village and urban life, and a politically engaged Kurdish dengbêj.

Dengbêj Silêman grew up in a small village near Silvan and learned the dengbêj art from his mother. His parents survived by farming; they grew chickpeas, grain and tobacco (an important export product). Only tobacco generated an income, the other crops were meant for the family's own consumption. He attended school until grade five, after which he quit to help his family. There was not enough money, his father was getting older, and his labor was needed. He and his brother focused on tobacco as their main crop, a time consuming job. But Dengbêj Silêman was an adventurous and willful child; when he was twelve years old he left the village and started to work in lemon export in Mersin, approximately 700 km from home:

> When I had grown up, when I was about twelve or thirteen years old, I abandoned the tobacco. You know I was still a child, and I got this into my head to go to Mersin, to Anatolia to work. Over there was the lemon trade, it was exported. We harvested the lemons, and they were brought to a market. From there they went on ships and were exported to other countries. I stayed there for some years and then I decided that it was not nice, that it was not successful, and I told my father that it had not worked out and that I wanted to go to Istanbul. I bought a ticket to leave for Istanbul. (How old were you when you went there?) I was about sixteen or seventeen years old. I started to work loading and unloading ships that brought sugar, cement, cars, import and export. So I worked there also for some years.[303]

Dengbêj Silêman explained his departure from the village as a decision he made as a child, when he was not capable of making wise decisions. He seems to have been attracted to another world, to go to Mersin, and so he abandoned farm work. These

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

departures happened frequently in this region as young boys escaped the hard work in the tobacco fields. They ran away in search of better places, without the permission of their families. Although they often eventually returned home, for dengbêj Silêman this took many years. Adventurous young boys who heard stories about large cities, other ways of earning money, and a different life far from home, were tempted to leave.[304] When dengbêj Silêman was seventeen years old he decided to leave Mersin for a more profitable job and he left for Istanbul. There he worked for several years, but finally returned home:

> Now my brother was here [in the village], and he had to marry. So I went into military service for eighteen months when I was twenty. I entered the military. After eighteen months of military service I went home and started again with the tobacco, I continued with my work. (Had there been somebody else who was doing the work that time that you have not been there?) The village continued planting tobacco, only our family didn't. When I returned we let my brother marry, and I made up my mind and I decided that escaping was not the right thing to do.

It is unclear what exactly made Dengbêj Silêman decide to return home. It seems that the years he worked in cities had calmed him down and prepared him for a family life in his home village. He claimed that he decided 'that escaping was not the right thing to do'. We can imagine that as a young boy, he felt the need to leave his village and build a life in a place that felt more attractive. Perhaps he was looking for adventure, as well as a better income. He did not feel satisfied with the income he gained in Mersin, and for that reason went to Istanbul. Maybe Istanbul did not bring him the success he had hoped for either. Although pressure from his family may have been one reason to return home, at the same time he presented his decision to return as his own: 'I made up my mind and decided'. Dengbêj Silêman felt the time was ripe to return home and build a life in the village. He had gone through a time of moral thinking in which he tried out various options, first trying to assimilate to Turkish culture which he found more attractive, later turning back to Kurdish culture and traditions. After many years of traveling and working far from home, he settled down in the village. The years of exile had brought him experience, a good knowledge of Turkish, and many memories.

The life story of dengbêj Silêman shows us the relationship between the Kurdish region, and Turkish culture and language. Dengbêj Silêman was 'always

304 According to Hanifi Barış who also worked on his father's tobacco farm during his childhood, and who is from a nearby region, there were many such stories: 'it happened in many families'. He remembers several cases of young boys leaving for big cities, often without their parents' permission. Thus, Dengbêj Silêman's story is not an isolated case (personal communication with Hanifi Barış).

singing', even after he left his home village. He learned many Turkish songs while in Turkish regions, and had already learned songs from the radio during his childhood. Speaking Turkish had become natural to him because he was quite young when he left home and adapted quickly to the new environment. About his years in Mersin he says:

> At the time that I worked in lemon export I sang in Turkish. Our inspector was Hasan Arabaci. His daughter always came after me and she loved me very much, but I didn't notice because I was still young. She came always to me when I was singing. I was fifteen or sixteen.

With this story he demonstrates his singing qualities, not only in Kurdish but also in Turkish. His singing attracted even the daughter of the inspector, someone higher up on the social hierarchy. When I asked Dengbêj Silêman: 'You went to many places, to Mersin, to Istanbul. Did you also sing at that time?', he replied:

> I was always singing. I sang during work, I sang at every place, I sang songs. For military service I was in Thrace. I was also singing there and when I sang they were very pleased. (And you sang in Turkish at that time?) Yes I sang in Turkish. Once when we were sitting inside because of the rain our leader came to us and asked if there were people who could sing songs. There were some people who stood up. Then he asked, 'are there also who know Arabic songs?' I raised my arm. I said I could sing Arabic, but I sang in Kurdish. They applauded for me.

