CHAPTER

KURDISH ORAL LITERATURE

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Verbal artistry is much valued in Kurdistan. Contests between well-known bards, vying to outsing each other, are within living memory in the villages; audiences are still stirred by stories of battle, moved by songs of love, and entertained by the exploits of fast-talking tricksters. The creative use of the Kurdish language is a vital part of Kurdish "folklore," part of that construct of a traditional past which is essential for the development of a national consciousness (Smith 1991, p. 21). The imagery of Kurdish nationalism draws much of its emotive power from its allusions to the rich landscape of centuries of Kurdish oral literature. Popular Kurdish singers not only perform songs from Kurdish folklore but often employ traditional musical forms and imagery in their own compositions, as in Úivan Perwer's *Hawar* (Cry for Help), about the chemical bombing of Halabja. Such images, already imbued with complex meanings for those brought up in the villages, are endowed with new layers of meaning in the modern nationalist discourse, and are also resonant for the Kurdish youth of the cities and the diaspora. Languages other than Kurdish, particularly Turkish, are sometimes used for such nationalist messages, but they draw on the images of Kurdish oral literature.

To describe fully the "superabundance," as Vilchevsky termed it (in Nikitine 1956, p. 255), of Kurdish folk literature is beyond the scope of a single paper. The aim here is to give a flavour of this distinctive literature. Accordingly I will outline the current situation of Kurdish oral literature and its

relevance to the Kurds, and give samples of some of the more important works. Considerations of space preclude comprehensive listings of traditions throughout, though the bibliography should prove adequate for those who wish to study this literature further. There is an unfair bias here towards the poetic genres rather than prose. Again, this is partly for reasons of space, but also because most of the poetry enjoys higher prestige and popularity amongst the Kurds. I have intentionally passed quickly over those oral traditions, interesting though they are, which are shared with Persians, Turks and Arabs. The poetry discussed here is distinctively Kurdish; it may contain motifs which are shared, but it embodies Kurdish concerns, and has meaning within the modern Kurdish discourse. Much of it also concerns events from Kurdish history.

1. Oral Tradition in Kurdistan

Despite the long tradition of Kurdish scholars and authors, many of whom used Arabic, Persian or Turkish as well as Kurdish in their writings, the great majority of Kurds in the past were not literate enough to be able to read “literature.” Today, state education in Turkey, Iran and Syria is given in Turkish, Persian and Arabic respectively. Even in Iraq, the Sorani (Southern Kurdish) dialect alone has been officially authorized for use in the education system. The former Soviet Union had sizeable minorities of literate Kurds and Georgia and Armenia in particular supported study of Kurdish language and folklore. However, in the homeland, many Kurds cannot comfortably read Kurdish, and much Kurdish literature, especially in Kurmanji (Northern Kurdish), remains oral. This is not to say that Kurdish society is at a “pre-literate” level, with a uniform “oral” world-view prevailing over all those who have no reading skills (Ong 1982). Such ideas are peddled in the Turkish context as part of anti-Kurdish propaganda and are unfortunately accepted by some Kurds who see their traditional culture as irredeemably primitive. Although there are certain aspects of oral literature, such as repetition and the use of mnemonics, which are found in almost all types of oral tradition throughout the world, we must beware of generalising both about the nature of oral

literature and the thought processes of those who produce and listen to it. A Kurd from Diyarbakir who is able to read Turkish novels is likely to have very different attitudes to history, the supernatural and aesthetics from, say, a Yezidi villager in Northern Iraq who has never been to school. Yet both may be equally illiterate in Kurdish and equally appreciative of songs of past Kurdish heroes and lovers.

