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

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Figure 27. A family in their living room in a village near Diyarbakır, with Kurdish satellite television in the background.

Chapter 5

Songs crossing borders:
musical memories
of a family on the run

Introduction

Although the institution of the nation-state and its associated political and cultural processes and practices are widely hailed as the most impressive achievement of modernity, statelessness and its consequences are seldom accorded the same privileged position in modern philosophical and political discourse. The stateless person is seen as a relic of the past fighting against modernity, or merely as an accident of modernity fighting against history. (...) The identity and the claims of the stateless are denied by the modern nation-state, which turns the stateless into the historical other of modernity (Abbas Vali 2006: 55).

It was summer 2008. We were sitting on the modest veranda of the village house in Zeban, the village where I had stayed the last four nights. It was the end of the day, just before the dusk arrived. With dengbêj Bahar and her relatives we sat on the carpet typical of all the houses in this region. They were laid out indoors, on the porches, and also outdoors in the gardens, to host the many people who were often around. Apart from dengbêj Bahar there was Murat, her brother-in-law, the owner of the house; her elderly father-in-law who spent most of the day on this porch; Murat's daughter who lived in the neighboring village and whom I could barely understand because she spoke the Kurdish dialect of this village; and Bahar's daughter who had just married her cousin, Murat's son. We gazed at the mountains that surrounded us on all sides, huge and impressive. Arriving by bus from the plain of Van, with the road climbing to Hakkari, and from Hakkari by car another steep and twisting road towards the village, this seemed to be the roof of the world. The highest peaks in this region are above 11,000 feet. The peace of the early evening was betraying us, giving the impression that this beautiful spot in the mountains was indeed a peaceful place. But the nights were filled with fighting, and the days with army vehicles and roadblocks every few kilometers. To our right we looked at the mountains of Iraq, and in the last sunlight we could still read the huge Turkish letters written in white chalk on the hill that formed the border: "the border is our honor."

That day there had been the wedding of a relative. A little later we would go to the house of Murat's sister to eat the wedding dinner. The women were all dressed in the colorful dress style of this region; long petticoats in pink, bright blue, red, green, and over these glittering see-through dresses in the same color. The ones with the most fashionable dresses had bought them in Iraqi Kurdistan which was known for the latest fashion styles and most beautiful fabrics. We dressed in the morning and had danced already the whole afternoon in the playground of the little primary school. The wedding band with *saz* (lute), drum and singer was set up in a corner of the schoolyard and played the latest Kurdish songs. The huge loudspeakers broadcast

the music over the village. To one side the women danced in a large colorful circle, in front a woman who was a good dancer waved a small kerchief to accompany the difficult dances. To the other side the men danced, at times slowly and quietly, at other times wildly and with passion.



Figure 28. Women dancing at a wedding in a village near Hakkari, 2008. They are not the people who told their life story in this chapter.

From afar we heard voices arriving. About forty to fifty men walked in a procession through the village singing the old wedding songs. In front walked the uncle of the groom and another relative, the groom in between them. His parents had died long ago. The groom and the younger men were dressed in suit and tie, the older men in traditional clothes made of Kurdish fabrics; dark green or brown wide overalls that are held up by a long Kurdish shawl in white and black, wrapped around the waist. Another shawl is tied around the head. With deep loud voices the groom's uncles were the first to sing a line which was then repeated by the others in the procession. Neither instruments, or speakers, but only the unaccompanied voices filled these last moments of the day. They passed by greeting us and continued their walk past all the houses of the village; about eighty in all, lined up neatly along three parallel streets. After dinner we returned to the schoolyard and danced, we danced late into the night accompanied by the wedding band that never seemed to grow

tired. Twice the unaccompanied voices came back on stage during a short power cut. The elderly men and women who knew the old songs well immediately took over from the band and the dancing continued. But their voices sounded reluctant and only when the wedding band struck up again, did the dancing revive with full energy.

The following morning we sat on the carpets in the house of our host, it was the day of our departure. This was the first time in many years that dengbêj Bahar had been able to visit her village. The visit was for a sad reason; her sister had suddenly passed away. She was only forty-six years old and had probably died of a heart attack. She was the sister who Bahar especially loved, a woman who was respected by many because of her wisdom. Also, she had had great knowledge of the old traditions, stories and songs. Dengbêj Bahar and her husband dengbêj Cengiz had been granted political asylum in Germany and were not able to enter Turkey legally. Since dengbêj Bahar wanted to return to the village by any means possible now that her sister passed away, she had made the journey with the passport of someone else, a risky journey. But people in this region were used to taking risks of all kinds and did not easily shy away from them. This day she had to leave again, after a stay of six weeks. Her saying goodbye recalled for me all the times she had done so before. Her life had been marked by separation: from her husband, from her village, her relatives, and many others she loved.

Although it was still early in the morning, the sun already burnt outside and the heat slowly entered the house. The women were gathered altogether in the large corridor, the front room of the house. The men sat in the adjoining living room with the door open so that we could see those sitting close to the entrance. In all there were about twenty-five people who came to say goodbye, all present a close relative of dengbêj Bahar. The atmosphere was heavy with grief. People sat silently, speaking softly with each other about things that still needed to be said or arranged or packed. Then Bahar's brother-in-law unexpectedly started to sing in the other room, he sang a lamentation for the deceased. His loud sad voice filled the room where he sat, came to us in the corridor, until it had filled the whole house. As soon as the voice began singing, most women around me began crying. The voice and the words touched on the grief they felt inside. They were mourning for the deceased; for other loved ones who had passed away; for the approaching departure; and maybe also for the difficult life in this village rent by violence. When the song ended everyone stood up to say goodbye. In tears dengbêj Bahar and her daughters got into the car and started the journey that would bring them to Hakkari that day, to Van the next day, and to Germany the day after. They went accompanied by the song that had announced their departure.

This chapter is an important follow up to chapter 4, where I discussed several sites where the dengbêj art is mobilized for cultural activism, constituting a contestation of the dominance of Turkishness in public life. In this chapter I focus on two processes related to that: first the deterritorialization of the Kurdish question and the displacement of many Kurds, and what this has meant for the dengbêj art, and second the ways in which some individual dengbêjs became involved in cultural activism. I present the life stories and songs of three members of a Kurdish family that currently lives in Germany. They originate from a village I call Zeban, located in southeast Turkey, exactly on the Turkey/Iraq border. Their (dis)embodied experience of hearing and singing songs became connected to their displacement. Dengbêj Bahar, her husband dengbêj Cengiz, and their eldest daughter dengbêj Narîn, are well educated in the oral tradition of their village. When they lived in the village their knowledge went unnoticed, but after they had left the village it acquired different meanings. The songs traveled with them on journeys which were mostly caused by ongoing conflict; from Zeban to Iraq, back to Turkey, to Iran, again to Iraq, and finally to Germany where they have lived since 1997. Since they live in Germany, they perform regularly in the *Şevbêrka Dengbêja* television program (chapter 4).

Marginalization and illegality are central to the lives of many Kurds, and also figure in the stories and songs of the family whose lives this chapter examines. Since the village the family comes from is situated on the Turkey-Iraq border, and is also close to the Turkey-Iran border, they did not feel that they belonged to any one of these nation-states in particular. Rather, much of their lives unfolded outside of legal state boundaries. Often they crossed borders illegally, for trade, to escape, or just to visit relatives on the other side. Although their village is located in Turkey, none of the family members has a Turkish passport. Instead, they obtained Iraqi passports during their stay in Iraqi Kurdistan, and German passports since they have lived in Germany. They have lived through all the major wars that have happened in the region during their lifetime, often fighting in, or on the run for, one of them, which meant that they lived in four countries, and sometimes in all simultaneously. For Bahar, Cengiz and Narîn the songs and stories they know, and the way they sang these songs for a large audience on television and on CD, seemed to make a difference in coping with the many hardships they have lived through. In this chapter I argue that the act of performing the songs, and working on archiving them, helps them to piece together the shattered experiences of lives fragmented by loss, violence and departure.

I was introduced to this family in 2007, at the start of my research, by Zana Güneş, the host of the television program *Şevbêrka Dengbêja*. He introduced us because

of their frequent participation in the program, and their profound knowledge of village songs and traditions. Although Güneş introduced them to me as dengbêjs and presents them as such in the TV program, they would not usually be regarded as such in eastern Turkey. This is because they do not sing kilams, the long recital songs that I introduced in chapter 1. Instead, they sing the more rhythmic songs called *stran* that are widely known in their village, and not the exclusive terrain of a specialized singer. This body of songs comprises work songs and wedding songs, lullabies and laments, and songs about the history of the village, the tribe and the region.³⁸² Until today, most people still living in the village know at least some of these songs by heart or are able to sing along with them. In the village such knowledge in itself was thus not seen as very special or remarkable.³⁸³

However, in recent years this knowledge has become more valued because of the increasing attention paid by the Kurdish movement to Kurdish traditions. As I mentioned in chapter 4, Zana Güneş' TV program was an important catalyst for creating a new space for dengbêjs to perform. There I showed how the dengbêjs are presented in the first place as ambassadors of Kurdish culture and as folkloric subjects. The village and its traditions became part of the performance of the essence of Kurdishness and of a Kurdish past. In this process of refiguration not only dengbêjs were invited, but also other people who could sing the songs of their village and region. By calling them dengbêjs, Güneş broadens the dengbêj art to include village traditions that are seen as less prestigious. This decision may have been inspired by several reasons. First, he could not have easily invited dengbêjs living in Kurdistan, and was therefore limited to people living abroad, and within reach of the television station. Second, it is not easy to find many good dengbêjs today. And third, especially female dengbêjs are very difficult to find, but are nonetheless an important focus of the program, the television, and the Kurdish movement generally. It was therefore crucial for Güneş to include women in his program, and to gain the attention of the public for the knowledge they possess, even if this was not usually seen as special. I suggest that this move had an important consequence: by expanding the definition of dengbêj, people who would have otherwise not been seen as sources of important knowledge began valuing and redefining the songs and stories they had once

382 Although the historical songs include topics that are also discussed in dengbêj kilams, the strans are easier to remember and have a less complex structure both in music and in words. One can thus easily separate the two genres: the kilam sung by specialized singers, and the stran by anyone.

383 This does not mean that all people know such a large amount of songs as the family I discuss in this chapter. Many people only know some of them and were used to repeat the songs when they were sung by others, and did not learn them by heart. The people central in this chapter are therefore still special in knowing such a large body of songs. However, they would usually not be regarded as dengbêjs.

learned and felt they could contribute to the preservation and continuity of Kurdish culture and language. The material presented in this chapter suggests that this new appreciation had a special impact on the lives of women.

Another important aim of the chapter is therefore to highlight the differences between male and female experiences with respect to what the songs mean to them and their position as singers. As I explained in the Introduction, I focused during my fieldwork more on men than on women for several reasons. However, the contact with the family in Germany offered the possibility of connecting the predominance of male voices and perspectives in this dissertation to the largely absent female voice. Whereas often in Turkey I encountered resistance to interviewing and recording women, dengbêj Bahar and dengbêj Narîn already had a public visibility when I met them through their TV performances and the CD they had made. They were open and friendly and willing to contribute to my research. I could connect to their life stories and to what they told me about the meaning they found in the songs and stories they know. Both were and are active in remembering and recording the knowledge they have, and both began to value that knowledge increasingly and in a new way after they had come to Germany.

Although this chapter focuses on a family in the diaspora, and on how their stay abroad has influenced the way they value their knowledge, I do not aim to create two distinct categories of people: those who live abroad and those who remain in Turkey. At the outset of my research it had been my objective to write a more comparative work, but while visiting places in Turkey and Europe and listening to people's stories, I felt that such a division into two groups is somewhat artificial. Most Kurds in Turkey lived through similar experiences as Kurds in Europe. Apart from sharing the same upbringing and cultural environment, many Kurds in Turkey also moved out of their village of origin, to one of the big cities of Western Turkey. These are distances of 1200 to over 1500 km. Housing, jobs, and the language of communication are different from what they were used to. Often, living in these cities is as much unlike the life they lived in Eastern Turkey as living in Germany, France or the Netherlands. Kurds living in eastern Turkey often (if not always) have relatives living in western Turkey and Europe. They keep in touch by talking on the phone or via skype, and by visiting their relatives in other places. The lives of their relatives form part of their imaginative and daily life world. For Kurds living in Europe the situation is comparable. They often continue to travel back and forth between Europe and Turkey and have a predominantly Kurdish network, both personally and professionally. Dengbêjs and other singers perform on Kurdish television channels and at festivals, release CDs with Kurdish or Turkish music

companies, and are thus in the first place directed towards Kurdish audiences. It is therefore important to see the interconnections between the (personal and professional) lives of people in Turkey and in Europe. All of this does not deny that the move to Europe often made people develop in ways different from before, and where relevant I pay attention to these.

The chapter unfolds in a way that I feel most appropriate for the material I collected. The ethnographic material consists, on the one hand, of the personal life stories of the family members, and on the other of their accounts about the songs and village life. These were often two quite distinct topics: either we spoke about the one or the other. When speaking about their traumatic experiences of life in a war zone, they usually did not refer to songs or singing, and were fully focused on reliving what had happened. When I asked them during these interviews about the songs, I did not get much response, and they would continue instead to speak about their experiences. The intense experiences required their full attention, and at the end of such interviews we felt tired and emotional, and not in the mood to switch to the topic of songs. When at other times we spoke of the songs this was a very different mode of speaking. The songs were often connected to pleasant memories of celebrations and associations with neighbors, relatives and friends. Also when they were sad songs that brought up sad memories, they seemed to provoke a different type of sadness, more bearable, and more comprehensible. The way they spoke of the songs was often in a nostalgic manner, about a life world they are no longer connected to today. In the chapter I therefore separate these two modes of speaking by first focusing on the background and life stories of the family members, and subsequently on the body of songs they know. I regard these as two different storylines, each of which connects to different types of memories. In the last part of the chapter I bring these two storylines together when writing about the new personal and social meanings the songs obtained. The chapter thus consists of three main parts: 1.the family's history and life stories; 2.the life of the songs; and 3.the meaning their songs obtain today.

5.1 Life in Germany

Currently the family from Zeban lives in Germany, in a town not far from Cologne. When I met them for the first time, one daughter of their six children was already married and lived in a nearby town, the others all lived together. Since that time two other daughters have married and moved out, but they still visit often. The parents have a predominantly Kurdish network in Germany. They do not speak much

German, but speak Bahdinan Kurdish³⁸⁴ as their mother tongue. They often visit relatives in nearby towns, for example a brother of Cengiz with his family. They also know many Kurdish people from other places whom they got to know since they are living in Germany. Their children, born between 1982 and 1995, all went to school here, although the eldest were already in their late teens when they arrived in Germany. But they also made friends at school and have a wider non-Kurdish network than their parents. The income of the family comes partly from a pension that dengbêj Cengiz receives from the Iraqi Kurdistan government (see below), from a kiosk where they sell cigarettes, food and beverages, and alcohol, and from the jobs of the children, who work in various professions. The dominant language spoken at home is Kurdish, and like their parents the children are interested in the Kurdish issue. Some of them expressed interest in moving back to Iraqi Kurdistan or to Turkey. They have plans to join the army there, or to start some type of trade or shop. Cengiz is most eager to move back to Iraqi Kurdistan, but Bahar wants to stay close to her children, at least for now.

The family members regularly visit Turkey and Iraqi Kurdistan, and keep a close connection to their relatives there. When they travel to Iraqi Kurdistan they go to Duhok, a city about 130 km away from the village in Turkey. This is where they lived in the 1990s, and where many people of their village live today. In 2008, Bahar, Narîn, and Guher, a younger daughter, paid a visit to their village in Turkey where they stayed for six weeks. On that visit, Guher got married to her cousin, who thereafter came to Germany. A year later the young couple returned to the village for another visit. In 2009 Narîn visited both the village in Turkey and Duhok, to take care of her grandparents, who were old and in need of care. In 2010 she married an Iraqi Kurd who lived in the same town in Germany. They organized a big wedding in Germany, complete with a hennah night and wedding salon, and some five hundred guests. About ten of the groom's relatives came over from Iraqi Kurdistan to join the wedding. The year after the young couple visited his relatives in Duhok. On this visit dengbêj Cengiz, dengbêj Bahar, and Guher were also in Duhok, where they celebrated Kurdish Newroz. In 2012 the whole family with in-laws, and also the family of dengbêj Cengiz' brother, went for another visit during summer, some by plane, others by car, and they stayed for four to six weeks. The reason for their visit was the celebration of two weddings of close relatives, and of Newroz. In short, although based in Germany, their lives also take place in the village, and even more, in Duhok. Since the visits to the village are not frequent today, the family lives primarily in an urban environment that is quite different from the village life they lived in the past.