So, although he often sang in Turkish, he also continued singing in Kurdish, usually among friends. Many of his friends were Kurds, both in his working environment as well as in the military. 'All the officers spoke Turkish, but when we were alone among ourselves with a group of friends, we spoke Kurdish'. Outside of this group of friends, Turkish was the language of communication. The assimilation was neither entirely natural or chosen, as it may seem in the lemon story. It was tense, because Kurdish was something that had to be hidden. His story demonstrates that Arabic did not have the same negative connotation that Kurdish had. Arabic, a language associated with a much smaller minority in Turkey, was accepted,[305] whereas Kurdish definitely was not. From his story, dengbêj Silêman appears not to have had a problem singing in Turkish in itself. The problem began when he did not have the freedom to express himself in Kurdish, and when he had to hide his Kurdish identity outside of his home environment.

After seven or eight years he returned to his home village, married and started a family:

305 Arabic was spoken by a minority and therefore did not form a threat for Turkey as a nationalist nation.

> I stayed in the village and continued planting tobacco. We continued for many years because it was a good thing to do, for one house we had two or three tons of tobacco. (Where did you sell it?) At that time one kg of tobacco was four and a half US dollars. So there was a good income. Our situation was good, we didn't need help from others. After planting tobacco I also decided to marry, I arranged one [a wife] for myself. We married, our weddings over there are very festive, very nice. We did it with the saz, you talked about Osmanê Farqînî isn't it? He was the one who played saz and sang at our wedding.

In 1987, when he was twenty-three years old, he had saved enough money from the successful tobacco industry, he was able to marry and organize a wedding celebration. For his wedding the family invited Osmanê Farqînî, a singer who came from the same region (see Introduction). The fact that they invited this wedding singer says something about their concerns at that time. First, his wedding was in a new style, 'with the saz', a wedding band that became popular in the late 1970s. Dengbêj Silêman had heard many kinds of musical styles and as a young man in Mersin and Istanbul he must have felt attracted to popular styles in which the saz played a main role. Osmanê Farqînî was a popular singer in the region and well known as a politicized singer. Although many singers sang in Turkish because of the harsh political situation, Osmanê Farqînî had always performed in Kurdish. Inviting him to his wedding was a political statement and required courage. Dengbêj Silêman lived far from his home village for many years, knew Turkish well, and was successfully assimilated to Turkish culture including singing Turkish songs. Yet after his return to the village, his life was again predominantly lived in Kurdish.

The tobacco industry collapsed some years later,[306] and dengbêj Silêman's family income decreased considerably which made it difficult to make a living. Sadly, his wife passed away in 2007. He remarried in 2009, and continued to live in the village with his second wife and six children. He emphasized that he spoke only Kurdish at home with his children and relatives. He said that he mainly sings kilams, and that he does not often sing in Turkish anymore. After he returned to the village the Turkish songs he knew were not relevant: 'Where I come from they don't sing Turkish at weddings. Nobody listens to that, it's all Kurdish'. But he also reported that after he returned the dengbêj art was not popular for many years and almost forgotten, and was only revived due to the recent renewed interest.

306 "Tobacco production has declined drastically, with the number of cultivators dropping by 49 percent from 1999 to 2004. What accelerated the downward trend, according to Kayaalp (2009) was the introduction of contract farming under a new tobacco law in 2002" (Kotsila and Turhan 2010).

Dengbêj Silêman's story demonstrates how he used both the Kurdish and Turkish languages as resources during his life. When he was young, Turkish attracted him and made him curious to see new places, to try his luck at working and earning money, and at learning new musical styles. He learned many Turkish songs, and sang them with pleasure, but upon his return to his village the songs were of little use. During his military service, he had to hide his Kurdish identity, but took a chance to release this tension by pretending to sing in Arabic. Back in the village, Kurdish was the main language of communication and entertainment. During the time that Dengbêj Silêman spent in western Turkey he learned to speak Turkish and moved freely in Turkish society, but he also developed a renewed interest in Kurdish. This interest appears upon his return to the village, his choice of a politicized wedding singer, and his current activities as a dengbêj. Other dengbêjs also speak about an initial attraction to Turkishness that later became a rejection as they came to re-embrace their Kurdishness. Often, this occurred after experiences of discrimination. Forced assimilation frequently created resilience and a reconsideration of the rejected identity that was found to have positive aspects after all. The propaganda machine of the Turkish state quite effectively depicted Turkish as the superior and only correct language. Many Kurds were forced to assimilate into Turkish culture at some time in their lives, and thus were influenced by this narrative. However, the forced character of this assimilation, and the continuing discrimination, inspired many Kurds to reflect on their position and search for other moral choices. This is when people (re)considered and revalued social narratives in the Kurdish political field (chapter 4).

Life story 7: the prohibition on musical instruments

Figure 17. A Kurdish Alevi *dede* (Alevi religious leader) in a village in the Dersim (Tunceli) region playing his saz, the long-necked lute. 2008.

'For twenty years my art was wasted'.

This chapter began with stories told by dengbêjs who lived in predominantly Kurdish environments during most of their lives. Subsequently, we heard stories told by a dengbêj who was in touch with Turkish music, language and culture due to forced assimilation and migration to large cities. The story I present in this section is, again, somewhat different. Aşık[307] Abdullah grew up with the dengbêj art, but was more attracted to other kinds of music that he heard in the town where he went to school, and on the radio. He tried to realize his dreams of becoming a good saz-player, but was only able to do so in recent years. He is someone who stands between the Kurdish dengbêjs from the villages, and Kurdish musicians and political activists to whom I turn in the following chapter. The story of aşık Abdullah forms the link between these two chapters: he tried to position himself with musicians who aimed to modernize Kurdish music, but he did not manage to do so. He grew up with the dengbêj art, but wished to move beyond the confined life world of his childhood. Kurds who resemble aşık Abdullah straddle and need to negotiate distinct moralities and temporalities. His story is so significant because it shows the transformation of the Kurdish music scene that began in the late 1970s and eventually replaced the dengbêj art.