Not only do terms such as "literacy" and "orality" have different meanings in different contexts (Street 1984), but in Kurdistan they do not exist in isolation from each other. Literacy has been known in Kurdistan for many centuries as a skill of the elite valued by the majority. Its association with the dominant "Religions of the Book" has given it spiritual power; it has been used for protective amulets and divination. The prominence of literacy has also meant that the dividing line between "oral tradition" and written text is not at all clear-cut. For more than a century, Kurdish oral traditions have been collected and published, becoming written texts. Conversely, texts written by renowned literary poets, such as Mewlewî or Feqiyê Teyran, may be memorized and pass into oral tradition, and much spurious material may eventually be attributed to them (Kerim 1998; Celîl 1985, pp. 53-81); characters, episodes and even whole storylines from literary works may be used by the composers of oral genres. Much of the richness of Kurdistan's folklore comes, not only from the free exchange of oral traditions and their components between Kurds and their neighbours, but also from the interaction of the written with the oral.

It would be rash to generalize too far about oral literature just because it is oral, and the sheer variety of language, religion, and social structure in Kurdistan should warn against thinking in terms of one type of "oral" mind-set existing over the whole area. To delineate the effects of orality on Kurdish culture, more detailed work focusing on specific areas and communities is needed. However, there is an important point to be borne in mind when considering all Kurdish oral traditions, which comprise all sorts of material which we might categorize under such headings as popular literature, history and philosophy. It is very easy to be swayed by one's own preconceptions. Orientalists have in the past been particularly guilty of looking at native genres and finding them wanting, usually because they have not conformed to

preconceptions of analogous Western genres, or of classical literary genres. Kurdish oral literature cannot be properly understood as "literature" unless its meanings for the Kurds are taken into account, the meanings for both the immediate audience which observes the performance, and also, nowadays, the wider Kurdish audience, particularly those young people in cities or the diaspora who do not attend performances but who know of the traditions and ascribe meaning to them. Divorced from its social context, this literature cannot be understood properly. A particularly important factor to be considered is performance;when and how oral literature was performed, and audiences' attitudes towards it.

It is easy to see how, in the past, the performance of various kinds of oral literature fitted into everyday rural life. One hears of folk-tales being told during the long winter nights when families huddled together for warmth, of epithalamia being sung at village weddings, of love-songs sung when flocks were taken to summer pastures, of men's and women's work-songs. Until relatively recently, most villages also had a *dîwanxane*, where local men would gather in the evening and guests passing through would stay. News would be exchanged, stories told and songs sung. However, oral literature was not just a homely village phenomenon. There were urban contexts too, such as tea-houses and other public spaces. But perhaps the most elevated context of all was in the great houses. Many of the Kurdish emirs, who flourished up to the mid-nineteenth century, were patrons of the arts, whose courts hosted performances of both literary and oral material. Evliya Chelebi's improbable description of the skills of Abdal Khan Bitlîsî was no doubt founded on a real reputation as a patron of arts and sciences (Dankoff 1990, pp. 93-109). Literacy amongst tribal leaders at the end of the Ottoman empire was mixed, but they also provided a venue for performance and had their own court poets to sing their praises, as befitted their status. Soane gives the Southern Kurdish example of Taha Beg, who wrote poetry and enjoyed Persian literature (1926, p. 228), but Driver (1919, p. 30) reports that Ibrahim Pasha Milli's son Mehmud Bey, whose stronghold was at Viranşehir (now in Turkey), was illiterate. It is likely that some of the "folk" poets and story-tellers in these courts were literate and multi-lingual.

In the past, Kurdish communities lived alongside Christians, Jews and Turcomen, speakers of Armenian, neo-Aramaic, and Turkish dialects. Not only did these languages share many oral traditions with Kurdish, but many members of minority groups spoke impeccable Kurdish, and some have been recorded performing Kurdish oral literature. There are many examples in Celîl 1978. Zaza and Gurâni, Western Iranian dialects spoken by substantial communities of Kurds (van Bruinessen 1994, pp. 29-37), also have a rich oral literature; in the case of Gurâni this lies alongside an established literary tradition. These dialects share many traditions and genres with Kurmanji and Sorani. Such local linguistic and cultural variety has added to the richness of Kurdish oral literature.

