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

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Figure 34. Dengbêj Apê Bekir and Salihê Qubînî in Apê Bekir's shop in Iğdır.

Conclusion

This dissertation investigated and presented the dengbêjs and their art on many different levels. It took us on a journey: from kilams about a Kurdish past, along current performances in Dengbêj Houses, to the different sites where the dengbêj art was turned into cultural activism, and to the personal life histories of dengbêjs and of a family on the run. The dengbêj art told us an important story of a society in conflict and change; of the redefinition of what it means to be a (good) Kurd; of ideas about the past and the future; and of one's personal place in these processes. During the time of my research, which was a unique moment of return of the dengbêjs into public life, different social narratives, moralities, and temporalities met in the dengbêj art, and were negotiated at places where the dengbêjs performed. This negotiation did not only tell us a story about Kurdish society in Turkey, but also about the larger global stories of modernity, nationalism, and Orientalism.

The approach that I followed in this dissertation was centered on narrative and morality. Both theoretical frameworks were helpful in discovering what different ideas circulated among Kurds at the time of my field research. Especially in a situation of decades of conflict and oppression in which the dominant stories produced by Turkish nationalism seemed to overshadow all other viewpoints, counter narratives are crucial in offering alternatives and in altering feelings of loss of power and control. As we saw in the chapters, dengbêjs and others mobilized such narratives in order to understand the transformation Kurdish society went through, but also to see their personal life stories in a different light. Although often these alternatives did not seem to be capable of resisting the power of Turkey's government, recent developments in the field of Kurdish culture and politics demonstrate that important changes were forged. These changes were prepared by political activists who had developed alternative models and searched for ways to enter and change the cultural and political arena.

In the first chapter I focused on the kilams and how they represent a Kurdish past. Since the dengbêjs were the most important and prestigious performers in Kurdish society, their art formed an important means through which moral ideas were conveyed about home and belonging, about what it meant to be a good person, about who belonged and who did not. The dengbêj art was one of the institutions that produced moral narratives that did not only stem from the religious or political establishment, but added the perspective of the Kurdish commoner. The dengbêjs were mostly common wo/men who stood in the service of an agha, and who observed the life world of the Kurdish nobility from the sideline. In the majority of the kilams a commoner is presented as the voice of the kilam. It seems therefore that the dengbêjs

saw themselves as close to the ordinary people and as articulating their viewpoints. Many of the events the kilams speak of can be situated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Through recurring figures that emerge in the kilams they sketch a life world that does not anymore exist today. The kilams express feelings of powerlessness and despair of people because of the power of elders who decided about their destiny. The kilams also demonstrate that the lifestyle of the nobility was out of reach for most commoners. The Armenians emerge as the most important Other living side by side with Kurds. In the kilams Armenian women are often imagined as marriage candidates, and Armenians are staged as serving Kurdish interests.

The late nineteenth and early twentieth century was a time of turmoil and war in which the centuries old Ottoman Empire disintegrated and made place for a modern nation-state, and in which new borders were created. The emergence of the Republic of Turkey and of Turkish nationalist ideology turned the Kurds and other minorities into undesirable citizens, and resulted in the denial and oppression of Kurdishness. The kilams sketch a Kurdish geography in which local structures were imagined and experienced as the center, and the surrounding states as the periphery. Local leaders had differing alliances with surrounding tribes and with the states they were part of. However, with the increasing control of the state in local affairs, and with the development of Turkish nationalism and the foundation of the Republic, the enmity and opposition between the Kurds and Turkey's government increased and became a structural feature of local politics. In the early twentieth century the figure of the local leader was predominantly defined in opposition to that government as a rebel, a traitor, or a fugitive, and was condemned for treason or praised for revolt. But the kilams continue to show diversity and divisions among Kurds, and the enmity between Kurdish tribes and clans.

The second chapter looked at how dengbêjs in Diyarbakır's newly opened Dengbêj House presented themselves. I understood the performances I attended during my research as performing tradition. The dengbêjs felt they offer an important contribution to Kurdish society by their knowledge of historical kilams, and through their embodied experiences with village life. They had many stories to tell about their younger years in which the dengbêjs were greatly appreciated, and when whole villages gathered in the dîwan to listen to them. They also spoke of the special qualities of village life, and believe that people had certain capabilities that the current generation of Kurds living in the cities lacks. Another quality they emphasized is their knowledge of historical kilams. They enjoyed the oral character of their art in which free association is a central feature. From one song line or topic

they remembered other kilams and topics, which contributed to the dynamics of a performance.