In the Introduction I addressed briefly the prohibition on musical instruments in the southeastern part of Turkish Kurdistan, that existed at least until the 1970s. The prohibition caused problems for a number of dengbêjs I interviewed. After 1960, tribal political structures and the power of landlords and religious leaders diclined, migration to the large cities of western Turkey became structural, and the Kurdish region became more firmly integrated into the Turkish Republic. The influence of cultural forms other than the existing Kurdish traditions increased, which led to conflicts between members of different generations. The older generation aimed to maintain existing social structures, as the new generation struggled for freedom and access to novel possibilities for making a living, new forms of communication, and styles of cultural expression. Migration, starting in the 1950s, and increased access to new forms of music, generated an interest among young people for musical styles that they did not grow up with. They felt attracted to Turkish music played by the aşıks to the accompaniment of the saz (the lute), or to the popular urban music that they heard on the radio.

The saz is an immensely popular musical instrument in Turkey that spread from its traditional use in music to new urban styles. Among Kurdish and Turkish

307 An Aşık is a performer of Turkish and/or Kurdish oral tradition and accompanies himself with the *saz*, the long-necked lute. See glossary and Introduction.

Alevi[308] communities, the saz is a widely used instrument that is used for worship and is viewed as a sacred instrument. Beginning in the 1960s, it also became popular among Kurdish musicians in non-Alevi Kurdish regions. However, the prohibition on musical instruments made it difficult for young musicians to learn to play the saz. The story of aşık Abdullah, whose father did not allow him to play the saz, shows how conflicts between generations could escalate and have a profound impact on someone's life. An aşık cannot perform without his instrument, which is a fundamental part of the performance. By taking away his saz, aşık Abdullah's father blocked him from any musical activity. His story illustrates the strict nature that the prohibition on musical instruments could assume.

Aşık Abdullah was born in 1955 in a small village close to the Iranian border, in the eastern region of Turkey called Serhat in Kurdish that includes Van, Muş, Dogubeyazit and the regions close to the Armenian and Iranian borders. I got to know him in the Dengbêj House in Van, where he came regularly to listen to the dengbêjs, and also to perform in his own style. Although he is not a dengbêj, aşık Abdullah is accepted as a member of the Dengbêj House. When I asked him to speak about his childhood he replied:

> My childhood went like this. You know the Kurds and our customs and traditions… they don't say: you need education, you need food and work. They say, as long as there are many men in your house, as long as you have many children, it doesn't matter. We are with ten brothers and three sisters. We grew up in the village.[309]

Thinking about his childhood days aroused memories of poverty and of social structures that he today regards as backwards and ignorant. Aşık Abdullah went straight to the heart of his views on Kurdish society by saying that they have customs and traditions that are problematic in his eyes. He felt that, instead of thinking about survival, people first thought about having a large family with many children. He felt that this happened in his family as well; they were a poor family with thirteen children. He grew up partly in the village and partly in a neighboring town, where he learned Turkish at a young age, and was the school's best student. Still, he experienced the tough aspects of village life in a region marked by poverty, cold winters and hot summers, and little means to protect one self.

308 Alevism is a religious movement in Turkey related to Sji'a Islam, originating from resistance groups fighting against Ottoman authority. They were often victims of repression and discrimination. There are both Turkish and Kurdish Alevis, and they have developed their own culture and music. Turkish and Kurdish Alevis often feel more connected to their Alevi identity than to their ethnic identity. See also Introduction.

309 All quotes in this section are taken from an interview with aşık Abdullah conducted in Van in 2008. The interview language was Kurdish.

> As children it took us until the evening to carry a pot for 5 km to fetch water. We were children. In the snow and in the rain. At that time the school had recently been built. We went to school, but we did not have a scarf, a hat, we did not have a notebook and pen. The people were poor, the Kurdish people were at that time very poor. There was nothing. We experienced all the sufferings of the world. At the time we ate barley bread, rye bread. When it was made in the oven you could smell it from a kilometer away and we said to ourselves: we need to go home and eat the barley bread.

Kurds often mention barley bread as a sign of profound poverty. The aroma of this bread was enough to make them return home and indicates the villager's miserable situation marked by suffering, a word he used often in this interview. The people in aşık Abdullah's village were farmers and cattle breeders. The winters were spent in the village, the summers in the *zozan*, or summer pastures. Since the village was close to the border, it was a natural place for a Turkish military station, which over the years caused continuous problems:

> In the evening at eight o'clock we went to the house of our uncle, or our sister, or our neighbors, but they [the soldiers] said it was forbidden. They said, where are you going? We said, brother, it is Turkey here, it is a republic, we are also citizens. We also enter military service. (…) The soldiers hit us, they took our livestock, they levied toll, we have experienced all kinds of trouble. I also experienced those things in my childhood. I saw it when I was growing up, I saw it from the neighbors, I grew up with oppression.