2. The upheavals of the late twentieth century

As the twentieth century ends and the twenty-first begins, oral literature, like most other aspects of Kurdish culture, is in transition. Recent history has changed society profoundly. In Turkey, the guerrilla war between the government and the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) resulted in villages being cleared and vast shanty towns growing up around cities. The PKK's operation out of Syria prompted the Turks to secure a previously permeable border, cutting off Syria's Kurds from their relations in Turkey. Communities have also been changed, and in some cases dispersed, by the "Great Anatolian Project," a system of hydro-electric dams. In Iraq, villages were cleared during the Iran-Iraq war and later in the "Anfal" campaign (Middle East Watch 1993) and the populations deposited in "collective villages," often at some distance from their previous homes. The Gulf War of 1991, the abortive Kurdish uprising and exodus to the mountains, and the ensuing civil strife between the Iraqi Kurdish parties, resulted in more displacement. Iranian Kurds suffered from the upheavals of the Islamic revolution and sporadic uprisings against it, and from their territory becoming a battlefield in the Iran-Iraq war.

Such catastrophes, which affect every aspect of Kurdish life, have obvious consequences for oral literature. Fewer and fewer Kurds are living in villages, and those forms of

tradition associated with venues and activities which no longer exist are dying out. This includes work-songs associated with village-tasks which are unnecessary in town or refugee life, such as grinding with millstones. Also in decline are performances of long narrative poems and fairy-tales; television provides much of the entertainment for most ordinary evenings. Additionally, there is, in some communities at least, a feeling that performances of "happy" songs and stories are inappropriate in times of distress and anxiety. Nevertheless, lyrical songs and cheerful dances are still performed at weddings and other gatherings, whether political or otherwise. The *gerelawije* of the Mahabad area, where listeners take it in turn to sing, still exists (Blum and Hassanpour 1996, p. 328). Laments for the dead are still performed in the traditional way. Some of the oral traditions which are not often performed, such as the long narrative poems, are leaping the "genre barrier" and becoming the subjects of novels and plays, where they are read and appreciated by younger generations. Thus, for much oral literature, survival depends on genre.

The Kurdish diaspora continues to grow, and is already a substantial global community. The diaspora Kurds are using the relative freedoms of Europe, North America and Australia in particular to express their own, Kurdocentric, perspectives, and for political organisation. Using modern means of communication, such as satellite TV and the Internet, they can reach the Kurds of the homeland more easily than with printed matter (Hassanpour 1998). Many Kurdish nation-building discourses are refined and transmitted throughout the homeland by Kurds in the diaspora. These include specific perspectives on Kurdish history,[1] a rehabilitation of the concept of Kurdish culture, and a portrayal of traditional Kurdish village life as a rural idyll. Examples from Kurdish oral literature are cited in support of all these.

3. Studies of Kurdish Oral Literature

[1] Ancient history, particularly the belief that the Kurds are descended from the Medes, has been strongly emphasised. The Kurdish satellite station MED-TV and its successors in particular screened programmes about ancient history and about Kurdish folklore, placing great emphasis on symbols such as the Newroz festival.

Few early collectors of Kurdish oral traditions presented their collections as examples of literature. Most of the early collections are evidence presented primarily for linguistic research (Lerch 1858; Prym and Socin 1887, 1890; Makas 1897-1926; Mann 1906, 1909), though a few, such as Jaba 1860, declare an intention to give information on other topics, such as Kurdish tribes and literature.