384 Bahdinan Kurdish is a Kurmanji dialect that is more influenced by Soranî Kurdish and differs somewhat from the Kurmanji spoken by the majority of Turkey's Kurds

Another important way in which the family stays connected to their home country and to their Kurdish network is through Kurdish television. As far as I could tell from the times I visited, Kurdish television was most watched by the parents, whereas the children showed more interest in German channels. The parents do not speak much German, and also their life world is more connected to Kurdistan than that of their children. Dengbêj Cengiz said about the television:

When there was no Roj TV I could not live for one hour. Also if I watch other programs [on Kurdish channels], I always switch back to Roj TV many times while I am watching. We cannot survive without Roj TV, it is very important. In the past there was nothing for us. There was a Kurdish radio, radio Yerevan, and they spoke Kurdish forty-five minutes a day, Kurdish dengbêjs came there, all the Kurds in the world listened to that. But thank God now we have television. We listen to the news, we see our own people, they show us the whole world, that's why Roj TV is very important to us (Dengbêj Cengiz, interview in Turkish, Germany 2007).

This was in 2007 when I had just gotten to know them. It is clear that Cengiz attached great value to Kurdish television, and indeed when I visited them I got to watch many Kurdish channels, the number of which has exploded over the years.³⁸⁵

5.2 Some historical notes on the village

The village Zeban is situated at less than one kilometer distance from the border with Iraqi Kurdistan. According to dengbêj Cengiz, long ago the forefathers of the village were from the lower Mizûrî tribe,³⁸⁶ but they were incorporated in the Berwarî tribe after they moved into Berwarî territory. Cengiz traveled a great deal in this region and is regarded as a knowledgeable person on the history of the village and the region. He said that there are approximately seventy-five Berwarî villages, all of them situated in Iraq. Zeban was at the northern edge of Berwarî area, and after 1923 the Turkey-Iraq border was drawn exactly through the village. Consequently, one side of the village came to be situated within Turkey's borders and was cut off from Berwarî territory.

The isolated position of the village after the 1923 border made them vulnerable for internal or external conflicts. In cases of conflict the tribe used to play an important role, either to solve internal conflicts, to negotiate with neighboring

385 At the time of writing (2013) there are around sixty Kurdish channels that can be watched through satellite and/or the internet.

386 The *Mizûrî jorî* and *Mizûrî jêrî*, the upper and lower Mizûrî, are a large tribe located in the region of Duhok and Erbil in Iraqi Kurdistan.

tribes, or to defend and fight (see for examples the below section on songs). Kurdistan generally had a certain level of self-government (see Introduction), and this applied especially to regions further removed from the state's center, and high in the mountains. Conflicts were resolved without the interference of state structures, and the tribes functioned as the local political system. After the border was drawn the village was sometimes cut off from its tribal affiliations, at times when border crossings were more difficult to realize. Zeban had an agreement with the neighboring Pinyanişî tribe in case they needed help and could not be supported by the Berwarî tribe further away.

Before 1915 this region was inhabited by a majority of Chaldean Assyrians, a Christian minority in south east Turkey and northern Iraq. Generally Kurds use the word *Fileh* (Christian) for all types of Christians, not differentiating between Armenians, Assyrians or other groups (see also chapter 3). Cengiz referred to these people as *Fileh*, but also said they were Chaldean Assyrians (*Asûrî Keldanî*). According to Cengiz, Zeban was the only Muslim village among twenty Christian villages, and thus in their region the Christians formed the majority. In spite of the conflicts with Christians, people also often talked about positive interactions with the Christians in their region. They visited each other, often shared at least one language,³⁸⁷ attended each other's weddings and celebrations, and Christians often served as *kirve*, the man who holds the young boy during his circumcision and becomes his godfather.³⁸⁸ However, during the 1915 genocide the Assyrians fled and did not return to Turkish territory. Many settled in Iraq where their descendants still live today. Their villages were seized by surrounding Kurds, and until today it is known which neighboring villages were previously Christian. According to Cengiz, and some other people who come from villages in this region, the relationship between Kurds and Assyrians was at times friendly and supportive and at other times hostile. The same applied to relationships among Kurdish tribes.

387 As I noted in chapter 3 in life story 4, Armenians and Kurds living in the same region often learned each other's languages. It seems that the same is true for other Christian groups who shared their territory with Kurds. Chyet (1995: 222) gives examples of people of the Syrian Orthodox church from the Tur Abdin region of Mardin who were completely trilingual in Turoyo, Kurm Kurdish, and Turkish", and from earlier sources he quotes: "All these [Christian] sects also speak fluently the language of the neighbors among whom they live, be it Turkish, Persian, Kurdish, or Arabic. (Joseph 1961:18)" (Chyet 1995: 220).

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From Cengiz' account and from the songs (see below) emerges a picture of a region with a patchwork of Islamic and Christian tribes and villages, of changing alliances among the various factions, and of people sometimes moving from one place to another and from one tribe to the next. Although in Turkey I did not often feel more isolated and far from the nearest town means of transportation than during my stay in Zeban, this suggest a different picture than one would expect from that far away village high in the mountains. In spite of the transportation difficulties that are even very challenging today, people from the Mizûrî tribe in present day Iraqi Kurdistan had moved to Zeban for unknown reasons, and had become incorporated into the Berwarî tribe. Dengbêj Cengiz knew of more examples of such migrations to other regions and other tribes,³⁸⁹ and also van Bruinessen (1992) indicates that the Kurdish tribal structure was far from static. After these migrants from the Mizûrî settled in Zeban, they lived at the edge of Berwarî territory and had therefore also ties with the neighboring tribes in case support was needed. But at the same time there were sometimes conflicts with these tribes and villages. After many Christians left the region during the year 1915, Kurds took over their villages and goods and the composition of the population in the region changed significantly. In the following section I will discuss the more recent history of the village, combined with the family history.

5.3 'Walls were built at the front and rear'. Life in the village Zeban.

Hinderîşê ya gişte / hay meşkê
Her ava bît ya gişte / hay jarê
Shûrhe da ber û pişte / hay meşkê
Hükmete da runîşte / hay jarê

All of the pasture Hinderîşê / oh butter churn
May it remain forever / oh poor one
Walls were built at the front and rear / oh butter churn
Where the soldiers settled / oh poor one

Hinderîşê pawan e / hay meşkê
Her ava bît pawan e / hay jarê
Kivetçera mana / hay meşkê
Hükmet lê bû xwedane / hay jarê

Hinderîşê is [our] property / oh butter churn
May it always remain [our] property / oh poor one
The pasture of [our] lambs / oh butter churn
Has been appropriated by the soldiers / oh poor one

Hinderîşê is the name of Zeban's summer pasture where in summer the shepherds went to herd their livestock, the milkmaids to milk, and women to gather herbs and plants that can only be found high in the mountains. Generally, people have good memories about the warm summer days when they spent time in the

³⁸⁹ Dengbêj Cengiz mentions other villages from which he knows the people come from elsewhere and from other tribes. After their migration to the new village they became incorporated in local tribes.

cooler pastures in the mountains. The above *meşk* song (a song sung while making yoghurt, see below) tells about the closure of the summer pasture by soldiers, and expresses the wish that their pasture will remain forever theirs. Also in other areas the military presence increasingly influenced village life. Because of its proximity to the border the village was more affected than villages that were not near the border. Apart from 'national' duties such as schooling, military service and identity registration, the village was also affected by the various military stations built in the near environment, by clashes between the military and the PKK, and by the many military checkpoints. By contrast, education and bureaucratic facilities were not easily accessible because of the village's distance from a larger town. Contacts with the state were therefore largely negative. The military presence also influenced the chance to make a good living. Jobs were and are very scarce, cattle breeding and agriculture are only possible on a very small scale due to lack of water and land; both already meager resources have to be shared with the military. In spite of the accompanying dangers, smuggle is a lucrative business in this region. The villagers do not perceive the border as legitimate. Rather, they see it as an obstacle that needs to be overcome, a barrier put up by unfortunate historical and political circumstances.

Over the years, especially after 1980, life in the village became increasingly violent, the young family had to escape because of conflict, and, both for them as well as for the villagers remaining behind, the village increasingly fell apart. Step by step the military presence hampered daily life, until in 1993 Zeban was burned down³⁹⁰ and all villagers left for other places.³⁹¹ A (former Christian) settlement nearby served as host village for many people. In 2004 the village was rebuilt by a government return-project. Slowly the villagers returned and rebuilt their lives next to the ruins of the former village. In this section I investigate how village life in Zeban evolved under these circumstances, and follow the stories of the Zeban family through which we learn how they dealt with and went through all these events. In the next section I

390 "As part of its counter-insurgency operations, Turkish Armed Forces evacuated and destroyed rural settlements on a large scale. According to official figures, 833 villages and 2,382 small rural settlements (...) were evacuated and destroyed. (...) In other words, around a quarter of all rural settlements in the east-southeast region of Turkey were emptied. Numbers provided by the Human Rights Association (HRA) and the Kurdish Human Rights Project (KHRP) suggest that most evacuations occurred in the period 1991-1995, peaking in 1993-1994" (Jongerden 2010: 79).

391 "A typical village evacuation would proceed as follows. Villagers would be put under pressure to join the so-called village guards. If they refused and did not leave their village after warnings and pressure, then regular soldiers and/or special teams would one day enter the village and order the village chief (the *muhtar*) to gather the inhabitants and evacuate the settlement. Sometimes villagers were given the opportunity to collect their belongings, but often the village was plundered or soldiers would begin firing at the houses and set fire to them together with their contents. Livestock would be stolen or shot, orchards and crops burned. The villagers would take refuge in a nearby town, later moving to a main city in the region" (Jongerden 2010: 81).

pay attention to the narrative structure of their stories and to the differences in how each of them talks about similar experiences.

Cengiz was born in 1965, Bahar in 1968, both in this village. They are cousins. Their childhood “passed by like that of every other village child”, as Cengiz said. Bahar’s father passed away when she was still a child, and after her mother left the village for her second marriage, she remained behind and lived with her uncle. The village was quite isolated; it was 70 km away from the nearest larger town Hakkari, there were no cars, nor car roads, and there was no electricity. Under these circumstances leaving the village was a major undertaking, and “there were people who could never go to Hakkari during their lives.”³⁹² There were about hundred and thirty houses when they were young, against about eighty today.³⁹³ A primary school was erected in 1968. Cengiz went to school from 1971-1975, but Bahar did not attend school. Although Cengiz went to school he never received a diploma as he was not registered as a Turkish citizen. His father is from Turkey, but his mother from Iraq, and in spite of the efforts of his father who tried to negotiate with the municipality, they did not succeed in registering their children until 1976.³⁹⁴ In 1981, when Bahar was fifteen years old and Cengiz seventeen, a marriage was arranged between them. Apart from being cousins, Cengiz was also the brother of the husband of Bahar’s sister.³⁹⁵

The village owned many fields and a good summer pasture. The villagers lived from farming and stock breeding, but many also made a living from border trade. Cengiz:

We have many mountains and summer pastures. Still we had only twenty, thirty or forty head of livestock. (...) If you had livestock, you had to bring it to graze, but when you brought hundred kg of tea to Iraq and you sold it, it was enough. The people at the border did not have that much livestock. Because there was the border crossing, there were things that were not available in Turkey, and there were things that were not available in Iraq, there was profit in both of them, so because of that we did not own that much livestock. It was too much effort (dengbêj Cengiz, interview in Kurdish, Cologne 2009).

392 Interview conducted in Germany with Cengiz in 2009, in Kurdish.

393 According to the information I got from my informants villages were generally (but not always) much larger when they were young than today. Most of the villages have at least halved in size. Many villages in southeastern Turkey also ceased to exist because of the military operations in 1993/4.

394 Cengiz’s father tried to register his children at the municipality but did not succeed. At the Turkish countryside children were often not registered, or got registered only a long time after they were born. The reasons were a.o. the distance of the municipality and lack of money. Also boys were often registered younger of age than they actually were so that they were able to postpone the military service.

395 Marriages between two sisters and two brothers are common in the Kurdish region. In Kurdish this practice is called “*berdel*” (Yücel 2006)

During his childhood years Cengiz worked as a shepherd to herd the goats and sheep of his family. In 1980 he started smuggling, when border crossings became possible after a long period of conflict and heavy military presence at the Iraqi side. Cengiz:

When I was about fifteen years old, in 1980, our border to Iraq was opened. The war between Iraq and Iran started, and the Iraqi soldiers were withdrawn. So there were not many soldiers left and we could now go to Iraq. In that time we bought goods in Turkey: fabric, shirts, seeds, livestock and animals. We bought them and sold them in Iraq. The situation in Iraq was good; there was a lot of money (dengbêj Cengiz, interview in Kurdish, Cologne 2009).

Although border crossings were still illegal and done at night, and although smuggling trips were harsh and filled with risks, young men preferred such trips over the more boring village jobs. Together with companions Cengiz traveled to Van (a 250 km distance from the village), Diyarbakir (570 km) and even to Gaziantep (775 km) and Adana (1000 km) to buy goods and animals. Between Hakkari and the other cities the trip was done by minibus, bus or car. From Hakkari to the village, and from the village to Iraq, the transport was by foot. They transported the goods first to the village and from there crossed the border at night with their goods loaded on donkeys. In the case of livestock (mostly goats and sheep), they herded the animals to the other side. In Iraq they sold the goods or animals, bought new ones to sell in Turkey, and returned. Apart from smuggling activities, the village also has a history of people frequently migrating to and from Iraq. Cengiz:



Figure 29. A woman taking care of goats in late afternoon in a village near Hakkari, 2008.

Everyone who left the village [had a reason]. In the first place everybody had to go in the military and stayed there for two to three years. During that time they did not have money, nor could they go on leave. Many escaped from that situation and went to Iraq. In the second place, Iraq was rich. And our village was from the Berwarî tribe. For that reason when people planned to leave the village, they did not go to the big cities of Turkey like Ankara and Istanbul, [but] they went to Iraq. In Iraq life was good. There was a lot of money, you can make a living there. That was before me, in the time of my grandparents. (dengbêj Cengiz, interview in Kurdish, Cologne 2009).

Depending on the relationship with the Turkish and Iraqi commanders, border crossings were sometimes allowed and sometimes forbidden, though always illegal via this route. When they were allowed the villagers would pay some money or goods to the commanders. This situation continues until today. For example, when I was in the village in 2008, relatives from Iraq crossed the border to attend a wedding, and the daughter of Bahar crossed the border to visit her relatives in Iraq. The border crossings were arranged with the military commander in exchange for some money, and thus could be done in daylight without any danger. When I visited the family in Germany in autumn 2009, I learned that the contacts between the villagers and the commanders had deteriorated and that it was again forbidden to cross the border. Those who wanted to visit the other side thus crossed the border at night. This is dangerous because of the general unrest in the region and also because of the many landmines. Besides for reasons of business, border crossings are also undertaken for many other reasons among which is family visits, weddings and celebrations, men who wish to find a marriage partner, and escape from conflicts with relatives or the government.

After Bahar and Cengiz married in 1981 they went to live in a house of their own. Their first two daughters were born there. Cengiz continued with border trade until 1984 and was often away on his trips. Bahar said that life in the village was most difficult for her in the years between 1980 and 1984. Although also before that time there was violence because of the presence of many soldiers in and around the village, this increased after 1980:

At that time, I mean from what I remember, from 1980 to 1984 there was a lot of violence. People could not even leave their homes. Women could not leave. Spring came, summer came, the women could not go out alone to the fields. The oppression was very harsh at that time. After six or seven o'clock in the evening no one could go out of the house (dengbêj Bahar, interview in Kurdish, Cologne 2009).

People were afraid to go outside because they would be easy prey for soldiers who, according to Bahar, 'regarded themselves as the law'. They bullied people, they stole their goods, and they raped women who were out alone. This situation changed, she said, after the PKK came; because of the presence of the PKK the soldiers were afraid

to go out on their own, and could not treat the villagers as they did before. But from the numerous incidents all family members gave of mistreatment, conflict and war also after 1984, the overall situation seems to have gotten worse rather than better.

Yalçın-Heckmann (2010) did research in a village in the same region, which she calls Sisin, and writes about the reasons for the increasing violence. The village she writes about is at approximately 50 km distance from Zeban. According to her, there was not much violence before the 1980-coup:

“In the area in which Sisin is situated there was hardly any political violence before the military coup in 1980. However, the Barzani-movement of the 1970s and its collapse appealed strongly to people in this area, many of whom actively participated. Many villagers and members of tribes became strongly politicized because of the Barzani movement and the war in north Iraq. The political culture that was shaped by the image of romantic desperadoes (*eşkiya*) found its equivalent in the image of the Peshmerga (lit. “be doomed to die”, i.e. Kurdish fighter).” (pp.226, translated from German).