Due to the proximity of a gendarmerie station (*jandarma*),[310] the village was subject to more control than other villages. There were frequent checks and soldiers mistreated the villagers by punishing them without cause.[311] In villages where the military was continuously present, the soldiers' frequent bad behavior occasioned deep resentment among the villagers.[312] When aşık Abdullah was young, the summer pastures were declared a 'no go' zone, cutting the village off from much of their land and their most important source of income. Over time, people became increasingly

310 The gendarmerie is a military division that mainly works in the countryside and has more authorization than policemen who are working in the cities. "The Jandarma, formally under the control of the Turkish Minister of Interior, is a rural police force assigned to internal security and border control in Turkey's countryside. (..) Human Rights Watch found that most experts agree that the Jandarma are heavily implicated in human rights abuses." (Human Rights Watch Report "Weapons transfers and violations of the laws of war in Turkey," November 1995. Link to the report: http://www.hrw.org/reports/1995/Turkey.htm.)

311 "In both the 1995 Human Rights Watch Arms Project mission to Turkey as well as field research in 1994 by Human Rights Watch/Helsinki, witnesses consistently pointed to the Özel Tim (Special Teams), together with the police special forces, as the worst abusers of human rights. In most of the forced dislocations investigated in this report, the Turkish troops behaved with extreme contempt for the dignity and physical well-being of civilians." Same source as previous footnote.

312 We will see a similar case in Chapter 6 where I will discuss life in such a village in more detail.

engaged in seasonal labor, living part of the year in western Turkey and working primarily in construction. However, the low income they earned from construction was seen as yet another form of discrimination and exploitation:

> All our children work in construction. They go to places in the lowlands where they work in construction. Compared to other people in the world the Kurdish people see a lot of suffering. They are not done justice. (..) There are buildings of Turks that have been totally constructed by our children. They are workers, they go to work. But they do not get a lot of money (..) Many people from the villages around us migrated. Europe is very good, I would also like to live there. There is humanity over there, human rights. (..). The world is such a nice place, and it is for all people. But in Turkey unfortunately animals have no value, and Kurds also do not have much value. I speak the truth, Kurds do not have much value. We go to work in the lowlands and they call us by saying 'kıro[313]' [derogating]. Friend, I am also your brother. I pay my taxes, I entered the military service of the government, in many places in Turkey there is blood of our martyrs in the earth. Why do I not have many rights?

Seasonal labor in Turkey is generally underpaid, manual labor done by 'the poorest of the poor'.[314] It means always being an underdog, working for others and being bossed around by others, often Turks. Aşık Abdullah's account exposes the social problems caused by this system, and how this deepens the Turkish-Kurdish divide. It also shows the connection between two processes of marginalization that reinforce each other: poverty and ethnicity. Aşık Abdullah feels that Kurds are not treated equally and that human rights are not respected in Turkey. The fact that the Kurds fought side by side with the Turks in the war of independence is a Kurdish social narrative about Turkish-Kurdish relations, which claims that Kurds are equal citizens in Turkey due to their participation in military action. Kurds often refer to the brotherhood between Turks and Kurds, and they respect this, but believe it is not respected by the Turks. The unequal treatment of Kurds makes aşık Abdullah want to leave for Europe as many other Kurds have done. He refers to an important meta-narrative about human rights and equality, 'in Europe there is justice and rights. There is love, people are free'. This meta-narrative provides him with a place he can only dream of, but where his current problems would be resolved.

313 The turkified pronunciation of the Kurdish word *kuro*, boy.

314 'Abdullah Aysu, the spokesperson of the Confederation of Farmers Unions, called the seasonal farm laborers 'the poorest of the poor of the rural region'. He added: 'in normal circumstances they can live from their own land. But this is not realized because of the conflict. There are also those who are displaced. They cannot live from farming. In case they can generate some production, they are void of mechanisms to sell their products. What they go through is directly connected to the southeastern politics'. According to official figures they number about 200,000. But specialists of the farming sector estimate that this figure in reality nears the one million if one would add the high number of people who work unregistered. They are families of laborers who come with them, and children who work as well'. Yıldırım Türker 'Istenmeyen köleler' in: the leftist newspaper Radikal 31/07/2011, my translation.

Apart from seasonal labor, villagers generate income by working as village guards.[315] Nearby villagers migrated out of the region because of the pressure to become village guards, but the Kurds in aşık Abdullah's village choose this option. According to aşık Abdullah, they were 'cheated' by the government, and opted to be village guards out of ignorance - a choice they now regret.

As a teenager, aşık Abdullah became interested in Alevi music. He bought a newly released cassette by Abdullah Papur, an Alevi aşık, and felt deeply moved by his music. He was sixteen years old and in love, and listened for hours to this music:

> (When did you see the saz for the first time? And how did it attract your attention?) 'I had a neighbor and I was in love with her. I was sixteen years old and it was not in my hands, it was destiny. I loved the daughter of my neighbor, and she loved me as well. Love at that time was not like it is today. Like they say Kerem u Asli, Ferhat u Sirin, Xece u Siyabend, Mem u Zin, my love was like theirs. The love of that time, of that era, was enduring. That of today is only something casual, it is fake. It is from day to day, you fall in love, you leave today. But the love of that time was not like that. I was crying until the morning. My mother came to bring tea in the evening, she said, in what kind of state are you? I had bought new batteries for my cassettes player, I had a cassette from Abdullah Papur, it had just been released. His first cassette. I can tell you, the love of Mahsuni, of Nuri Sesiguzel, I was still a child, there were not musicians like today, the musicians of the past. (..) I was seventeen years old. I was crying until the morning. My mother said to me, in what kind of state are you? I said, I am in love. I have fallen in love with that girl. Tell my father that he has to ask for her hand. I told my father, and he said 'no. I don't want it'. I said, but I want it. It's not for him, I am the one who will marry. But I could not do anything. I was still a child of course. I had made a stick with strings bound to it, and I played on it. (...) At that time my voice was very beautiful. Whatever I did, they did not want to ask her hand for me. I left and I went to that nice *ozan* (singer) Mahsuni Şerif.