However, this free association was hindered by the morality of political activists who provided the dengbêjs with a new space in public life. The activists, and many young Kurds who grew up in the Turkish education system, were taught to emperson Turkishness, and to see their Kurdish identity as backwards and ignorant. As a response to this, the Kurdish movement redefined Kurdishness as a positive identity, but only through a rejection of certain elements. This ideology opposes the tribal past of the Kurds, and therewith also an important part of the dengbêj kilams. Political activists saw the dengbêjs, like all Kurds, as in need of education and awakening towards Kurdish nationalism. They need to be taught which kilams to sing, and which to leave out. As a result, the dengbêjs felt often obstructed and undervalued by people who wished to control and guide them in their choice of kilams.

Rather than seeing the dengbêjs as ignorant and as unaware of recent developments and narratives, I suggested in this chapter to see their activities as deliberate choices to embrace other moral narratives. Unlike the activists, most dengbêjs did not feel ambivalent about their Kurdish identity and past. They appreciated the kilams as sources of historical knowledge that reveal important information about the Kurdish past and should not be forgotten. Also, I argued that the dengbêjs should not be seen as pre-modern or on the road towards modernity, but as caught up in and influenced by the process of modernization. The centralization of government authority, the rise of nationalism, and the denial and oppression of Kurdish language and cultural production, pushed the dengbêjs and their art to the margins. They could only continue in the villages where they could remain outside of government control. Their stories show that the lack of access to education and a musical career they had often wished for, was a result of these developments, rather than its precursor.

The third chapter presented an in-depth investigation of the life stories of six dengbêjs and an aşık. At the time of my research, the dengbêjs had only recently returned into public life, and looked back on their personal histories from that particular moment. They reflected on the happy times when they had been able to sing frequently, and on the times that they had been obstructed from doing so. In their stories I discovered a range of reasons for the times that they remained silent. The experience of silence that was shared by all dengbêjs was the period from roughly 1980 to the beginning of the 2000s, when political oppression and the overall situation of conflict and resettlement, deeply disrupted village structures

that had been the main facilitating institutes for them to sing. Dengbêj Mahmut, Isa, and Hamîd spoke about these experiences of oppression that made them afraid to continue singing. After their recent return into public life, Dengbêj Hamîd expressed the disappointment about the lack of support, that many other dengbêjs shared with him. Being tortured and prohibited to sing made him experience this new lack of attention as a returning experience of silence.

But there were also other reasons for silence. Dengbêj Bêrîvan spoke of the limited chances she had to sing because of being a woman. Dengbêj Cîhan's story was indicative for the erasure of Armenian identity from eastern Turkey. He had chosen to define himself primarily as a Kurd and a Muslim, and not as an Armenian. From his story spoke a strong sense of the ways in which being Armenian had become undesirable. Dengbêj Seyda spoke about the religious class he felt connected to through his education at several madrasas. As a religious student he had initially felt hesitant to show his qualities as a dengbêj, but he found a way to combine the two identities. Dengbêj Silêman was an adventurous child who, like many others of his age, was curious about life in western Turkey, and who went there as a laborer. He learned to speak Turkish fluently, and learned many Turkish songs. But after years he returned to his village and took up a more Kurdish centered life again. Finally, aşık Abdullah had wished for a musical career, but was obstructed by his father who destroyed his saz and married him under pressure. The prohibition on musical instruments meant that only twenty years later, aşık Abdullah had the chance to strive for the publication of an album and to live the life he wished for himself.

The variety of personal stories showed how individual singing careers were influenced by different developments taking place during the life times of the dengbêjs. They also showed that many dengbêjs spoke in moral terms about choices they had made in their lives. Following Zigon (2007), this demonstrates that in times of deep transformation of an entire society, people feel the need to reposition themselves towards the social narratives they hear around them, and at the same time to create their own story in which they rework their stories in ways that enable them to present themselves as morally good persons.

In chapter 4 I investigated the processes, sites and narratives that had turned the dengbêj art into a project of cultural activism in recent years. Cultural activism was an important means to contest Turkish nationalism in public life, and to reclaim public spaces for the expression and production of Kurdishness. This development had been initiated from abroad, by the Kurdish satellite channel MED-TV. Kurdish television was arguably the most important platform through which a Kurdish majority began seeing and imagining itself as a national community.

Through the life story of Zana Güneş, the host of the TV show *Şevbêrka Dengbêja*, we saw how these processes of politicization and deterritorialization took place in the life of an individual who played a central role in redefining the dengbêj art. We also saw how he framed and gave meaning to his life by tracing in himself an evolvment of former ignorance and later awakening for the Kurdish cause. This manner of self-presentation fits well in PKK ideology that sees the need for each individual to go through a process of learning to become a good Kurd with a new Kurdish personality.