The development of folklore as a field of study affected Kurdish scholarship. Oral literature was perceived as an important part of Kurdish folklore, which is also considered to include many other items such as traditional costume, agricultural implements, etc. Early Kurdish journals such as *Hawar* (1932-45) published many oral traditions, sometimes with explanatory notes for non-Kurds. In the second half of the twentieth century it became clear that Kurdish oral traditions were in decline, as a result both of general modernising processes found in many developing societies and of the specific proscription of Kurdish culture in Turkey and Iran. The widespread idea that folklore reflects the collective character of the people producing it in a uniquely intimate way has found expression amongst both Kurdish and foreign folklorists (Bois 1946; Nikitine 1956, p. 259ff.). Kurdish scholars in particular have seen folklore as a fund of information about the past, an expression of the people's feelings, and a repository of popular wisdom. Proverbs, for instance, are often called "sayings of the forefathers" (*gotinên pêşiyan*) and are one of the most commonly collected genres. It is widely recognized that this national treasure is in decline. As one eminent scholar has written, "not a day goes by but Kurdish oral tradition loses something of value" (Celîl 1985, pp. 5-6, 9). Kurds have responded to this crisis by making collections and publishing. These initiatives range from the large-scale works, such as *Zargotina Kurda* (Kurdish oral tradition) of the Jalîl (Celîl) brothers in the former Soviet Union (Celîl 1978), and the two-volume *Folklor, komele berhemêkî folkloriye* (Folklore: a collection of folkloric work) from Erbil (Cutyar et al 1984-5), to the valuable smaller collections made by teachers, writers and other interested parties who devoted their spare time to visiting villages and recording folklore. Due to the political situation, most collections were made in Iraq and the former Soviet Union,

with some in Iran, Syria and the diaspora and very few indeed in Turkey. Since Iraqi collections focused mainly on Sorani material, it was the Soviet folklorists who kept Kurmanji folklore studies alive through the twentieth century. They also contributed to studies of music. Kurdish folklore has regularly been featured on the radio in Iraq, Iran and the Caucasus, and, very recently, on satellite television (Hassanpour 1998). Such enterprises have in turn had an effect on the oral traditions, as a concept of "the correct version" grows among the audience, and young performers sometimes learn material from books or broadcasts. Nevertheless, Kurdish folklorists agree that only a small proportion of the available material has been preserved by collection.

Secondary literature on Kurdish oral traditions is not plentiful. With important exceptions, most of the works by Kurdish folklorists are collections rather than studies of the material. Although they provide important records of oral traditions, they were mostly produced for a public which was already familiar with local genres and performance trends, and much remains unexplained for the outsider. Performances are rarely contextualized; where performance details are noted, often little explanation is given of its wider significance in the community. As noted above, this characteristic is shared by much, though not all, of the linguistic studies which include oral literature. Exceptions which have short but useful introductions include Mann 1906 I, pp. XXVII-XXX; Blau 1975, pp. 4-7; MacKenzie 1990 II.

Although some noted Kurdologists have given broad outlines of the role played by oral literature in Kurdish life (Bois 1946, 1986; Nikitine 1956), outsiders wishing to understand this on a detailed localized basis have needed to do fieldwork, which recent history has made difficult. There have been some notable studies of Kurdish music; a vital accompaniment to much oral literature; which include some description of social context, such as the work of Blum, Christensen and Tatsumura, but unless extensive fieldwork could be done, scholars of oral tradition have had to undertake the type of analysis which can be based mostly on collected texts (e.g. Chyet 1991a). Even these are scanty; for instance, no comprehensive typology of narratives has yet been

made for Kurdish.[2] Comparison with better-documented traditions, such as Arabic, Turkish, Aramaic and Armenian, can be fruitful, and the studies of the folklore of the Kurdish Jews now living in Israel, such as Brauer and Patai 1993 and Sabar 1982, are particularly useful for the Kurdologist.

4. Genre

Although genre is a key factor in understanding Kurdish literature, there are many problems in defining and discussing the genres. Many narrative traditions are found in several genres and it can be illuminating to consider a tradition in its various forms, and the impact that a change in form has on the tradition. However, some genres, such as proverbs and fables, are highly prescriptive of both subject-matter and form.

The role played by genre in the interpretation of oral literature by Kurdish audiences is crucial. For example, it may indicate whether or not traditions are to be literally believed, or it may signal a particular emotional mood. The spoken genres of Kurdish, the forms of discourse used, and questions of style, have so far been very little studied by academics. Genre is not determined only by a combination of text with style and form, but also by social context (Ben-Amos 1976; Dundes 1964). The occasion and location of a performance can have a significant impact on its evaluation by the audience and thus on its meaning. The variety of generic terms found in Kurdish is somewhat bewildering; what follows is a general description, giving some of the most common terms and their approximate meanings.