The manner of speaking about this experience is similar to how aşıks often explain how one becomes an aşık. An aşık needs to be called by God. Many aşıks tell how one night they had a dream in which God calls upon them to search for an unknown girl they clearly see in their dream.[316] The dream makes them fall in love with the girl, and sets a quest for her in motion. In the dream, God touches their lips with wine, and the next morning the aşık is able to play the saz and sing songs without any previous knowledge. This first experience with love arouses their wish to play the saz. An

315 'The Turkish armed forces effectively put into practice the institution of the village guard from 1987 onwards. Villages were expected to assign sufficient men to form a unit of village guards, which was armed, paid for and supervised by the local gendarmerie. The village guards were not only expected to take defensive positions against the PKK, but also to participate in operations (..). About 5,000 men joined this paramilitary force in its first year, and by 1995 this number had increased to 67,000' (Jongerden 2007: 65). The position of village guards is highly contested, as it is regarded as betrayal by many Kurds.

316 Hamelink 2005, Günay 1999.

aşık is thus connected both to divine and earthly love, which provides the aşık with the inspiration for his[317] music. Here aşık Abdullah connects his interest in music to being in love and demonstrates his involvement in Alevi music and Alevi social narratives. He compares his love to experiences of profound love of the heroes of Kurdish and Turkish tales, love stories that always end dramatically. When his father refused to ask for the hand of the girl he loved, aşık Abdullah decided to leave his village. He fled and went directly to the most famous aşık of his time: aşık Mahzuni Şerif.[318] He gives authority to his position in two ways; by mentioning his connection to this famous aşık, and by offering his unhappy love story as the source of his love for singing, Alevi culture, and the saz.

It is exceptional that aşık Abdullah felt attracted to the Alevi tradition. He grew up as a Sunni, in a region far from any Alevi influence. What is more, Alevis are often viewed as heretics by Sunnis in Turkey. He could have learned to play the saz in the style of Sunni aşıks who lived in his region. Instead he felt specifically moved by Alevi music and consciously positions himself within Alevi tradition:[319]

> I went to them, I got to know them, I got to know the culture and the singers of the Alevis. And I gave myself to that. I am from Serhat, but I can say to you that I am Alevi. Because they are so hospitable, they are so warm hearted, they are such nice people. Their culture is very different. They are deep people. For example Abdullah Papur, Mahzuni Şerif, when you told your sorrows they took their saz and they sang a solution. You could know that they were folk poets (*ozans*). Their voices affected me. (…) I was influenced by Alevi culture, I had abandoned the dengbêj art, and dedicated myself to that. When I was a child I also sang in dengbêj style. But it didn't suffice for me, I didn't love it enough. My love was for the saz, I could sing in peace, I could easily express myself via Alevi culture'.

Aşık Abdullah felt he was drifting away from his culture, which did not affect him in the same way as Alevi culture. Although he is from Serhat, he identifies much more with the Alevi. He explicitly says that he 'abandoned the dengbêj art' for Alevi music. Perhaps his love for Alevi music partly stemmed from the feeling that the culture in

317 There are also female aşıks, although less than male. I have no information on whether female aşıks have similar stories about their becoming an aşık.

318 Mahzuni Şerif, whose real name was Şerif Çırık, was born in 1943 in an Alevi family in the village Berçenek near Elbistan in Eastern Turkey. He became famous in the late 1960s. His poor background, and his commitment to fight against poverty and in favor of equality which he expressed in his songs, made him immensely popular among poor people from the countryside, and among the urban poor. (http://www.mahzuniserif.net/01.%28yasami%29.htm, consulted at September 21 2011).

319 During my MA-research I encountered a similar story. A Kurdish aşık from the region Kırşehir said he had always felt connected to Alevi music. He sang songs from famous Alevi aşıks and related to their public discourse. Because he lives near Hacıbektaş, the heart of Alevi tradition, his familiarity with Alevi music is more easily traceable than that of aşık Abdullah.

which he grew up was backwards, not something that he wanted to be a part of or could be proud of. Maybe he was attracted to Turkish and wanted to belong to a more 'modern' and 'progressive' environment like many young Kurds. He fled to western Turkey, learned songs from Alevi aşık, and learned to speak and sing in Turkish fluently. Most of the repertoire he learned from his masters is in Turkish because many of them did not know Kurdish. But when I asked him whether he sings in both languages today he replied:

> Actually at the time when they did not oppress us I sang both in Turkish and Kurdish. But when we came under oppression and they forced us, I started to hate it a bit. I totally broke with Turkish. I said, why do they not see us as people? I sang Turkish day and night, so when I sing one [song] in Kurdish take the effort to listen to that one. I watch Turkish television day and night, I watch their series, their films, that's how much of a human being I am. But they do not want to listen to even one of my songs. That is humanity. Because of that I said, I won't sing Turkish anymore. I don't sing it. I find it difficult. (..) The songs of Mahzuni Şerif and Abdullah Papur[320] are for me like Kurdish. Because they experienced much of suffering and they sang in Turkish.