Within Turkey, similar processes started somewhat later due to the conflict, oppression and turmoil Kurdish society went through until the beginning 2000s. Since the 2000s, the Kurdish movement was increasingly able to mobilize cultural activism within Turkey in order to expand its political influence. The reemergence of the dengbêjs in public life was thus directly related, and part of, these new forms of cultural activism. At the time of my research, new places where Kurdish culture was displayed and produced were in the process of being set up. Political activists invited the dengbêjs to perform at historical sites such as the old palace in Doğubeyazıt, and the newly renovated historical building of the Dengbêj House in Diyarbakır. These sites reinforced the historical claim they wanted to make that presents the dengbêjs as an age old Kurdish tradition and heritage. Moreover, speaking Kurdish in public at the festival and the opening of the Dengbêj House, were means to publicly acknowledge and reclaim the for almost a century denied existence of the Kurdish language. An important form of the new presence and visibility of Kurdishness can also be found in the music market in Istanbul. In recent years, Kurdish music CDs sit alongside Turkish CDs in the large music shops in Istanbul's main shopping street. Finding such CDs and other publications in the center of commercial activity is an important means to transform the Kurdish Other of Turkish modernity, often imagined as violent, primitive, and backwards, into a legal, visible, and non-violent presence in public life.

However, these activities were still highly contested, and dangerous for many people involved during the time of my research. Activists risked being arrested, imprisoned, or charged, and many activists had a (long) personal history of persecution by the government. This added a strong moral claim to their position as advocates for Kurdish rights, as people respected them for their dedication, something not everyone could or would do. Their ideological narratives were therefore quite influential. Zeki Barış, an activist who was one of the central figures working at the Diyarbakır Dengbêj House, spoke passionately about his ideas. He felt that the nationalist awakening of the Kurdish people would make their traditions, and thus also the dengbêj art, more meaningful for today. He and other activists

were primarily focused on political improvements, and could not see the dengbêj art as loose from political struggle. Notwithstanding the influence of these narratives, we saw that many dengbêjs did not adopt such narratives uncritically in their self-presentation, and that the ones who did, emphasized elements that connected to their life stories and personal interests.

Chapter 5 investigated the (musical) memories of a dengbêj family that had lived through, and escaped from, all major wars occurring in the border region during the last decades of the twentieth century. By focusing in-depth on the life stories of one family, and particularly on the two female dengbêjs singers of this family, we gained better insight in what multiple and devastating consequences conflict and escape have in the lives of individuals; in how they mobilized the songs they know to cope with their current experiences, and in how they got involved in cultural activism through their participation in the TV show *Şevbêrk*. I used the chapter also to focus on the position of women. In the TV show, the definition of dengbêjs included people who had a good knowledge of rhythmic songs (*stran*), but not of kilams. This meant that many more female singers could be included in the show. The focus on female dengbêjs fit in the importance attached in the ideas of the Kurdish movement to the enhancement of the position of women, as this is understood necessary for the creation of a modern Kurdish society. It also gave women and men whose knowledge was previously not seen as valuable, a new sense of importance of the songs and traditions they know.

We saw how during the interviews and talks I had with the family members, two storylines emerged: one in which they primarily spoke of their life experiences, and another one in which they focused on the songs and on memories of village life and its activities. These two storylines remained mostly separate and were characterized by two sets of emotions. When speaking of the life events they went through, the interviews brought up painful memories of loss, violence, and confusion. When speaking of the songs, they brought up joyful and peaceful memories of village life, and even when they referred to sad memories, these memories seemed to be more comprehensible and bearable than in the context of telling their life stories. I suggested that the songs they learned during the years they lived in the village, do a particular work. By bringing to mind repetitive actions that were carried out by all people, the songs connect to embodied memories of village life, and therewith have the capability of overlooking and of not connecting to painful memories.

After the family moved to Germany, they got involved in TV performances and the production of a CD. These activities were on the one hand a form of resignifying cultural memory. The songs and stories of people who in Turkey remained outside

of the story of Turkish nationalism and modernity, were now given importance and included in the new story of Kurdish nationalism. Additionally, these activities were also important in redefining the role of women who had previously often been excluded from performing in public life. Therefore, miss Bahar and miss Narîn not only gained a new sense of valuation for their knowledge, and of the importance of their songs as 'folklore', they also gained a new position as women. Their activities on remembering, performing, and archiving the songs, thus held several personal meanings to them. The new visibility of women, and the broader definition of what it means to be a dengbêj, arguably also affected the audiences of the TV show.

