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

Hamelink, W.

Part III

Conflict and Activism

Figure 18. Dengbêj Şah Îsmaîlê Milanî performing at the Ehmedê Xanî Festival. Doğubeyazıt 2007.

Chapter 4

‘Decorate your heart
with the voice of the dengbêjs’
Cultural activism.

Introduction

> I greet you all with respect and value, warm greetings from [my home town]. I was almost leaving for my trip when something happened; comrade Zana Güneş called me and invited me for a phone attendance of his [TV] program. I said: 'I am sorry, I am leaving for Bazîd'. He said, 'convey my greetings especially to the people of Bazîd'. So he sends you his greetings and respect. But at the beginning of the 2007 festival, in honor of the immortal teacher Ehmedê Xanî, I congratulate all the people of Kurdistan! Good luck to all of you! For all our intellectuals and politicians! Good luck! Progress for us (*pêşketî ji me re*)! Live long! (..) With the permission of my friends, shall I sing a song? (dengbêj Ahmed, tr.from Kurdish, Doğubeyazıt 2007).

This is how in the summer of 2007 dengbêj Ahmed introduced himself at the Ehmedê Xanî Festival[327] in Doğubeyazit (Bazîd in Kurdish), a town on the far eastern border of the country.[328] He was the first of seven dengbêjs to perform in the dengbêj afternoon program, which took place in the Ishak Pasha palace, a huge palace built of sand-colored stone with a very large courtyard. Together with two dengbêjs performing in the program I had arrived half an hour earlier at the palace, during the performance of a folkdance group. The palace was filled with about three hundred people, men, women and children. They were either sitting on chairs that were arranged in a concert set-up, or walking around, chatting and watching the performance. The old palace added to the folkloric atmosphere, it created the image that the dances and the dengbêjs were remnants of an age old culture. Against one of the outside walls a stage had been set up for the dengbêjs, and although it was quite large it almost vanished in the huge courtyard. Behind the stage hung a large banner in the yellow, green and red colors of the Kurdish flag, reading in Turkish: "Dengbêj Divan, in the remembrance of Karapetê Xaço."[329] It was about 4 pm when the host opened the dengbêj program, and although it was summer, a cold breeze blew through the castle that made people freeze in the late afternoon.

327 The Ehmedê Xanî festival, also called the Doğubayazıt Culture, Art and Tourism Festival, is a yearly returning event attracting many visitors, music groups, intellectuals and politicians from all over Turkey. It was organized for the first time in 2002 by the municipality of Doğubayazıt 'both to show the potential of the region for tourism, as well as to help people living in the region realize the importance of tourism' (Gültekin 2008: 44). Being new phenomena, these kinds of festivals have become very popular in eastern Turkey over the last years, and often take a political turn. The state also organized events about Ehmedê Xanî in the same town (Yüksel 2011: footnote 127), in order to provide a counter voice against Kurdish events.

328 This section is based on my field notes and video recordings.

329 Karapetê Xaço (1898-2005) is a famous dengbêj born from Armenian parents. His relatives were massacred during the genocide. He was adopted by a Kurdish lord and learned the dengbêj art. He later migrated to Syria, and subsequently to Armenia, and sang at radio Yerevan. His performances at the radio made him especially famous (Kevirbirî 2005).

I present the festival at the beginning of this chapter as an illustration of how the dengbêjs reemerged in public life after 2000; namely often as a project of cultural activism. The dengbêj program at the festival was one of the sites where Kurdishness was performed and made public, and was presented as a competing project alongside other nationalist projects within Turkey. I argue that the place and program of the festival, the use of certain symbols, and the speeches by dengbêj Ahmed and the MC of the program, are all examples of a new mobilization of Kurdishness in public life. The festival will guide us through the chapter and help us to understand the position of dengbêjs in the current contested field of culture making in Turkey.

The Ishak Pasha palace was built in 1685 as the second administrative center of the Ottoman Empire after the Topkapı palace in Istanbul. It was built in an innovative architectural style, ahead of its time, famous for its beauty, and had an important strategic function in Ottoman times.[330] In 2007, when the festival took place, the city administration was in the hands of the pro-Kurdish DTP[331] (Democratic Society Party). This enabled the DTP to mobilize the historical palace as one of the festival sites. Monuments, statues, and other (quasi-) historic spaces are important sites to contest political authority. As Çınar notes, an "essential component of nationalist projects that seek to institute a new sense of nationhood (..) is the construction of national space" (Çınar 2005: 99). She remarks how successive Turkish governments have been especially creative in this strategy. Atatürk statues mark the central squares of every town and city; big white letters saying "how happy is the one who says 'I am Turk'" adorn mountains and hills; the secular Beyoğlu business district replaced the Ottoman Islamic Sultanahmet neighborhood as Istanbul's city center.

Counter movements, the most important ones during the history of the Turkish Republic being these of Kurds and Islamists, tried to reclaim strategic spaces for their alternative nationalist projects. Using the most outstanding building of the area, that was a symbol of the Ottoman reign, as a site to assert Kurdishness, can be regarded as a strategy used by the city administration to reclaim space for their political project. Through its historical meaning, the palace as a site of culture making reinforced the significance of the use of Kurdish symbols in public life, turning them into strong political statements. Speaking Kurdish on public occasions,

330 "The best preserved Islamic palace in Eastern Turkey is that of Ishak Pasha. Located amid the hauntingly alluring and desolate landscape of Doğubeyazit, it is one of the most outlandish buildings in Turkey. Built on a dominant rocky spur and visible from afar, the fortified palace was strategically positioned on the border of Turkey and Iran" (Sagona 2006: 213).

331 The *Demokratik Toplum Partisi* was the pro-Kurdish successor of the DEHAP (Democratic Folk Party), and was followed up by the BDP (Peace and Democracy Party) after its closure in 2009.

Figure 19. The Ishak Pasha Palace in Doğubeyazıt. 2007.

Figure 20. The dengbêj performance at the festival, with the banner. 2007.

and using Kurdish as a language for publication, were unlawful acts until 2001, and although this law was amended in 2001, in practice people could still face severe repercussions for such activities.[332] Therefore, hearing Kurdish spoken in public places like the festival offered a collective experience of resisting the government and anti-Kurdish movements in Turkey, and of resisting the erasure of Kurdishness. The banner behind the dengbêj stage also conveyed a political message. "Dengbêj Divan, in the remembrance of Karapetê Xaço" was written in Turkish, but with the forbidden letter X,[333] and it bore the colors of the Kurdish flag. Still writing the banner in Turkish directed it at a Turkish audience, displaying Kurdishness for everyone in the country to see. These visual signs thus gave the dengbêj program a politicized character, even before it began.

Dengbêj Ahmed is a famous dengbêj who has produced many cassettes and CDs, sometimes gives concerts, and has published a book with part of his songs. Unlike many other dengbêjs, he was familiar with a concert situation and used to presenting himself in front of a large public. In several ways he placed the festival in a political framework through his opening remarks, making it clear that he supported the Kurdish cause. First, dengbêj Ahmed referred to Ehmedê Xanî as the immortal teacher. Ehmedê Xanî (1651-1707) was a poet, philosopher and mullah who wrote in Kurdish as only a few in his time, and he is the author of the famous Kurdish epic Mem û Zîn that is often presented as a national epic. He is regarded by many as an early Kurdish nationalist. His tomb is located just outside of the palace, and the festival was named for him. Subsequently, dengbêj Ahmed congratulated 'all the people of Kurdistan'. Referring to the highly charged word Kurdistan in a public speech immediately clarifies one's position. Another way in which he politicized his performance was by mentioning his conversation on the phone with Zana Güneş.

332 Until 1982 there was no overt prohibition of the use of Kurdish, but a politics of "invisibilisation": the practice of exclusion without overt mention is characteristic of official usage throughout the Republic's history" (Haig 2003: 10). But in the 1982 constitution overt prohibitions were implemented: "article 42, which is still in force today, provides that "no language other than Turkish shall be taught as a mother tongue to Turkish citizens at any institutions of training or education". Crucially, Article 28/2 specified at the time, "no publications or broadcasts may be made in any language prohibited by law" (amended in 2001). The legally prohibited languages in question were "languages other than those which are the primary official languages of states recognised by the Turkish State" (Law 2932) meaning in particular Kurdish (Zeydanlıoğlu 2012: 110).

333 The 1928 law "*Türk harflerinin kabul ve tatbiki hakkında kanun*" (law on the acceptation and implementation of Turkish letters) imposed the use of the Latin alphabet for Turkish writing for all publications. The law established which letters belong to the Turkish alphabet, and ruled out the use of other alphabets. This meant that the letters Q, W, and X that are used in Kurdish, but not in Turkish, are not permitted. The Turkish Penal Code, article 222 states: "Those who violate the 'Law of Turkish letters and their usage', passed in 1928, shall be tried and sentenced to an imprisonment between 6 months and 2 years." The law is under discussion and might be amended in the time to come.

The latter was a member of *Koma Berxwedan*, one of the first popular political music groups. The group performed from France and Germany in the 1980s and was openly supportive of the PKK. Currently Güneş is the producer and host of a television program on dengbêjs on Roj TV, the first Kurdish satellite channel among Kurds in and from Turkey. By referring to his conversation with Zana Güneş, dengbêj Ahmed gave both a political meaning to his performance, as well as authority, since Güneş is widely regarded as one of the experts on the dengbêj art.

Following his opening remarks dengbêj Ahmed began singing about a woman named Xêlya. His voice filled the palace, singing passionately the kilam's opening exclamation *haylo li me haylo li me were haylo were haylo*, meaning "woe to us, woe to us." Xêlya is engaged to the father of Beced, the brother of Mihemed. However, a conflict with the government causes her fiancé to go into exile, and he is unable to return. Although people around her advise her to marry someone else, she decides to wait for him, even if he will not return. When the song ended dengbêj Ahmed concluded:

> Our songs are indeed very long but I will not do injustice to my friends and give them [the microphone] as well. With your permission I would like to say something. Many times people have asked me: what actually is the dengbêj dîwan? It is my conviction that everything, my life, my language, my culture, I learned everything from the dengbêj nights (şevbêrka dengbêjan), from the dengbêj dîwan. Our writings, our tapes, our television, our radio, everything started with the dengbêj nights. We have learned everything under God (*her tiştê xwedê*) from there. (..) Yes thank you for coming and thank you for your attention, I am very pleased to be here (dengbêj Ahmed, translated from Kurdish, Doğubeyazıt 2007).

With these lines dengbêj Ahmed underscored the importance of the dengbêj art. He switched from his individual perspective, that he learned everything from the dengbêj dîwan, to a collective perspective, from 'my life' to 'our writings': we the Kurds have learned everything, our language and culture, from the dengbêjs. He regarded the dengbêjs as symbols of Kurdishness, and the dengbêj art as the cradle of Kurdish civilization. Civilization (writing, tape, radio, television) started with the dengbêjs. They are traces from a far, almost lost history, the last remnants of a culture that many Kurds have only recently rediscovered. This opening performance of the dengbêj program thus conveyed two messages: the dengbêj art stands at the beginning of Kurdish culture and language, and it supports the Kurdish struggle. The master of ceremonies added weight to this meaning in his reply to dengbêj Ahmed, which he read aloud from a paper:

> Yes we thank dengbêj Ahmed very much, on behalf of the municipality and the people of Bazîd. Indeed, as he claims, the dengbêj art is of great historical value in that it protected and transmitted (ji bo parastina û pêşxistina) Kurdish language, culture, folklore and customs. For that reason the dengbêj art must be protected in every city of the Kurds. The dengbêj art gives voice to the suffering, the oppression, the sorrows, and the dreams and visions of Kurdish society. It gives voice to their heroic deeds, and also to their defeats. The dengbêj art is in its essence just like our country, without borders, it is like a river that flows, like a brook that rushes. For that reason we hope that every Kurd will decorate his heart with the voice of the dengbêjs (*ji ber vê çend em hêvîdarin ku her Kurdek dilê xwe, bi dengê dengbêjan bixemilîne*) (program's MC, from Kurdish, Doğubeyazıt 2007).

At the time, the MC worked for the Kurdish Institute[334] in Van. He was a political activist full of ideas about ways to mobilize and unify the Kurdish people.[335] He had been arrested and imprisoned several times, and was in prison again the following year when I returned.[336] With his words the MC listed several functions of the dengbêjs: 1) to protect and transmit Kurdish language and culture, 2) to give voice to suffering, oppression, sorrows, 3) to offer dreams and visions of Kurdish society, and 4) to give voice to their heroic deeds and defeats. In this way he presented the dengbêjs as representatives of Kurdish society as a whole, and also as the guardians of Kurdish society because they safeguarded its language and culture. In the dengbêj art, so he claimed, all aspects of Kurdish society come together; all suffering, all dreams; i.e. the suffering and dreams of the Kurds as a collectivity. He compared the dengbêj art directly to 'our country', a country without borders, by which he can only have meant Kurdistan. But he used this comparison in a positive sense: the dengbêj art, like 'our country', is without borders, it is a river that flows freely in all directions. The MC also mentioned hopes for the future: protection of the dengbêj 'in all cities of the Kurds', and every Kurd needs to 'decorate his heart with the voice of the dengbêjs.' These are references to the unity the Kurds are supposed to be or become. Decorating one's heart with the voice of the dengbêjs is presented like a duty that will turn one into a better Kurd.

The introduction by dengbêj Ahmed and the MC; the palace as the site selected for the program; and the visual and auditory presence of the banner and the language, are all ways of placing the dengbêjs within a particular politicized framework that links the dengbêj art to broad and collective political claims.

334 The Kurdish institutes can be found in most big cities in Turkey and organize activities to promote and spread Kurdish language by giving classes and publishing books and magazines.

335 We had a long conversation in an outside café in Van in 2007, where the MC passionately explained his visions of a democracy built from the grassroots in which local people are actively involved. Our conversation was followed by a policeman in plain-clothes sitting at a nearby table.

336 People I spoke with who were active in the organization of similar festivals or working at Kurdish cultural centers often had a personal history of arrests, court cases, imprisonment and torture.

This chapter focuses on the reemergence of the dengbêjs in public life after two decades of collective silence. Starting in 1994 abroad, and at the beginning of the 2000s within Turkey,[337] the dengbêjs were invited and encouraged by political activists to perform in cultural centers, Dengbêj Houses, on radio and television programs, and at festivals. Such sites became important spaces where Kurdishness was performed (audio)visually, and where the dominant presence of Turkish nationalism was contested. I focus on two aspects of this display of activism through the dengbêjs. I pay attention to the sites where the dengbêjs performed, and argue that these sites became places to perform Kurdishness, even more than the dengbêj art in itself. I also investigate the position of various political activists, mainly through the narratives they told about the dengbêjs and Kurdish culture, and see the reemergence of the dengbêjs as predominantly guided by them, and not by the dengbêjs themselves. I situate these narratives in the context of their lives and recent history, and in the context of the development of Kurdish nationalist thought and cultural activism.

In part I and II of this dissertation we looked predominantly at local processes. I investigated the songs and performances of dengbêjs at specific places, and presented the life stories of a number of dengbêjs in order to examine the variety of experience of individual dengbêjs in situations of conflict and social transformation. Although this was based on multi-sited fieldwork carried out in many different places, I grounded these stories in the specific local context in which the songs were sung, in which performances took place, and in which life stories were told. However, these local stories cannot be understood well when they are separated from the larger processes in which they are embedded. Kurdish media, music production, and sites of cultural production such as festivals, cultural centers and the Dengbêj Houses, increasingly shape what it means to be a dengbêj today. People do not only identify with their immediate local environment, but also connect to such larger processes. Anthropology "found media a rich site for research on cultural practices and circulation that took seriously the multiple levels of identification – regional, national, and transnational – within which societies and cultures produce subjects" (Ginsburg e.a. 2002: 5).

We already saw glimpses of these larger processes surfacing in the previous chapters, but have not yet investigated them in-depth. Therefore, in part III I pay

337 Med TV started broadcasting in 1995 and had a program on the dengbêj art from the start. Although the program already then offered a new way of looking at the dengbêjs as a form of Kurdish heritage, the active reemergence of the dengbêjs in this format began a bit later within Turkey. Until the late 1990s the Kurdish region was in an extreme state of emergency that did not allow for such things to happen yet.

attention to the way local stories are connected to larger processes of politics, conflict, and culture making. The sites of cultural production that I investigate in chapter 4 are instances of how the dengbêj art obtained different meanings and became part of cultural activism. In this chapter I mainly focus on political activists who recreate the dengbêj art in a way they see fit in relation to the political objectives they fight for. Chapter 5 investigates how a dengbêj family was affected by continuing conflict and escape, and how and why they became involved in cultural activism.