In the Kurdish context, as in many others, “emic“ (local) and “etic” (outsider) genres of oral tradition do not usually match. An additional complication for both outsiders and locals is the variety and inconsistency of terminologies and classificatory systems found in different areas, and different traditions of Kurdish folklore study. Even the most commonly found Kurdish generic terms are rarely understood without ambiguity throughout the entire Kurmanji- or Sorani-

[2] Spies 1972 lists examples from a specific collection giving correspondences with Aarne and Thompson’s motif- index; Jason 1962 does the same for Drushinina’s collection. Marzolph 1984 has Kurdish examples.

speaking area. Many terms are also more general, and used by Persians, Turks, Arabs and Armenians with subtle differences of meaning. Various names of Arabic or Persian literary genres are also used for Kurdish oral genres which are quite different in form. Some generic distinctions used by Kurds, both at a local level and in scholarly collections, are indications of content, such as *stranêd tarixî*, “historical songs,” and *stranêd evînî*, “songs of love.” Other generic terms relate to purpose, such as *stranêd govend/reqs,* “songs for dancing”; in practice one can usually infer that these latter will be rhythmic and upbeat, and many will be about pretty girls. Still other generic terms are known by occasion, such as the *payizok*, the “autumn song,” which is associated with the return from the idealized summer pastures (rarely a feature of contemporary Kurdish life) and the preparation for a grim, hard winter. This term usually denotes melancholy lyrical songs, but can in some contexts refer to a different genre, a “rhetorical riddle” whereby a pattern is set up of questions with predictable answers. Thus it is very difficult to discuss genre in Kurdish in a rigorous and systematic way; we must have some recourse to etic terms.

Certain local terms have been directly equated with etic terms. Thus, *dastan, hikaye* and *efsane* are “epic,” “story,” and “legend” respectively. This is useful as a general rule of thumb but does not bear detailed scrutiny; apart from the debates surrounding these terms in English, there are always Kurdish exceptions, areas and contexts where the terms have other meanings. The term *dastan/destan*, for example, for most Kurdish scholars, means a long, elevated heroic or romantic narrative about exceptional people and events. However, in some areas the term means little more than “narrative” and does not have heroic connotations. It does not necessarily denote a specific form; tellings may be in prose, or poetry, or both. But if a tradition is described to a researcher as *dastan/destan*, it is likely that it is prestigious and that long poems exist on the subject even if the individual performance attended by the researcher is a prose account. General terms for oral literature, both prose and poetry, are often taken from other languages, such as *qisse* from Arabic, but Kurdish terms such as *axiftin, gotin*, which strictly mean “speech,” are also sometimes used.

Many terms describing form are used in Kurdish. The oral literature includes much poetry, most of which is sung, with or without musical accompaniment. There is a general distinction between the long narrative poem and the shorter lyrical song; in fact they are usually performed in different ways by different types of performer (see above). The long narrative is called *beyt* in most Sorani areas and some Kurmanji areas,[3] and *qewl* in other Kurmanji areas, but in Kurmanji at least both these terms can also mean shorter religious poems, such as the Yezidi Qewls and *Beyt*s. There seems to be no special word distinguishing the form *cante fable*, or alternating prose and verse, from verse narrative. Other terms for the verse narrative include *şi'r*, an Arabic word meaning "poetry" in general, *bend* which can also mean a line or verse of poetry, and the Sorani *bend û baw*. The shorter, lyrical song is called *stran, meqam, kilam, goranî*, which are also general words for 'song'; the longer songs are called *lawik, qetar* or *heyran*. *Livêj /liwêj* is sometimes used for lyric in general, but often indicates a song with a religious theme. *Heyran, heyranok* often denotes love songs in particular. This distinction between narrative and lyric holds good in many areas, but it is important to note that it is not absolute; there are many borderline cases where, for example, a song performed by a *stranbêj* may contain various narrative elements. Kreyenbroek (1999) has usefully suggested the term "allusive" poetry, which alludes to events or beliefs known by the audience, but which are not explained within the poem itself. A whole spectrum of material exists, from poems which recount stories to songs which are very allusive indeed, which require a great deal of background knowledge to understand them, and whose purpose is to arouse emotion rather than to inform. A great deal of the literature lies between these two extremes.