By focusing on the performers of a 'tradition' who are regarded as remnants of an age old Kurdish history, this dissertation contributes to gain understanding in how people connect to, redefine, and negotiate, ideas about history, modernity, and nationalism. Not only in Turkey, but also in the country where I live (the Netherlands) and elsewhere, we came to understand our history in (often evolutionary) terms of a modern present and an ancient, traditional past. Anthropology has often reinforced and contributed to this way of thinking. From an early age on we learn to regard certain people as modern and progressive, and others as traditional and backwards, and as 'back in time'. These ideas reflect and reproduce global power relations in which the 'western world' is defined as the economic and ideological center, and other places as less or more removed from that ideal. Every 'modern' place is in need of a 'traditional' elsewhere that can reconfirm and reestablish our sense of being advanced to others.⁴²⁴ We imagine the other as backwards, tribal and ignorant, as unaware of modern technology, and as incapable of catching up with truly democratic, neoliberal, and nationalist values. In Turkey in a self-Orientalist way, that modern center came to be defined as western Turkey, and its traditional elsewhere as eastern Turkey, the countryside, and the Kurds.

As I suggested in the Introduction, the PKK mobilized such Orientalist ideas for their self-definition of what it means to be Kurdish. In a 'reversed process of othering,' this self-Orientalist ideology first defines all Kurds as backwards and degenerate from within. It then tries to de-Orientalize itself by explaining that backwards and degenerate character as stemming from the contamination of Kurdish culture by outside influences. Finally, it recreates itself into a new modern

⁴²⁴ As Yeğenoğlu (1998) says it, "both the 'Western subject' and 'Oriental other' are mutually implicated in each other and thus neither exists as a fully constituted entity" (pp.58), and: "difference, within a signifying economy such as Orientalism, is nothing but the self's/same's own excluded but necessary negative other" (pp.84).

Kurdish personality that has shed backwards, tribal and religious traits, that has understood the true core of what it is to be Kurdish, and that has embraced modern values of democracy and Kurdish nationalism. This process of 'the empersonment of Kurdishness' by awakening and learning to become a modern Kurd is seen as necessary for all Kurds.

Since the dengbêj art is regarded as transmitting ancient Kurdish history to the current generation of Kurds, it was precisely this art that became the center of discussions on the reinterpretation of that history. Political activists were haunted by the question how to deal with the tribal and divided past of the Kurds that did not in any way reflect a nationalist 'awareness', and what to do with the thousands of kilams about tribal battles and enmity that could re-incite division and enmity. To them, the most viable solution seemed to silence these kilams: if they would not be performed anymore, people would be able to rid themselves from this problematic history. They would unlearn their 'tribal' thinking, and would begin to think and act as 'nationalists'. Instead of thinking of their own gain, they would see themselves as in the service of the Kurdish people, who would then work unitedly towards their aim of increasing rights and independence for the Kurdish nation.

As we have seen in this dissertation, their approach was in many ways a successful undertaking. Step by step, political activists managed to increase the space for Kurdish cultural production in public life in Turkey, and also to gain influence in local and national politics. Their emphasis on Kurdishness as a positive characteristic, and the new role models of Kurdish musicians, politicians and others, gave people who had learned to emperson Turkishness rather than Kurdisness, a more positive sense of their Kurdish identity. However, their approach had the downside of a renewed silencing of alternative viewpoints. Next to being silenced by government oppression that regarded any form of Kurdish cultural production as an act of rebellion, the dengbêjs were also silenced by political activists who first discarded their knowledge because they regarded it as problematic, and then only accepted the kilams that most fit into their political viewpoints. Moreover, the dengbêjs were classified as ignorant people who were in need of awakening, and who were, ultimately, not capable of deciding by themselves what they felt was important to them and Kurdish society at large.

After listening to the various types of stories that the dengbêjs told, and parts of which I have presented in the chapters, defining the dengbêjs as behind on the road towards modernity appears to be inadequate and mistaken. Each of them was in different ways deeply affected by, and tied to, the consequences of modernity, most notably the establishment of the nation-state of Turkey and the

implementation of Turkish nationalist ideology. These had defined Kurdish as a non-language and a non-culture, and had pushed the dengbêjs and other Kurdish cultural production to the margins of the nation-state, to those villages that to a large extent remained outside of government control. I suggest therefore that the differences in viewpoints between dengbêjs and political activists should not be sought in their level of progress (we are all entangled in modernity), but in their differences in temporal and moral perspectives. These different perspectives mean that many dengbêjs feel comfortable and at ease with the Home they find in the songs, whereas many political activists have different imaginations about a Kurdish home, and seek to redefine its history, present and future.