Following Ginsburg (2002) I use the term cultural activism to highlight the manner in which minority groups began to use different media and other cultural practices as a means to react to their representation in national media. Faye Ginsburg has called this 'cultural activism' "to underscore the sense of both political agency and cultural intervention that people bring to these efforts, part of a spectrum of practices of self-conscious mediation and mobilization of culture that took particular shape beginning in the late twentieth century" (Ginsburg e.a. 2002: 8). It focuses on the specific characteristics of culture making by minority groups as distinguished from that of culture making by the nation-state. Nation-states aim to unite people under a single national identity by focusing on the nation's majority culture and language. As a consequence, collective histories of minorities are often "erased in the national narratives of the dominant culture and in danger of being forgotten within local worlds as well" (Ginsburg 2002: 40). Cultural activism counters such erasure by creating new places of cultural performance where the minority's stories can be retold. Of course, the process of retelling stories "often requires reshaping them, not only within new aesthetic structures but also in negotiation with the political economy of state-controlled as well as commercial media" (Ginsburg 2002: 40). In chapter 5 we will see how this process works for a family that attended Kurdish television after their escape to Germany. There I will use Ginsburg concept of 'resignifying cultural memory.'

The politicization of cultural expression in Turkey has various dimensions. First, folk songs and folk music have been used for political goals since the foundation of the Turkish republic. Folk songs were collected, translated, and transformed into a unified Turkish national music.[338] At Turkish music conservatories, students were educated in western music, and Ottoman music was abandoned. This turned music and oral tradition in Turkey into a political project: either into a Turkish nationalist one, or, when concerned with languages other than Turkish, into an

338 "Ismail Beşikçi points out that Kurdish folklore is often presented both within and outside Turkey as Turkish folklore. There are a large number of Kurdish songs that have been Turkified and played on state radio and television in Turkey" (Yüksel 2011: 89).

oppositional project. Second, in the case of the Kurds, strict prohibitions meant that *any* Kurdish expression became a political statement in itself, even when not political in content, especially after 1980.[339] This meant that people who wanted to stay outside of political trouble would automatically not occupy themselves with the Kurdish cultural realm, and for anyone interested in Kurdish cultural expression it would be difficult for others not to see this interest in a political light. Third, since the 2000s the politicization of cultural expression obtained a new dimension. Cultural activism became an important way for the Kurdish movement to expand its political influence.

Following the capture of Öcalan in 1999, the Kurdish movement focused increasingly on non-violent and legal opposition to the Turkish state. Earlier in that year, the pro-Kurdish political party HADEP won for the first time a majority of the southeastern municipalities. In 2002 the AKP (Justice and Development Party) came to power, and introduced "a range of political reforms (..) which allowed a more peaceful atmosphere to prevail in the Kurdish-inhabitated provinces of Turkey's southeast" (Casier e.a. 2011 :104). These developments resulted in the increasing success of the Kurdish movement in establishing a cultural activism that visibly contested the state project, this time not through violence but in public life.

Çınar (2005) shows how in Turkey everyday practices such as the use of certain public places, festivals, and clothing became sites for opening up a space for alternative viewpoints in public life, and became the field of politics. In her book *Modernity, Islam, and Secularism in Turkey*, she focuses on the contestation of the secular nationalist modernization project of the Turkish state by Islamists. Çınar's analysis shows that the state's authority never went unchallenged: "throughout the twentieth century the official secular Turkish nationalism was continually challenged by (..) rival projects, including Islamist, Kurdish, and Marxist movements that produced alternative projects of modernity and nationalism" (2005: 18). Although the state tried to ban alternative viewpoints, those alternatives did not lose their voice entirely, and both Kurdish and Islamist movements gained a new visibility after the mid-

339 Zeydanlıoğlu writes about the aftermath of the 1980 coup: "Officials ordered Kurdish folk songs to be sung only in Turkish to avoid 'separatism' and public speaking or printing in Kurdish was banned and thousands of newspapers, magazines and books on Kurds were confiscated and burnt" (2012: 109). A recent example of the continuing sensitivity of Kurdish singing in public: in 2011 the famous Kurdish singer Aynur Doğan was booed and pelted with rubbish because of singing a Kurdish song during an international concert with performances in various foreign languages. "Aynur Doğan'a çirkin protesto" published at www.cnnturk.com, July 15, 2011.

1980s (Özkırımlı 2000,[340] Yavuz 1998). The Kurdish movement offered "an alternative, Kurdified set of national symbols to those of the Turkish state" (Watts 2006: 132). And the coming to office of the AK-party in 2002 even entirely changed Turkey's political landscape.

This contestation or negotiation takes place not only through 'verbal exchanges' but also through 'performative acts'. To give one example: while the Kemalists interfered in bodily appearance by forbidding the fez and prescribing the hat, and by encouraging other forms of 'modern' clothing, in the 1990s the Islamists turned the headscarf into a powerful political symbol that made Islamism visible in public life. Çınar broadens the idea of the public sphere, understanding it "as any sort of verbal, bodily, or spatial articulation, performance, or display, any location can become a place where the public comes into being" (Çınar 2005: 37). She sees modernity as "a series of interventions in the public sphere (..) related to bodies, places, and time" (2005: 25), in which "everyday life is the field of politics and power" (2005: 27).

In a similar way, the Kurdish movement contests the Turkish state's project in public life[341] by claiming certain spaces and practices for the performance of particular forms of Kurdishness. The institutions and people promoting the dengbêjs form a loose network that produces similar narratives and symbols about the meaning of the dengbêj art (Scalbert Yücel 2009). This is related to the way the Kurdish political movement functions (see Introduction). Watts also shows how since the 1990s pro-Kurdish actors have gained increasing access to government offices and have provided "new access to domestic and international audiences, and new symbolic resources" (2006: 126). She calls these actors 'activists in office'. They operate within the framework of legal institutions, and have gained access to these posts through Turkey's state bureaucracy, but were and are at the same time "contested nearly every step of the way by various branches of the Turkish state" (Watts 2006: 126). The current visibility and institutionalizaton of the dengbêj art has in part been prepared and facilitated by such activists in office, as Scalbert Yücel (2009) argues in her insightful article on the dengbêj project in Diyarbakır. I elaborate

340 "Indeed, questions of 'nation' and 'national identity' have been particularly predominant in Turkish political discourse in the last two decades – under the impact of the Kurdish and pan-Islamist movements" (Özkırımlı 2000: 789).

341 I refrain from using the term 'public sphere' as it was introduced by Habermas to refer to the political stage of the nation, and not to that of counter movements. Others have replied to Habermas by using the term counter publics (Warner 2002). However, in order to emphasize the fluidity of the public, in which public and counter public cannot be artificially separated, I use the general term public life, which leaves room for a more open-ended and negotiable concept of the state and the public.

on her arguments by adding the television and music production as sites of analysis. Cultural activism by activists in office was supported by actors not involved in the state bureaucracy, but who nevertheless did important work in making Kurdishness more visible for a large public. Kurdish television moved the Kurdish question to an international level, and music producers managed to find an entrance into the Turkish music market for Kurdish productions. These various sites, and the political activists[342] operating there, reinforced each other in representing the dengbêj art as Kurdish 'heritage'.

The dengbêjs and their art became part of these processes in multiple ways. For example, they are presented as Kurdish cultural heritage and under that definition they counter the official state discourse of the homogeneity of Turkish heritage, and of the denial of a Kurdish culture. At the festival, the historical importance of the palace where the dengbêj program took place, turned it into a strong symbol that reinvented the palace as a Kurdish space, where Kurdish language and culture could be articulated and openly displayed. In order to understand how the dengbêjs became part of such a negotiation in public life, along with the festival I discuss three other sites where these processes took place, and which I regard as central for the current position of the dengbêjs: the television, the Dengbêj Houses, and the music market.[343] For each site I also highlight someone who was central in promoting and supporting the dengbêjs at the time of my research, and I investigate their particular role. I suggest that political activists have been decisive in facilitating the return of the voice of the dengbêjs to public life, and therefore have also in many ways been decisive for their current positions. Their stories reveal various elements of the politicization of folklore in Turkey and abroad, and the development of Kurdish nationalist thought. The dominant ideology that speaks from their stories, and from the way they approach the dengbêj and their art, is the idea of the need for a change in mentality, an awakening towards nationalism and modernity, and the need for developing the new Kurdish personality (see Introduction and chapter 2). Political activists often trace such a development either in their own lives, or in the lives of others, which they tell as a story of previous ignorance and subsequent awareness of the Kurdish cause.

342 I decided to use the term 'political activists' for all people who were active in promoting Kurdish culture on an institutional level. This can be people involved in the state bureaucracy, but also those outside of that sphere, such as television and music producers. What these people had in common was that all of them had (or were forced to have) certain political aims with their activities, and almost in all cases faced certain repercussions that directly followed from these activities. These repercussions were either persecution within Turkey, or living in exile abroad.

343 Scalbert Yücel (2009) also pointed to television, Dengbêj Houses and festivals as central places for the performance of the dengbêj art today.

4.1 Kurdish television in Europe

An important platform through which the dengbêj art was promoted for the first time on a large scale was MED-TV, the Kurdish television channel founded in 1994 by Kurds from Turkey, and first broadcast in May 1995, with its base in London and Brussels. The launch of MED-TV would become of enormous influence in informing and organizing Kurds in Turkey and Europe, and it played an important and crucial role in promoting Kurdish nationalism among Kurds worldwide. The channel is immensely popular in Eastern Turkey, and already in 1996 was watched by a large majority of Turkey's Kurds,[344] in spite of the risk of persecution. The presence of a Kurdish television channel broadcasting in Kurdish and focusing specifically on the Kurdish viewer has arguably been one of the most important means of displaying Kurdishness as a distinct identity with its own characteristics. Whereas for long, in Turkey and elsewhere, broadcast television was primarily mobilized for nation-building, satellite television and internet "have opened up other kinds of spaces that cross cultural and geopolitical borders more easily" and have "facilitated new social configurations" (Ginsburg e.a. 2002: 2).

The television offers a platform in which the Kurds are addressed as a nation with a distinct territory, language, culture, and flag. It attempts to unite Kurds into one visible and audible imagined community, through image capitalism rather than through print capitalism. It gave a new dimension to the Turkish-Kurdish conflict, as the channel addressed the Kurds as a nation and thus became a powerful tool for the creation of an imagined national community, enabling people over great distances without physical contact to feel they belong together (Anderson 1991). "The ever presence of the Kurdish national flag and anthem [visible on the screen] means that MED-TV has the power to treat the Kurds not as audiences but as citizens of a Kurdish state" (Hassanpour 1998: 59). As such it became a major site for contesting the authority of the Turkish state. Although the founder Tabak declared himself to be independent of the PKK, the station is often regarded as having ties with the PKK and of broadcasting PKK propaganda (Romano 2002). Turkey tried by all means to close down the station in Europe, labeling it as a mouthpiece of terrorism. Due to Turkish pressure on European governments the station was banned and renamed several

344 "A Med-TV director estimated the number of viewers at about fifteen million ('MED-TV emet a nouveau', Le Figaro, aout 21 1996). According to Turkish government sources, about 90% of people watch the channel in the southeast. It is watched even by 'village guards' hired by the government to fight PKK; also, the refugees of the war who relocate 'in shanties in western towns invest in satellite dishes to see it' ('Turkey Said to be Considering Allowing Kurdish Broadcasts', Turkish Daily News, 2 June 1996)" (Hassanpour 1998: Footnote 47).

times, was called Roj TV at the time of my research, and is currently called Stêrk TV.[345] However, through such interventions the Turkish government unwittingly contributed to growing European awareness of the Kurdish question.

From the start of its broadcast, MED-TV had one program on dengbêjs, *Şevbêrka Dengbêja* (the dengbêjs nights),[346] that was initiated, made and presented by a host I will call Zana Güneş. In 2006 my research began with him, after I heard he was a central figure in revitalizing the dengbêj art. I interviewed[347] him at the television office of Roj TV in Germany, where at the time he worked making weekly programs about the dengbêjs. Together we watched some of the programs he made, and he appeared to be very enthusiastic about the dengbêjs, their different regional styles, and their individual characteristics. In 2007 his office moved to the Roj TV office in Brussels, and he continued making his programs from there. Güneş worked more than fulltime for the television, and his whole life stood in the light of cultural activism. He had lived in various European countries and travelled often to give concerts. Although he had not been able to enter Turkey for two decades, he had contact with many dengbêjs in Turkey and spoke with them on the phone regularly. They often mentioned his name and indicated that his television program had been of tremendous importance in bringing them into the spotlights. He is thus well-known and highly valued among them, as we saw at the start of this chapter, when dengbêj Ahmed referred to him in his speech at the Festival. Since 1995 Güneş' program was broadcast once a week and hosted dengbêjs and other traditional singers and musicians from a variety of backgrounds. Because of the limited possibilities for dengbêjs living in Turkey to attend the program, most dengbêjs attending were living in Europe.

When I visited Roj TV in 2006 and 2007, the politicized atmosphere was obvious. Everyone I spoke with seemed to be imbued with the political importance of their work, and the zeal to convey the message of Kurdish rights to everyone they

345 MED-TV was closed down by the British and followed up by Medya-TV in 1999. Medya-TV was closed down in 2004 by the French and replaced by Roj-TV, which was again replaced by Stêrk TV in 2012, and operates from Denmark. It has ongoing problems with the authorities and satellite broadcast is currently (2013) prohibited, which means they can only broadcast online. In Denmark it was threatened with closure because of alleged PKK-ties in August 2010 and in January 2012 (source: Institut Kurde de Paris). Although the broadcast is based in the aforementioned countries, the production is done in Belgium and, until 2007, also in Germany.

346 *Şevbêrk* means literally 'to pass the evening'. It is used for long nights when people gather together, possibly with guests, and tell each other stories, sing songs, or listen to a dengbêj.

347 In 2006 I recorded a 4 hour interview with Zana Güneş, and we worked together for 2 days at his workplace at the television. I also visited Roj TV in Brussels, although he was not present at that moment. We met regularly over the years, either in person or on the phone, and I attended both a festival performance as well as a wedding performance of him in Germany.

met. This atmosphere gave every activity a strong ideological and moral tone, as we also saw at the festival. Likewise, the program *Şevbêrk* was not just a program for entertainment or documentation, but had specific goals. Zana Güneş expressed this as follows:

> Against this [government oppression] we created for ourselves, for example among the people we created a battle front against exploitation, in order to fight this. With this program I enlighten the people, as far as my knowledge goes, and I also preserve the songs. Currently the Turkish government derives its mentality from a fascist mentality, from a racist mentality, from a mentality that denies the Kurds. But in the future, if this system will change and if the Turkish people live like brothers with the Kurdish people, then they will value these songs.[348] (..) Turkish music is influenced by many other forms of music. But Kurdish music is special in that dengbêj music is not influenced by anything.[349]

He felt that his program could educate 'the people,' and aimed at preserving Kurdish tradition. He regarded Kurdish music as purer than Turkish music and believes that one day the Turks will value this as well. His television program was thus also meant as an advertisement for the outside (Turkish) world, not yet interested in Kurdish music, but maybe in the future. This interest should stem from the fact that Kurdish music 'is not influenced by anything', i.e. pure, unspoiled, and carrying traces of a distant past. Subsequently he expressed his wish to protect Kurdish identity and culture:

> This people was continuously in revolt. Why? Because they revolted against injustice. And millions of our people went abroad. That is why this became a big massacre. For example our dengbêjs were also scattered. (..) All these people migrated as a result of wrong state politics. That's why in this system, we say to ourselves: we are the servants of this people, we are their revolutionaries, we will protect and serve this people and push them forward and in that way we will see that also our identity, and our high culture, is protected, and let's make other people accept us. This is our battle.[350]

348 "Bunlara karşı biz kendimizi örneğin mesela halk içerisinde kendimizi bir.., bu sömürücülüğe karşı mücadele etmek için bir mücadele cephesi oluşturduk. Mesela bu programı yaparken hem halkı aydınlatıyorum, bildiğim kadariyla. O türküleri koruyorum. Şimdi Türk devleti zihniyeti faşistdan bir zihniyettir, ırkçı bir zihniyettir, kürtleri inkâr eden bir zihniyet. Ama ileride bu sistem değişir Türk halkı da, Kürt halkıyla beraber, kardeşe yaşarsa, o zaman o türkülere önem verir".

349 All quotes in this section are taken from the interview with Zana Güneş in 2007 in Germany. The interview language was Turkish.

350 "Bu halk sürekli isyan etmiş. Niye? Çünkü haksızlığa karşı isyan etmiş. Ve bizim milyonlarca insanımız dışarıya çıkmış. Onun için bu bir kültürel büyük katliam oluyor. Mesela dengbêjlerimiz de dağılmış. (..) Bunlar hepsi, bu devletin yanlış politikası yüzünden göç ettiler. Bundan dolayı bizim bu sistemimizde, kendimize diyoruz biz bu halkın hizmetçileriyiz, bu halkın devrimcileriyiz. Biz bu halkın kültürünü koruyacağız bu halkı hizmet edeceğiz ve bu halkı ilerleteceğiz böyle diğer halklar içerisinde bizim de bir kimliğimiz bizim bir yüksel kültürümüz korunsun, ve diğer halklar kabul ettireceğiz. Bu bizim mücadelemiz bu."