She explains the violence in Sisin after 1980 by the influence of the Barzani movement in this region. Zeban was affected by the same development, but had been under military control much earlier than Sisin, because of its location on the border. The presence of a military station next to their village, and its location on the border, may explain the already disruptive times in Zeban before 1980, in contrast to the overall peaceful situation in Sisin.

In 1984 there were serious disagreements between Cengiz and his brothers, and one or more other villagers. These villagers complained about Cengiz and his brothers to the military about their alleged help to a wounded PKK fighter.³⁹⁶ Cengiz and Bahar strongly denied the accusation, and say the men who accused them were from a family of troublemakers and traitors who not only caused problems for them, but also for other people in the region. Two of Cengiz’s brothers were arrested, jailed and tortured. Cengiz managed to escape to a village of the Berwarî tribe in Iraq, about 3 to 4 hours on foot from their village of origin. Because of this history Cengiz has not been able to return to his village until today. In the same year Cengiz joined the peshmerga army in Iraq that stood under the leadership of Mullah Mustafa Barzani.

396 Such accusations were common since the PKK had established a firm grip on the countryside. “From 1990 to 1992, the PKK established control over much of the countryside in the (primarily) Kurdish region of Turkey. In PKK-terms, these were considered ‘semi-liberated zones.’ In these areas - large parts of the provinces of Hakkari, Van, Şırnak, Siirt, Batman, Diyarbakır, Bingöl – the PKK established a permanent presence. The region was essentially controlled by a network of guerilla units. These had their own local bases, but were also in regular (near daily) contact with other local guerilla forces, and sometimes even lodged them in the small rural settlements in the area. These hamlets and villages provided not only shelters, but also intelligence, recruits, and food supplies” (Jongerden 2010: 83).

The Barzani peshmergas were initially the most influential movement fighting for Kurdish rights in Iraq,³⁹⁷ although their authority was later contested by Talabani peshmergas. During the first half of the twentieth century, the Barzanis had made a name for themselves because of their revolts against the Iraqi government. Mullah Mustafa became the face of Kurdish resistance.³⁹⁸ In 1961 the Kurdistan Democratic Party “tried to forge a regular Kurdish fighting force, and those who enrolled became known as *peshmergas* (those who face death)” (McDowall 1996: 311). In 1975 they numbered over 50,000 trained peshmergas, and another 50,000 irregular forces (McDowall 1996: 337). They were supplied with weapons by Iran, that hoped to be able to topple the Baath regime. The following decades were characterized by wars and peace negotiations, and by the increasing Kurdish division into two camps. In 1975 Talabani founded a rival party, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), which gathered its own peshmerga army. The involvement of Cengiz in the Barzani movement is indicative of the complex situation of Kurds living in this border region. He was sought in Turkey for his assumed protection of PKK fighters and fled to villages of his tribe on the other side of the border. Since these villages were close to Barzan, and affiliated with the Barzani tribe, he became involved in Barzani’s KDP, rather than in the PUK camp more to the south.³⁹⁹

On his arrival, the Kurdish conflicts were at their peak both in Iraq and in Turkey. Bahar and their two children followed him soon afterwards, and for four years the family lived in the village just on the other side of the border. However, although safe from the hands of Cengiz’s enemies, it was far from a peaceful stay. The border region served as a base for Barzani’s peshmergas, and as a battleground of which both Iraq and Iran attempted to get hold.⁴⁰⁰ Because of the war between

397 Its influence in Iraqi Kurdistan stemmed from the early 20th century leadership of the naqshbandi sheikh Ahmad Barzani over a number of villages around Barzan, a village in northern Iraq on a less than 100 km distance from Zeban. Like many other chiefs at the time, his territory was in name incorporated in the Iraqi state, but in practice it formed an autonomous region.

398 He had fought in the 1932 conflict with the Iraqi army, and he had been one of the marshalls of the Mahabad Republic, a short-lived Kurdish republic in Iran in 1946. After the defeat of the republic by Iranian troops, he escaped with his troops to the Soviet Union. Their march through the border lands of Iraq, Turkey and Iran, followed by the Iranian army, gained a legendary status. After the 1958 coup in Iraq the new prime-minister invited the Barzanis to return to Iraq. However, this initially friendly relationship soon turned into a conflict, and in the early 1960s they were again on the rebel side.

399 The KDP’s following consisted mainly of the Kurmanji speaking Kurds of Bahdinan in the north, whereas the PUK’s following consisted of the Sorani speaking Kurds in the south. Another important force were the pro-government Kurdish *jash* troops. Although they are often seen as collaborators, it also occurred that *jash* secretly sided with one of the peshmerga camps.

400 Starting in the late 1970s, and continuing until the Anfal campaign, the Iraqi army tried to weaken Kurdish resistance by razing villages, by chemical attacks, by a scorched earth policy, and by mass executions and deportations.

Iraq and Iran the peshmerga had been able to occupy this territory. Cengiz: “That time was very bad, because also the government of Iraq was bombarding us, sending us planes, and at the same time we also could not go to Turkey. It was very bad.” The system of the peshmerga was arranged in such a way that every soldier spent one month with the peshmergas and the next month at home. Meanwhile, Bahar and the three children, with the third one born in Iraq, lived under very stressful and difficult circumstances in the village. Bahar:

There were no soldiers but planes dropped bombs. Not a day passed without planes coming three or four times. They threw bombs, the planes came, we could not do anything, all the time we had to flee, the children were running away by themselves, at that time we have seen many bad things. (Did this continue for a long time?) Yes from 1984 that we came until 1988. (So it continued for four years, this situation?) Yes at the time it was very difficult (dengbêj Bahar, interview in Kurdish, Cologne 2009).

The conflict with the Iraqi government culminated in the Anfal campaign in 1987/8,⁴⁰¹ and the family was forced to escape and return to Zeban. Cengiz: “In 1988 the war between Iran and Iraq finished. The whole government of Iraq returned, and came over us. With planes, with chemical [weapons] they attacked us. So we left the village in Iraq, we abandoned it. It was during the Anfal.” Cengiz crossed the border in secret and hid in a cave nearby the village, while the others stayed openly in the village. This was again a fearful time because the Turkish soldiers were searching for Cengiz, and appeared regularly at the family home to see if he was there. Narîn, who is the oldest child and therefore of all the children experienced the most of the bad times, tells of the return to Zeban:

They first try to save the children to bring them to a quieter place. And I can remember that my father brought us by horses, and in the past you know there were no cars. We were first on foot, and then he put us on horses and that's how we went to Zeban. I can never forget that day. (How old were you there?) I really don't know. My father always says that I was seven or eight when we went to Iran, so at that time I must have been five or six. But I don't know. When I look back on how my father brought me and my sister and my brother, he brought us to Zeban and went back to get my mother. (..)

When we were still in [the Iraqi village across the border], my mother somehow was not as afraid as all the other women. My aunt always took us and brought us to a hiding place under the earth. Any time when they heard something from bombs or weapons they first took us children and I can remember that we always first went to those hiding places under the earth and my mother always stayed at home.

⁴⁰¹ The Operation Anfal was a series of seven operations “of major assaults on peshmerga controlled areas, using chemical and high explosive air attacks” (McDowall 1996: 359). McDowall (1996) lists that approximately 150,000 to 200,000 people were killed; 4,000 villages were destroyed; and over 1,5 million people forcibly resettled. Over half of the entire Kurdish region had been cleared of Kurds.

Everybody was afraid to go out, but my mother always just continued with her normal daily duties. (...) She just continued. And we were really afraid. I can never forget those voices, from the bombs and from how the people were screaming (you were also so young!) Yes I was so little, I was a child, but those were things.. I forgot many things from my childhood, but these I never forgot. How my aunt took us, and how my father brought us from [the village in Iraq] to Zeban. And then my father left. And as far as I remember we were just always afraid. We were hiding ourselves. And we thought my father is gone, but actually he was not gone, he was also in hiding in Zeban. For a long time we did not see him. (...) I remember from a few times that they [the soldiers] came to our house and just opened the door and entered. It was so bad, they also did not think something like 'oh my God there are children here, maybe they will be afraid', they didn't care at all. They came in with dirty shoes, checked everywhere in the house, and they were threatening us: 'when you don't tell us where he is we will also arrest you!'. (And they were soldiers?) Yes they were Turkish soldiers. And my grandmother was always bringing messages to my father how it was going and whether he could come out. And when it turned out that it was not anymore possible, because they were searching for my father everywhere, then he left for Iran. And then, I cannot remember everything, but after my father left we also had to leave (dengbêj Narîn, interview in German, Cologne 2011).

After some months Cengiz left for Iran, away from the problems in the village. Bahar and the children remained in the village. Over there twins were born of which only one survived. Cengiz's father gave them revealing names: State and Country, because, so he said, the Turkish state had made Cengiz leave for another country. The state structures would continue to affect the life of the family in the years to come.

The choice to support the one or other party, army or group was mainly related to one's nearest tribal and national ties. Although living in Turkey, Cengiz was more informed about the Iraqi than about the Turkish situation, apparently because most of the Berwarî tribe was settled there. On the other hand, not many people of the village joined the peshmerga, and the first reason why Cengiz left Zeban to fight was because he was sought after in Zeban. When I asked him what knowledge he had at the time of the political situation he replied:

At that time, someone like me, I knew about the states that were against the Kurds, that were enemies of the Kurd. I knew there was Mustafa Barzani who fought against the government of Iraq. Our villages also went, especially the villages that were on the border, they were peshmergas and went to fight, against the Iraqi government. (In which year was that?) In 1973/4/5 and 1966/7, when the movement started. After that Mullah Mustafa went to Russia and the movement fell apart. In 1971 he returned, he returned in 1966. The movement started. The people fought against the Iraqi government. At first I thought that Iraq was our only enemy. I didn't know that the biggest enemy was Turkey, and Iran, and Syria, because at that time the movement was only in Iraqi Kurdistan. Until the PKK also started the movement in 1985 in Kurdistan in Turkey. Again there was a broad revolution (dengbêj Cengiz, interview in Kurdish, Cologne 2009).

From the sentence “I didn’t know that the biggest enemy was Turkey, and Iran, and Syria” we can assume that Zeban’s inhabitants were predominantly connected with the Berwarî in Iraq, and not with their neighbors within Turkey’s borders. With the beginning of PKK fighting, dengbêj Cengiz became more aware of other ‘enemies’. Even though he did not have direct connections with the PKK, Cengiz claims that he was supportive of them if only because of their resistance against the Turkish regime that troubled the village so much. He also says that his and other people’s support grew tremendously because of the way the Turkish soldiers treated people after the PKK began their revolution. “Why did the PKK become strong and big? Until 1988 it was still very small. [But] the Turkish government oppressed the people, tortured them, threw them in the prison of Diyarbakır.” He connects the support for the PKK to his own experiences with the soldiers, that caused him to escape and his brothers to be arrested and tortured. After the accusation of the brothers and the arrest, it was logical that Cengiz chose to escape across the Iraqi border, as it had always been the escape route of the village. Across the border Cengiz had relatives and friends, and he had a good network because of his many smuggling visits to the Iraqi side. He explains that each group was fighting against its own government:

We fought against Iraq. We were at the border. We were there and we fought against Iraq. The PKK came up and fought against Turkey. And there were the Democrats from Iran, they fought against Iran. Each part was fighting against its own government. Many times the enemy forces united and fought against the Kurds. At that time the Kurds also united and fought together. (..) It also happened that Kurds fought among each other (dengbêj Cengiz, interview in Kurdish, Cologne 2009).

In 1989 Bahar and her four children left the village and followed Cengiz to Iran. They left one daughter behind because they could not cross the border with too many people. Again they had to go illegally, and by night. They paid smugglers to help them across. In Iran the family enjoyed a few peaceful years. They stayed in Naghadeh, a Kurdish town not far from the border. For the first time, the children went to school, “and somehow our life became normal” (Narîn 2011, interview in German). For three years Cengiz stayed in Iran,⁴⁰² and he and his family had a more regular life. But in 1991 Cengiz was summoned to return to Iraq and join the peshmergas. The Kurdistan Front⁴⁰³ saw its chance when most Iraqi troops left the

402 Peshmerga activity continued during those years. “With the threat of chemical weapons, and an almost universal absence of habitation, the Kurdistan Front now waged war by lightning raids and ambushes, without holding any territory at all. Both parties set up food and weapons caches in the mountains for the hundreds of guerillas still willing to fight” (MacDowall 1996: 368).

403 The Kurdistan Front was a joint force founded in 1987 of Barzani peshmergas, Talabani peshmergas, and smaller Kurdish factions.

Kurdish region to fight in the Gulf War.⁴⁰⁴ But with Saddam's defeat of the war, his army returned to the north and attacked the rebels with full force. Against the expectations of the Kurdistan Front, they did not receive US support. "Mass panic and flight gripped all Kurdistan. Over 1,5 million Kurds abandoned their homes in a mad stampede to reach safety either in Turkey or Iran. (...) The rebel forces largely disintegrated as fighters rushed to escort their families to safety" (McDowall 1996: 373). In 1991 the Safe Haven was declared, and accepted by Saddam later that year. In the meantime, Bahar and the children had followed Cengiz to Iraq which was in total turmoil. Refugees came from everywhere, and often stayed in the small house where the family now lived.



Figure 30. Women resting after a late lunch in a village near Hakkari. 2008. They are not the people who told their life story in this chapter.

When Zeban was burned down in 1993 due to the villagers' refusal to become village guards (armed villagers who were paid for their assistance of the armed forces),⁴⁰⁵ Cengiz's two brothers and their families came to Iraq and lived with them in the house for one year, one room for each family. After a year the family moved

404 After Saddam's defeat, many soldiers deserted, and the majority of pro-government *jash*-forces joined the Kurdistan Front.

405 "The system of village guards, *Korucular*, was established in conjunction with the abandonment of the old garrison system (...) and incorporated into the organization of the Turkish Armed Forces" (Jongerden 2010: 88).

out of their house and bought another house, the uncles remaining behind in the old house. But the Safe Haven did not bring the peace people had hoped for. Internal rivalry led to another series of clashes in the years to come, this time between the PUK and PDK.⁴⁰⁶ Sick of war, in 1996 Cengiz fled to Germany. When I asked him if he had not wanted to stay in Iraq he replied:

No I didn't want. I wanted to stay but it was not a good situation. Life was difficult. We were up in arms again and there were fights between brothers. (Again there was war?) Yes again there was war, among ourselves, Kurds against Kurds. There was the war of the parties, and of the PKK, it was a bad situation. I did not want to fight again, because all my life passed by in wars. So I didn't like it. But I got a chance and went to Europe. Until May 1997 [I was alone], then Bahar and the children came. During the time in between I had received political asylum (dengbêj Cengiz, interview in Kurdish, Cologne 2009).

Apart from the oldest daughter Narîn, who stayed behind in Iraq and would arrive in Germany three years later, all family members managed to go to Germany legally because of Cengiz's political asylum. After Zeban was burned down, two of Cengiz's brothers went to Iraq, and another brother went to Hakkari. Bahar's sister lived in Hakkari as well. But many villagers, among whom Cengiz's parents and his youngest brother, had moved to the nearby village Kevra. Bahar and the other children visited Kevra in 1996. Narîn went more often and stayed also after that visit for many months in this village, as we will see below. In a way, the village Zeban had not stopped to exist after its destruction. Many people continued their lives in the same region, and would later return to the Zeban area where they would rebuild the village from scratch.

In the 2000s the Turkish government started so-called return projects, in which people from villages that were destroyed in the 1990s were allowed to return to their villages, on the condition that they support the Turkish government in their struggle against the PKK. In return for such support the villagers received new houses, a sum of money to build the village again, a monthly salary far above the average income in the region, and weapons. Some of the former inhabitants of the village Zeban decided to accept the offer and settled again in their village of origin. Under the government project, about eighty similar houses were built in three parallel streets.⁴⁰⁷ At the time of my visit the vegetation was slowly returning and outside of the village there were new vegetable gardens. The village looks very

406 Apart from the PUK and KDP, also the IMK (Islamic Movement Kurdistan) joined in fighting in 1994. In 1997, the KDP attacked PKK forces coming in from Turkey. The rivalry was thus larger than only between PUK and KDP, but they were the main rivals.

407 According to the villagers the government failed to keep their promises in many ways. A lot of money that was meant for construction disappeared, and the houses are therefore much simpler than the people expected.

different from what it was in the past and from other ‘natural’ villages in the region. Apart from the lack of older vegetation, all houses are exact copies, built in neat rows, very untypical for ‘normal’ villages. Also its inhabitants are not the same as before; many of the previous inhabitants live now in Duhok in Iraq and in Hakkari in Turkey, and there are some newcomers.