There are many less prestigious verse forms. The upbeat dance songs with strong rhythms, called *dîlan, govend, reqs* or *peste* are particularly popular, and performed at weddings and celebrations; Bedir Khan (1932, p. 11), on the other hand, defines *beste* as "les chansons plus lourdes" with melismas and repetition. Various examples of traditional

[3] *Pace* Chyet 1991, p. 80. The word is used in this sense in Badinan at least. For the use of qewl in this sense see Chyet *op. cit*., p. 78.

lullabies or *lorî* have been collected (e.g. Nikitine 1947, p. 46). Most work songs, on which little has been written, have disappeared, but some are still remembered, such as the rhythmic songs for grinding grain and cutting crops. Laments for the dead, called *şîn, dîlok/dîrok* (a usage probably peculiar to Yezidis, since *dîrok* more usually means 'history'), *giriyan, lawarna* are the province of women and an important social duty in all Kurdish communities. They are performed on specific occasions and are to be distinguished from the lyrical eulogies performed by singers who are usually male.

The meters of Kurdish oral poetry are not well understood. Early attempts to analyse it in terms of quantitative meters (Socin 1890, pp. xxxviii-lxiii), were less productive than emphases on stress or syllabic meter (Mann 1909, p. xxxii ff.). Although these are useful for some areas, such as the syllabic Gurâni and Sorani poetry, it is clear from the collections that in other poetry line length can be very variable, making meaningful syllable-counts difficult, and that rhyme, which is a noticeable feature in most poetry, can be consistent for many lines, or for just a few.[4] The Kurdologist Basil Nikitine (1956, p. 270) goes so far as to say that Kurdish folk poetry "ignore à vrai dire le rythme et ne connaît que la rime." Chyet (1991a I, p. 144), who gives a very useful account of stanzaic structure in narrative poetry, says of Kurdish folk poetry: "Meter as we know it does not exist, syllable counts being a useful substitute." However, for some areas and genres the evidence suggests otherwise; in Badinan, for instance, many examples of narrative *beyt*s are highly rhythmic, with strong stresses in the lines, whereas the performers of lyrical stran deliver their long lines very fast, with some extended melismas towards the end of the (clearly marked) stanzas. Such confusions will not be resolved until broad comparative studies are undertaken which are sensitive to genre and regional differences, and which include melody types and other performance details. It is clear that melody plays an important part in Kurdish poetics; if Kurdish rhythm

[4] The words which rhyme at the ends of the lines usually have their stress on the penultimate syllable in both narrative and lyric. The many varieties in rhyme-scheme make it difficult to draw up fixed definitions of stanza (cf. Mann *loc. cit*).

and meter are to be understood properly, the vital dimension of performance must not be ignored.

Kurdish prose genres are not yet well understood either. Of the narrative genres, a key distinction is that between fiction, *chîrok* (which includes *efsane* and *hikaye*) and fact; a historical narrative (*dîrok, tarix*) would rarely be called *chîrok*. It is unclear how far Kurds consciously perceive subdivisions within these broad categories. One well-defined prose genre, however, is the proverb, *pendekan, gotinên mezin, gotinên pêşiyan*, "the sayings of the ancestors." They are usually short and pithy; many use rhyme. Some are extremely blunt, others more oblique so that their meaning is obscure to outsiders.