Güneş felt that a culture and identity needs to be protected and placed on the map in order to make the Kurds visible, and to make other people accept them. This also shows his moral framing of the aims of the show, in which he regarded the average Kurd as in need of enlightenment and education: they are not aware of their culture and identity now, and therefore they need to be made aware of it. In short, he saw the dengbêj TV program as a means to protect and archive Kurdish culture; to educate the Kurds and others about their culture; and to create a visible Kurdish identity.

There is a variety of programs on Roj TV, ranging from news and discussions to music, from productions about Kurdish culture and history to dubbed movies and documentaries. Although music receives a lot of attention, dengbêjs generally do not perform in music programs. The latter are attended by singers and groups with the accompaniment of instruments. As at the festival, the dengbêjs are generally not incorporated into the Kurdish music scene, but classified as 'folklore'. This results into a very different set-up of the program and the stage. In music programs the singer or group performs on a large concert stage. All the attention is on the performers and instruments, and the programs have a professional character. The singers are presented as professionals who can compete with world celebrities. Conversely, *Şevbêrk* is not focused on celebrating the individual singer, but on celebrating Kurdish culture. One can argue that the dengbêjs participating in the program are ambassadors of Kurdish culture rather than musicians in their own right. They are there to represent and propagate Kurdish culture, as I demonstrate in the following.

The opening of the program shows old or seemingly old video images that are seen as typical for Kurdistan: riders on horseback, wo/men in traditional dress, people dancing, people sitting in a traditional-looking dîwan, landscapes with mountains and plains, some pictures of old houses and cities, people at work in the fields, people sitting in a nomad tent, and an image of dengbêj Karapetê Xaco. The background music consists of old dengbêj recordings. Both visuals and music give the impression of a time long ago, a distant Kurdish past, as it is imagined by many Kurds today. The title *Şevbêrk* is displayed, accompanied by the image of a beautiful sunset in the mountains. The image then switches to the studio. It displays the message saying that the sun has set, and the evening can begin.

Figure 21. From right to left dengbêj Gulê, Şermîn, Fehîma, and Qedriya who performed in the şevbêrk program, and who live in Germany. Source: Roj TV archive.

Figure 22. Picture of the shooting of *Şevbêrka Dengbêja*, 2006. Source: Roj TV archive.

In each episode of *Şevbêrk*, attention is given to a specific dengbêj style, mostly linked to a single Kurdish region. A group of eight to twelve or sometimes more singers are present, often men and women together. The décor consists of handmade Kurdish carpets, and other traditional handicrafts, if possible from the same region. The dengbêjs sit in a horseshoe shaped form, Zana Güneş in the middle, all dressed in traditional Kurdish dress. Often, an elderly woman and one or two children are present, who do not participate actively in the program. Their attendance enhances the feeling of sitting in a Kurdish family home, in their apparently 'natural' state. Some women are knitting or occupied with some other handicraft. In the centre of the stage, women prepare food from the region concerned. During the program they are seen kneading dough, cutting vegetables, or preparing meat. Sometimes there are also animals (sheep, birds) that walk on the stage. Güneş showed me a program where birds were present. The birds were walking around the stage, sometimes making sounds and chirping. At a certain point in the program Güneş started singing a song himself, and while he was singing, one of the birds joined in. This caused excitement among the people present on stage, who were listening to the song. Güneş used this as an example of how close the Kurdish traditional singing style is to nature, as even birds recognize the sounds and join in. *Şevbêrk* is designed to emphasize the natural and authentic character of Kurdish culture.

Its similarity to Turkish folklore programs,[351] which at that time were set up in the same way (the décor, the handicrafts, cooking and animals), turned *Şevbêrk* into a deliberate attempt to contest the Turkish state project of presenting all music and culture within its borders as Turkish national heritage. The program is meant to reveal the wealth of a culture in Turkey that was for long hidden from the public. It is now visible and present, displayed on television, broadcast worldwide, and placed alongside official 'Turkish' culture, in an attempt to counter a century long politics of "invisibilisation" (Haig 2003). At the same time, it presents Kurdish culture not only as one of the cultures of Turkey, but as a culture hailing from a different nation which has all the necessary ingredients: its own language, singing styles, clothing, songs, culinary traditions, and animals and nature specific to the Kurdish region. The program, and arguably the entire television channel, attempts to display the abundance of elements that are regarded as typical and specific to Kurdistan.

351 A current example is the TRT show Aşıklar Meclisi. However, in recent years there was also a different development: rather than focusing on 'the traditional' folklore programs intended to show the ongoing popularity of folk music, and therefore invited young people to their programs, dressed in jeans and other modern dress. Personal communication with Evrem Tilki, 2013.

What is the role of the dengbêjs in the program, and how do they value it? The dengbêjs in Turkey could only participate in the program through the phone, and some of them said they had done so. Of course participation by phone does not offer a good alternative for live participation in the program, especially in the case of singing. Since I only spoke with a few people who attended the Roj TV program live (see chapter 5), I cannot say much about the experiences of the participating dengbêjs. I can only combine some information (general remarks the dengbêjs made about TV performances, and about their participation in a program on the local television channel Gün TV in Diyarbakır), and give in that way an impression of how they felt about their art being displayed on television.

Although many dengbêjs felt positive about the new opportunities, they also expressed feelings of disappointment that were linked to a general feeling of lack of recognition, as I discussed in chapters 2 and 3. They often said that TV performances turned the dengbêj art into something else, and that it could not be seen as a replacement of the real dengbêj art. As we have seen in the first chapters, dengbêjs used to sing for relatively small audiences where there was much opportunity to interact with the public. A performance was made in cooperation with the audience and was directed towards the people present. Such a setting is still available today in the Dengbêj Houses. By contrast, singing on television, or on stage as at the Festival, is a very different way of performing and has several consequences for the performances. Because the songs are quite long they are often not sung in their entirety. Instead, the dengbêjs sing several stanzas only and do not have time to comment on the story. They sing with a microphone, separated from the audience with whom they cannot interact as would be usual in a performance (see chapter 2 for an example). Although theoretically the other dengbêjs present on stage could be interacted with, there is not much space in the program for such improvised exchange.

Also, the dengbêjs need to share a relatively short performance time with five or more singers. This is quite a number considering that dengbêjs used to sing only with one or two other singers together, or alone. Not only time, also attention needs to be shared with many others. In their younger days they used to take care of a full performance of at least several hours in which it was crucial to hold the attention of the audience as long as possible. Long stories were alternated with kilams, and long kilams were introduced by stories. Performing on television, or at occasions like the festival, the audience has quite a different expectation of the dengbêjs. The attention is much less focused on the content of the performance than on the symbolic meaning of hearing and seeing dengbêjs performing. The dengbêjs, placed

in a village décor, may remind people of their grandparents and maybe of the village they came from. For people who grew up in urban settings or live abroad nowadays, the dengbêjs may evoke a rediscovered Kurdish identity.[352] In small performance settings the content of the songs is of central importance, whereas the context of the television is not very suitable for that. The archaic language and frequently used metaphors require a good knowledge of the Kurdish language, which many people do not have. The voice and the presence, the visuality, of the dengbêjs are more central than the content of the songs.

In the interviews the dengbêjs often complained that people did not genuinely value their performances, and that on television they (or others whom they saw in the program) were not able to finish their songs. This indicates a difference between the expectations of the public and the aspirations of the dengbêjs. Also, the connection with the audiences was, in the case of the television, not made by the dengbêjs but by others, who arranged the program for them. The dengbêjs were not used to performing on stage or television and therefore seemed to feel more comfortable when others arranged it for them; they were invited by others who choose the setting of the program, the number of dengbêjs present; they were asked to sing certain kilams which means that the choice of kilams was not their own; the organizers introduced them with speeches that established their own agenda; and they did not have time to give an elaborate performance because they shared the stage with many others. This makes clear the shift in position from former days to today. From being respected, knowledgeable elders who were in control of the entire performance, they lost that control to others. The educational aims of the program transformed them into folkloric subjects, and into ambassadors for Kurdish culture, a position they occupy with ambivalent feelings.

Notwithstanding the criticism of the dengbêjs, I heard from many people how moved and encouraged they felt when they saw dengbêjs perform on television for the first time. It seems they did not mind in what manner the dengbêjs were exactly presented, or in what form. For them the issue of importance was the fact that they could see their dengbêjs, as a display of Kurdishness, on television, and that they could hear Kurdish sung and spoken in a public space. A friend of mine said about Med-TV in general: "Med-TV was truly magical when it first appeared, I remember watching it as if aliens had arrived." Another friend said how the whole village gathered around the television to watch *Şevbêrk*, and that they would listen to the whole program from beginning to end. He said how amazed they were to

352 I discussed the perception of the dengbêjs by their current audiences with the host of a television program on dengbêjs made by Gün TV in Diyarbakır.

hear *their* kilams on television. Also some others specifically referred to *Şevbêrk* when talking about this. These first experiences of seeing Kurdish dengbêjs on television had been particularly impressive and emotional for them.

4.2 Zana Güneş: TV activism

Until now we have looked at the emergence of Kurdish television, its meaning for the display of Kurdishness, and the particularities of the program on dengbêjs. This might give the impression that the political presentation of the dengbêjs in *Şevbêrka Dengbêja* by its host Zana Güneş was beyond discussion. However, as I described in the Introduction and in chapter 3, for long the dengbêjs were not paid attention to and were almost forgotten. The process of the previous ambivalent attitude towards the dengbêjs and Kurdish traditions by the Kurdish movement, and its recent embrace, is well illustrated by the life story of Zana Güneş. His story is relevant for three reasons: first because he is a central figure in deciding how the dengbêjs were mobilized for cultural activism, second because it shows how he framed his life story as an evolvement from ignorance towards awakening for Kurdish nationalism, and third because it illustrates the transformation of the Kurdish music scene in which the dengbêjs occasionally took part, but at other times lost ground.

Zana Güneş was born in 1955 in a village near the town Iğdır, close to the Armenian border, and grew up in a predominantly Kurdish environment. He had an early interest in music and dance, and sometimes visited the Aşık-Café in Kars, where folk poets competed with each other in singing competitions in Turkish (Reinhard 1986). Turkish music was more appealing to Güneş than Kurdish music, and learning to play the saz was a first entry into the world of Turkish music. However, playing a musical instrument was not accepted by his father and his environment generally, and it was difficult to pursue his ambition. In part as a reaction to the resistance he met he started working in Izmir, 1500 km away, where he took saz lessons. From that time on he stayed regularly in the big cities for seasonal work, and returned to the village in summer when there was a lot of work.

In the cities, singing competitions were organized by owners of *gazinos* (music halls) who were looking for young talented singers to sing in their halls. As several of the dengbêjs of my research attended such competitions, we can assume that they were open to a broad public, that education was not necessary, and that it attracted young talent from all over Turkey. Zana Güneş tells us that:

> In 1979 there was a singing competition for three levels: folk music, pop music, and arabesk. I attended the level of folk music, of course in Turkish, because at that time Kurdish was forbidden. It was in Istanbul, I was there at the time. Owners of *gazino*'s came to listen to the singers, and they liked my voice very much. I won first place, and they invited me to sing in their *gazino*.

It was a matter of course that singing in another language than Turkish was not accepted at the competition.

Güneş told me that around the same time he came into contact with Kurdish student activists in Istanbul who were trying to raise awareness of the oppression of Kurds in Turkey, and who actively recruited members. Contact with these activists gave him new ideas and pushed him in new directions.

> At the universities Kurdishness (*Kürtlük*) developed among students, and this influenced me (*bizi de etkiliyordu*). And of course I grew up with these things, my family, our mothers and fathers, they told us about the things that the state did to us, that the state killed our people. And then you start to think: why is the state doing this? You also live in this state. And then you understand that the state has wrong, racist, chauvinist politics (*bir bakıyorsun ki devletin yanlış ırkçı şovenist bir politikası var*). And then you yourself also start to resist it.

The arguments he heard from the students connected with his own experiences and the stories of his relatives about the oppression by the government. He began to see his previous experiences, and the social narratives he had learned during his childhood, in a new light. When looking back on this period of his life Güneş described his deliberate choice in favor of his Kurdish identity and against government assimilation.

> I could have sung in Turkish music halls, and I could have been rich. My voice was also nice. But look, I did not do this. I have chosen this road to stand for the Kurdish culture, a thousand years old culture, and to claim my own values and my identity (*ben halkımın binlerce yıllık o kültürünü, o insanlık yönü, ve kendi değerlerime sahip çıkmak için, kendi kimliğime sahip çıkmak için, o yolu seçtim*). I said: I am a Kurd and I want to sing in my own language. (..) That is why I will claim my own identity, that's why I became political and headed towards kurdishness, Kurdistan, and these things. That's how I got a place in this front. And we said to ourselves: 'if we are a people, our people are exploited, everything is taken away from them, then we have to protect our people, and we have to stand up for them.'

Güneş presents the various options as that of either singing in Turkish and becoming rich and famous, or singing in Kurdish and 'becoming political'. He linked his choice to the public narrative of Kurdish activists, speaking about colonization, the people, and the need to protect them. As we will also see in other stories in this chapter, political activists present their lives as being marked by a period of moral questioning

in which their eyes were opened to the ideology of the Kurdish movement. By presenting previous life experiences as marked by ignorance and unawareness, they frame the encounter with the new ideology as a shift towards a different way of thought and behavior as a result of being trained in the new Kurdish personality. The prior ignorance and subsequent awakening transformed them into people who successfully passed through the stages of learning that the PKK expects from them. Güneş underlines this later in the interview:

> I told you about those *gazino* owners. They came to see whose voice was nice and invited them to their *gazino*. But my culture is different. I don't have a *gazino* culture. I have a different culture and I wanted to work in a different branch. If there would have been something else, if there would have been radio or television for example, I might have done it. But it's good that it didn't work out. Sometimes I think about this, if it had worked out than maybe I would have been like other Kurdish musicians who do not feel as Kurds and who take the culture of their own people and change it. For example we have such musicians who are Kurdish and Turkify their own Kurdish culture.[353] (..) Something like that could also have happened to me. That's why I am very glad that I never got into that.

In this part he adds an element of coincidence to his involvement with Kurdish activism; he could have been like other Kurdish musicians who neglected their Kurdishness and chose to sing in Turkish. The prohibitions on the use of Kurdish language, and the strong assimilationist policies of the government, meant that it would have been much easier for someone like him, who longed for a career in music, to leave Kurdish music behind. But he did not feel connected to the *gazino* culture, and since there were no other options, he dropped out and began to sing more and more in Kurdish. His dislike of the *gazino* culture and the lack of other possibilities along with his new connections with Kurdish activists made that Zana Güneş did not continue a career in Turkish music. His contacts with other activists made him feel increasingly connected to the PKK ideology that demands self-analysis and criticism from its members. By understanding his life story in this manner, he connects to other Kurds of whom he and other political activists hope and expect that they will follow their choice.

After the singing contest Zana Güneş stayed in Turkey for seven more years. He became more politicized during these years, singing songs made by controversial Kurdish singers, and he attended discussion groups of several political organizations active at that time. Students organized such groups to recruit members for their

353 "Bazen diyorum, belki olsaydı biz de şimdi hani o diğerleri, Kürt sanatçılar nasıl kendileri Kürt olarak hissetmiyorlar ve kendi halkın kültürünü götürüp değiştiriyorlar. Mesela bizim öyle Kürt kendisi Kürt olup da öyle Kürt kültürünü Türkleştiren sanatçılar var."

organization and to educate them in the principles of these movements. "The number of Kurdish university students was growing. They had gatherings for discussions and I learned many things from them. Of course I also knew something but not as much as them. They were more scientific." He felt most sympathy for the PKK, "because the others did nothing, but the PKK did most in actuality". Zana Güneş's increasing involvement in politics made his situation more difficult and led him in the end to leave the country. "I wanted to sing in Kurdish and it was forbidden, so I had to leave. It was not because of economy, it was because of politics." The first time he went abroad was in 1986 when he did construction work in Libya. From that year on he started to compose more songs himself, and he began to use his artistic name. He returned to Turkey in 1988 and left for France that same year, after which his political activities made a return to Turkey impossible.

From the late 1970s on, Kurds began to experiment with new forms of music. They had hardly any opportunity to perform in front of a public in Turkey, but did develop abroad, especially in Germany and France. Copies of cassettes of these groups in exile were circulated illegally among Kurds in Turkey and became immensely popular. A new Kurdish music scene developed abroad among political refugees in Europe. In France Güneş joined the music group '*Koma Berxwedan*' (lit. Resistance Band), that was associated with the PKK. They released their first album in 1983. The group composed songs about resistance, the political awakening of the people, guerrillas and martyrs.