As in many other villages in Turkey, people who migrate to other places are still counted as part of the village. “We have this many houses in Duhok, this many houses in Hakkari, and this many houses in Germany.. etc.”. The village becomes an imagined community with at its core the geographic locality of the original village (even when it ceases to exist), and as its extension the communities in other regions and even countries (Anderson 1984). So although the village was totally destroyed and transformed into a military zone during the 1990s, the imagined village continued to exist. And although the Bahar and Cengiz and their family were not able to return to their village of origin, they could build up a life that was connected to that village by settling in Duhok in 1991.

5.4 Experiencing borders

In this section I investigate the ways dengbêj Bahar, dengbêj Cengiz and dengbêj Narîn tell their life stories. On the one hand all three share many similar experiences, and lived through many events together; on the other hand each of them has a different story to tell about his or her particular perception and understanding of how events unfolded. As I argue in the next section, the songs and performances seem to create a place of expression in which their life experiences become more comprehensible, unified and acceptable, and through which they can retrieve positive memories which in other ways are not always easily accessible. ‘Experiencing borders’ not only refers to the dominant presence of political borders in this family’s lives, but also to their personal experiences of fragmentation and trauma due to their being continuously on the move. The songs and their singing activities traveled with them across all borders and were always there as an anchor to hold on to. Their activities on television reinforced this function of the songs. By investigating these personal experiences with borders I aim to understand better what personal and imaginative work the songs do for them, and for the audiences of the television program in which they perform.

When in 2007 I visited the family for the first time I only stayed for one evening, and we did not yet know each other. I interviewed Bahar and Cengiz together.

They told me about village life, and about the many situations in which songs were sung and composed. They spoke of different performers and their positions. They summarized how their lives passed by, and told me how they ended up performing on television, and what this meant for them. Later I interviewed Bahar, Cengiz and Narîn separately, each of them twice. In the first interview we talked in-depth about their individual life experiences, on which most of this section is based. In the second interview we talked about the songs they know. Numerous times we also shared personal experiences in other situations than in interview settings, and we wrote down and translated songs at quiet times at home. My analysis for this section is therefore specifically based on the three individual interviews that were most personal, but is naturally also informed by all other encounters we had.

Reading through the three interviews there are some things that struck me. First, as I also observed in chapter 3, each of the interviews contains themes that reappear frequently. Second, Narîn's interview is the longest with the least number of questions from my side, mostly guided by her own storyline, whereas the interviews with Bahar and Cengiz are shorter and more guided by my questions. Third, the interviews with Bahar and Narîn were emotional and intense, both for me and for them,⁴⁰⁸ whereas the interview with Cengiz was more factual and lighter. This may be related to the fact that Bahar was present at Cengiz's interview, whereas in the case of the interviews with Bahar and Narîn we were alone.⁴⁰⁹ Although she was half asleep and on the other side of the room, I had the impression Cengiz did not want to go into too many painful details because he thought it might have been unsettling for her. Other reasons may have been the larger distance between him and me because of the gender difference, and the reluctance of showing too many emotions as a man.

In all interviews the experience of being continuously on the move dominates, but is differently valued. The prevalent theme in Bahar's interview is the experience of being alone, of being confused because of the many times she had to gather her children together and flee, and of the disrupting influence caused by the presence of soldiers and war. For Narîn, the most significant theme that came up in the interview is the feeling of having to leave all the time, and of how fearful she felt in the often life threatening moments. For Cengiz, the interview is dominated

408 Sharing emotional experiences was not easy because it brought alive the memories that were often not on the surface. As interviewer and friend I felt connected to the stories and also partly responsible for the emotions they brought up.

409 Although I sometimes asked to be one to one with the respondent, I did not always do this out of fear of being impolite, and I did not often pose this question in the case of men because I was afraid this was not fitting cultural expectations.

by accounts of the many border crossings and also of the advantages that living in a border region had. Let us look at how these themes variously come up in the interviews.

Dengbêj Bahar

To my question about how her childhood had passed by, Bahar began the interview⁴¹⁰ by speaking of the early loss of her father, the remarriage of her mother who could not take her with her, and how alone she had felt. Her mother could only take her youngest daughter with her, and left Bahar and her older sister behind. Bahar therefore grew up first with her uncle, and later lived with her newly-wed sister.

I don't remember much of my childhood, only a little bit. I was alone. My father had passed away, I have never seen him, I was very small when he passed away. My mother remarried. I remained on my own. I stayed alone with my uncle. (You grew up at your uncle's?) Yes I grew up at my uncle's, I stayed there until I was about ten years old. Around that time I went to my sister. My sister had married the brother of Cengiz. I stayed with them until I was sixteen or fourteen years old. And then I married with Cengiz. (So you were still very young..) Yes, because I had no one.

She felt no one could give her the care she needed, which made her marry at a very young age, and also meant that she could not go to school. She told me that growing up without her parents had often made her feel lonely and unsupported.

She continued her story by telling about the many times when soldiers mistreated people in the village, and how several times they entered and took the houses upside down where she lived, during her childhood and also after marriage. At several moments in the interview she described the feeling of a loss of control in these situations and the inability to do anything to prevent the behavior of the soldiers:

-At that time there was a lot of violence. Nobody dared to do anything.

-People could not even leave their house.

-Many many times, I have seen it with my own eyes, the government, the soldiers came into the house, they beat up the men, women didn't know what to do. They brought the men to the police. They beat up the women many times, and nobody could do anything against it.

She opposed the people's inability to react to the control of the soldiers, "who could do anything they liked." When speaking of their experiences as a family she said that they got stranded in Iraq after Cengiz was betrayed by a co-villager:

⁴¹⁰ All quotes in this section are taken from an interview with dengbêj Bahar in Cologne in 2009 in Kurdish.

We could only be there. We could not go to Turkey. We could not go to Duhok because of the government and Saddam. In the village where we stayed were the houses of the Peshmerga, there was war, planes came, there were illnesses. That's how my life passed by for four years.

They could not go anywhere else, even though the place where they stayed was filled with war, air strikes and disease. Bahar apparently often felt the victim of circumstances over which she had very little influence. This feeling was reinforced by the absence of her husband who could not take care of his family in what were already unbearable circumstances. Of Cengiz's escape from the village she says:

Cengiz escaped, and we stayed behind without 'owner' [head of the household]. One of his brothers was a soldier. We were left without owner, we were hungry. It was winter, there was a lot of snow, we were in very bad trouble.

Even though they stayed in the house of her parents-in-law, Bahar felt left 'without owner' because Cengiz was not around, and fearful she would be unable to manage without him. About the frequent absence of Cengiz, who stayed one month at home and one month in the peshmerga for many years, she comments:

Half of my life, and of my children, I could not feed them, half of the time their father was present, half of the time he was not present. He was in the Peshmerga, one month he was at home and one month he was there. When he went to Iraq we returned to Zeban. When we went to Iraq he went to Iran. When we went to Iran he went to Iraq. When we went to Iraq he went to Europe. Our life was like that all the time.

Whenever the family followed Cengiz, they still did not manage to stay together. Apart from his frequent absence because of his being a peshmerga, there was also always something happening that meant he needed to leave again for other places, whereas she stayed behind with the children. She also describes the traumatic effects of war at several points in the interview, and what this meant for her:

- All my life, since I exist, I am a human being, I have seen every war, until 1991.
- Every day my family and my children, we were running away to the mountains, to the trees.
- For six days we remained outside! [excited]. For six days we were outside, next to the city Naqadeh in Iran. Cengiz came from Duhok to Naqadeh and could not find us.
- For example we were eating breakfast, and planes came. We had to flee, we could not continue eating. We could not wash ourselves. We could not prepare our food, -because we had to run away together with the children. It was that bad, I can really say that. Since I did not go to school I don't know the dates, but I can say that it was even more than that. Whatever I can tell you it is not everything, I can continue telling you without end.

Daily life was frequently interrupted by terrible events that made it impossible to have any feeling of basic security. Bahar told me how nowadays she still often feels confused and shattered because of the many years of war she went through. She associated her feeling of confusion with not having attended school, which made her feel insecure. In the last excerpt she implied that she could have told the story much better, in more detail and more convincingly if she would have gone to school since she would have then understood about the dates and years. Not having that knowledge made her feel that she could not remember things systematically. Several times during the interview, and also at other moments, Bahar expressed her feelings of helplessness because of her lack of education. However, at the same time she is also precise about the years at other moments. For example, in the following excerpt she summarized briefly the main phases of war:

One of our neighbors betrayed us to the government about Cengiz and he went to South Kurdistan. He stayed there for a year and after that I joined him. I had two children. We went there and stayed there until 1988. Cengiz became a peshmerga there. (When did he start as a peshmerga?) We came in 1983, but he had already started. In 1988 we escaped and came again to Kurdistan of Turkey. You know that in 1988 there were the chemical attacks of Saddam. (Yes). The Anfal happened and we fled. Cengiz went to Iran, and I again remained in the village Zeban for a year. After a year I went to Iran to Cengiz.

She described here a period of six years in a few sentences. Later on she returned to these topics and spoke of all these events in more detail. It seems that the moves served as marking points in her memory that help her recount the events. But even though she was very precise about the dates, she did not feel she had enough knowledge to tell her story in a congruent way. She ended the interview as follows:

These are the things I know. Everything is mixed up in my mind. Illness and beauty, war and .. for me in my mind is .. everything is mixed. And someone without education.. (but actually it's not like that, I mean I understand, your life has been so difficult, everything is mixed, like a nightmare) exactly it is like that (but at the moment that you are talking it is not like that. For example you know the exact years.) But Wendy, when someone has not studied..

For Bahar, the consequences of living for many years in situations of war and of moving from one place to another, often on the run, are feelings of confusion, loneliness, having to cope alone with her children while Cengiz was fighting, and the sense of being incapable because of her lack of education. Below we will see how these experiences make her feel about the songs she knows and about the many times she performed on television but also in other situations.

Dengbêj Narîn

Narîn's story⁴¹¹ is marked by the detail in which she relates the many times she and her family moved from one place to another. She was born in 1982, and only two years old when the family left Zeban. Before she came to Germany in 1999 she lived hardly more than four years a stretch in a single place. More than any other family member (apart from Cengiz), she had always been on the run. She began speaking as follows:

When I look back on my life, how my childhood was, there were more bad than good things. There were also good times, but when I was still in Zeban we did not have so many opportunities as children have here. The children have toys, they go to kindergarten, they have many things with which they can experience childhood, but with us it was different. When I was still little I experienced war, that my father was not with us, that he had to go to Iran because of political problems. And at the time I was of course with my mother and my grandparents. There are so many things and I do not know where to start. We were always gone. We were always gone really. First we were in Zeban, I was born there. After that we were always at the borders. For example in Iraq, in the village over there, there was somehow war of Kurds in Iraq, with Saddam. We went back to Zeban, again to Iraq, then to Iran, we were always on the move.

She described how, when she thinks back to her childhood, the main experience that comes to mind is that of always being gone, of never being in a stable place. Because she was already on the move when she was still very little, she had difficulty understanding what they were going through and why they always had to move to other places. About the escape to Iran when she was only eight years old she told me:

On the day when they told us that we would leave, I just ran away from home. I had gone far and my uncle came after me and I was in a tree and I was crying and screaming: 'I don't want to go to Iran'. Because I did not even know what it was and I just wanted to stay there [in Zeban]. I had been born there and I really did not want to leave. And he came after me. (..)

We had to be a bit far from the village and from there a car would take us. We were afraid that the soldiers would notice and that they would not let us go. [To other people] we had said that we were going to another town, my mother said. Anyway they came by car, it was the first time that I really did not want to leave this village. It was very bad [in the village] but I was always thinking that it was better than Iran because I didn't know and I could not even imagine. So my uncle took me down from that tree and they took me with them. And I can only remember a little bit that we drove by minibus and after that we had to walk and then again with horses. But it was dark, it was in the night, it was in the mountains, you know we went to Iran illegally. And we could hear the howls of wolves, we could even hear their howling! It was in the night and you know it was in the mountains, far from any town or village.

411 All quotes in this section are taken from an interview with dengbêj Narîn in Cologne in 2011 in German.

It was really dark and they were also afraid to light a light in case someone would see it. (And you can remember that? So scary for children..) Yes it was like a horror movie, really. It was worse than a horror movie. In the middle of the night, dark, and you hear the sounds of wolves. And you are afraid whether one of those might come because in the past at our place many people were eaten by wolves.

This experience was so shocking for her that she felt numb when they arrived and in the days that followed:

We stayed with them [people who lived close to the border] for the night and the next day we went to the place where my father was. It was horrible. When I remember that... It was so terrible that when we saw my daddy I did not feel any joy. I felt totally mixed up. Because you have experienced so much, and then with this fear you see someone, and you are seven or eight years old and you already have enough of life. Just imagine when one already has enough of life when one is so little.

After they moved to Iran, for a long time she kept longing for her grandparents and dreamt of seeing them. When she was sent to buy something at the shop she always passed by phone booths and tried to call them:

So whenever I went to buy bread they were waiting for me at home, but I always came an hour late because I wanted to call. Once someone told me that you have to throw money inside, but I did not know that you needed a number. I thought you just say the name and someone comes. So I was just talking and talking in the phone. That's also something I cannot forget.

In Iran it was the first time Narîn was able to go to school. She was a good student and very eager to go. She learned to read and write in Persian. After three years the family moved on to Iraq, and now the school was in Arabic and Kurdish. Again she loved going to school, but when she was fourteen and her mother was pregnant of the youngest boy, she had to stay home to help her. She regretted much that she could not continue her education.

After that time she returned several times to Zeban because she wanted to see her relatives and was also frustrated that she could not continue at school. But whenever she was in Zeban there were problems: bombardments, battles, exploding landmines, arrests by soldiers. She spoke of many such events in detail, for example, of one visit when also her parents and brothers and sisters had come, when there was fighting during the nights and a bomb fell close to their house:

After that bomb fell between the two houses, we waited until it calmed down again so that we could leave from there. But that night it was really bad [fighting] and the next morning soldiers came. That's also something I will never forget. We had to go there altogether to that place where the soldiers lived, to the military station, we

had to go there, women, men, children. Why? Because they had found some people from the PKK and killed some. And they hung them on a cable behind the car and dragged them over the streets. Those streets were of course not like here, it was full of rocks. They said to us, watch, and they came with the cars and the people on the cables behind, they were already dead. And we had to watch. We were still young and yes I have seen that, even though they were dead. With their legs... I cannot forget the shoes of the soldiers, those big soldiers' shoes, like Nazis. They were walking up and down and said: 'when one of you helps them we will do the same with you'. They were shouting this. They were five people. And they said: 'when we notice that someone from the village is not here, we will find them and you will all have to watch so that no one will help them.' (They were five dead people from the PKK?). Yes. (And not from the village, you didn't know them?) No we didn't know them. (It is terrible. And the children!) They brought a lot of wood, and poured petrol on them, and burned all of them. It smelled terrible, and for days one could still smell it. So we waited until it was a bit quiet again and then we immediately returned to Iraq. We were really afraid. (So actually it was by accident that you were there just at that moment...) Yes we were just visiting. We wanted to see everyone and we were just unlucky that we were just there at that moment. On the other hand it was always like that. It was not just once, at that time when we were there. You cannot say that we were unlucky, because it was always like that. Every few weeks there was again something happening. So after those people were burned, we waited for a few days until it had calmed down and then we returned to Iraq.

Whereas Bahar and Cengiz did not go into any detail of such events, Narîn related them one by one and told what she remembered.

In 1997 Cengiz arranged his political asylum in Germany, and the family would join him there. For a combination of reasons Narîn stayed behind, whereas all the others left. She told me:

From Iraq, when my father went, I can say that again I did not want to leave. I tell the truth, but on the other hand, I was just a child! My father did not leave me behind because I did not want to leave, but because everyone said that I was the oldest and when one goes to Europe one should not take the girls. Because there are bad things there and they become bad there, how they dress themselves. It is a non-Muslim country. They had not seen and experienced it, so they could hardly imagine how it would be. So they made my father afraid, I don't know why. After we had experienced so many things, I mean they should just have taken me as well. It was normal that I said I did not want to go because I just was fed up with always leaving. That was my problem. But I know that they did not leave me behind because of that. It was another reason. And then my father did not have enough money to go, so he brought someone else's child to Germany in my place as his own child and the father of this boy gave him money for that. People wanted to have boys in Europe so that they could work and not girls. (And at that moment you were actually happy that you could stay?) Yes, for a short time. But that day that my mother and the children left I understood that it was a mistake that I had said that I did not want to travel anymore. But I was small. When I look back at it now I think it was not like that. They

also wanted to leave me there because everyone said: 'don't take her there, the girls become bad there'. And my mother already said that [she felt] they had abandoned me as soon as she came to Germany. She regretted it.