The experience of being forbidden to sing in his language caused a feeling of resentment and resistance. Aşık Abdullah did not have a problem singing in Turkish, and maybe even wanted to do so until he was prohibited from singing in Kurdish. The effort he made to sing in Turkish and to integrate into Turkish society made him feel that he was treated unfairly when Turkish society did not allow him to sing in Kurdish. Singing in Turkish became connected to experiences of oppression; he finds it 'difficult' to sing in Turkish which causes an embodied experience of oppression. It is interesting that he said that the songs of his masters are, although in Turkish, 'like Kurdish, because they experienced a lot of suffering'. Singing Alevi Turkish songs therefore did not occasion the same embodied experience as singing other Turkish songs, because he felt connected to the aşıks through their common suffering. He felt that the experience of suffering united Kurds and other oppressed peoples:

> I fell in love with the saz, I expressed my own sorrows and the sorrows of the people of Serhat, and of all Kurds, actually the suffering of all people of the world, of all oppressed people. I know their sufferings and I sing about all of them. Whatever their religion, their language, their color, for me what is necessary is only humanity, brotherhood. Not: I am a Muslim, you are a Christian, and the other one is a Jew, the other one is a Sunni, Zaza[321], Alevi, no! Brother, it is enough that you are a human being.

320 Mahzuni Şerif and Abdullah Papur are two famous Alevi aşıks.

321 The Zaza are a Kurdish speaking minority and many adhere to Alevism. Their language Zazaki is related to Kurmanji, but the two languages are not mutually intelligible.

In this sentence aşık Abdullah draws on the Alevi social narrative about equality and more specifically a narrative used by aşıks. Alevi aşıks often speak in this way about their art: their task is to unite people and to voice the sorrows of oppressed people.[322] They often combine this goal with a communist or Marxist rhetoric, stemming from the 1960s and 70s when many aşıks gained a political position instead of a religious one.[323] They became active in leftist political movements and advocates of all oppressed people, of the 'workers' and the poor, in so doing defending themselves and other minorities in Turkey. For the Alevi aşık, no one should be excluded, everyone should be seen as equal. The aşıks became the voices of these movements by singing popular protest songs.[324] At that time, Kurdish Alevis and Sunnis formed an important segment of Turkish leftist political movements and they shared a common cause.[325] Although many Kurds subsequently separated from Turkish leftist politics,[326] because they did not see an adequate response to their situation, the connection between Kurds and Alevis was established. Aşık Abdullah could therefore easily adopt Alevi narratives for the situation of the Kurds, and presented himself similarly, as someone who articulated the 'sorrows of the people'.

In the short time that aşık Abdullah spent with Alevi aşıks, he became deeply influenced by their music, narratives, and attitudes. However, he could not continue on that path after his father brought him back to the village:

> My father came and said: I have organized a wedding for you. He had already given the money, everything was arranged, they had arranged some middlemen, he brought me back, he broke my instruments, he took me to the village, he married me under force, I could not continue my art. For twenty years, until my children had grown up, these twenty years were lost. That's how my life passed by. That love of my heart, the saz I was playing, and the words that I sang [were wasted], my life was wasted among my children. I'm married and have children, I was obliged to look after them, I worked for them, and I could not go anywhere. Until they were grown up.

322 Aydın 2004

323 Hamelink 2005. During the 1960s and 70s Alevi communities changed significantly. Due to migration to the big cities the social and religious structure as it was practiced in the villages fell apart.

324 Hamelink 2005

325 'A staggering range of leftist publications emerged – from radical populist and social democratic… through to ostensible Marxist, 'Marxist-Leninist, and even Maoist. Despite this proliferation… there was general agreement by many leftists on the perspective of struggling for a 'broad national front" (White 2000: 130).

326 In 1967 people gathered by thousands in the so-called 'Eastern Meetings' (Doğu Mitingleri) as a collective action of protest in seven cities and towns in eastern Turkey and in Ankara, organized by socialist Kurdish members of the TIP (Turkish Labor Party) and Kurdish nationalists of the DPTK (Democratic Party of Turkish Kurdistan) (Gündoğan 2005). The meetings are an example of collaboration between Kurdish and Turkish leftist protest, but also of protest directed at specific Kurdish problems 'instead of the class-based politics of the Turkish left which remained indifferent to the ethnic dimension of the Kurdish problem' (Gündoğan 2005: 2).