The style of most of these songs is very different from the dengbêj style. They are rhythmic songs in wedding style, accompanied by instruments. The most prominent instrument is the saz, and other instruments used are keyboard, drum, small oboe, and various kinds of flutes. The refrain is often sung by a group, and the other stanzas by one singer. They are short songs to simple melodies that are easy to remember and can be sung by anyone. They are composed to make people aware of the Kurdish question and PKK ideology, and to generate enthusiasm for these. The popularized style of bands like *Koma Berxwedan* was new at the time and attracted much attention, and also set an example for other Kurdish music groups (see the section on the music market in this chapter for some notes on the *koms*). They disseminated political ideas among the people, raised awareness of Kurdish identity, and popularized Kurdish as a language of communication (Sarıtaş 2010).

Until 1990 Güneş identified not with dengbêjs but with musicians who wanted to modernize Kurdish music and who wanted to 'serve' Kurdish society with their modernizing ideas and political ideology. He did not have a particular interest in the dengbêj art; like aşık Abdullah (chapter 3) he had moved away from

traditional Kurdish culture. Although he had been influenced by the dengbêjs, "I grew up among dengbêjs", Güneş was more attracted to other music styles. To my question if he wanted to become a dengbêj when he was a child, he replied: "No. I preferred [instrumental] music and dance, I liked that very much. It was only later that this idea took shape. When I was sixteen I bought myself a saz." He was more attracted to music and dance, to wedding songs and wedding music, to the saz and Turkish music, than to the more heavy, serious dengbêj style, like many other young people of his time. The owner of music company *Aslan* (pseudonym) in Istanbul told me:

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

Especially in the countryside, where hardly any variety or choice was available, people continued listening to and enjoying dengbêj performances. But as soon as other musical styles were available, especially young people were receptive. Depending on the region and the family, traditional Kurdish music continued to be performed occasionally at weddings. But wedding bands performing in Turkish (and Kurdish, but this was marginal) became much more popular at this time, with the result that the role of the dengbêjs was largely pushed aside.

Interest in the dengbêj art returned in the early 1990s when the Kurdish movement began to validate Kurdish traditions as Kurdish 'heritage' that was regarded as demonstrating the 'authenticity' of the Kurds as a people. From that time on dengbêj kilams started to be collected and recorded, even though this was still a minor development. Zana Güneş was one of the first to recognize the importance of the dengbêjs as Kurdish heritage, and its potential, and he became more and more preoccupied with the dengbêj art. This route had already been prepared by *Hunerkom* (lit. Art group), of which *Koma Berxwedan* was a part, a cultural organization founded in 1983 to stimulate and disseminate Kurdish music in Europe. They organized concerts, festivals and cultural activities. Members of the organization were sent to different parts of Europe to teach folklore, especially folk dances. Güneş: "because of these activities our people could save their culture and our children did not forget their folklore, their music, and their dances." Because of the activities of *Hunerkom*, Güneş became more interested in traditional culture and music.

> In 1990 I sang *Bedirxan*, this was a song Efwê Esed sang on radio Yerevan. That was the first time I sang such a song. And after that I started to see how rich the dengbêj culture is. And I thought, if I don't sing it, if others don't sing it, then who is going to sing it? So although it was not my own style, I turned to it and started to sing [in the dengbêj style] (*kendi tarzım olmadığı halde ben bu sefer yöneldim ben de söylemeye başladım*). (..) [In my childhood] I only listened to dengbêjs, I only sang wedding songs. With the dengbêj style I only started much later.

Zana Güneş clearly indicates how he became interested in the dengbêj art only late in his musical career. The fact that someone like him, who was involved in cultural activism for many years, realized the importance of the dengbêj art only in the 1990s, shows that traditional music had not been high on the agenda of the political activists. From then on he became active in placing the dengbêj art at the center of attention, both by making television programs about them, and by singing in their style. The way he spoke of his increasing interest for the dengbêjs shows that his involvement with the dengbêjs was in the first instance driven by his activism. He had followed the path of Kurdish activism, that of modernizing the Kurdish people and leaving behind the allegedly problematic parts of Kurdish identity. But when in the 1990s he felt there was a different way of looking at tradition, placing it in a primarily political framework, he became as motivated with respect to this new objective as he had been for his previous musical activities.

Güneş' life story is that of a musician developing his position within the strongly politicized climate of Turkey in the 1970s and 80s. Initially attracted by Turkish music and the modernizing project of the Turkish state, he changed his views after coming into contact with Kurdish student activists. The moral appeal of the PKK turned him into a fervent activist aiming to reach as many Kurds as possible with the ideological message of the PKK. This also made him frame his life story as an evolvement out of ignorance into an awareness of the struggle for the Kurdish nation. The modernizing trend of the PKK had been a strong motivation for Güneş' activities, and had at first excluded the dengbêjs from his interests. His life story demonstrates that the dengbêj art only became relevant for him when he acquired a new way of looking at Kurdish tradition, and that his interest in the dengbêj art arose in the first place from cultural activism. His individual views carry a broader social meaning, as he was the person who for many years became an important face and voice that presented the dengbêjs on Kurdish television.

Şevbêrka Dengbêja became the first and most important vehicle for bringing the dengbêjs back into public life. The program created a space for dengbêjs among the many other programs Roj TV had to offer. Much earlier, almost ten years, than possible within Turkey's borders, the television contested the Turkish state project

by offering an alternative Kurdish imaginary world. Within this form of cultural activism, the dengbêjs became folkloric subjects who stood in for the 'natural,' 'authentic' history of the Kurdish nation. This paved the way for later developments within Turkey, when local pro-Kurdish political activists entered government offices and opened up increasing room for Kurdish cultural expression.

4.3 The Dengbêj House in Diyarbakır

Although television has been of fundamental importance in providing a new space of performance for dengbêjs, and a new visibility, Roj TV is in Europe, or 'in the air', and not in Kurdistan. Even though television produces and performs Kurdishness, the physical presence in the homeland is seen by political activists as a crucial dimension in terms of authenticity. This holds especially for traditions like the dengbêj art that people regard as strongly connected to the physical Kurdish geography. The geographical region Kurdistan is defined as the place where real Kurdish culture is found. Someone who is not surrounded by Kurdish people, by the sound of the language, by the mountains of the *welat* (the homeland), and by its nature, is regarded as less capable of being a good dengbêj: the geography where the dengbêj is born and lives determines the sound of his voice – it is said that a voice from the plains sounds different from a voice from the mountains - ; the place where a dengbêj comes from determines the content of his songs; and the political oppression he lived through makes him understand and articulate the suffering and sorrow of his fellow Kurds (see also chapter 2). The dengbêjs who live in Kurdistan are therefore perceived as more 'real' and 'authentic' than those living elsewhere and seen in this light it is of crucial importance that the dengbêjs occupy a visible place in the 'Kurdish landscape' in Turkey that has been built up by the Kurdish movement over the last decade. This turns the Dengbêj Houses into important symbolic sites where the dengbêj art and Kurdishness is performed. Now I turn first to the symbolic value of the Dengbêj House in Diyarbakır, and in the following section to the position and ideas of Zeki Barış, one of the central figures of the House.

Figure 23. Singing at the Dicle Firat cultural center in Diyarbakır. 2007.

Figure 24. The courtyard of the newly opened Dengbêj House in Diyarbakır. 2008.

The first Dengbêj House was founded in Van in 2003, followed by another in Diyarbakır in 2007. In other cities and towns there were also initiatives to establish a Dengbêj House, and if not in their own special House, dengbêjs were invited to perform at local cultural centers. The Houses form part of the Mesopotamia Cultural Centers (NÇM),[354] an organization that promotes Kurdish cultural and linguistic expression in many cities and towns in Turkey. The NÇM was founded in Istanbul in 1991, the year in which the ban on Kurdish music was lifted, and attracted youngsters who wanted to be part of the 'struggle'. Its aim was to make Kurdish culture visible, to create a space for Kurdish cultural production in a society dominated by Turkish cultural production, and to stimulate and spread Kurdish culture and language among young Kurds. It was founded first in Istanbul, the most feasible place for the survival of such an initiative, and followed by branches in other cities. The NÇM is influenced by PKK ideology and discourse (Sarıtaş 2010). In the 1990s local NÇMs were frequently closed and reopened, and its leaders imprisoned. Since the 2000s persecution has diminished, and in Diyarbakır where the city administration has been pro-Kurdish since 1999, the center is supported by the municipality.

The local political situation was also decisive for the opening of the Dengbêj Houses, and, more generally, for the space the Kurdish movement was able to claim. For example, during the time of my research, the city administration in Van was in the hands of the AKP party, which gave the Kurdish movement significantly less freedom to operate than in Diyarbakır, where the pro-Kurdish DTP was in power. In Van the atmosphere was tense and sometimes laden with fear, contrary to Diyarbakır where people felt freer to express their opinions and to display expressions of Kurdishness in public. In Van I spoke with some people who did not want to visit the Dengbêj House because they feared being associated with the Kurdish movement, whereas in Diyarbakır I never encountered such concerns. This is also related to the unique position of Diyarbakır as the capital city of the Kurdish region, which receives recognition from European politicians and is visited by them (Gambetti 2008: 101). Under the gaze of Europe, the Turkish government felt forced to ease restrictions. Diyarbakır functioned long as the main haven for Kurdish resistance against Turkish domination. So although there was a Dengbêj House in both cities, the one in Diyarbakır had much more room for the negotiation and performance of public Kurdishness.

The *Dengbêj ve Dengbêjlik Geleneği* (the Dengbêj and Dengbêj tradition) project that was set up in Diyarbakır in 2006 was both an expression of as well as

354 *Navenda Çanda Mesopotamya*, see glossary.

a catalyst for more freedom. In her article "The invention of tradition: Diyarbakır's Dengbêj Project", Scalbert Yücel (2009) offers a sound analysis of the project. I did not focus specifically on the project, but it was part of my research because I was often at the Dengbêj House and interviewed many dengbêjs involved in its activities. I will summarize Scalbert Yücel's argument, which is the only academic article about the dengbêjs today, and which confirmed many findings and ideas I developed in the course of my research.

The aim of the Dengbêj Project was to promote Kurdish culture and language, and the activities involved were the publication of an anthology and CD, and the organization of two concerts. The CD and anthology were published in 2007, the latter followed by a second edition in 2011, and the concerts were organized in September 2007 in Diyarbakır and Istanbul. The whole project was led by the municipality and the Dicle Fırat cultural center in Diyarbakır,[355] by the European Union,[356] and supported by several Turkish government ministries.[357] Additionally, the Diyarbakır municipality funded the renovation of a historical building in the city center for the location of a Dengbêj House, which opened in May 2007, and the publication of the second edition of the anthology. The municipality can be seen as the main actor in the project, as it was most directly involved in its practical set up and implementation. Since in Van the Dengbêj House had also applied for European Union funding, but not managed to receive it,[358] the involvement of the municipality in Diyarbakır seems to have been essential for its success.

Scalbert Yücel regards the project as noteworthy for three reasons: it was the first time a Turkish ministry had been involved in a project that openly supported Kurdish culture and language; it was an important step in recognizing, constructing, and institutionalizing a specifically Kurdish 'tradition'; and the project also demonstrates the complex relationship between 'activists in office' and the state (Watts 2006). One can regard the Dengbêj House as a successful attempt of legal political actors to create more space for a Kurdish voice, and as part of the larger process of the 'decolonization of Diyarbakır' (Gambetti 2008).

Watts argues that in situations of violent conflict between militants and the state most political, media- and academic attention goes to the conflict. Legal, political, and cultural activities are often neglected, whereas they may be

355 Dicle Fırat Kültür Merkezi is a branch of the NÇM.

356 The European Union's Grant scheme for the promotion of cultural rights in Turkey (Scalbert Yücel 2009).

357 The Office of the Prime Minister Directorate General of Press and Information, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, and the Central Finance and Contracts Unit (Scalbert Yücel 2009).

358 Personal communication with one of the leaders of the Van Dengbêj House.

of fundamental importance in understanding the ongoing negotiation process between the state and the opposed party. She claims that this is also true for the Kurds. Since 1990 pro-Kurdish politicians have entered government offices, and began to work within the legal framework of the Turkish state towards a better position for the Kurds. Although the position of these 'activists in office' has often been highly contested and opposed by the opposition, resulting in the dissolution of Kurdish parties, the detainment and imprisonment of its leaders, and assaults on people and offices, their activities have resulted in increased rights for Kurds. According to Watts, participation in politics:

> "strengthened the pro-Kurdish movement by providing it with an institutional basis for public collective gathering (..), some legal protection (..), new access to domestic and international audiences, and new symbolic resources (2006: 126). And: "Kurdish ethnic activists brought highly charged Kurdish national demands into the sphere of everyday political and public life, making such demands increasingly difficult to ignore" (Watts 2006: 133).

As Watts demonstrates, what she calls 'symbolic politics' were a crucial means of making Kurdishness visible in the public sphere. Diyarbakır was a pioneer in this regard. After having "long been subjected to the homogenizing strategies of the Turkish nation-building project", it became the first city with a pro-Kurdish municipality, which used "its institutional power to reverse the Turkification of the city" (Gambetti 2008: 98-99). Gambetti argues that, due to the emergency law operative since 1984, and the restrictions that followed from that, the most likely site where the municipality could expand its influence was in culture, not politics. Although attempts of the municipality to Kurdify spaces and events met with resistance in the first years, their increasingly established position enabled them to carry out more and larger projects from year to year. Examples are the publication by the municipality of a history of Diyarbakır, rewriting that history to include Kurdish rebellions and activism; highly politicized festivals featuring Kurdish cultural production;[359] the celebration of *Newroz* (Kurdish New Year); and the reclaiming of geographical places and monuments as Kurdish[360] (Watts 2006).

Following upon the increasingly successful politics of the pro-Kurdish party, the state initiated counter projects in order to reclaim certain sites and

359 "The real 'event' has undoubtedly been the Culture and Arts Festivals organized by the municipality from the year 2001 onwards. In the first festival, the governor did not allow for singing in Kurdish" (Gambetti 2008: 113), but in following years this was allowed.

360 Diyarbakır's mayor removed a statue of Atatürk from the city center, and Batman's mayor renamed streets after Kurdish leaders, international leftist figures like Ghandi, and after international human rights discourse such as 'Democracy avenue' (Watts 2006).

symbols, in what can rightly be called a battle over cultural property. In the 1990s, when the Kurdish movement began to encourage Kurds to celebrate *Newroz* as an expression of Kurdish identity, the Turkish state tried to gain control over the meaning of *Nevruz* by reinventing it as a Turkish tradition[361] (Yanık 2006). Since the coming to office of the Islamist AKP Party, which gains many of its votes in the Kurdish provinces, this party organized numerous projects in order to contest the Kurdish movement. In response to the Ahmedê Xanî Festival in Doğubeyazıt, the AKP Party organized an alternative Ahmedê Xanî festival in the same town (Yüksel 2011). As a reaction to the popularization of the Mem û Zîn folktale as a Kurdish national epic, the AKP Party published a Turkish translation of the story, and turned it into a film and theatre play. In January 2009 a state television channel in Kurdish, called TRT6 (pronounced in Kurdish), was launched as an alternative to Kurdish satellite television channels. TRT6 also broadcasts a dengbêj program. Such examples demonstrate the importance attached by political actors in Turkey to the appropriation of symbolic space in the sphere of everyday political and public life. These examples also demonstrate how much influence the 'activists in office' have built up through seemingly insignificant steps, resulting in "the opening up of spaces of expression and activity that were unimaginable five years ago" (Gambetti 2008: 110). The counter measures of the government, including the launch of a Kurdish TV channel, were even more unimaginable at the time.

Clearly, the Dengbêj Project needs to be analyzed as part of this larger framework of cultural activism. Scalbert Yücel shows that the funding received by the European Union, and the official support given by the Turkish state, turned the Dengbêj Project into a symbolic resource that was interpreted by many as an official recognition of the dengbêjs and of Kurdish language and culture. This was realized mainly by the efforts over the years of the pro-Kurdish municipality, positioned between the state and the Kurdish movement, to gain legal acceptance for their political presence (Scalbert Yücel 2009). Apart from the official status that the dengbêjs obtained through the publication of a book and CD under the authorization of the Ministry of Tourism and Culture, the physical presence of the Dengbêj House in Diyarbakır was also an important symbolic step. The old building renovated by the municipality constitutes a historic space for Kurdish tradition. Although situated in a small alley behind one of the main roads, a sign on the road in Kurdish, Turkish and English makes the House visible and locatable for outsiders, and the House has also been made part of the tourist route through town. The House is part of an ongoing

361 Yanık's argument is more complicated than I present it here for reasons of space. She argues that

appropriation of historical buildings as sites where Kurdishness is represented.[362] The renovation of the house of Cemil Pasha, covered extensively by Kurdish TV channels in February 2012, is another example.