Narîn's wish not to leave anymore for other places caused her difficult years ahead. She stayed alone with her relatives in Iraq as a sixteen-year-old girl. Her relatives were afraid she would bring trouble and wanted her to marry soon. They exerted much pressure so that she would marry; as Narîn told me it was usual that families were afraid that their girls would fall in love with someone and in that way would bring shame on the entire family. Narîn spoke with hesitation about this period of her life, because she did not want to discredit her family. At the same time she said that she wanted this story to be told as well, since she had always kept silent about it. She decided to escape the pressure of her relatives by going back to the village, not Zeban anymore, but Kevra where her grandparents and other relatives now lived. After another illegal border crossing, an arrest, and a night in prison, she arrived there. The village gave her some peace of mind for the time being. She had more to do than in the city in Iraq where she could not go out and had to stay inside the house all the time:

I came in winter and left in summer. (So you joined in with everything in the village, the work and everything?). Yes at the beginning of course I did not know how to do it. The women did a lot of handicrafts, and when you could not do it of course they said that you were lazy. So I learned it. And what I also did, I took a course to learn how to make carpets. We learned it from one of the women. After all the daily duties in the morning we went to the course, every day. All the girls joined. And we learned how to do that, I also learned it. (So it was a woman from the village?) Yes, she was talented. She had not learned it from anyone but she could do it so she taught us. At the beginning it is bad because your hands start bleeding. But it was the only thing that I really enjoyed. We were with all girls and we played music, it was much better than in Iraq. Because in Iraq it was in the city and there was nothing to do. (...) But in the village it's better, we had the nature, in spring we went out with the girls. And you could just sit in front of the door and talk with someone. I felt much freer. (...) The village was better. I always say you have more freedom there.

Although she felt generally better in the village, the pressure to marry continued, and when she let her father know about her difficult situation he decided she had to come to Germany as well. Her uncle brought her to Istanbul where she met shortly thereafter with Cengiz who arranged a smuggler for her.⁴¹² Five times she attempted to go from Istanbul to Greece with a group of people and a smuggler, four times followed by arrests and imprisonment. After some nights in jail the Turkish

⁴¹² She could not go to Germany legally because of the earlier decision to take another child in her place.

authorities always let them go, after which they tried again. About one of the worst journeys she told me:

And when we were in Greece we again got arrested and they brought us again to Turkish soldiers. And when we were with them they were busy and the smuggler said: 'let's escape, who will come?' I wanted to join and so did some more people. So we escaped. We were in the mountains and we hid ourselves and waited until dark. We had to go through water. We had to swim, whether we could or not. And we were wet and walked through the mountains. Somehow we almost reached a train station. And again they caught us. They had weapons and they shot so that we would stop. And just at that moment the smuggler tried to bring the daughter of a woman across the river, and because of the shooting he was afraid and let go of the girl. So she died. They jailed us in Greece, and the men were beaten with belts. So the Turks [came to] take us with them. It was 1999 just at the moment of the big earthquake. And we were in jail [in Izmit]. And in the night a soldier came to wake me up and said: 'you are still sleeping but the world is going down'. So there was an earthquake. Everything was destroyed. By bus we went to Istanbul. And slowly it became light and we saw what the earthquake had done. So we came to Istanbul and we had no money for a hotel, so we rented a house together. We were always [sleeping] in front of the big mosque, we stayed outside at night because we were afraid of [another] earthquake. At that moment I didn't care about being alive or not.

In the same year she finally managed to reach Germany.

Living in Germany opened new doors for her. Within two years she learned German, and after two more years of studying she got her high school diploma (*Fachoberschulreife*). When people treated her badly because of her being a foreigner and due to her limited German she felt even more determined to continue:

He [a bus driver] was shouting at me but I did not understand anything. And because I had already experienced so many things in my life, at that moment I could not take it that he was humiliating me so much. So I said to myself: 'I will show you in a few years. If someone like you again shouts at me I will be able to give a reply'. Those small things were big for me, they made me stubborn. I tried and I managed, I don't know how.

When a teacher tried to prevent her from continuing her studies, she waited until she had her diploma and after that looked him up to tell him what she thought of him:

And afterwards I went to him and said to him: 'what do you have against me, what do you want from me? I don't know if you hate foreigners or what kind of problem you have. You have no idea who I am and what I have been through. You have no idea how I came to Germany and you have no idea how much effort it took me to reach this point. And now you want to destroy it for me? You cannot destroy that for me,' I said. 'If you destroy it now I will do it again next year, and if you destroy that as well I will come back again. Do you think I will give up?' I went through so many bad things in my life and I did not give up even if I did not want anymore. That's how I reached [this point]. If I would not have been this strong I would maybe not

have managed. I said: 'I am now seventeen and all of this happened in a few years. And you want to destroy this for me?' I shouted at him. I became aggressive because of the things that I had been through.

The hardship she lived through made her a fighter who would not easily give up.

In all of its detail of places, people, and feelings, Narîn's story captures well how painful, threatening and shocking it was to live through successive stages of war and illegality. As a young woman she not only dealt with the consequences of violence and statelessness, but also with the consequences of being a woman which meant that her relatives felt they could and had to decide her destiny. Her longing to stay in one place instead of leaving all the time for other unknown places, made her remain behind in Iraq in circumstances she had wished to avoid almost immediately after her family left. Her years of being without her family seem to have made her painfully aware of how much she needed them; nowadays she often talks about the value her family has for her.

Dengbêj Cengiz

In Cengiz's life story⁴¹³ the border had a significant place. From the start it is the topic he talked about most and it kept coming up during his interview. Although the border played a largely negative role in his and his family's lives, he often gave it a positive twist while talking about it. He began by telling me that he was not able to receive his primary school diploma:

I wanted to continue studying but at that time we did not have Turkish nationality. For that reason I could not go on studying. In Turkey when you finish primary school you can get a diploma. But I did not get that as well because I was not registered. That was because my mother was from Iraq and my father was from Turkey, because our village is on the border. (And your father did not go to the municipality?) He went! He went many times, but it didn't work out. You had to give money, and at that time the opportunities in the village were limited.

Since Cengiz could not continue his education he started looking for paid jobs on an early age. When he was sixteen years old he and his friends started with their border trade, as I already mentioned above. As he told it:

In 1981 I started, I bought sowing seed (*dindik, toftê, cekirdek*). We bought one or two or three ton, we did not have much money. If our situation was good we bought ten or even twenty tons. (...) We bought things with a few friends and we brought it to the village. We used mules, every mule could carry hundred to hundred-and-twenty

⁴¹³ All quotes in this section are taken from an interview with dengbêj Cengiz in 2009 in Cologne in Kurdish.

kilos. We brought it to Iraq to sell, it took about fifteen days every time. You had to cross the border, it was illegal, so you could not go free and go quickly. We had to wait until the road was free, until there were no soldiers, we had to estimate that, and after that we could pass to Iraq. (At night?) yes at night, crossing the border was at night. The other places were in the daytime. (Weren't there landmines?) There were. There were mines, but we detonated them. Two of our people were killed by landmines when they stepped on them on the way. After that we continued to Antep, Diyarbakir, Van, where we bought things and brought them. After some time we started with livestock and animals.

Cengiz did not go into detail about the danger of the route, and the experience of losing two friends through a landmine. He actually only spoke of it because I asked him. Instead, he focused on the amount and types of goods they traded, on the places where they went and on the means of transport used. He was clear about the positive sides that smuggling had had for him and the other villagers:

So we went full to Iraq and also full to Turkey. We did not go empty on the road. We went with a load and returned with a load. It was very good. That village was on the border. Our village was on the border. You could not do that work in other places. The good thing of our village was that it was on the border. If it would not have been on the border, we could not have done it. Because of that we could do such work.

Even when he was talking about the declining risks of smuggling when the border became easier to cross, he immediately translated this into a loss of profit:

Livestock also goes slowly. We sold it. That was also good, we had profit. Later it was easier to go, the roads were free, and the profit was little. Because at first there was only little trade, you could sell whatever you wanted. You sold some things and returned. The trade was at night. But when it became easier the profit was little, although it was still good.

At an early age Cengiz was aware of the conflict and the need to defend oneself. He had saved money and bought a weapon, because he said, living at the border made it necessary to carry a weapon:

Every house had a weapon. At that time weapons were expensive, they were 1000 dinar. That would now be \$300. (...) It is a village on the border, so it was necessary to have weapons. Both the Iraqi and the Turkish government were our enemies. If we had no weapons we could not defend ourselves, we needed them to defend ourselves.

In the conflict it was also positive to live close to the border, because if necessary one had the possibility to escape (see also chapter 1):

Whoever managed went to Iraq, they did not end up in prison. It happened to a few, but only few. Everyone left and went to Iraq. Because our village was on the border, there were mountains and the government could not get us.

After his own escape across the border in 1983, Cengiz became incorporated in the Peshmerga. I asked him about his experiences:

(Can you remember how you felt when you went to the peshmerga? Life changes a lot, doesn't it?) Life changes a lot, it was very difficult, but I told you, I was young, my blood was warm, I could do every work, I could also work as a peshmerga (do *peshmergatî*), I could work for myself, and I could look after my children, I did all the work at the same time. I was working day and night, but my blood was warm and I didn't realize [the hard work]. Because when you are young you can work harder, you can do *peshmergatî*, you can do everything. I was young. I will get the picture [he shows a picture of himself with Masud Barzani in peshmerga outfit that has a prominent place in the living room].⁴¹⁴ This was when I was young, in 1986. I was nineteen or eighteen years old. You can see the date here. This was at the border between Turkey and Iraq. The leader had come, and I went to the leader: Masud Barzani who was the leader of Kurdistan. (Was he also your relative?) No, I was his peshmerga. In the past we were like brothers. Because we very very active peshmergas. We woke up together, we ate together. It was like the military, we were even closer than soldiers, because we went often into the mountains. We slept together, we ate together, we fought together. We were like brothers. We had become friends. Friends are closer than brothers.

Also when speaking of the hardship of life as a peshmerga fighter Cengiz focused on the positive sides. He emphasized his youth and strength at that time, the opportunity to meet the leader, and the brotherhood that peshmerga life had brought him. Moreover, he was fighting for what he felt was a good cause recognized by many:

There are many Kurds who do not fight against the enemies, who remained subordinated (*bindest*). They work for themselves. They collect money for themselves, they became rich. But those who have fought for themselves, they were killed, they were tortured, they were imprisoned; those people who have made a revolution. But the people who stayed subordinated and accepted the situation, who said: 'whatever you say I do it', they have become rich. (But was there such a choice available for you?) No I did not accept it, I went into the mountains. (But was there such a choice for the other villagers?) Yes. You have seen how the villages at the border are. Everything has been in war. There are landmines. Life is very difficult. It is very difficult. You have seen Istanbul, and you have seen Hakkari. Is there a difference? There is a lot of difference. (...) Because it is a Kurdish city nothing has been developed, it has remained like that. You have seen how nicely developed Ankara and Istanbul are. There is a lot of difference.

414 This is a more common practice among former peshmergas: "One of the Chaldeans, whom I met when he came over to play backgammon with my Kurdish host, was a peshmerga in the mountains of Kurdistan, and proudly displays a photograph of Idris Barzani (one of the sons of the late Kurdish leader Mullah Mustafa Barzani) in his living room -- a common sight among the Kurds of San Diego" (Chyet 1995: 227).

With the last lines Cengiz meant that people who have ‘enriched’ themselves and accepted Turkish oppression are generally those who moved to western Turkey and benefited from the developments over there. But people who decided not to move there but to stay in the Kurdish region have suffered and lived a difficult life. So, to my question as to whether he and the other villagers could have opted for a better life, he replied that they could have left for the big cities and stayed out of the fighting, but that they did not do so. He meant that they chose to resist, but that this choice also meant hardship, poverty, war, death and destruction.

It seems that a positive attitude has served Cengiz as a weapon to combat all difficulties. More than Bahar and Narîn, he saw a certain degree of personal benefit from the difficult life he lived and he could see the immediate gains that were maybe less visible for his family. Because of border trade he could travel and experience more if than had he remained at home in the village. Being a peshmerga was associated with feelings of pride for fighting for the good of many people, and his status of peshmerga is recognized today in Iraqi Kurdistan. However, it seems that his way of speaking is also a way of protecting himself and of not bringing up the pain he feels. Narîn said that her father does not want to return to the village. She said:

He had to leave, and he always missed the village, and now he has lost all the important people in his life, and he says: ‘now it does not have a meaning anymore to me.’ (..) He always says: ‘when I go I want to see them all, but now I cannot see them anymore so then I also don’t want to go anymore.’ (..) And at a certain point, after you lose so many people, then you don’t want anymore. But ten years ago or so, I really noticed how much my father missed Zeban. With every phone call, with every picture he saw, or when they sent videos from weddings, he had to cry. But I know that my father also wants the old Zeban [and not how it is now]. It is so sad, all that has happened there.. (dengbêj Narîn, interview in German, Cologne 2013).

Comparing the three stories of Bahar, Narîn and Cengiz, we can see clear differences. Bahar and Narîn expressed despair and fear, loneliness and having to leave all the time, whereas Cengiz emphasized the more positive sides he found in the proximity to the border and in his life as a peshmerga fighter. Although he clearly also suffered from all they went through, he had to some extent more options to choose from than Bahar and Narîn, although of course his choice was also limited. Being betrayed by a neighbor was surely not his wish, and after joining the peshmerga this new identity became an obligation he could not easily escape from. And yet, Bahar and Narîn were even more constrained by circumstances than Cengiz. They always had to *follow* Cengiz, when he was already gone. Several times, Bahar had to carry the heavy responsibility on her own of fleeing with her young

children through a border zone during war. This made her feel desperate, lonely, and afraid, and without defense and protection. Her lack of education reinforced the feeling that things were out of her control, and that today she is left only with painful memories and confusion. Her life was so dominated by war and escape that she felt that nowadays she is standing in the ruins of war, rather than having a life *after* those experiences. Narîn likewise often felt shattered and traumatized by her past experiences, but they have also made her determined to succeed in life. She felt she now has a life in front of her in which she can make up for all the things she missed out on in her childhood and teenage years. In the following section I investigate how dengbêj Bahar, dengbêj Cengiz and dengbêj Narîn spoke about the songs, and how they feel about the knowledge they have about village life, songs, and Kurdish traditions.

5.5 Speaking of songs and village life

As I already mentioned above, speaking of the songs seemed like a different mode of speaking in which the traumatic experiences of life in Zeban became more bearable. In this section I will present different song types with the accompanying comments by the family members that show how each of them spoke of the songs and their village memories. I did not include love songs as I already discussed them elaborately in chapter 1. For the first song types I did not feel the need to make additional comments and therefore only present the comments of Bahar, Narîn and Cengiz without further explanation. The overall analysis follows in section 5.6.

Wedding songs

Dengbêj Bahar (2007 in Kurdish): “In our region, in the past, a wedding was not one day. It was three or four days, day and night they played and sang. In the past it was different. The women all gathered in one house and sang, together with the bride. The men celebrated the wedding together with the groom in another place, and sang songs. But now they do it together.”

Dengbêj Narîn (2012 in German): “My father knows already twenty-one different dance types. And every type has its own song. *Şamîrane*, *Barso*, *Sincanê*, *Batlakan*, *Beryok*, they all have their own songs. For example *Şamîrane* is a dance type, but the song is about a Christian woman. About her work, and what she had accomplished:

Şamîrane Şamîrane
 Dadu bedat Şamîrane
 Cukek kêşa ji behra Wanê
 Pênc sed pala yed berdane
 Hevde kîsa haq lêdane
 Avî kirin reskêt Wanê
 Dadu bedat Şamîrane

Oh Şamîran oh Şamîran
 Şamîran, first she had all, then she had nothing
 She grew a channel from the Wan lake
 She let five hundred workers work
 She paid seventeen bags of gold
 She watered the gardens of Wan
 Şamîran, first she had all, then she had nothing

Şamîrane cukek kêşa
 Dadu bedat Şamîrane
 Ber şulkira heft cu aşa
 Qutqu kumaş dan şebaşa
 Avî kirin reskêt paşa

Şamîran dug a channel
 Şamîran, first she had all, then she had nothing
 She put to work seven watermills
 She gave a shirt and fabric to each worker
 She watered the gardens of the pashas

Dengbêj Bahar (2007 in Kurdish): “When there was a wedding, there was the henna night. On the henna night the women go to the house of the bride. They sing songs, they make henna, put the henna on her hands, and sing songs to her. The groom also came to the house, and they sang also songs about the groom. They prepared the groom. Then the wedding was celebrated. For example tomorrow is the wedding, then we will prepare the bride this night. And the men prepared the groom.”