Because he had been deeply affected by Alevi music, and was on his way to becoming a professional musician, he experienced the return to his village, marrying, and becoming involved in family life as a great disappointment and waste. This was reinforced by the fact that he was forced into a marriage with a woman he did not love. He felt obstructed in carrying out what he wanted to do and trapped in the small village that he felt he had outgrown. Taking care of his family became a fate and burden rather than a positive experience. When I asked him why exactly his father broke his saz he replied:

> Our people of Serhat do not value arts. They say, what is a saz? It's not their fault. They have not been educated, in their time there was no school. They don't know anything about culture or about the world. They reason as if the whole world only consists of their own villages. (..) There are six billion people in the world. They are not aware of that fact, they only know the village, they say, the saz is shameful. They don't know anything about culture, they don't give it importance, because they don't know it. They didn't go to school, it's not their fault because they are not educated. Because of that it counts as very shameful among us. People thought that culture was shameful. They were very ignorant. Is it possible to be so ignorant.. My father said, my son, leave it behind. He prohibited it. He broke my saz. (..) My youth has seen a lot of suffering. (..) Our people (...) were deprived of many things, they suffered a lot. Because of that my saz playing was obstructed. (..) I was married under force, and after I was married I could not leave until my children were grown up. I could not enjoy a little bit of freedom.

Aşık Abdullah explains the prohibition of musical instruments as a result of a lack of education and knowledge. His relatives and co-villagers did not know better, he argues, and regarded the saz as shameful. Throughout the interview, it is clear that Aşık Abdullah regarded the lack of education, suffering and poverty as the main social aspects that prevented him from living the life he would have liked to live. By linking the prohibition of his father to larger societal structures, he managed to give meaning to his negative experiences and understand his fate. In his younger years aşık Abdullah did not have the means to resist his father's power, but now that his children have grown up he has more freedom to pursue his wishes, as we will see in chapter 4.

In the story of aşık Abdullah he often spoke of suffering. Suffering was caused by various inequalities that played a role in his life, and he regards it as an essential part of Kurdish life generally. These inequalities reinforced each other and marginalized him and others in his environment. He located the inequalities in a number of institutions: the customs and traditions of society, the physical presence of Turkish soldiers and state oppression, and the bosses of seasonal laborers. He saw the lack of education and knowledge - 'is it possible to be so ignorant' - as a

central problem of Kurdish society. Customs and traditions provided his father with the power to decide about crucial issues in his life. His father came to Ankara to bring him back to the village where a wedding had already been planned and arranged without his knowledge. His father destroyed aşık Abdullah's instruments and blocked his musical career, managing to silence him for many years. But instead of blaming only his father, he clearly situated his father's power in the customs and traditions of society, and indirectly in the lack of means provided by the government.

The government was negatively present in aşık Abdullah's life when he was young: 'I grew up with oppression'. The soldiers stationed near the village were a daily threat to the inhabitants who became the subjects of frequent raids and checkups, as well as physical violence. The government took away the Kurds' most important source of income by closing off access to their summer pastures. This forced them to look for other sources of income, which they found in seasonal labor, along with a low income and ill-treatment. Another way to gain income was by becoming a village guard. The government forced the Kurds living at the countryside into an impossible choice: be a village guard or leave the village.

Aşık Abdullah wanted to escape from this difficult existence and sought a better life in western Turkey. He wanted to escape from his father, from a society he regarded as backwards, and from discrimination, oppression, and poverty. He wanted to distance himself from his own society and sought a connection to another tradition that felt promising to him, and with which he could identify – that of the Alevis. He felt connected to the Alevi musical style and to their concerns with inequality, poverty and suffering. He learned to sing in Turkish, a language that triggers in him various emotions. He began to 'hate' singing or listening Turkish music, but when listening to his masters who share the experience of suffering and are therefore 'like Kurdish', the same language does not provoke a negative emotion. In chapter 4 I return to his story and show how he situates his music in the context of the Kurdish political movement in the hope of finding a new audience.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have analyzed the life stories of six dengbêjs, and another of an aşık. Their stories show that being a dengbêj can have different personal meanings, and that opportunities to perform, or reasons to keep silent, also varied from person to person. This variation is related to the specific characteristics, experiences and interests of each individual. As a woman, dengbêj Bêrîvan had

a very different relationship with the dengbêj art than male dengbêjs. Instead of feeling obstructed by the state in her singing career, she felt oppressed by patriarchal structures of society. Dengbêj Hamîd on the other hand, who grew up in a dengbêj family that had been supported by landlords, valued the former moral framework of landlords and their support. This made him evaluate the current framework, which sees dengbêjs as volunteers for the Kurdish cause, as inadequate. Dengbêj Cîhan is proud of his Kurdish identity and his knowledge of Kurdish history and kilams. He does not regard himself as Armenian, but speaks freely of the stories and memories he has of his Armenian father and the genocide. His story relates the destructive manner in which Armenian identity was erased from Turkey, but the story is also telling for what it reveals of how his Armenian roots continue to speak through his memories. Dengbêj Silêman felt attracted to Turkish life and music, but returned to his village and a predominantly Kurdish social and political life after his experiences as a migrant laborer. Aşık Abdullah's experiences shed light on a development many dengbêjs were affected by as well: the rise of new Kurdish musical styles, and the replacement of the importance of the dengbêjs. He tried to break away from village life and from the dengbêj art, which he associated with stagnation and backwardness, and hoped to have a professional music career. However, through the intervention of his father he did not manage to follow his ambitions until quite recently.