Before the Dengbêj House was built the dengbêjs in Diyarbakır performed in the Dicle Fırat cultural center. Their move to the House gave them a more visible and official status, which had a number of consequences for the activities of the dengbêjs, and for how they understood their position. Twenty-four dengbêjs were officially registered as members of the House. They were expected to show up regularly at the House, and to perform at festivals and on television and radio programs when requested. The House was run by the municipality, and a number of municipal employees had their offices in the House.

During my fieldwork the relationship between the dengbêjs and the municipality employees was not always without tension. The dengbêjs felt injured in their authority and position as elders of the community, because they were supervised by others who were often much younger than them, and moreover, as they saw it, also less knowledgable on the topic of dengbêj art. However, they were also dependent on these others for access to public performance and visibility. At the time of my research, there was a lively negotiation ongoing between the employees of the Project, the leaders of the House, and the dengbêjs. The latter felt their new position of 'municipal dengbêjs' had to result in some kind of official recognition and payment. In August 2007 when I was not in Diyarbakır, one of the more active dengbêjs of the House phoned me to tell me that all the dengbêjs of the House had gone 'on strike'. He sounded agitated. Was it not true that the dengbêjs came every day to the House and worked hard to serve their city? And would this not also give them certain privileges because of their special function? Moreover, the employees hired by the municipality to realize the Dengbêj Project were paid a good salary, would it not therefore be more than fair if the dengbêjs would get their share as well?

On the other hand, the Project employees[363] complained that the dengbêjs 'just did not understand', that they were caught up in 'old-fashioned thinking', not realizing that the 'times have changed' and that their art is not as popular as they would like it to be. They argued that the Project should be seen as a gift for the

362 "The conditions of possibility of the re-appropriation of urban space in Diyarbakır were not produced locally, of course. The PKK's unilateral ceasefire in 1998 and Turkey's aspiration to become a full member of the European Union, as well as the change of direction and strategy within the Kurdish movement itself, have all enabled the city's transformation into a haven of activism and Kurdish cultural expression" (Gambetti 2008: 125).

363 I spoke with several employees and others involved in the Dengbêj Project who expressed similar opinions.

dengbêjs, but instead of being grateful, they showed up with demands. As Scalbert Yücel (2009) notes, the strike resulted in an agreement of the twenty-four dengbêjs registered at the House and the municipality according to which the dengbêjs would receive a free meal on the days they visit the House, and free transportation in the city. When I visited the House again in 2008, the free meals appeared to give the registered dengbêjs a certain status: the meal was served in a room of the House, and the lunchtime spent in that room separated the registered dengbêjs from the non-registered ones and from visitors. Through its connections with the cultural center and the Dengbêj Project of the Municipality, the Dengbêj House was thus influenced by these institutions.

Unlike Scalbert Yücel, I argued in chapter 3 that the demands of the dengbêjs follow from previous understandings of their task and position, and should not be understood as a 'commercial turn' (Scalbert Yücel 2009). The management of the House and the Project, and others involved in promoting the dengbêjs, condemned the above attitude as a commercialization, arguing that the dengbêjs should be willing to serve 'their people' voluntarily. Such judgments stemmed from the fact that the activists felt driven by a goal that occupied a large part of their energy, time, and efforts. PKK influence was strongly present in places that were directly concerned with the representation, investigation and reconstruction of Kurdish culture. At the Dengbêj House I noticed a difference between, on the one hand, the attitude of the dengbêjs and other (elderly) people visiting the House and, on the other, the management or other political activists involved in the House's organization. The latter expressed a strong concern regarding the achievement of political goals, and viewed most of their activities as being, in one way or another, instrumental towards these goals. The dengbêjs were less concerned with such larger goals, and viewed their activities rather as goals in themselves. Most tensions between the activists and dengbêjs were caused by this difference in perspective, which, at the same time, was often a generational difference.

4.4 Zeki Barış and activism in the House

The perception of the tasks of the dengbêjs was clearly articulated by one of the people involved in the Dengbêj Project, Zeki Barış, who felt that the dengbêjs should be devoted to the Kurdish cause. Zeki Barış has been occupied with collecting stories and songs since the late 1970s. He was impressed by the stories of a relative who was a great storyteller. "After I finished high school I got the idea of collecting

them. First because I liked them so much, and second because I had the fear that they might get forgotten". He recorded and wrote down many songs and stories, which much later, beginning in 2000, he archived and published. At the time of my research he was closely connected to the dengbêjs, many of whom he saw almost daily. His collecting activities were for a long time his private occupation without making any of it public. As Scalbert Yücel notes, people like him felt "discouraged by the political milieu which, during the 1990s, gave priority to contemporary music, theatre and folkloric dances. In the 1990s, people interested in folkloric and oral literature were considered 'reactionary' [*gerici*]" (2009: 23).

The turn to folklore interest within the Kurdish movement and the increasing space for Kurdish publications in the 2000s gave him the opportunity to publish his material, and to see his work made public and valued by others. In 2006 he and a friend were asked to work at the Research Department of the municipality, and in that function he also became part of the Dengbêj Project. He worked in an office of the Dengbêj House located on the second floor. From there he looked over the courtyard where the dengbêjs would gather to sing, and he often joined them and listened. He also invited the dengbêjs into his office to sing songs, which he recorded and transcribed, and many of which were published in the Anthology of the Dengbêj Project (2007). Regularly the dengbêjs were invited to perform at festivals, on television and at other meetings, and he was one of the people to decide who to send to such events. At times this caused trouble when some dengbêjs felt passed over by the choices of the House management.

According to Zeki Barış, the dengbêjs initially did not have any political awareness. Only after they developed such awareness, did they become more active. In the following quote he compares the current Dengbêj House with the Dengbêj Café that existed in Diyarbakır between 1960 and 1980:

> The Dengbêj House is more advanced than the Café (*ji kahvêye pêşdartir e*), it has become more advanced. To the Café they came, three or four dengbêjs, now twenty dengbêjs come together. Now there are cultural centers everywhere and dengbêjs sing songs, it is more advanced now. (Do you know why it is that there are many more dengbêjs coming now?) In part it's because it's more known, it's more known among the people, and in part because there is a struggle, there is awakening, they come out with their culture, that influence is also present (*hinek zanan e, zanabûn ketiye nava gel, hinek jî têkoşinekî heye, yani hisyar bûye, çanda xwe de derdikevin, hinek ev tesîr heye*). They have woken up, and bring the

> culture out, its because of that influence. (They are now more aware (*bilinçli*)?)[364] Yes! If there are twenty dengbêjs together, then sixteen or seventeen of them are aware of their service to the culture (*bizanebûne xizmetê çandê tê dê*). They are aware of that. That we have a culture, that we will develop that culture (*çanda me heye, kultura me heye, em vê karê xwe pêşkêş bikin, dengbêjiya xwe pêşkêş bikin, bizanebûn*).[365]

Only three or four dengbêjs came to perform at the Café. Barış argued that the House is much better visited by the dengbêjs, because they are aware of their task. They now want to develop the culture because of their awareness of the 'struggle', and are thus much more active in pursuing that goal. He understood culture as being in the service of the struggle, and felt that this awareness is new among the dengbêjs:

> (And was this awareness not there before 1980?) No, their thoughts were not nationalist (*na, ramana wan netewî nebûn*). Dengbêjs came to the Café because they wanted to perform together. Şakîro for example came, he thinks: 'nice, let them know that I am a dengbêj as well', Mihemed Salihê Beynati also said I am a dengbêj, it went in that way. They did not sing with a nationalist mind (*bi ramanekî netewî nedihatin gotin*).

He mentions here two of the most famous dengbêjs of the previous generation, of whom he feels that they did not think in a nationalist way. They only thought about their position as a dengbêj and their fame, but not more than that. He describes this type of the dengbêj art here as something without a deeper meaning, which seems to make it less valuable for him. Performing alone was not enough. With a nationalist awareness, such performance becomes more valuable, and it would also have incited the dengbêjs to action:

> But if they would have been under nationalist influence they would have gathered in that time and they would have started recording by themselves! (*lê eger bi ramanekî netewî bandawî ev çax tişt berhev bikirane, wan bi xwe tomar bikirane!*).

According to Barış, the lack of awareness of Kurdish nationalism caused the dengbêjs to stop singing after the 1980 coup:

> If you ask the dengbêjs who sang before 1980, whether they also sang after 1980, they say no. But if they would have had nationalist thoughts, then they would also have

364 I usually avoided using political terms, but by mistake I introduced this much-used term here myself. It is often used by political activists to refer to the level of ideological awareness of ordinary people. The collector already used himself the terms 'struggle' and 'woken up' before I mentioned 'awareness,' so there is no doubt about his political intentions.

365 All quotes in this section, unless otherwise indicated, are from the interview with Zeki Barış conducted in 2008 in Diyarbakır. The interview language was Kurdish. In this interview I sometimes asked questions in Turkish, but the answers were all in Kurdish.

> sung after 1980. But they did not do that. The dengbêj art was finished. And before the NÇM was opened, from 1980 until 1991/2, The dengbêj art was finished down to its roots (*dengbêjî ji binî re qetiya bû, nema bûn*). It had disappeared. (..) At least for 20 years they didn't sing, they only started anew now. That much fear existed.

Barış felt that, if the dengbêjs would have had the higher goal of Kurdish nationalism, they would have been able to conquer their fear and continue to perform. He is convinced that only after the cultural center NÇM opened, could the nationalist mind be developed in the dengbêjs, with the support of political activists working at the center.

Barış situates also other developments within an ideological perspective. When I asked him about local differences in repertoire, and differences in performances among religious and ethnic groups, he felt disturbed by my questions:

> (Do you also know Yezidi dengbêjs?) There are no different kinds of dengbêjs, the dengbêjs are dengbêjs. They are not divided in Yezidi dengbêjs and Muslim dengbêjs. That is not a good way of speaking, it disturbs me. Dengbêjs are dengbêjs, whether they are Muslim or Yezidi or Alevi. The dengbêj style is the same, there is no difference. The person who sang yesterday was Yezidi, the one who came from Izmir. Did you notice it? What was the difference? Nothing. The dengbêj art is the dengbêj art. Karapetê Xaco was Armenian, Christian. In the dengbêj art there is no religion and belief. The dengbêj art is Kurdish. Because it is in Kurdish it can be Yezidi or Muslim or Christian or Jewish, or Zoroastrian, the dengbêj art is the same among the Kurds.

The different ethnic and religious groups that live or lived together in the Kurdish region (see Introduction) are recognized by Kurdish nationalists as all being part of the Kurdish heritage. In the television program on dengbêjs on Roj TV, Armenian, Syriac, Yezidi and Alevi dengbêjs and aşıks are invited to perform. They are given a great deal of attention and respect. However, according to Barış they should be understood as part of a unique Kurdish heritage that unites the Kurds into a single people. The unity of the Kurds is one of the spearheads of the movement. Division is a big fear for them, as the unsuccessful attempts to fight the Turks at the beginning of the century are explained because of the failure on the part of the Kurds to form a united front. This fear is often expressed indirectly among activists in their denial of the existence of internal divisions and their emphasis on the unity of the Kurds, as, for instance, here by mister Barış:

> (But for example, aren't there local songs that talk about their specific situation?) There are special songs. For example Derwişê Evdî and Adulê. Because Derwişê Evdî is Yezidi it is sung a lot among Yezidis. But Muslims also sing it a lot. Because of that we actually do not want someone saying about the dengbêj art: 'he is Yezidi

> and he is Muslim'. We are Kurds. That is separatism. We do not want racism because it destroys our unity. He is Yezidi and he is Sunni, there is not something like that.

When I tried to challenge his ideas by asking once more about the differences between regions, he again insisted on the unity of the tradition:

> (But if it is about local songs.. for example you go to Hakkari, then I expect over there a song from that region..) In the dengbêj art there are no local songs. For example the song Bavê Faxriya is sung by people from Amed, from Serhat, from Mosul, from Şengal, and by Kurds from Konya. In the dengbêj art there is no locality. The dengbêj art is *Kurdîtî*, *Kurdewarî* [Kurdism and Kurdishness].

Kurdîtî and *Kurdewarî* are terms that are used to emphasize the cultural instead of the political.[366] Although it is not easy to translate these terms and to know how individuals use them, one could say that he interprets my questions as political since I look for difference instead of unity. He felt that I was disturbing the unity of the Kurds by asking what differences there might be. He expects from me that I, as a researcher with sympathy for the Kurds, support Kurdish unity and would never emphasize possible differences. Although it is clear from the many kilams that take place in a specific region that these kilams were composed in a specific place and at a certain date and time, Barış argues that such kilams have lost their specificity and are now sung by dengbêjs from all places. His reaction demonstrates that he looks at the dengbêjs first and foremost from a Kurdish nationalist perspective: how can they support the Kurdish cause?

People like him who had an early interest in Kurdish culture often made great sacrifices to pursue their goal. Due to their efforts very valuable material has been collected and archived. They invested money, free time and energy in a project supported by no one other than themselves. They were forced to conceal their objectives out of fear someone would find out. Some had to flee the country to pursue their goals, others were imprisoned, and material destroyed. The efforts they made, the sabotage and persecution they experienced, and the lack of support from others, often politicized them. Their political objectives and the expectations they have from others to be equally devoted to the Kurdish case, should be seen in this light.

The Dengbêj House is thus an important site of culture making and cultural activism. The renovation of an old building in the city center, now dedicated to the

366 The words *Kudîtî* and *Kurdewarî* are difficult to translate. It seems they were used for the first time in the Kurdish magazine *Hawar* (the Call), published in Damascus in 1932 by Cedalet Ali Bedirxan. The magazine announced that it had the specific aim to focus on Kurdish language and culture, which it called *qurdanî* and *qurdîtî* ('Kurdism' or 'Kurdishness'), and it left politics to the "compatriot organizations" (*civatên welatî*) *(Çakır 2011: 22). They are thus used as terms to refer to activities in the field of Kurdish culture that are not directly related to politics.*

performance of the dengbêj art, contests Turkish nationalism through the display of a non-Turkish tradition in the public sphere, supported by the pro-Kurdish municipality and the European Union. The daily performance of dengbêjs in the House is a continuous visible and auditory reproduction of Kurdishness and therefore has significant symbolic value, even if the audience is limited. The municipality leadership has different expectations from the House than the dengbêjs. The activists working in the House are driven by strong political and ideological motives, in which not all dengbêjs are interested. This regularly causes tensions between the two parties. Most dengbêjs think in different moral terms about their art than the activists. This makes the activists feel that they need to 'educate' and 'awaken' the dengbêjs in order to make them ready to serve 'their people', and to enable them to recognize their 'duties'. Conversely, the dengbêjs feel they are not supported in the way they should be. They expect financial contributions, larger audiences with a genuine interest in their art, more invitations to sing at festivals, and in general more attention than they receive today. Before turning to the last place of cultural activism, namely Istanbul and its music market, I first discuss how some individual dengbêjs reacted to or evoked in their interviews to narratives of political activists introduced above.

4.5 Individual dengbêjs referring to political narratives

> Nationalist violence or inter-ethnic cooperation and tolerance depend on what narrative, what tales of injustice, oppression, or betrayal are told. Tellers of tales have enormous (*though far from absolute*) power to reshape, edit, share their stories, and therefore to promote a future of either violence or cooperation (Suny 2001: 864, my emphasis).

As the Kurdish movement developed strong ideas about the meaning of the dengbêj art in the current context, many dengbêjs incorporated these ideas in their self presentation. But because many felt at the same time also connected to other moral ideas, they did not entirely or uncritically adopt the new ideas about their function. Social narratives (or myths) are indeed powerful tools that enable people and institutions to construct and articulate identity and belonging (Suny 2001, Ferguson 1999). Other studies on social narratives (Askew 2002, Malkki 1995) focused on their being shared by large numbers of people, influencing the lives and views of individuals who felt they belonged to a certain group. But narratives, however much

disseminated and supported by institutions, are not unambiguous or univocal. Instead they are understood and utilized in different ways by individuals who subscribe (partly) to the prevailing views of certain institutions, but simultaneously seek and find ways for different interpretations.

As Suny claims in the quote above, tellers of tales have the power to shape people's stories, but this power is far from absolute. Even in a situation of dominance and oppression by political institutions caused by a violent and ongoing conflict, the interpretation of social narratives appeared to be slippery and negotiable. On the basis of the stories of a dengbêj and an aşık, whom I have already discussed in chapter 3, I argue that social narratives indeed offer a powerful means to construct one's values and identity, but that people also negotiate and develop them according to their particular life experiences and goals. These examples indicate that at the time of my research the dengbêjs were searching for new moral positions, and selectively used or rejected certain parts of the social narratives that came up in the process of their return to public life. One such story I already discussed in chapter 3. I described there how dengbêj Hamîd had internalized current narratives about the undemocratic and backwards character of the landlord system, and about the need to 'open one's eyes' to democracy and modernization. In this section I return to the stories of aşık Abdullah and dengbêj Bêrîvan, who both, in different ways, also connected themselves to the narratives of the Kurdish movement.