Dengbêj Narîn (2012 in German): “When they went to fetch the bride they sang again other songs. And even before they would come for her, the mother and her friends also sang songs. They sang about how the girl is now leaving and has to say goodbye, and then everyone cries. For example:

Em hatin te bi kar kin narîne
 Tu negirîn narîne
 Em hatin te kar bikin narîne
 Em hatin te ji mala bavê te bar kin narîne
 Emê te bişin, emê te kar bikin,
 Te ji mala bavê te bar bikin

We have come to get you ready, our delicate
 Delicate, do not cry
 We have come to have you, delicate
 We have come to take you away from your father's house
 We will wash you, we will get you ready,
 We will take you away from your father's house

When the bride takes a bath, they hang a cover so that she cannot be seen, and then the women sing these lines. I sang with them and at that moment I had to cry as well. Because that moment [of leaving] is really sad.”

Work songs

Dengbêj Bahar (2007 in Kurdish): “We started with the household chores, we made yoghurt, we went milking, we made bread, the tasks of the women were clear. The women looked at the house. And because there was a lot of work in the village, you don't do it alone, but with four or five girls. We worked together. We milked the sheep. We put the milk in a *meşk*-yoghurt sack and swing it, to make yoghurt and

cheese. While doing this we sang songs. For example two women sang and two others replied. Another one looked after the children.”

Meşkê kê ma li ser banî / hay meşkê	I was swinging meşk on the roof / oh butter churn
Meşkê kê ma li ser banî / hay jarê	I was swinging meşk on the roof / oh poor one
Gazît ke me şîvanî / hay meşkê	I called the shepherd / oh butter churn
Gazît ke me şîvanî / hay jarê	I called the shepherd / oh poor one
Tu pazî bîne danî / hay meşkê	Bring the livestock for the milk hour / oh butter churn
Tu pazî bîne danî / hay jarê	Bring the livestock for the milk hour / oh poor one
Meşkê kêma bin tuye / hay meşkê	I was swinging meşk under the mulberry tree / oh butter churn
Meşkê kêma bin tuye / hay jarê	I was swinging meşk under the mulberry tree / oh poor one
Avêt ke mê kaniya / hay meşkê	At the spring I add water to it / oh butter churn
Avêt ke mê kaniya / hay jarê	At the spring I add water to it / oh poor one
Bo nextê çil keziye / hay meşkê	For the dowry of the forty-braids-girl / oh butter churn
Bo nextê çil keziye / hay meşkê	For the dowry of the forty-braids-girl / oh poor one

Dengbêj Cengiz (2013 in Turkish): “The *meşk* is a leather bag made from goat skin with a rope at each side. The leather bag is filled with milk, and two women would swing it from side to side until it had become yoghurt or butter. One woman would sing the first line, and the second woman repeat the same line. The last lines mean that the yoghurt and butter could be sold to pay the bride price for a girl who was named ‘the forty-braids-girl’, after the many braids of her hair.”

Dengbêj Bahar (2007 in Kurdish): “In the past we did not have a mill. We made the flour at home. And when a woman in the evening ground the grain and made flour, because we did not have mills and we did it by hand, the women and the girls would come together in the evening and do it all together, and they made three or four bags on one evening, within one hour. And they did not do this work silently. When they were sitting there, they sang songs. They sang these songs towards each other. In that way they were singing, and the time was passing by.”

Comments on music and village life

Dengbêj Cengiz (2007 in Turkish): “In our regions, in the east, if people leave the village, they sing songs to themselves. You go to the mountains alone, and to the fields, and for that reason everybody knows how to sing songs. It comes from the air, from the mountains. If you sing in such a place, it is as if there are three or four people listening to you. You are surrounded by the mountains and the voice is coming back to you.”

“When it was winter, because there was a lot of snow, no one left the village. That’s why we made many preparations before it became winter. When it is winter all the roads are closed, there is snow everywhere, and this continues for about three or four months. In the winter at daytime we give hay [to the animals], and at night time we

gathered with five to twenty people. We had walnuts and honey, we gathered in a house and sat together on the floor. We told fairy tales and we sang songs. Wedding songs as well as recital songs (*uzun hava*), in Kurdish we say *stranên gaziya*.”

“[When we gathered on winter evenings] we continued until late, until midnight, then everybody went home, and the next day at daytime everybody again made preparations for the winter. The whole winter the people gathered. From the mountains, from other villages if they had gone there, they all came to the village and stayed there for the winter. You cannot go anywhere, if you cannot go out, how will you spend your time? In daytime you look for the animals, you chop wood, you do preparations, and in the evening you tell stories, sing songs, talk. Three or four months were spent in this way. Until spring.”

Heyranok and metelok

Dengbêj Narîn (2012 in German): “*Heyranok* are rhymes, they are not songs but a rhyme. There were funny ones, and serious ones, and political, and sexy ones. About young people who were in love and showed each other their love. In the end, one needs to express everything. For example:

Çiyayeke gundê me niqebîn
Rexek Kurdin yêk Erebin
Piştê bejna lawkê min ê delal
Mêrên vî zimanî li min heram bin
Min tube bin

The mountains of our village are like hills
At one side are the Kurds, at the other side Arabs
After the beautiful figure of my dear man
Are all other man for me a sin
May I be doomed if I would love someone else

“At the time, when someone didn’t have brothers and when there were no men in the house, they did not have so much value so to say. *Heyranok* were also about that. About children who had lost their mother, about women who had no brothers or father, there were funny ones about men, and about love between boys and girls:

Girêl ber gira
Agirê şivan û bêriya
Şemal û çira
Înşallah ez nemînim
Bo xwişka bê bira

Hills over hills
The fire of shepherds and milkmaids
Is like candles
If God allows me, I will not become
Like sisters who have no brothers

“Sometimes I think: did that really happen was it really true? But when I go there, then I miss it and say to myself: okay it was really true. There were good people but they passed away. There was a woman with whom i really wanted to meet up and write a lot of her things down, the *heyranok* rhymes. And she died and took everything with her in the grave. She knew things that no one else knew apart from herself. I find that really a shame.”

Dengbêj Bahar: “We also have many *metelok*, they are short rhymes that form an expression or very short story, for example:

Heta tu be serî rêvaneçî
Tu qedra pyê nizanî

As long as you have not walked by yourself
You cannot know the value of feet

“Our songs are sung even more when people suffer, when people experience bad things. There are some songs that come into being during nice days, and others during bad days. For example when bad things happened in the village, and when we had to leave from the village, some songs come into being from such bad days.”

Lullabies

When I asked dengbêj Bahar if there were songs she especially liked, she gave the following song. The song is sung by a father who rocks the cradle of his son and accompanies the bodily movement with a lullaby. He mourns the death of his wife, who apparently died in childbirth or soon thereafter. The father feels desperate after the death of his wife. How will he take care of his son without the mother? Will there be anyone from the village who will help out and come to nurse the boy? And how will life be meaningful for him without his wife? Dengbêj Bahar said that the song connects to her feelings of loneliness during her childhood.

Landikê kurê min

The cradle of my son

Hey layê layê hey layê layê
Di eşa bin ve azizê ber dilê dayê
Ez ê landikê kurikê xwe hejînim
Ez ê landikê delalê xwe hejînim
Ez ê dest bilunga desta
girêdema ya piya dêşidînim
Ma keseke nine gundê me kubi xêrê xwe
Dayikekê ji bo kuro min bînim

Oh my son, my son
Be quiet, dearest of the heart of your mother
I will rock the cradle of my son
I will rock the cradle of my sweetheart
I will wrap his hands
and his feet in a sling
Is there no one in our village who will help?
Who will bring a mother for my son?

Hey layê layê hey layê layê
Na dayika te male cîrana ne
Ez ê ji bo te gazî
Na dayika te li mala xalan e
Ku ez ji bo te qasitekî virê gemê
Û ne dayika te gera govendê ye
Ku ez bo te çavkeme
Dayika te li gîreke moqberê ya
Mar û mişk dixwun xal û nîşanê gerdanê

Oh my son, my dear son
Your mother is not in the house of the neighbors
So that I could call her for you
Nor is she at the house of the uncles
So that I could send a messenger to fetch her
Nor is she dancing at the lead of the *govend* dance
So that I could wink her for you
Your mother is in the grave
Where snakes and rats eat her face away

Hey layê layê hey layê layê
Ez ê landika kurê xwe hahakem
Ez ê landika keça xwe hahakem
Ez ê dest bilunga desta lê gîredema

Oh my son, my son
I will rock the cradle of my son
I will rock the cradle of my daughter
I will wrap his hands in the sling

Ya piya dêlêtata kem
Ma çî xêrxas li gundê me nînin
Ji bo kurê min dayikekê peyda ki

I will wrap each of his legs
Is there no benevolent person in our village
Who will find a mother for my son?

Hey layê layê hey layê layê
Di eşa bin ve dayika xwe nemîna
Bavîkê xwe nemaye
Ma kesek xêrxas nîne bi xêra xwe
Xaletê bînin şîna dayê

Oh my son, my son
Be quiet, if your mother did not stay with us
Your father should also not stay alive
Is there no benevolent person in our village
Who will bring an aunt instead of the mother?

Songs about the village history

Cengiz told me that Zeban was attacked by Christian Assyrians at the time his great-grandfather was still a young child. The child hid himself in the oven and was saved, whereas all others were killed. The song about the attack of Zeban is called *Lîzane*, which is the name of the Christian tribe that attacked Zeban. This tribe comprised five or six villages and was led by the Christian leader Melik Xewşaba.

Lîzane

Fila cemyan Lîzane
Xweşmêr cemyan Lîzane
Sund xwar dêra Qesrane
Diçîna ser Zebane

The Christians gathered in Lîzane⁴¹⁵
The heroes gathered in Lîzane
They swore on the church of Qesran⁴¹⁶
That they would go to Zeban

Fila hatin şîvewa
Xweşmêr cemyan şîvewa
Sund xwar dêra Bêwa
Diçîna ser Çelêwa

The Christians came to dinner
The heroes gathered for dinner
They swore on the church of Bêwa
That they would go to Çelê (Çukurca)

Zebane gundê me ye
Avaya gundê me ye
Melik Berxû Filaye
Çîn Deştanê hilêye

Zeban is our village
May our village remain forever
The Christian ruler Berxû
Went to Zeban in secret

Zebane cîhê mîra
Ava bît cîhê mîra
Melik û xweşmêra
Çîn Zebanê nêçîre

Zeban is the place of kings
May the place of kings remain forever
The Christian ruler and the heroes
Went to Zeban to hunt them down

Welya Bega bi lezîne
Şêrê sora bi lezîne
Aşîra te bi cemîne
Here hayfa Zeban bistîne

Hurry up Welya Beg!
Hurry up red lion!
Gather your tribe
And revenge Zeban!

Welya Bege dibêyo
Şêrê sore dibêyo
Bo min bîn derbînêyo
Sud mizgefte xwedêyo

Welya Beg says:
The red lion says:
Bring me a binocular
By God the mosque is burning

415 Lîzane was the tribe of Melik Xewşaba and consisted of 5 to 6 villages.

416 Qesran was a village with a special old church



Figure 31. On one of the many family trips this family made to Duhok in Iraqi Kurdistan. 2013.

The song speaks of a conspiracy against Zeban, the place of kings. They swore to attack in addition to Zeban, also Cele (Çukurca), which was a Pinyanişî stronghold. Welya Beg was the leader of the Pinyanişî, the alliance of Zeban, and the song tells that he heard about the attack of Zeban when it was already too late. From afar he saw its mosque burning. He was too late to prevent the defeat of Zeban, but promised to take revenge. It is not clear from the song how the story continued, and Cengiz does not have further information, maybe because the main concern of the song is what happened to Zeban.

Another song Cengiz gave me was *Haci Marîfa*, about a conflict of two Pinyanişî villages with a Christian village. They disagreed about the borders of a summer pasture called Giştîke. Most villages owned a summer pasture to which they brought their livestock in the warm summer months. Ownership of a pasture was of crucial importance for the herding of the livestock of a whole village. In this song the inhabitants of Marîfa feel challenged by the Christian leaders and gather their own leaders to discuss how to react to this challenge. They prepare 'to kill the pigs'. Both songs emphasize the opposition between Christians and Muslims. Cengiz distanced himself from this content, as today such songs are regarded as problematic by many Kurds.

The following song tells of an intertribal conflict between the Berwarî and Zêbarî tribes in Iraq.⁴¹⁷ *Şêx û mer* (lit. Sheikh and snake) is the name of a Berwarî hero who was the subject of a conspiracy of the Zêbarî who wanted to kill him.

Şêx û Mer

Zêbarî bû gûtine
Çarbûtê bû gûtine
Cemandin çem mezine
Got Şêx û Mer kujine

Bi Zêbarî bû xebere
Çarbûtê bû xabere
Cemandin çend mêrsere
Şêx û Mer destile sere

Şêx û Merê Berwarî
Bê dewleta Şêx û Mere
Xencer didane marî
Yella bibît nêyarî

Şêx û Mer

Among the Zêbarî it was said
Among the four cooperating villages it was said
That the big men were gathering
And said they would kill Şêx û Mer

Among the Zêbarî the news got around
Among the four villages the news got around
That the chosen few heroes
will capture Şêx û Mer

Şêx û Mer of the Berwarî
Şêx û Mer who was without rule
Your sword is like a snake tooth
Get going, let there be hostility

417 A more recent history of conflict may have been the reason why this song had continuing relevance for Zeban, or for dengbêj Cengiz personally. During the Mulla Mustafa Barzani revolt (1942-1945), the Zibaris had supported the Iraqi government in their fight against Mulla Mustafa. Also in later times they remained rivals. They joined the pro-government troops *jash*, and fought against the Barzanis (McDowall 1996). Since Cengiz fought for the Barzani movement (see below), such a song may have attracted the attention of Barzani tribesmen.

Şêx û Merê Berwarî
Şêx û Mere tu bi xwe yî
Xencer didane sayî
Yella bibît xwe bi xwayî

Şêx û Mer of the Berwarî
Şêx û Mer you are on your own
Your sword is like a dog tooth
Get going [Zêbarî], go ahead and fight your own people

Four villages of the Zêbarî tribe planned to kill Şêx û mer, who was known for his courage and strength, someone whose sword was ‘like a snake tooth and a dog tooth’. But the Zêbarî were divided; some of them conspired against Şêx û mer, but others sided with him. Therefore, the song incites the Zêbarî to go and fight together, instead of fighting their own people and being disgraced by their internal division.

Songs about recent events

Dengbêj Cengiz said that after the foundation of the Turkish Republic no new songs of significance were made. Dengbêj Bahar agreed. However, at the same time she said that there are many more recent songs, for example about the clashes with the soldiers who were stationed in their village, and she gave some examples. Also dengbêj Narîn gave examples of recent songs and verses. She especially liked such recent compositions and had a great memory for them. The songs and verses that Bahar and Narîn referred to were seen by Bahar and Cengiz as of less importance than the historical songs presented above. It seems therefore that the former were more ‘informal’ compositions that were not performed on official occasions and had less prestige than the songs dengbêj Cengiz presented. Another reason for their assumed lesser value may be that more recent songs of which the maker is known, are not regarded as real ‘folk songs’, which are usually seen as old and anonymous. A final reason may be that this points to a difference in male and female repertoires, with the former seen as more important. In the following, Narîn gives an example of a song that was made by women about a recent event.

Dengbêj Narîn: “Somewhere in the middle of the night it started, around three, we heard bomb-bang and these noises. We knew it was war. (..) And only the next morning could we go outside and see what happened. My parents were in the one house and I was in the other house with my uncle, and the bomb had fallen exactly in the middle. And our minibus was there, and the cow and sheep. And the bomb parts had hit the animals. So they wanted to slaughter the animals before it becomes *haram*. And not even two days later, I was there and [my aunt and her daughter] were laughing, so I asked: ‘what is going on?’, and then she started to sing. Immediately she had a song ready about this situation, my aunt and her daughter. They were laughing and singing, but immediately [after what happened]! (2012 in German).”