The changes that took place over the last decades were experienced differently by individual dengbêjs, and had diverse consequences in their personal lives. Conflict, migration, resettlement programs and persecution often deeply changed the lives of the people I spoke with. In the aftermath of the coup, harsh oppression caused many dengbêjs to abandon their art and to keep silent for many years. Some of them moved to the big cities due to the conflict situation which deprived them of their homes, lands, jobs, and often also of relatives and friends who lost their lives or were in prison. Most people living in eastern Turkey had these experiences, or were affected by them (see chapter 5 for an in-depth analysis). Some, like dengbêj Ali, were in prison themselves and traumatized by torture and suffering. Most dengbêjs rarely talked about these experiences, but a few, like dengbêj Isa, found meaning in the experiences for their current situation by presenting them as hardship they had defeated; they overcame oppression and suffering and managed to protect their art through difficult times.

Such reworking of experience is central to the narrative approach. By making use of this approach we discovered how each individual in this chapter interwove personal and social narratives into a meaningful life story. Many dengbêjs,

as storytellers by profession, told long narratives during their interview in which they valued and evaluated their life experiences. In their stories, they referred to social narratives circulating that mattered to them today or in the past. For example, religious narratives about how a religious student was not expected to dance or sing kilams made it necessary for dengbêj Seyda to think about his own position in this matter, and to rework that narrative into a form acceptable to himself. Narratives about the value of the dengbêjs as guardians of Kurdish heritage play an important role in the current revitalization of the dengbêj art by the Kurdish political movement. The dengbêjs integrated such narratives in their self-presentation, but not uncritically; they adopted elements that they found useful to their story, and reconfigured or left out other elements (see also chapter 4). Narratives about Kurdish poverty, suffering, oppression and hardship were used by various dengbêjs, and strongly by aşık Abdullah. He brought the narratives of Alevi aşık suffering together with those of the Kurdish movement. Since both Alevites and Kurds have suffered hardship and oppression, aşık Abdullah felt they understood each other and spoke the same language, whether Kurdish or Turkish.

The concept of morality helped situate moments when individual dengbêjs struggled with moral questions, often due to the deep transformations of the larger society around them, and to see how they dealt with these questions. Periods of change in a society can function as indicators of how people make new choices in new circumstances. For most dengbêjs, the current situation enabled them to view events that happened earlier in their lives in a new light. They went through periods in which they reevaluated their moral views. Dengbêj Bêrîvan expressed how she felt disadvantaged and oppressed because of being a woman. Later she came to know other views that elevated instead of devalued her womanhood, and that helped her to turn this into an advantage in the context of her political activities. She thus reworked her personal narrative. Dengbêj Cîhan's story demonstrated that he worked to find a solution for accommodating his Armenian roots. He accepted his identity as a Muslim with Christian roots, and strongly defended his viewpoint that he was a Kurd and a Muslim, not a *Fileh*. Dengbêj Seyda initially concealed that he was a dengbêj, assuming this would not be accepted in the religious environment of a madrasa student. But the encouragement of his teacher enabled him to reevaluate his moral framework and to create a life in which his dengbêj and *feqî* qualities could be combined. Dengbêj Silêman was curious about Turkish life and adventure in his young days, but reevaluated this after he was outside of his home region for many years. He decided to return to his village and eventually became active as a Kurdish dengbêj, in which capacity he rarely draws on his Turkish experience.

The connecting thread of the stories I presented in this chapter was the individual experience of the dengbêjs in regard to silence, oppression, and the inability to perform. The stories revealed that for each performer their songs had functioned in different ways as their home. In dengbêj Isa's story we saw that the oppression of Kurdish language and culture meant that the songs became defined more strongly as a *Kurdish* home. For dengbêj Bêrîvan, who loved to sing and listen to music but was often obstructed from doing so, her new position as a female dengbêj provided her with a place where she could feel at home as a woman. Dengbêj Cîhan sought to find a home in Kurdish society, for which he felt much in need because of his Armenian background and personal past. For him, learning to become a dengbêj meant at the same time that he felt more Kurdish and more accepted in a society that often continued to see him as an outsider.

This chapter, that formed part II of the dissertation, gave insight in how the dengbêj art formed a home for individual dengbêjs during their lives, how it meant 'life' and 'a bracelet' for each of them in distinct ways, and how they had almost lost that home during the long period of silence and oppression. After many years of collective silence these dengbêjs put great effort in rebuilding a Sung Home that fit new expectations, but would also align with their past experiences. By investigating seven personal stories in-depth, I believe we gained an in-depth perspective on the variety of experiences of people who often had little access to technology and larger power structures, but were and are part of these systems. This will shed a different light on part III that presents new processes of Kurdish cultural activism in Turkey. Rather than understanding the different viewpoints of political activists and dengbêjs as an indicator for how 'progressive' or 'modern' they are, we can explain these differences as a result of inhabiting different temporal and moral places.

The following chapter focuses on the endeavors of political activists who have strong moral views on what a modern Kurdish society should look like, and look at the dengbêj art from that perspective. With the personal stories of dengbêjs in mind, we will better understand how the latter must at times feel disconnected from these perspectives, that narrow down the dengbêj art to folklore in the service of Kurdish nationalism. This narrow perspective leaves out much of the variety of the colorful life of the dengbêjs and their art as it emerged in this and the previous chapters. However, it did a different important work: it successfully aimed at contesting the dominant presence of Turkishness in public life, and at opening up a new and visible space for Kurdishness. This was a groundbreaking development in Turkey of the 2000s, after the rejection and ignorance of the existence of Kurdish language and culture for almost a century.