Aşık Abdullah

The section of the interview I discuss here was the interview's first part. In this part the director of Van's Dengbêj House (see Preface for information on the House) was present and influenced our conversation. Aşık Abdullah's focus on the director, in an attempt to make the latter understand why he should be seen as part of the House, provides insight into how the dengbêjs of the House understood their position and the function of the House as related to the moral narratives of the Kurdish movement about Kurdish suffering and oppression, and about the task of each Kurdish individual to put him/herself at the service of the Kurdish people and their struggle.

We were sitting in the director's office in Van's Dengbêj House, the director behind his desk, and aşık Abdullah and I sitting across from each other on the other side of the desk. The director was following our conversation, and his position was clearly one of authority. Occasionally he made a short remark about what aşık Abdullah was saying, a correction, an encouragement, or an addition. On other occasions, the director was also sometimes present during parts of interviews or performances that I recorded and paid close attention so that the person I was interviewing did

not forget to mention the name of the Dengbêj House and its director. The dengbêjs seemed to feel somewhat intimidated by his presence, and took care to give the entire introduction that the director expected from them. During the time that the director was present, aşık Abdullah spoke more to him than to me, seeking approval for what he was saying, and praising the director for his work. In this part of the interview he also strongly connected what he was saying to political narratives.

At the moment I started the recording, aşık Abdullah began by introducing himself at length in Kurdish in the following manner:

> Oh Kurdish people, I greet all of you, Kurds everywhere in the world, and I greet all people. I am aşık Abdullah from the Dengbêj House, being a cultural center and recording studio [the director adds: in Serhat], of the dengbêjs from Serhat. I am not a dengbêj, my style is a bit different. But I have a lot of respect for them, I am full of love for them [these last words he said in Turkish]. I am sorry that I speak Turkish, I have stayed for long among Turks. The name of our dear director is our friend Emîn. He is involved in our work.[367]

In this introduction aşık Abdullah exemplified his position: he was speaking to the community of Kurdish people; although he was an aşık, he was a member of the Dengbêj House; he was not a dengbêj, but said he appreciated them a great deal. He was the only person who called the Dengbêj House a 'recording studio', an important detail because aşık Abdullah wanted to release an album, which appeared to be one of the main reasons why he was connected to the Dengbêj House. He hoped that the director of the House would make this possible, and praised him as being involved 'in our work'. Immediately after his introduction he turned to one of his main concerns, namely, the oppression of the Kurdish language, and his own experience with that:

> We went in Ankara to the Kızılay Alevi Association. (..) We sat down there and sang one or two songs, and I also sang a few in Kurdish. I sang two songs in Kurdish, and across from me two people stood up and said to me, come we go outside. But I said, I don't know you, what would I do there? But then they said we are police in plain-clothes, why did you sing in Kurdish? Yes, it was in 1972, around that time, somewhere between 1971 and 1973. I said to them: 'brother, I am a Kurd, I have not done anything related to politics. In the same way as you have Ferhat and Şirin, we have Siyabend, and Mem and Zîn. We have love, we have our customs and traditions, our fate and love, we sing about that. If you have a problem with that, go to God and ask him why he made so many languages. What can we do about that?' They brought me to prison and beat me a lot, it was dark,.. , they left me there for four days. They put me there for four days, and they let me go.

367 The quotes in this part are taken from the interview with Aşık Abdullah conducted in Van in 2008. The interview language was Kurdish.

The Kızılay Alevi association was a meeting place for Alevis, and also for Alevi aşıks. When I visited this association in 2004[368] there were many aşıks present, all with their saz, and singing each in turn. Such associations arose in the larger cities from 1960 on. In the 1960s and 70s Alevi society changed profoundly due to the massive migration to the big cities, and the rise of the political left in Turkey (see Introduction). From a closed religious village society many Alevis living in cities became involved in leftist political movements, and began emphasizing a politicized identity much more than an Alevi religious identity. It is therefore not surprising that, in the years of political turmoil aşık Abdullah spoke about, civil policemen were present during this meeting. Singing in Kurdish was regarded as a political statement of resistance. Aşık Abdullah defended himself against their accusations by emphasizing that he had nothing to do with politics. By invoking to a famous Turkish folktale, *Ferhat and Şirin*, he tried to elicit the understanding of the two policemen, who, in the end, also must have had their own folklore. Aşık Abdullah argued that he sings Kurdish love songs that are as innocent and touching, and as disconnected from current political developments, as Turkish love songs like *Ferhat and Şirin*. He pleaded that the Kurds, like the Turks, have customs and traditions they want to carry on. But it did not make a difference, he was still detained.

Following the story about his detention, aşık Abdullah went on to speak of another kind of imprisonment:

> I stayed for a year [in Ankara] and after that my father came, he took me out of there, and he took away all my instruments from me. I was imprisoned in our village and I was married under force. For twenty years my art was wasted. I asked my art, by God where is a saz so that I can play a bit, to express the love of my heart, the fire that is in my soul, because it is still in my soul. (..) But my father broke my saz.

It seems that aşık Abdullah told these two stories in succession to emphasize the experience of imprisonment in both cases, especially since he used the strong word 'imprisonment' (*mahkum kirin*) in the second story as well. Although he had been able to escape to western Turkey at a young age, he seemed not to have had such a chance again after his father brought him back to the village. These two forms of imprisonment formed a leitmotiv in his story. Both imprisonments hindered him from carrying out the profession he would have liked to. But now, after twenty years, with his children grown up, aşık Abdullah had found a space to resume his musical career. He continued:

368 I visited this or a similar association in Ankara in 2004 during the fieldwork for my MA-thesis (I do not have information if the association I visited was of the same character as in the 1970s).

> A long time passed by, my children grew up, and I had some more time for myself. My children were grown up, so I thought, let me go and do what I wish for, so that my longing does not stay in my heart. I am a person of the Kurds, I am from Serhat, I have suffered a lot, I will go and express that sorrow and longing so that the people get to know me.

From the narrative about how he felt silenced to perform, aşık Abdullah turned to the moment where he took up his profession again. He highlighted two aspects that motivated him to start singing again. The first was the longing in his heart that he had suppressed for many years. The second motivation was that he was 'a person of the Kurds'. This sense of being Kurdish meant that he suffered much, that he shared this suffering with many other people, that he wanted to express this in his music and share his experiences with his fellow Kurds.

In the narrative that followed this, Âşık Abdullah explained this motivation in more detail. At the moment that he decided to start performing again, he looked for a way to come back on stage. His first attempt was in 2003 with a music company in Istanbul, but it concluded unsuccessfully. After that he came into contact with the Dengbêj House in Van, and he spoke of how he experienced his first visits to the house:

> One day I went here and I saw their customs and traditions, everything they do is only about Kurdish motives, the sorrows of our people, dengbêjs come and sing, now they say a dengbêj.., the dengbêj is something very important. The dengbêjs are the ones who express in words our customs and traditions, our culture, our sorrows, our love.

For a moment aşık Abdullah separated himself from the people coming to the House. It was as if he realized for the first time what the dengbêj art meant when he visited the Dengbêj House. He had distanced himself from the dengbêjs in his youth, when he wanted to learn a different musical style and be involved in a different culture. At that time, the dengbêj art did not satisfy him, as we saw in chapter 3. But according to aşık Abdullah, when he came to the Dengbêj House he discovered the value of the dengbêjs. An important reason for saying this explicitly and in this manner might be because the director of the House was still sitting next to us. In this quote aşık Abdullah emphasized the Kurdishness of the dengbêjs and the way they represented the Kurds in their songs. He included himself again in the last line, where he became part of the larger community of Kurds, whose 'customs and traditions, culture, sorrows and love,' the aşıks and dengbêjs put into words. From this important characteristic of the dengbêjs, and from the united experience of being Kurd, he made a connection to his own work and life, although he is not a dengbêj:

> Someone who today, one day, does not understand the grief of the dengbêjs, the love, .. I am musician, I have respect for every music. But in Turkey, at the moment Tarkan[369] is a great musician, but when he sings he does not understand our sorrow, I do not understand what he sings. Because in the middle of winter… my father, or my brother.. could not reach a doctor.. and that pain is still in my heart. I have suffered a lot. So I do not understand his songs,[instead] it is necessary that I sing about my own sorrow.

Aşık Abdullah produced a clear argument here, even though it may seem rather confusing at first glance. He began by saying that not everyone today can understand the grief of the dengbêjs, meaning not only the dengbêjs but the Kurds in general who have suffered a lot. This suffering cannot be understood by a modern singer like Tarkan, who did not experience the same kind of suffering as the Kurds: 'he does not understand our sorrow'. aşık Abdullah gave an example to illustrate his point: he experienced how his father died because there was no doctor within reach, and this pain 'is still in my heart'. This is not just suffering without reason; later in the interview he argued that it is suffering that was caused by the fact that they were not provided with the necessary resources by the government. There was no doctor nearby, and no infrastructure that could have brought his father to a doctor. The Kurdish region has remained undeveloped in many ways, and this has caused a great deal of trouble and suffering. This experience of suffering separate the Kurds from a singer like Tarkan, who grew up in western Turkey and does not know anything about the experiences of the Kurds. Because of this aşık Abdullah felt that there was a need among the Kurds for musicians who had experienced such suffering, who had shared the same fate, and were therefore capable of expressing this in their music. Because the core of what was needed was someone who understood the suffering of the Kurds, aşık Abdullah, even though not a dengbêj, could include himself. At first he differentiated himself from the dengbêjs, who have a different performance style, but with this shift in his argument aşık Abdullah brought himself back in. Although not himself a dengbêj, he is a Kurd who has suffered as well, and could therefore, like the dengbêjs, put his sorrow into words. He continued:

> It is necessary that I understand myself, that I understand who are my people, where do I come from, that I know myself. (…) My name is aşık Abdullah, I have made songs about the motives of the Kurds. I had a friend, one of their writers who is very close to me, I heard from him, and from you [he points to the director], and from my father and forefathers, what they talked about, how they lived, whom they loved, what further oppression, the pain and the sufferings of the people in Serhat, and I have expressed these things into words, I have showed these things. I am aşık Abdullah,

369 One of the most famous Turkish popular musicians at the time.

> I play and sing in my own language. I sing about love, about the suffering and pain of the people of Serhat.

So whereas in the past aşık Abdullah distanced himself from the culture he grew up in, and escaped to western Turkey to build a different life (chapter 3), he now accepted himself as being part of the Kurdish community. He now felt the need to see himself as a Kurd, 'to understand who are my people and where I come from'. Knowing himself meant at that moment to aşık Abdullah that he included himself in the collective experience of being a Kurd. In this way he tried to repair the relation with his 'own people' that he felt had been broken.

At the moment of the interview this was a fundamental issue for him, because when I met him he was trying to find a way back into the Kurdish music scene. He was seeking recognition, and to obtain such recognition he needed to make his position and aims clear. In the interview, with the director present, he placed himself within the moral narrative that was often reiterated by the director who by all means tried to place Van's Dengbêj House, not as successful as the one in Diyarbakır, on the map. While in the past aşık Abdullah did not want to listen to his father, at that moment he listened to the director, and to 'my father and forefathers'. He related here that he learned from them, about 'how they had lived, whom they had loved' and about the 'oppression, pain and suffering of the people in Serhat'. This collective experience of the Kurdish people, who were oppressed and went through a great deal of suffering, was the social narrative the dengbêjs connected to. Aşık Abdullah, having learned from their experiences and seeing himself as being one of them, could now say that he, too, like the dengbêjs, has 'expressed these things in words'. By connecting his own life to the social narrative about what the dengbêj art meant at that moment, and about the suffering of the Kurds generally, he created a new self definition, which he concluded with the significant conclusion: 'I am aşık Abdullah, I play and sing in my own language. I sing about the love, the suffering, and the pain of the people of Serhat'. These words were, more than to me, directed to the director behind his desk. They were meant for him, assuring him that, while an aşık and not a dengbêj, he was part of them. The experiences of imprisonment, both by the Turkish government and by his own community, are herewith turned into meaningful experiences, because with them, aşık Abdullah has become part of the collective Kurdish experience of suffering, which he articulated in his songs.

Dengbêj Bêrîvan

In chapter 3 I presented the story of dengbêj Bêrîvan, who placed much emphasis on the different experiences of female dengbêjs compared to that of male

dengbêjs. In her second interview, which I conducted a year after the first one, she spoke less about her life and more about her political views, and about the way her views had changed after she came into contact with PKK ideology. I present her story here because she indicated so clearly how she came to develop a different moral position which she adopted from Öcalan, the PKK, and, more importantly, from the Kurdish women's movement. Like Zana Güneş, dengbêj Bêrîvan also sees her life story as a development from ignorance into awakening, in this case an ignorance of the subordinate position of women, and an awakening towards her own liberation.

As we saw in chapter 3, dengbêj Bêrîvan located her own silencing not in state oppression, but in the 'family and the tribe'. She strongly emphasized the change in her own position as a female dengbêj after the Kurdish movement had gained influence. Dengbêj Bêrîvan began by asserting that in the past she had accepted that her position as a woman meant having fewer rights than men. She said that she did not know a world that was different from her own and so followed the traditions she had grown up with: "At that time I thought like that. When they said so, we did not dare [to resist]" and "I said to myself, [when they say that] this means it is forbidden". So at the time, before the 2000s, she accepted the situation as a given, whereas after that time she began to think differently. When I asked her how this change in her thinking had come about, she commented:

> It is because the struggle has started. The one from whom we have gotten the utmost rights is Apo. Apo has given rights to women. Apo said, 'women are human beings'. You know Apo Öcalan. He said, 'women also have rights'. Women should not be oppressed. Women should not be married under force. Women should not be slaves. Women should not be servants in the house. When you have rights, then women also should have rights. The *hoca* and *mele*, our imams, (..) they have hidden it. They hid the rights of women.[370]

According to dengbêj Bêrîvan, Öcalan's ideology made a stand for women.[371] She said that it is not in conflict with religion, because, as Öcalan argued, men and women are equal in the Quran and for the prophet. Apart from the influence of this ideology, dengbêj Bêrîvan saw other reasons why also men today have accepted the rights of women. She argued that, in the first place, women had suffered most during the war between the Turkish army and the PKK, more than men. Because of their suffering and their dedication to the Kurdish struggle, men have finally accepted rights for women:

370 All quotes in this section are taken from the second interview with her, conducted in 2008 in Diyarbakir. The interview language was Kurdish.

371 Women often see Ocalan 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 similar discourse as Abdullah Ocalan.

> Women have stood upright through all those things that happened. Women have done that more than men, have done more effort. (..) Because of that, I believe that seventy percent of the women have received their rights. They are not oppressed anymore. They are now independent, they are now free.

Another reason why, according to dengbêj Bêrîvan, men have given up on oppressing women is the humiliation and oppression they experienced themselves at the hand of the Turkish government:

> The government oppressed them. They saw how difficult oppression is, that it is something bad. Because of that they removed the revilement of women. If men would not have experienced this pressure and revilement themselves, they would have continued offending women.

She regarded the ideology of Öcalan, the war, and the oppression of men by the Turkish government, as the reasons for the changing position of women. The increasing gender equality was what opened a space for her to perform.

After 2000 she began to attend political meetings and festivities. She started being active as a dengbêj after a friend heard her singing and suggested she might sing at the meetings. Because of the lack of women willing to sing in public places, she became one of the much sought after woman for all kinds of occasions, and creatively used the advantages of this new position:

> I believe in this, that women will support women. Female dengbêjs have a special influence on the people, they are more influential. And the men are jealous, I can see that, I am in that situation. Because the people want female dengbêjs more, female dengbêjs attract more attention, and male dengbêjs are jealous. For example in summer the festival will take place, and in the program most attention is paid to women. They have two days for women activities.

She placed female dengbêjs in opposition to male dengbêjs, who were jealous of her success. She managed to escape from her previously marginalized role by using that role to move to the center of attention today.

Since dengbêj Bêrîvan only became involved in political activities recently, it seems likely that her politicized narrative has evolved since that time. During the interview she made it clear that she has learned many things from political meetings and television. She deployed the political narratives she heard in these places to recreate her life story into a narrative which explained and gave new meaning to her life. This narrative may not always reflect the realities of everyday life, in which she may still experience moments of discomfort because of being a woman, as I think I witnessed when she visited the Dengbêj House (chapter 3).

The PKK has been criticized for its neglect of women's issues, notwithstanding its apparently progressive discourse (Çağlayan 2007, Yüksel 2006). Women felt they were only accepted as PKK members if they disregarded their female identity (Yüksel 2006). They founded alternative organizations in which they felt better represented. Dengbêj Bêrîvan did not refer to such developments, and attributed her better position as a woman to the PKK leader Öcalan, of whom she heard speeches that encouraged the equal position of women.[372] That narrative gave meaning to her painful experiences of being humiliated and punished only for being a woman, for wanting to sing like a man at weddings; it gave meaning to the painful experiences of suffering because of the war; and it authorized her current position. It gave her authority because she felt she spoke not only as an individual, but as a representative of all Kurdish women. As she put it herself:

> I speak in the name of the women, in the name of the Kurdish women I can say. When they will see this interview they will be very happy, they will give me credits.