Sibêdeye sibêde zuye
 Hewexana hatiye
 Gut ew çiye çiwe
 Telqek jorda hatiye
 Ya dolmişê ketiye

Omar runişt pencerê
 Gut Selwa bîne xencere
 Em ê biçîne dere

Helê dibetê Guleyo
 Tu bîne menceleyo
 Da bi kem guştê celeyo
 Û bidim xêra me û dolmişeyo

[Daughter:] It is morning early morning
 when Hewexana came
 And said what is wrong, what happened?
 [Grandmother:] A bomb came from above
 And fell upon the minibus

[Uncle:] Omar sat in the window
 And said: 'Selwa bring me the big knife
 We will go outside [to slaughter the wounded livestock]

Grandmother said to Gulê:
 'Bring me the large pot
 So that we can put the meat in there
 And receive grace for life and the minibus

5.6 The embodied experience of singing songs

Until now in this chapter we have traced two separate storylines: the personal narratives, and songs and fragments drawn from village life. In this section I bring these two storylines together. As I said at the opening of the chapter, these two storylines often remained separate during our talks. The family members had positive memories about the long winter evenings when people told each other stories, about the wedding dances, the work songs, and all the activities that they associated with life in the village, and that were often accompanied by songs. These memories seemed to remain separate from the many negative memories that also took place in the village. Life in the village had often been marked with war, oppression, and fear. Dengbêj Bahar said that “all my life I have seen every war.” Dengbêj Narîn began her story with: “when I look back on my life, how my childhood was, there were more bad than good things.” Dengbêj Cengiz spoke much less about the hardship he experienced, but Narîn’s remark shows how much he also suffered from their painful history. However, all three of them seemed to feel different when evoking the village and their memories through the medium of the songs. The songs set in motion a specific work by being capable of connecting them to their past memories in a positive rather than negative way.

This work of the songs became visible through the positive atmosphere that emerged when we spoke of the songs and memories surrounding them. Since songs were present in everyday life in the village, and since many lyrics refer to village activities, these are also the things that come to mind when speaking of the songs. Most of the songs are not self-composed, but are songs that are not directly related to individual experiences. Although initially I was searching for songs of their own

making, as I hoped to find a more personal meaning produced through such songs than in the more general songs, I came to understand much later that it is precisely the anonymity of the songs that makes them so apt for bringing up such positive memories. In the previous section I gave many examples of how Bahar, Cengiz and Narin talked about village memories. They did not speak about specific memories, as they did in the life story interviews we had. Instead, they spoke in general terms: how on long winter evenings they would gather and tell each other stories; how they sang songs while making yoghurt; how they sang songs when they fetched the bride from her home, etcetera. The *meşk*-songs about the yoghurt making, the *bêrî* songs about milking the sheep, the wedding songs and other work songs, they all remind one of the many activities that characterized village life. These activities were repetitive acts that occurred daily, or weekly, or during specific months of the year.

Precisely because the songs refer to repetitive, general acts that were carried out by all people in the village, they do not connect directly to individual memories. One could even suggest that by linking specifically to general and repetitive activities, the songs have the virtue of *not* reminding one of individual experiences, of overlooking and skipping over these memories while connecting to village life and activities in their most general form instead. In cases of extreme distress and trauma in the past, the songs could also serve as a place of hiding, where one could go when painful memories become too overwhelming. When singing songs, or talking about these acts, instead of the memories of pain and loss, other memories come up that are capable of displacing the pain, and of evoking activities that have no immediate connection to the trauma. In cases of trauma, people often lose the capability to express what happened into words, as words seem insufficient to capture the dramatic experience of the trauma. When speaking about the experiences of refugees, Jackson (2002) writes:

We speak of trauma as something that ‘shatters’ or ‘fragments’ a life, ‘tearing it apart’ (...) This loss is centered on the loss of language. In its resistance to and its shattering of speech, trauma creates a deep sense of unsharability. And as trauma reduces us to unbearable solitude, so our stories become reduced to contingent events. The loss of emotion, of narrative design, and of moral conclusion that one sees in stories of traumatic experience are signs that the refugee has momentarily lost his or her sense of being connected to a world that can be recognized, chosen or known (Jackson 2002: 95).

In the case of this family, it seems that songs take over where words do not suffice. The songs offer an anchor in intense experiences of fragmentation, and can at times relieve feelings of pain, loss, and loneliness.

I suggest that this function of the songs is reinforced by the bodily activity, both of singing and dancing, and of the village activities to which they refer. The

embodied experience of these activities causes them to come to mind when the same actions are repeated. Many songs are directly associated with a specific village activity. For example, when singing a *meşk*-song the women who sang the song were at the same time moving back and forth in order to swing the leather bag with milk. This action had to be repeated for a long time before the milk would turn into yoghurt. One can easily imagine that dengbêj Bahar, who for years had performed this activity while singing its song, can experience in an embodied fashion the same feeling of swinging the leather bag when she hears or sings a *meşk*-song today. The same applies to many other songs: they bring to mind and body the repetitive sense of carrying out a village activity, and of being in a village environment. The bodily movement that accompanies the songs reinforces the act of singing and the memories these provoke.

As I mentioned above, the songs of this chapter did not have much prestige in the past as they are easy to learn, often seen as female repertoire, and not part of the more difficult genre of kilams that are the field of specialized dengbêjs. One could therefore easily overlook them. However, the ethnographic material of this chapter suggests that the bodily experience of singing songs in fact does a powerful work in piecing together shattered experiences of lives fragmented by violence and escape. In the following section I will turn to another role the songs play after the family members began to participate in the dengbêj TV program on Roj TV.

5.7 Resignifying cultural memory⁴¹⁸ and redefining the position of women

As we saw in chapter 4, Kurdish satellite television has incited the growth of an imagined Kurdish community worldwide, that crosses national borders. It has helped to reverse processes of assimilation into the dominant national identity of the countries Kurds live and of erasure of Kurdish identity. In an article about indigenous television making in Canada and Australia, Ginsburg points to similar processes among the Inuit and Aboriginals respectively, and names them “resignifying cultural memory” through media. She highlights what work media production does in the places where she carried out her research: their own film

⁴¹⁸ When talking about Inuit film productions that show (fictive) family life as it was believed to take place before 1945, Ginsburg notes how people loved these productions and felt they rightly depicted the history of their communities. “For Inuit participants and viewers (...) [the productions] serve as a dynamic effort to resignify cultural memory on their own terms” (Ginsburg 2002: 42).

productions helped marginalized communities (1) to recuperate their own stories, (2) to increase feelings of empowerment, (3) to reverse power relations, (4) to include their stories in national narratives, and (5) to create a counter-public sphere. We have seen some of these processes taking place in chapter 4. However, for the women participating in the *Şevbêrk* program, their participation had a double meaning. For them, the program was not only about resignifying cultural memory, but also about redefining their position as women and as female dengbêjs. Although the program's style and this redefinition was to a large extent decided by others, their appearance on television had important consequences for themselves and for the position of women more generally. Also, the new recognition they received, and the new value they themselves discovered in knowledge they had previously taken for granted, seem to reinforce the positive work of the songs as described in the previous section.

How did dengbêj Bahar, dengbêj Cengiz and dengbêj Narîn become involved in the television program *Şevbêrk*? First, before singing on television, Bahar and Cengiz were already active as wedding singers in the places where they lived. It seems that this was a first step in which they became aware that the knowledge they had learned in the village was seen as valuable at other places. Second, all three were invited to join the television program. This was the biggest step, as they felt that performing on television was very different from what they had done before. Third, Bahar and Narîn got involved in the production of a CD with songs sung by women. These three activities made them feel that they possessed special knowledge that was worth recording and archiving, something they had not realized before. As mentioned above, my main focus here is on the women's stories.

From the time the family left their village and moved from place to place, Cengiz and Bahar were active as wedding singers. In Iran and Iraqi Kurdistan dengbêj Cengiz was often invited for weddings, and dengbêj Bahar sometimes accompanied him. They sang the songs they had learned in the village, which turned out to be much in demand. People often had forgotten the songs and were not able to dance the wedding dances in the same way as they had done in their villages. Dengbêj Bahar spoke about their experiences in Iran:

For example in Iran it happened often that we had weddings of Kurds. We went to those weddings, especially my husband, especially he would sing. In Iran it was forbidden to have music groups, or to celebrate weddings outside, so people celebrated their weddings at home. Not everyone knew the songs, that's why they invited dengbêjs. Cengiz and some friends went to many weddings. I also went, I also sang. They sang and I repeated. Three men sang first, and I repeated it.



Figure 32. A family picture with Duhok in the background, Iraqi Kurdistan. 2013.

In Iraqi Kurdistan the opportunities for Kurdish music were much larger than they were in Turkey and Iran. At weddings usually there was a wedding band, but they also invited a dengbêj to complete the program. Dengbêj Bahar:

Actually there were more bands, modern music, but there was also always a dengbêj. There would not be a wedding finished without a dengbêj. For example some hours music was playing, and after that elderly people would say: 'now the music is enough, let the dengbêj sing.' So they wanted the dengbêj to come.

But she also told me that much had changed and that many traditions had disappeared in Duhok, because life was different, and not all traditions fit that new city life. For example, in the village on the hennah night (the night before the wedding) a female dengbêj would accompany the bride and sing songs for her. The same would happen on the day of the wedding when they fetched the bride and brought her to the groom. But in Duhok that tradition did not continue:

Day by day folklore and traditions are disappearing you know. Because they went by car and switched on the music. They did not need a dengbêj to sing songs about the bride. That time has not remained. The dengbêjs still know everything, they did not forget. But in Duhok it did not remain.

Also other types of songs that they had learned in the village were not sung anymore, because the situations in which they were sung previously no longer existed:

There were only few [work songs] because many things that were happening in the village were not happening there, such as to make yoghurt (*meşk*), or going to the mountains, there was no milking (*bêrî*). For that reason such songs were not there, they were special for the village.

After moving to Germany, the couple was again often invited to sing at weddings. Sometimes these were weddings in which there was no musical group present, and where they only danced to the accompaniment of their voices, as in the old days. At other times there was a wedding band and they would take turns with the band.

Although dengbêj Bahar and dengbêj Cengiz thus already had public recognition before they participated in the television program, their activities had always been informal. People asked them to perform at weddings because they knew them, or because they had heard about them from others. They had not been involved in publications, productions, or interviews. However, it seems that it was especially the informal character of their activities that was helpful for dengbêj Bahar to become slowly more involved in activities that had been seen as problematic for women earlier in her life. In the village, weddings were mixed as long as the attendants were no strangers. As soon as there were people from other villages, the men and women would celebrate weddings separately and not dance or sing together. In Iran and Iraq weddings were also often celebrated separately, although there were more moments when they sang together, and dengbêj Bahar began joining dengbêj Cengiz to sing at weddings, “three men sang first, and I repeated them.” In Germany mixed dancing and singing was much more common, and Bahar sang at weddings together with her sister-in-law and her husband, “Cengiz sang, and Helin and I repeated him.” In this way, Bahar had become used to singing in public.

The family's participation in Şevbêrka Dengbêja

In 1998 the family became acquainted with Zana Güneş through a Kurdish neighbor. The latter had already performed once in the program *Şevbêrk*. Dengbêj Bahar said that the idea of singing on television had never occurred to her. The evening before we did this interview we had been watching some old recordings of the program. In one of them Bahar said that initially she had felt embarrassed to sing as a woman on television, but that she was now used to it. I asked her how this had felt for her.

(Yesterday you said on Roj TV that you felt embarrassed to sing in front of society, in front of everyone. How was it for you? You went to Roj TV and sang songs, did your thoughts about it change?) I know many traditional songs and also when I was in Iran and in Duhok I have always sung songs. But the weddings for women were

separate from the weddings for men. Still we went together to fetch the bride and we sang together, men and women. But when we came to Germany, until that time I had not had any thoughts about television. I knew many things but I didn't realize myself that I had that knowledge. One day Güneş called my neighbor. He wanted us to make a program together. (...) So we talked with Güneş and showed some songs, we did some rehearsal [in the studio]. I just sat there next to them, I listened, and because there was no one else I repeated the songs.⁴¹⁹ I felt embarrassed but I still did it. Güneş said to me: 'you know so many things, why did you pretend during the whole program as if you don't know anything'? I said: 'It is very difficult for me. When I see the microphone, and the television, and the camera, it was very difficult for me to sit there. It was both hard and also an embarrassment (*şermahî*). In what way embarrassment? I had sung many times together with Cengiz. But when there is a camera you feel that people are watching.

On her first encounter with television dengbêj Bahar felt embarrassed. This was because she was not used to performing in front of a camera, and because she felt it might be inappropriate for a woman to do so. She used the word embarrassment (*şerm*) first when she talked about village weddings which women and men celebrated separately as soon as there were strangers around; they would do so because they felt embarrassed. On television she also felt initially embarrassed, but overcame these feelings with time (see below).

The encounters with Zana Güneş raised her self-esteem. He tried to encourage her to speak of her knowledge. He often visited her and asked her many things about the village and the songs she knew, and this made her feel that she had something to tell, that she possessed a type of knowledge that other people did not have and that was valuable:

When I was young I did not understand. I knew that it was the custom among us in the village, but I did not know it was folklore. (...) Maybe I know one thousand traditional songs, but I did not know that all these songs that I know are songs of the people. I did not know that all people were singing those songs. I thought maybe only my villagers sing those songs. That's how I understood it. It was difficult.

This is an interesting quote because it shows how her local knowledge was turned into 'songs of the people,' into 'folklore' that had a broader value beyond simply the village context. 'Songs of the people' is a term that is used for anonymous songs that are seen as old and authentic because their maker is not known. Once dengbêj Bahar could define her knowledge in terms of a category that she recognized as important, she began to see its broader value. Previously she had liked the songs, but did not feel they had any more value than for herself and the people of her village. After her

419 As indicated before it is usual that the lines of a wedding song are first sung by a lead singer, and then echoed by several other singers. Every song line is thus sung twice.

encounters with Güneş she began to feel that she had something to offer. Dengbêj Narîn had a similar way of expressing this.

As we saw in her life story, Narîn was born in 1982, and lived for several periods in villages, much shorter than her parents. Often when speaking of the village she talked in terms of ‘they,’ whereas her parents always talked in terms of ‘we.’ Her position alternated between two perspectives: sometimes she felt like a participant, at other times she felt more like an outside observer. From a young age she had been interested in the songs and sayings and had learned many by heart, “I think when you are interested in something you don’t forget.” She said that many people listened to the songs but did not really understand their meaning and sang along, because they did not have a genuine interest in them. She herself had listened from an early age intensely to performances. When Zana Güneş began to visit her parents and asked them about their knowledge of songs, she also listened and felt inspired by Güneş’ eagerness to know more:

He came and they talked a lot, I was not always there when they were talking. And I heard how happy Güneş was, how interested he was, and I liked that and I knew all those songs by heart as well. When I saw that a singer [Güneş] since many years goes everywhere, in Europe and in Kurdistan, and looks for people, and we were somehow his last station. He said: ‘I have [collected] so many things, Kurdish music is so rich, but what I hear from you is really very interesting.’ Because the other villages and cities did not have so much as we had.

Comparable to the way dengbêj Bahar felt about Güneş’ interest, dengbêj Narîn also felt encouraged by his recognition, and it was one of the reasons that made her more confident to speak her mind and to perform on television. She had never imagined herself doing something like that: “Actually I was extremely shy, you can’t even imagine. I was so shy that I always hid myself, I sat down in a corner and I never felt confident enough to say something, I only listened.” But on television she got used to singing with a microphone and telling some details about the songs or about their value. They sang in over a dozen of programs because Güneş felt they had much to tell and he kept inviting them back (see below).

After some years Güneş invited dengbêj Bahar and dengbêj Narîn to make a CD of their songs. The album was released in 2006 with the title *Stranên gel* (Folksongs), and the subtitle *Herêm: Colemêrg* (Region: Colemêrg). Colemêrg is the Kurdish name for Hakkari.⁴²⁰ The term *stranên gel* is used for songs that are anonymous, and that are presented today as the common heritage of the Kurdish

420 Hakkari is also used in Kurdish, but Colemêrg is seen as its real Kurdish name.

people. The cover picture shows a Kurdish village with clay houses, and snowy hills in the background. In the foreground a woman walks carrying a basket, and in the back one sees some other women busy at work. The CD includes various types of songs that were mostly sung by women, and of which I presented some above. The CD booklet opens with the texts of a well-known Kurdish folklorist and of Zana Güneş. The folklorist first presents the 'role of the dengbêjs and of Kurdish language.' This part is comparable to the texts of other CDs (see chapter 4) in which the dengbêj art is seen as ancient, as expressing the suffering and sorrows of the Kurds, and as the source of ancient history, as "Kurdistan is that geography where the rose of life was opened for the very first time." The next section speaks about the specific features of songs from the region Colemêrg: the song types, when they were performed, and some names of famous dengbêjs of the past. The third section is called: "the heritage of women in the preservation of Kurdish art and language." It reiterates some of the usual features ascribed to dengbêjs in general, but also pays attention to the specific place of women:

Kurdish women more than men, are faced with the pains and illnesses of life. That's why a heavy sadness is felt in their voice. (...) In their songs one can find philosophical themes, and they awaken people to see things that are not right. With their natural voices they immerse their audience in a thousand-years-old sea of history. The fire of life is hidden in the hearts of Kurdish women.