Dengbêj Bêrîvan was not only present in the interview as an individual singer, but even more as a Kurdish woman and a representative of Kurdish women. Her female identity was more evident than her identity as a singer. She spoke of the attention for her position not as an opportunity for individual gain, but rather as a benefit for Kurdish women in general. In this way, she gave meaning to her life story in the light of PKK ideology, and used that ideology to become a successful dengbêj today.

In the last section we saw how aşık Abdullah reworked his story in order to make it correspond to the moral narratives of the suffering of the Kurdish people and the need to serve them with his art. By defining himself in this way he hoped to be able to realize his longtime dream of releasing an album. Dengbêj Bêrîvan assumed an entirely new identity as a female dengbêj who represented all Kurdish women who had experienced oppression and inequality vis-à-vis men, rather than in the first place on part of the Turkish government. In this new position she was often invited to perform in the highly politicized public domain that aimed at redefining women's role in Kurdish society. Dengbêj Hamid (chapter 3), on the

372 Yüksel (2006) quotes a woman who felt her female identity was oppressed when she attended PKK meetings: "Let me put it that way: it was necessary for me to be sexless or it was necessary for me not to express the problems that I lived as a woman. And whenever I expressed, like someone who talks unnecessarily, I was not to be seen, not to be heard and not accorded any importance". At the same time, the idea that Ocalan's writing has encouraged women's liberation is also a commonly expressed viewpoint, like in this quote: "There are ideas and definitions about women, about which Abdullah Öcalan wrote, there are books Abdullah Öcalan wrote. We, too, get and read them. In these books, especially the ideas about women have been very mind-broadening for us." PKK narratives thus seems at times to have been more liberating than the practice of the organization.

one hand, endorsed the public narratives that rejected the landlord system but on the other, understood himself in relation to the moral narrative of that system that once defined the dengbêjs as poor and in need of support. This was an issue for him because in the past he had benefited from the material support of the agha of his village, whereas he saw the dengbêjs lacking such support today. He thus attempted to mobilize and change contemporary narratives in order to raise a similar type of support for today's dengbêjs.

In short, each of these individuals expressed distinct needs and concerns, and from that position drew on one of the social narratives of the Kurdish movement to accommodate their specific circumstances. All three referred to the general idea of a nationalist awakening, dengbêj Bêrîvan and aşık Abdullah most elaborately. Dengbêj Bêrîvan adopted the PKK ideas on womanhood and emancipation. Aşık Abdullah adopted the narrative of suffering and the need to fight for his people. This sheds new light on studies like Malkki's (1996) who emphasized how social narratives were produced and shared by large groups of people in a similar way. Although one can clearly detect the social narratives of the Kurdish movement in individual stories, it also becomes clear that individuals give their personal twist and interpretation to the narratives in ways they see as relevant in the context of their lives. Especially people like the dengbêjs, who were much less connected to PKK ideology than the political activists, articulated their own interpretations. In doing so, they resisted the level of control the PKK would have liked to have had over the Kurdish individual. The PKK vision of how every Kurd needed to remodel him/herself into a new Kurdish person was thwarted, not by a unified opposing power, but by individuals who simply reworked these narratives according their own needs. As Zigon (2009) insists, institutions tend to give the impression that their morality is unquestioned and that their supporters follow them in a united fashion, but this is rarely the case.

4.6 Istanbul, a market for dengbêjs

The Unkapanı district is located just outside of Istanbul's modern business district Beyoğlu. When from Beyoğlu one crosses the Golden Horn, and goes straight in the direction of Aksaray, one is in the heart of Unkapanı. On the left hand side of the busy street, always filled with buses, taxis and cars, one finds the center of

the music industry of Turkey. It is a multi-story mall called IMÇ record market,[373] where "the vast majority of significant music businesses aside from studios – including record labels, promoters, distributors, suppliers, instrument stores, and management companies", is located (Bates 2008: 164). Some of the labels have a specific affiliation; there are, for example, Alevi companies that mainly produce Alevi records, and Kurdish companies that produce Kurdish language records. I visited regularly the different Kurdish music companies, all located in this same place. The owners informed me about the newest released CDs; the best dengbêjs; the young generation of popular Kurdish singers; and about the criteria for choosing one singer over another, for releasing albums of some while rejecting others. Although one can find and buy all released records of these music companies at Unkapanı, the majority of their CDs and cassettes are sold at other places. In recent years, some of the most popular Kurdish music can be found in mainstream music shops in Istanbul's city center, although this remained marginal up to the present (2013). To find a broader collection one has to visit Kurdish-focused places such as the NÇM or a Kurdish bookshop.

The presence of Kurdish music companies at the IMÇ, and the availability of books and CDs in Kurdish in places accessible to the mainstream public is an important means through which Kurdishness has become visible in public life since the 1990s, and all the more so since the 2000s and has come to occupy a space next to publications in Turkish. It cannot be emphasized enough that hearing Kurdish in public and seeing Kurdish written on books and CD covers caused a fundamental experience of shock for many Turkish citizens,[374] through the confrontation with the existence of the Kurdish Other that had been denied for close to a century. This non-people and non-language at once had a visible and unavoidable presence, but now not as 'terrorists' [*terörist*] in 'the mountains' [*dağlarda*] and in 'the south east' [*güneydoğuda*], but in legal public spaces at the heart of commercial activity, and in non-violent ways. In this section I explore the place of the dengbêjs in the Kurdish music scene through the emergence of Kurdish music companies and the style and content of dengbêj music CDs.

The current Kurdish music market does have some precursors. Kurdish radio stations began broadcasting from abroad in 1955. In the first decades of the

373 Istanbul Manifaturacılar Çarşısı, literally Istanbul Draper's Market, which today has a different use.

374 Bates (2008) makes a similar remark when speaking about the famous music group Kardeş Türküler that studied, performed, and released albums of non-Turkish language music (such as Assyrian and Zazaki): "The knowledge that these allegedly dead languages and extinct cultures are actually still in existence is a radical and disturbing realization for many people, since it directly contradicts the widely-held fundamental conceptions about the modern Turkish nation" (pp. 66).

Republic, musicians and intelligentsia had left Turkey for a freer existence abroad, many moving to Syria and from there on to France and to Iraq. "For musicians Bagdad radio constituted a relatively comfortable place to stay (..) A lot of musicians (like the Cizrawî family and Hesen Zîrek) went from Iran and Turkey to these centers where they found a free working space" (Yıldırım 2007). Yıldırım writes that in the period from 1925 to 1960 it was very difficult to work on Kurdish cultural production, and that this situation only improved slightly after these years. In 1961 the new constitution marked a short period of more political freedom which resulted in a flood of publications and some album releases. In 1965 the first Kurdish records appeared on the market, produced at IMÇ. They featured the dengbêjs Mahmut Kızıl, Ayşe Şan and Hüseyin Tutal (Huseynê Fare) in editions of a few thousand copies. At the same time, the range of leftist movements that emerged in the political arena had consequences for how the music scene was organized: "with the fragmentation within the left, different movements and organizations started to have their own affiliated minstrels" (Sarıtaş 2010: 32). In this climate, in which political opposition groups got space to operate, there was also the growing mobilization of Kurdish activism. Both Yıldırım (2007) and Sarıtaş (2010) indicate that much of the newly emerging Kurdish music groups had a political character and developed in tandem with political movements. Most of the albums of that short liberal period were banned almost immediately, but through private copies still had a large distribution (Yıldırım 2007). This does not apply to LPs as they were not easily copied. Apart from illegal cassette copies after the 1960s (when the cassette player was introduced) there was hardly any visible and auditory presence of Kurdish music in Turkey's public life. This changed gradually from 1991 on when the ban on Kurdish music was lifted, but a more significant visibility of Kurdish music only came into existence in the 2000s. Before that time, most Kurdish musicians performed in Turkish.[375]

One of the early music companies at IMÇ is a company that I call here Aslan Müzik. Its owner, Murat Aslan, started the company in 1991, the year in which the ban on Kurdish music was lifted. He came to Istanbul in the early 1980s with the plan to start singing and make his own albums, but instead he became a producer of Kurdish music, and has close contacts with many musicians. When Aslan came to Istanbul he began as a street vendor at Eminönü Square, selling illegal cassettes which he bought from small illegal Kurdish firms. He said that at that time there were no official Kurdish recordings due to the prohibitions. He could therefore not sell his cassettes

375 The owner of Aslan Müzik (pseudonym) mentioned Fena Bedri, Aysel Bedri, Ayseli Ermeni, Izzet Altınmeşe, Ibrahim Tatlıses, Burhan Cacan, Hüsamettin Subasi, Selahattin Alpay, Mahsun Kırmızıgül, Nuri Sesigüzel, and Belkiş Akkale.

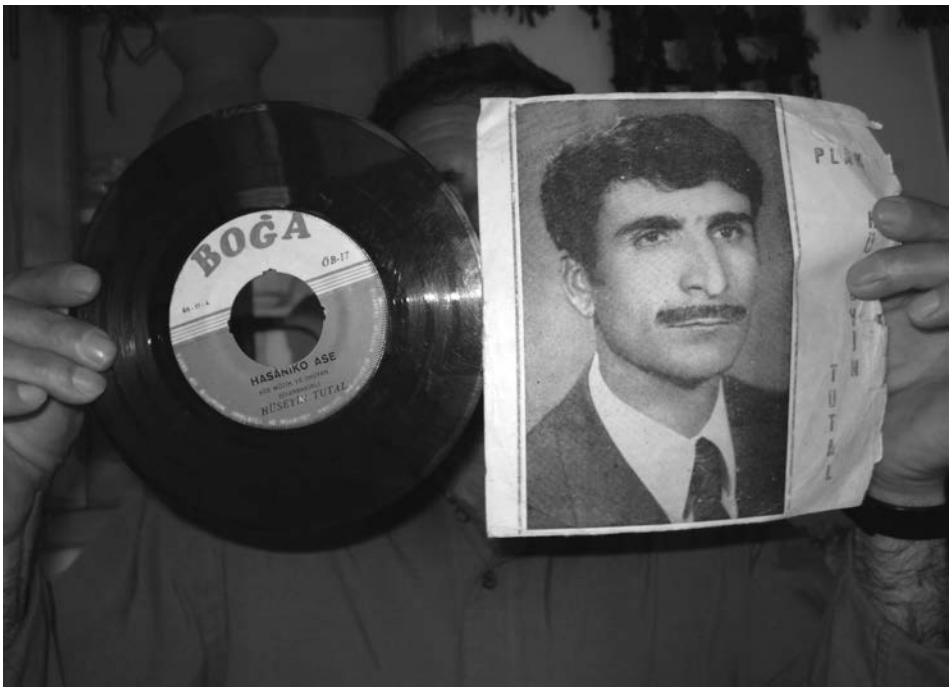

Figure 25. The early Kurdish LP of Hüseyin Tutal, shown by a music seller in Diyarbakır.

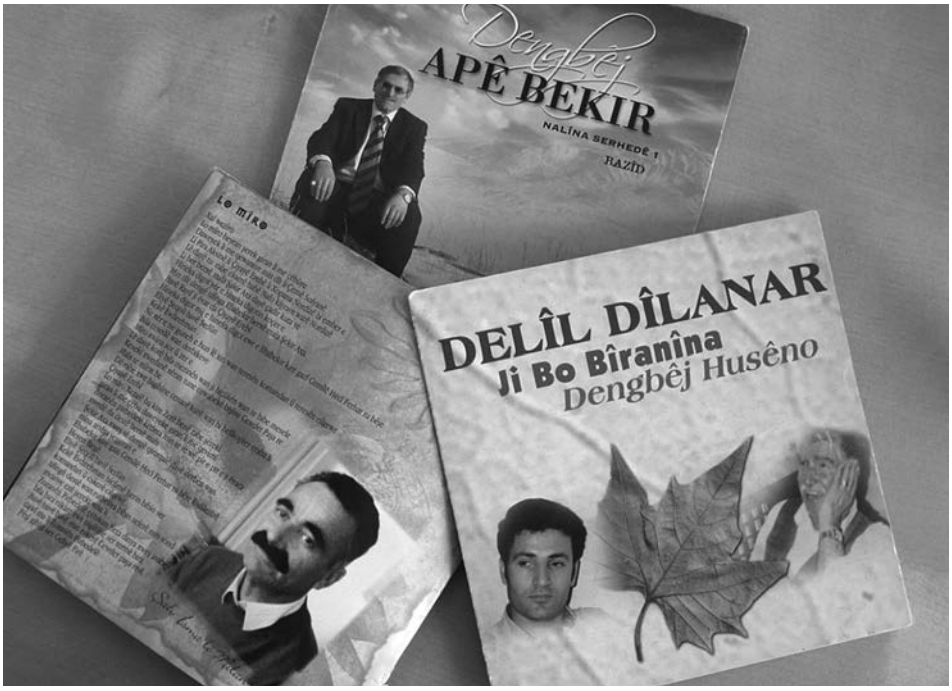

Figure 26. CD booklets, one of them the CD made by Delîl Dîlanar discussed in this section.

openly, but hid them and only showed them undercover to interested customers. In 1991 Kurdish music production became legalized, but it still happened frequently that individual albums were banned because of their alleged political content.[376] In the same year he opened his own production company.

In the Turkish music industry all recordings are registered and approved by the Ministry of Culture. The system offers protection to musicians against pirating, but serves at the same time as an instrument of censorship, which meant that until the late 1990s not many Kurdish productions were accepted. Also after 1991, despite lifting of the ban, many productions were banned because of their (alleged) political content. Aslan:

> The records were indeed published but they were not distributed. (Only in Diyarbakır and around there?) Yes in Diyarbakır, Urfa, Muş, Batman, some were distributed and after that they were removed [from the market]. Before 1990 Kurdish music was hardly sold in Unkapanı. There were some cassettes that were in Turkish and had also one or two songs that were half in Kurdish. After 1990 it was opened up a bit, but at the same time many cassettes got banned. For example I changed many names of cassettes, and also the names of songs.[377] I distributed them in Diyarbakır, the police listened to them and prohibited them (Murat Aslan, from Kurdish, Istanbul 2008).

According to Aslan, the Kurdish music scene abroad[378] had also an only limited influence in Turkey due to the same reasons. Still, new Kurdish music groups were mushrooming, and at the time Aslan worked mainly with them, as they were immensely popular among young people.[379] The place the dengbêjs occupy in the collections of the music companies is rather small, because of the only recently revived interest in them. Young and modern Kurdish musicians had an earlier and much more successful access to the wider public. Aslan released some archival albums with dengbêjs, but generally stayed away from them as people simply did not ask for their music. The focus of Kurdish music companies was on new developments in Kurdish music.

376 Aslan mentioned the first productions after the ban was lifted: "When Özal liberated it in 1991 there was a cassette of Fırat Başkale. Within two days it became banned. The name of the cassette was Cêne Cêne. It was banned, but slowly they were still published. An instrumental album came out of Şivan Perwer. An album with the name Newroz 1 and 2 by Nilüfer Akbal and Fırat Başkale. Another album of Besir Kaya half in Turkish, half in Kurdish." Interview in Istanbul in Kurdish, 2008.

377 He means that he changed these names in order to make them sound acceptable to the authorities who checked the albums before and after they were released. Still they were often banned.

378 He mentions Koma Berxwedan, Xelîl Xemgîn, Kawa, Diyar, Seyidxan, Hozan Şemdin, Maruf, Hozan Serhat, Zozan, Besê, Cewat Merwanî, Aydın, and dengbêj Seydo.

379 Also today, "the market is dominated by popular music groups known as *kom*, which incorporate traditional Kurdish materials into an arranged aesthetic, drawing often on Turkish popular music forms (most notably, *arabesk*), but also recently on rock 'n' roll, electronica, and other Western styles" (Bates 2008: 56).

In the late 1980s, and 1990s, Kurdish political music groups emerged under the name *Kom* (lit. gathering/group) which were related to political movements. *Koma Berxwedan*, of which Zana Güneş was a member (see above), was among the first. According to Sarıtaş, the groups differed from the Kurdish music produced in the previous decades. "The *koms* that emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s created a tradition of group music making that did not exist in Kurdish music previously. While there had been some Kurdish music groups in the 1970s, they did not gain much popularity and reputation" (Sarıtaş 2010). Making music in groups was regarded as a way of building a collective and national identity, and music making was seen as instrumental in establishing a collective history.

Sarıtaş argues that the *koms* adopted ideas from Turkish leftist music groups that had emerged in the 1980s, in the same manner as Kurdish activists were connected to the Turkish left in the 1960s and 1970s. Since the Turkish left was the movement they came from, it was not surprising that Kurdish musicians took Turkish political music as their example. Kurdish political music emerged at the time that Kurdish movements started to develop independently from the Turkish left. From the left they adopted ideas about the role of the musician. "Especially the musician as a political figure who has certain responsibilities for the movement s/he belongs to has been very influential on *kom* musicians" (Sarıtaş 2010: 38). They also adopted some other elements from the Turkish left, such as the idea that polyphonic music needs to be introduced to 'modernize' Kurdish music and the use of Western popular music forms as a basis for new Kurdish music. Like the Turkish left the Kurdish *koms* produced elegies for martyrs who had died in the Kurdish struggle. This politicized music scene was immensely popular among many Kurds in years that were marked by oppression and suffering. They expressed the hardships many people went through, and they openly called for resistance, and supported the 'freedom fighters in the mountains', the PKK.

In the heated political atmosphere of that time, Kurdish music companies followed the new developments and released albums related to that, and related to the interests of the majority of the public. This is why only after 1998 a market for dengbêjs came into existence:

> In 1998, 1999 and 2000 it was increasing a bit, but now that the market is better it is even more increasing every day. Day by day the dengbêj art is growing. (..) For example, people buy an album and then they ask me, isn't there anything new of dengbêjs? Isn't there a new album of someone who is making dengbêj art? (Murat Aslan, interview in Kurdish, Istanbul 2008)

Since then Aslan has started working again on archive albums. He cleaned some of the old recordings in the studio and issued them anew, such as an album of the dengbêjs Huseynê Muşî and Reso. He noticed a rise in demand, whereas before "there were not many people who knew about it". Dengbêjs began visiting him to ask if he wanted to make an album. Aslan has certain criteria regarding whom to accept or not. They need to have a nice voice and songs that they learned from a master as well as their own songs. He also said that he travels to eastern Turkey to find singers himself, mainly in his home region of Serhat. When he hears about a youngster with a good voice, or a woman, he visits them. According to Aslan, it remains difficult to produce albums of female dengbêjs, despite the high demand for them. That is because "they are a minority. (..) There is a demand! Definitely, but they don't have much voice. There are also those who hide themselves and who don't come".

Aslan also pointed out that the Kurdish music industry received a great impulse from Kurdish television. "Our people had moved very far away from their music. Because they watch [the Kurdish music channel] MMC and Roj TV, day by day people come closer to the music (..) Often people did not know the musicians, they got to know them from Roj TV". Recently the music industry has run into hard times because of the availability of music on the internet, and the difficulty of protecting one's records from being illegally spread on the internet.

Another smaller production company is owned by Fatih Oruç. He said that he had a special interest in dengbêjs, which comes from the time he was a reporter in Diyarbakır:

> In 1992 I worked as a radio journalist in Diyarbakır. Even though it was forbidden, we still made the dengbêjs a topic in the radio programs, and I also listened to their songs at home. We came together to listen. For that reason this tradition became my essence. Because of that I have to take care of it, and I do that because I want it, not because I have to. I am very interested in it. I grew up with their voices (Fatih Oruç, interview in Turkish, Istanbul 2008).

The fact that it was forbidden to broadcast the dengbêjs and to listen to their songs, made him feel even more connected to this music. He used the term 'classical songs' (*kilamên klasîk*) for the music of the dengbêjs, and said that the dengbêjs are at the roots of all contemporary Kurdish music, which makes them of great importance.

To give an impression of what the dengbêj albums look like I discuss here one album as an example: the album *Ji bo bîranîna dengbêj Husêno*[380] (*In the remembrance of dengbêj Husêno*) made my Delîl Dîlanar, a young singer who currently lives in Cologne.

380 Album title: *Delîl Dîlanar. Ji bo bîranîna dengbêj Husêno*. Production: Ses Plak Yapım/Mîr Muzîk. Year: 2003.

The album was released in 2003. Dengbêj Husêno is one of the most famous dengbêjs of the previous generation, and he was Dîlanar's uncle. Dîlanar is a popular singer with strong ties to the dengbêj art. He is a master of several traditional instruments, and is well qualified to sing in the style of the dengbêjs, something not many young singers can accomplish. When I interviewed him at his house in Cologne, Dîlanar said, in the same vein as Zana Güneş earlier in this chapter, that he had first preferred other musical styles, but later turned back to the dengbêj art:

> There was a time when I said to myself: 'I don't want to sing at all.' I said: 'my uncle was singing with his hand to his ear [in the way of the dengbêjs], but I play an instrument and I don't want to sing in the way he sang.' But later, when I got to know more about the culture, when I got involved in Kurdish associations, I began thinking: 'If I am a Kurdish artist, if I make Kurdish music, then what is my source? I live in Turkey and if I watch television I don't see anything Kurdish. They take things from my culture, translate it, and sell it to me. Why should I listen to that? I have my own language, I have my own dengbêjs.' So first I drifted away, and then I came back to my own source. I live in different conditions, I don't live anymore in the mountains, or in a village. I live in modern conditions, but my source is there. What I need to do is to take it from there and to do something with it today (Delîl Dîlanar, interview in Turkish, Cologne 2007).

The CD is an original combination of Dîlanar's own voice and style with that of his uncle. It starts with the kilam *Bavê Fexriya* (chapter 1). One hears the sound of birds and water, to emphasize how close the dengbêjs stood to nature. From the middle of these sounds, Delîl sings the entrance, *ahiiiaaah*. This is followed immediately by an archive recording of his uncle, who sings the song. The sound is cleaned, but one can hear it is an old recording. The singing of Husêno is embellished by Dîlanar with soft drum beats, and one still hears water flowing. After 1.30 minutes, the voice of his uncle stops and Dîlanar continues the song in his younger voice. He sings a stanza, and again his uncle continues with the next. In between of the stanza's Dîlanar already joins in the last sounds of the stanza, when his uncle starts with the chorus. By mixing the voice of his uncle with his own music and voice, Dîlanar makes the voice of the dengbêj accessible to today's listeners.

The CD booklet of this CD gives transcriptions of the kilams, and a text with first some information on the life and works of dengbêj Husêno. The author, Kakşar Oremar, a well-known folklorist who wrote many texts about the dengbêjs, presents him as one of the masters in his art, who helped in protecting Kurdish culture. He is presented as resisting Turkish assimilation politics by refusing to sing in Turkish on a local radio station: "he did not sell his art cheaply" (*hunera xwe bi erzanî nefirot*) and "he did not become a seller of art (*mirovekî hunerfiroş nebû*)." He is also presented as

someone close to nature, his voice displaying "the beauty and smells of the summer pastures and mountains of the homeland (*bedewî û behna zozan û çiyayên welat, di zengilên dengê Husên de tên xuyakirin*)."

The next section of the text is about the content of the kilams. Here the author focuses on the political songs he sang: about the Sheikh Said Revolt, the resistance of Mistefe Barzanî against the Baath regime in Iraq, and some other Kurdish heroes. The text leaves aside any reference to tribal songs. In the next section the author mentions how dengbêj Husêno got known by many people when he performed at the first Newroz (Kurdish Newyear) celebration in Diyarbakır in 1991:

> After the fire of revolution and uprising lit up in the north of the homeland,[381] and after the government displayed a warm attitude against some of the requests of the Kurds (*piştî ku agirê şoreş û serhildanê li bakurê welêt geş bû û dewletê li hemberî hinek daxwazên Kurdan helwesteke nerm nîşan da*), the celebration of Newroz was permitted. At the 1991 Newroz celebration in Istanbul, that was celebrated for the first time by the HEP [Kurdish political party], dengbêj Husêno also came out into the open in front of over 30,000 people. That day the warm welcome of his people for dengbêj Husêno, demonstrated that the Kurds know the value of the dengbêjs and their art very well.

Clearly, the CD booklet expresses the ideology of the Kurdish movement and follows their narratives. In the last section the singer Delîl Dîlanar makes clear that the album is dedicated to dengbêj Husêno, and with him to all other dengbêjs of the previous generation:

> It is not an easy task to be capable of giving the taste of the songs to the people, as he did (*ne karekî hesan e ku mirov bikaribe mîna wî tehma stranê, bide gel*). I did not have the privilege to sing with him, but I hope with this work that the people will listen to my and his voice together. (..) With this album we commemorate once more, with endless respect and honor, the immortal dengbêjs Reso, Şeroyê Biro, Kawîs Axa, Meryem Xan, Evdalê Zeynikê and all other dengbêjs.

Delîl's work paved the way for the young generation of Kurds who were not used to listen to the dengbêj art, to get acquainted with their voices. By adding a musical interpretation to the old voice recordings of his uncle, alternated with his own voice, he makes the dengbêj art more accessible to people who would otherwise find it difficult to listen to the naked voices and the recital style. As one of my Kurdish friends described it: "he introduced the dengbêjs to a whole generation."

As is evident from the language used in this (and other) CD booklets, the music market often reproduced the same social narratives as in other places. At the

381 'The north of the homeland' refers to Kurdistan in Turkey.

same time, the story of Murat Aslan shows that the producers are not only driven by political motives, but also by customer demand. Although this demand also followed upon political developments, an important producer like Murat Aslan did not base his choices solely on cultural activism. He was interested in finding a market for the music he produced. His production firm originated in political engagement; the political climate was so oppressive that without a political motivation he would never have opened it. However, he also followed the wishes of the Kurdish public. Since the renewed interest in the dengbêj art, he had released many more CDs of dengbêj than before. And because he knows that there is a demand for CDs of female dengbêjs, he began searching for them himself so that he can produce their albums.

Conclusion

In this chapter we looked at the various processes, sites and narratives through which the dengbêj art has been transformed into cultural activism. Local activities such as the festival, Kurdish television, the Dengbêj Houses, and the music market in Istanbul, were prepared by international actors who presented the dengbêjs as folkloric subjects, as ambassadors of a Kurdish national culture. The specific way in which the dengbêj art became a project of cultural activism needs to be understood within the context and development of Turkish and Kurdish nationalisms. The dominant nationalist project of the Turkish state turned any Kurdish cultural expression into a subversive act. Harsh oppression made people shy away from performing Kurdishness in public. Since the 2000s the political climate became more amenable to Kurdish cultural production and step by step political activists gained more space within the cultural arena.

The open display of Kurdish language and culture in public life in Turkey became increasingly possible. Activists managed to claim places like the Ishak Pasha Palace where the festival took place and the newly renovated Dengbêj House in Diyarbakır's old city center as Kurdish sites. In Istanbul, Kurdish music producers managed to find a space for Kurdish music CDs in places otherwise dominated by Turkish cultural production. The NÇM cultural center, at the time located on Istanbul's main shopping street, and the Kurdish bookshop, were other places where Kurdishness was made visible. These sites, by their mere presence, openly contested Turkish state nationalism that for almost a century had excluded Kurdish cultural production from public life and denied its existence. However, these activities were still carried out with great difficulty; other people in the state

bureaucracy sabotaged projects, pressed charges against Kurdish politicians and activists, and arrested and imprisoned them. Consequently, for the activists, culture-making was close to being a matter of survival. Their political agenda had grown from decades of oppression and resulted in moral claims on their fellow Kurds from whom they expected total dedication to the Kurdish struggle, which they felt should be everyone's first priority.

Cultural activism was therefore not only directed at finding a space for Kurdishness in public life, but also at influencing Kurds in their way of thinking. The activists who were involved in Kurdish culture making were part of the Kurdish movement and its ideology that had developed moral narratives on what Kurdish nationalism and modernity should be. The narratives developed by the activists on the meaning of the dengbêj art were strongly tied to that ideology and the activists tried to control the "retelling" of the dengbêj art in ways they saw as appropriate for their political agendas. We saw how this retelling of the dengbêj art in terms of heritage, awakening, and being in the service of the Kurdish people, emerged in many places. It was articulated in the speeches of dengbêj Ahmed and the MC at the Festival, in the ideology behind the *Şevbêrk* TV program on dengbêjs, and in how Zana Güneş presented his own life story. Also in the Dengbêj House, the activists expected that the participating dengbêjs would be passionate volunteers devoted to serving the Kurdish people. Zeki Barış felt that some dengbêjs performing at the House had now developed a 'nationalist mindset' that made them much more dedicated and suited to the way the activists wanted to present them to the larger public. In CD booklets dengbêjs were presented as exemplifying 'thousand years old' Kurdish heritage, as mouthpieces of Kurdish suffering, and as part of the Kurdish freedom fight.

When speaking of the dengbêj art, the activists spoke at the same time of their ideas about the Kurdish past, present and future. To them, the dengbêj art holds a mirror up to Kurds in which they can see not only their beauty, but also their flaws. They feel that from this partially flawed history a better future needs to be created. The activists tried to educate the dengbêjs about the problematic side of their kilams, which speak of Kurdish rivalries, treason, and bloodshed, and of a tribal system that they see as wholly outdated in the era of nationalism. The Dengbêj Houses, cultural centers, festivals and television channels functioned as sites where ideological ideas were presented and discussed, and where social narratives were (re)produced, negotiated, and circulated. The strong ideological ideas of the activists caused tensions with the dengbêjs who often had different goals and expectations regarding their performances at these places.

Most dengbêjs were primarily interested in the transmission and performance of their art. The bodily experience of singing the old kilams they had learned when they were young, but had to hide from public life for so many years, was in itself a rewarding experience for them. When singing together, they listened to each other, and they enjoyed following the associations that the kilams brought up. Slowly they remembered more and more kilams that they had once known fluently, but had forgotten in the years of silence. The requirements established for them within the political atmosphere of cultural activism prevented them from such free association and often made them feel obstructed again. This frustrated them and made them feel that they were not valued and recognized enough for their efforts and real talents.

As we saw in chapter 2, although the dengbêjs mostly subscribed to the future ideals of the Kurdish movement, they did not always share their views on the Kurdish past, or at least felt less of a need to omit kilams seen as problematic. Only some dengbêjs who more strongly identified with the Kurdish movement incorporated the new social narratives into their own self-definition. Dengbêj Bêrîvan regarded herself as a spokesperson and example for Kurdish women who had suffered from patriarchal oppression, and saw the PKK leader Öcalan as the one who had opened the way for a different position of women in modern Kurdish society. In a way, her position as a modern female dengbêj in the service of Kurdish politics was a more important quality than her singing as an aim in itself. Aşık Abdullah connected to the ideas of suffering and the united Kurdish struggle for freedom. He hoped that this would also give him access to the music market. His endeavors show that involvement in activism had become an important way to gain access to Kurdish cultural production. Both of them framed their life stories as stories of prior ignorance, a time of awakening, and then service for the Kurdish struggle. However, they were selective in how they used this narrative, and mobilized it for what was important to them. In chapter 3, dengbêj Hamîd also used the narrative of democratization and Kurdish nationalism selectively, by mobilizing it as an appeal for more financial support for the dengbêj art.

This chapter was therefore revealing of how social narratives are created and deployed, and for what meanings they may assume in a society undergoing profound changes. Existing power relations are crucial in determining what narratives are circulated in what way. I follow other authors in their understanding of the Kurdish movement as a loose network of a number of organizations that, although they differed in their objectives and approaches, produced similar narratives, and functioned as a unified voice promoting and supporting Kurdish emancipation in

Turkey. Although there was indeed an increasing diversity of views among political activists, the PKK as the dominant ideological force for two decades was still influential in the way the activists presented their objectives. Decades of oppression, in which precisely these activists had taken a leading role and had suffered for doing so, gave their moral messages a strong claim: they had a certain authority because of their suffering. Also, the narrative of the division and hatred among Kurdish tribes and the failure of the Kurdish rebellions as a consequence thereof, makes it more difficult to come up with alternative viewpoints. In the end, no one wants to be seen as the trouble maker and as the person who destroys Kurdish unity.

If we compare this chapter about the endeavors of political activists, with the first three chapters of the dissertation that focus mainly on the perspective of the dengbêjs, a temporal perspective will help us to appreciate the differences in moral narratives and viewpoints. As I mentioned before, the majority of the political activists belong to the young generation of Kurds that grew up in the 1980s and 1990s that formed the most oppressive and disruptive decades of recent Kurdish history. Growing up with harsh oppression and violence made this generation radical in their battle for Kurdish rights. When after the 1999 arrest of Öcalan the Kurdish movement focused increasingly on peaceful and non-violent negotiation, cultural activism became an important way to place Kurdish language and culture on Turkey's political agenda. Over the last decades the cultural arena offered the best place to achieve increasing rights for Kurds, and also to enhance the influence of Kurdish policy-makers in mainly local politics. We saw in this chapter how slowly the activists' efforts began to bear fruits. Keeping in mind the many difficulties the activists had already gone through on a young age, it is understandable that their primary aim and focus was on gaining increasing Kurdish rights. They regarded strong and outspoken moral viewpoints on what Kurdish society should be and become as the only way to form a unitary front against the dominance and oppression of Turkey's politics regarding the Kurds. The historical moment is thus crucial for the type of moral narratives that emerged, and also for the force with which these moral narratives were brought across. In the following chapter we will see how this historical moment deeply affected the life of a family of dengbêjs, who lived a life on the run.