The folklorist presents women as suffering more than men, and it seems he feels that this suffering infuses their songs with a moral value. Again, we see the theme of 'awakening' coming up in this quote. He also presents Kurdish women as almost legendary figures, close to nature and connected to old Kurdish history, and ultimately to the 'fire of life'. Zana Güneş wrote the last section of the booklet and highlights the same theme:

Especially in those seven years when I was making the program *Şevbêrk*, [I discovered] that there are many voices of Kurdish women among our people, and I hope that these Kurdish voices (*dengên kurdewarî*), the voice of Kurdish folklore and the voice of the Kurdish women, in this way do not remain hidden, but become visible (*bilind bibe*) and spread among the people in the same way as the natural beauties of Kurdistan.

He connects women to nature, and sees them as a hidden treasure that he began to discover himself through the program, and that he now wants to spread to other people as well. Güneş thus sees women as an important target of his program.

This rediscovery of women is also discernable in other places, and thus fits within a larger process of the redefinition of women's positions by the Kurdish

movement. The Kurdish author Müslüm Yücel who lives in Istanbul, writes in his book *Berdel* (2006) about his own sad experiences with female relatives who had suffered in unhappy marriages (pp.45-89). These personal experiences inspired him to write about women. In 1999 he wrote a series of articles about female dengbêjs⁴²¹ in the Kurdish newspaper *Özgür Politika* in 1999, a newspaper that was printed and distributed primarily in Europe. The heading of one of these articles⁴²² says: 'Sadness was sometimes a soft crying. In the dengbêj institution, one of the most important pillars of Kurdish culture, there were also women'. The opening of the article reads:

Until now Kurdish newspapers, magazines, books and even music companies kept saying that men are the roots of the dengbêj art. However, the number of female dengbêjs from the past until today is not small at all. Because in the wars that lasted for centuries every woman who gave her son to the earth, only reaped laments from the rain that watered the earth, not roses'.

Also here, Müslüm Yücel focuses on the suffering of women, which, he says, resulted in the singing of laments. From his article it appears that in 1999 female dengbêjs had only recently been discovered.



Figure 33. The cutout of the discussed newspaper article

421 Many thanks to Müslüm Yücel who kindly shared his knowledge and material with me. He showed me the cutouts of the newspaper articles he had written about this topic.

422 Published September 16, 1999 in *Özgür Politika*.

During the times I visited the family we watched many tapes with recordings of the programs in which they had participated. They all have a similar format, which I discussed in chapter 4. I focus here on the participation of the family in two programs that were broadcast in 2006, shortly after their CD was released. The second program (below) was especially dedicated to female dengbêjs, and only women were invited. The first program was at the same time also the promotion of the CD of which the cover appeared a few times on the screen. After the introduction, which offers images and sounds of Kurdish customs and traditions from long ago, the first image shows all people present in the studio, around twenty people and four musicians. Some people are present as audience, others as singers. All people are dressed in traditional Kurdish dress; the women in wedding dresses, the men in baggy pants tied with a shawl. The two young daughters of dengbêj Cengiz' brother sit on the floor. The floor is covered with carpets, and on the wall hang large paintings that show Kurdish landscapes: a bullock plowing a field, a shepherd with his herd of sheep, a woman making bread, and people dancing at a wedding. All in all the stage represents a Kurdish village life world. The team of musicians play their instruments (saz, drum, oboe, and shepherd's flute). After a short musical introduction, all people present begin to sing a wedding song. The camera focuses on the main singers, of which each holds a microphone: dengbêj Cengiz and his brother are the lead singers who sing two lines each time, which are then repeated by dengbêj Bahar, her sister in law, dengbêj Narin, and their neighbor. After the first song ends, the camera zooms in on Zana Güneş:

It is indeed important that together we preserve and record all our folk songs, the songs of our fathers and elders (*bav u kalan*), our folklore, for the future. Today our guests are people from the region Colemêrg, from Cizîre, from Şîrnax, from our region Botan. We will talk with them today about their songs, about the dengbêj art, and about folklore. The songs of our dengbêjs have been released as a CD, according to the wish of our viewers. We welcome everybody to this *Şevbêrk*.

After this introduction, Güneş introduces all people present in the studio by their first name, and asks them to say something about Kurdish folklore. They reply by thanking him for his efforts and for inviting them, and send greetings to "all four parts of Kurdistan", and also to relatives. These recurrent elements of greeting relatives back home and of thanking the host for his efforts, enhance the informal character of the program. The greetings also connect the program, of which everyone knows it is produced in Europe, to Kurds in the 'homeland.' Dengbêj Narin for example sent greetings to all people in Zeban, and in Duhok.

The one-hour program consists mainly of the singing of songs. In this case, most songs are wedding songs. Either dengbêj Cengiz and his brother take the lead, and are repeated by the three female singers, or one of the women takes the lead, and is repeated by the other women. There was no song in which women took the lead and were repeated by men. Even though the program is meant as a promotion for the CD, which is made solely by women, Cengiz receives most attention, and is presented as the most knowledgeable person present, and as a “dengbêj from a dengbêj family.” Güneş also asked him twice for explanations of songs. In between the songs, the participants are sometimes asked for their opinion about the program. They emphasize that they see it as a program that highlights Kurdish traditions and that prevents these traditions from disappearing. A female participant:

I want to thank you very much for this beautiful program. In the past in Kurdish folklore there were many singers who sang songs. But after they died, no one came to take their places. So those songs disappeared, they were lost. Now singers imitate others, they imitate Turkish singers. That is not right. Therefore I hope that our grandparents will remember their songs so that we can learn them and sing them.

She refers to the loss of Kurdish culture and the assimilation to Turkish culture. She also pays attention to the loss of songs because of the period of silence in which many songs were forgotten. In all programs I watched the participants express their gratitude for the renewed attention to Kurdish culture. Another person comments in this program:

This is a day as in a dream, when people see a dream they say: ‘was this real or not?’ When I was young I heard many songs in the region Colermêrg. When we went to the fields, when we went to harvest hay, our voices would spread through valleys and against cliffs (*wextê cuna giya drunê, li va kevn û zinara deng ve da*), the shepherds sang songs, these are the memories that come to mind. I thank you very much. I greet all people of Kurdistan and especially those from Colermêrg.

This man makes it clear that singing the songs reminds him of the times that he lived in his home region. It reminds him of specific occasions when these songs were sung, when they all sang together while harvesting the hay for the animals, and it brings to mind images of the fields, the work, and the shepherds. Güneş asks dengbêj Narîn what she thinks of the fact that there are women present in the program. She comments:

I think that it is necessary that we do not remain as we were in the past. Because women are the society, and everyone gives his/her own color. I do not see anything wrong in women also bringing into public view the things they know. And I want that men and women always do things together. I hope that women will go public about their lives.

As we know from her life story, Narîn had lived through many difficulties as a result of being a woman. The TV program gave her the feeling of being involved in a transformation that she herself had wished would have happened when she was a teenager.

In the program that was broadcast not long thereafter, women are the main focus of attention. This time, the visitors are twelve women from different regions. Dengbêj Bahar and her sister-in-law are also present. Güneş introduces the program as follows:

Dear listeners, this time we have invited women from all regions. We can say that the dengbêj art began with the folklore of the mothers, that is how it spread in our society. Therefore, today we make a program especially about women.

Apart from there being only women present, the program has the same format as the other programs, and consists mainly of singing songs. A few times Güneş asked for comments on his choice to focus a program solely on women. The women commented that they were glad that he did so, and that “in the past women did not appear on stage and did not sing songs.” Another woman said that she remembers that once when a dengbêj performed in the village guesthouse, she went there to watch, but she was not invited inside. She said that this has changed and that “now men and women are one.” Another woman sang a song of Meryem Xan, one of the famous female dengbêjs of the previous generation. She said:

I greet all four parts of Kurdistan. Thank you very much for the opportunities you give us. We don't want women's voices to get lost. They were very influential for me, I regard them as a mirror. When I hear the songs of Meyrem Xan and Ayşe San, it is as if I see myself in their songs.

Dengbêj Bahar and her sister in law do not receive much attention this time, probably because they had already participated in the show recently. When dengbêj Bahar wants to say something, Güneş urges her to keep it short, even though she is not a women of many words. She congratulates him with the program, and says how important it is for her.

In these two, and the other, programs I watched, Güneş acts not only as the program's host, but also as a wise father and a teacher of the participants and viewers. The educational purposes he has with the program (chapter 4) clearly appear in the often patronizing way he presents. This is also reflected in the behavior of the participants who elaborately express their gratefulness for the opportunity to sing in his program. However, as I also mentioned in chapter 4, viewers and participants seem to overlook the unequal power relations displayed in the program because

of the appreciated position of Zana Güneş, and because of the enormous value it has for viewers to see Kurdish culture produced on television. Dengbêj Bahar and dengbêj Narîn both expressed their appreciation for Güneş' work. They said that their participation in the program, and the release of their CD, gave them a new sense of value and meaning. Dengbêj Bahar said that it made people recognize her on the street, and that this gave her much satisfaction:

(You went now many times to Roj TV, and your album was released, how is that for you?) For me that is very nice. I sing nicer, it is nice. (And the things that you know now will spread and don't stay only with you, that's also nice). For me that is no problem. My husband and my relatives did not hinder me, they do not say anything. For that reason it is nice for me. The further it comes the nicer it is. Once I went to the South (*Başur*) [to Iraqi Kurdistan]. And anyone who saw me was happy. They said how much they liked it. I came on the Radio. They had invited me, at radio *Dengê Kurdî* (Kurdish Voice). (You went there as well, to the South?) Yes in 2006. (...) That was very nice, I liked it very much. I went to the market and walked around and the people greeted me, it was something very special. And some were also protesting against it, they said: 'women should be veiled like in the past, it's not good for women.' But I didn't care. They can say what they like.

Because of the recognition for her knowledge and for her effort, dengbêj Bahar obtained a new sense of value and a new appreciation for the songs she had once learned. This was even more special to her because she was a woman. Her reply to my remark that it is nice that the songs she knows are now spread (with which I actually did not have in mind her position as a woman, but the recognition for her songs) shows that this was not self-evident; her husband or relatives could have obstructed her activities, but did not do so. Dengbêj Narîn expressed similar feelings about these experiences.⁴²³ Their activities had a double value to them, in that they on the one hand were involved in a process of 'resignifying cultural memory,' and on the other, obtained a new visibility in public life, that redefined their position of being woman.

423 Dengbêj Narîn: "And then I was in Hakkari and almost everyone had heard the CD, and I was in Duhok and we were somehow really well-known. Because people like Güneş and his program, and they had seen us often because Güneş had taken us many times to his program. (...) And the people in Iraq liked it as well since it was from the village, from the past. Not something new but something they had missed. So they had seen it and [they found it] interesting. (...) And in Hakkari people were really proud because we had sung songs that came from there. So they were proud, and they said: 'we heard that and it is really nice, we have your CD.' And someone in a bus opened the window and said: 'are you that [person from TV]?' They were proud that we did it."

Conclusion

This last chapter investigated the personal experiences of a Kurdish family on the run. They brought their songs with them, from place to place, through times of conflict and war, the destruction of their village, and the loss of many loved ones. The two storylines of life story and songs brought us to a level where we could gain a deeper understanding of the work the songs do in the lives of individuals. Through their embodied memories of singing songs while carrying out all kinds of village activities, the songs connected them to positive memories. In that sense, the songs offer a hiding place from the many bitter and painful experiences that also took place in the village. When singing songs and speaking about them, rather than feeling pain, joyful memories came up; rather than feeling helpless and losing control, a new sense of agency emerged; and rather than feeling loss, the songs gave them a sense of worth. This function of the songs was reinforced through their activities on TV and the release of the CD.

For Bahar and Narîn, their stay in Germany probably made it easier to sing on TV and to become public figures. As dengbêj Bahar mentioned, when some people in Iraqi Kurdistan criticized her TV performances because she was a woman, she claimed that she did not care. But if they had still been living in Turkey or in Iraqi Kurdistan the social costs of such activities might have been too high. Therefore, it is likely that their stay abroad provided them with different opportunities than they would have had if they had remained in their home region. Their stay in Germany may also reinforce the feelings of loss they already had. Dengbêj Narîn told me that her interest in the things she had seen in the village was related to the fact that she had been continuously on the move. It felt to her “like a dream”, because everything changed so fast and “we always saw new things and experienced new things, and somehow at a certain point your own [experiences] felt like a dream” (*Und irgendwann mal, deine war wie ein Traum*). At another point in the interview she said:

[Living in the village] was so nice and interesting, and when i look now back on it, it appears to me like a dream (*das kommt so wie ein Traum*). As if I have dreamt it. These were so nice times. Sometimes..., I would give everything if we could just have those times back. If we could live through these moments once more so that I could have done many things differently.

Being far from a life world once lived increases the feeling of alienation and of being cut off from past experiences. When they are back in Duhok, where they travel regularly, they feel reconnected with their relatives and with a life world that is only marginally present in Germany. In this diaspora life the songs provide a home that

offers a reconnection to the place they come from, a place to escape from painful memories, and a way to piece together the many fragmented experiences that have characterized their life histories.

As Ginsburg (2002) notes, when cultural memories are resignified, new meanings emerge. In the process of bringing the dengbêj art back into public life, the position of the dengbêjs and the definition of what it means to be a dengbêj, changed. As we also saw in chapter 4, political activists have higher moral aims with their activities, and are not satisfied as long as they cannot work towards these higher goals. The TV program aimed at the redefinition of Kurdish tradition along nationalist and modernist lines. While dengbêjs often felt frustration about the lack of recognition compared to former times, as they felt that the political and moral aims of the TV often paid too little attention to their real qualities, this did not count for the family of this chapter. Since the family did not have the same type of singing career of many other dengbêjs, they also did not have the expectations of the dengbêjs. They had not expected that one day their elaborate knowledge of songs and stories would become meaningful for a much larger audience than that of their village. Also, Bahar and Narîn could not have known that one day they would perform on TV and that it would become acceptable to do this as female singers. Therefore, they experienced the redefinition of the dengbêj art by political activists much more positively than many other dengbêjs.

I suggest that these developments not only affected the personal lives of the family I discussed, but was also influential for the viewers. It became a common sight for women to perform on television, and this being a new phenomenon, made people curious about female voices and songs. The program was widely watched by many people in Turkey and abroad. Seeing Kurdish culture, language and traditions performed on TV gives people a sense of pride and a new sense of belonging. Part of the often negative sentiments that many people in Turkey had about their Kurdishness, could be replaced by positive sentiments. Also, the program provided (mainly elderly) people with examples they could easily identify with. Famous Kurdish singers such as Şivan Perwer, Aynur Doğan, Nizamettin Arîç, and Cîwan Haco, also had the function of creating a much more positive experience of being Kurdish, speaking Kurdish, and of Kurdish music. However, for many elderly people, and also for younger people who grew up in villages, the dengbêjs resonated in a different way with their cultural interests than the Kurdish music produced over the last decades. By broadening the definition of what a dengbêj is, the program *Şevbêrk* could include these people and give them a sense of recognition and value for their knowledge of songs and traditions. Moreover, because of the few female dengbêjs, the broader definition of

being a dengbêj includes women whose knowledge would otherwise remain in the shadows. The program on the one hand reconfirms what people remember of the dengbêj art, and what they imagine it to be, but also challenges their imagination by putting women in the limelight, who were generally not regarded as important dengbêjs in the past.

As a final remark for this chapter I will return once more to the personal meanings the songs have (obtained) for the family discussed. If we look at the total body of songs they know, of which I could only present a few in this chapter, the songs reflect a life world that has to a large extent disappeared today. Although some of the practices the songs speak of still take place in the village, current village life has changed profoundly. The village was burned down and rebuilt; many people who were born in the village live elsewhere; and people who still live in Zeban do not carry out all practices as they are described in the songs. For Narîn, Bahar and Cengiz, the village has become a far-away place that is, as Narîn said, almost more real in her imagination than in reality, since the village is not anymore what it used to be, and many of their relatives have moved away. To this family, and many other Kurds who witnessed the destruction of village life and who live a different life today, their songs and stories form a Sung Home that connects to positive experiences, and that depicts a life world that today only exists in their memories.