5. Performers

There is often a distinction in Kurdish between those performers who perform with musical accompaniment and those who use only their voice. For the former, the Turkish term *aşik* is often used in the former Soviet Union and Iran; Kurdish terms include *stranbêj* (song-teller) elsewhere in Kurmanji areas and *guranbêj* in Sorani areas. The latter are often called *dengbêj* (voice-teller) in Kurmanji and *çirger* (singer) in Sorani, and are usually associated with the long narrative poems, whereas the *stranbêj* perform folk-songs, *stran* or *kilam*, which are often lyrical, and accompany themselves with instruments such as the *saz, tembur, oudh*, and *kemançe* (Celîl 1978 II, p. 26; Allison 2001, pp. 68-70) A *dengbêj* may also accompany his singing by clapping his hands or by striking other available surfaces. However, this distinction is not absolute; narrative poetry can be accompanied with musical instruments.

Becoming a *dengbêj* or *stranbêj* required considerable training. Oskar Mann has described how aspiring performers would apprentice themselves to a known singer and learn his repertoire, paying for their training by doing chores (Mann 1906, pp. xxviii-xxix). Some would build up their own repertoires by moving on to other masters. It is unclear whether "lessons" as such were given or whether the student learned by imitation and constant exposure to the master's music. However, having had an apprenticeship with a known performer was an important element in being accepted as a

performer oneself. The performer who has learned from reading books (or watching videos) is a modern phenomenon and probably not yet fully acceptable as a *dengbêj* or *stranbêj*. Many children of performers, both boys and girls, have been pupils of their parents, a convenient arrangement for girls in particular, who would be less able to travel elsewhere to learn. It seems that there was also prestige for the master in being seen to have pupils. Along with the composition of new songs to be performed alongside the famous old ones, having pupils was an attribute which marked out the truly successful performer.

Nearly a century ago, Oskar Mann described travelling performers in Persia who gave performances in exchange for payments of food and money. In the modern context the wandering *aşik* who makes his entire living this way seems to have disappeared; performers tend to be semi-professionals, who may travel long distances to perform at specific events, such as weddings. People well-known at the village level might perform at local celebrations, though with the decline in performance of long narratives this is more likely for *stranbêj* than *dengbêj*. In some areas being a semi-professional performer confers higher status than being fully professional; *dengbêj* and *stranbêj* are considered to be above the *mitirb*, or "common" musicians who play instruments such as the *zurna*, though this is not only a matter of the distinction between "professionalism" and "semi-professionalism," but also the type of material performed and instruments used.

For the prose genres, performers are less clearly designated than for the poetic. These genres require less specialist training to attain competence, though they do undoubtedly require skill and experience, and, until the second half of the twentieth century, a large percentage of the population must have known at least some traditional narratives well. Although the word *chîrokbêj* (storyteller) is known and used in many areas, such performers enjoy lower prestige than the *dengbêj* and are rarely known over a wide area. The wandering *chîrokbêj* who earns his living from his stories seems, like the *aşik*, to have disappeared; recent accounts of storytelling all feature performers who had other jobs. Performers of prose narratives in general are declining in number, as most are elderly and the young are relatively uninterested in learning these oral traditions (Blau 1975, p. 4).

Narratives such as fairy-tales seem to enjoy less respect than historical narratives, especially eyewitness accounts of important events.

Most well-known Kurdish *dengbêj* and *stranbêj* are men, but women are also lively exponents of Kurdish oral literature. They mostly perform for other women and children. Although there is no *a priori* prohibition on women performing in mixed company, in practice their performance (especially singing) is felt in many communities to be immodest (e.g. Blum and Hassanpour 1996, p. 328). Nevertheless there have been a number of well-known female performers, though few of these have made recordings. However, given the restrictions on women's opportunities for apprenticeships, the prose genres, such as *chîrok*, are more open to them than the poetic ones. There are also genres which are exclusively the province of women; not only the improvized lament, which a woman may sing for a family member or on a professional basis for others, and which she learns from attending mourning and observing other women, but also the *lorî* (lullaby) and other traditions associated with childcare and women's work.

Most Kurdish oral poets remain anonymous, but a few are remembered by name. Some, like the mysteriously-named Feqîyê Teyran (Jurist of the Birds) and Mewlewî, are literary poets, to whom orally-transmitted poems are attributed. Others, such as Evdalê Zeynik and Ehmedê Fermanê Kikî, were folk-poets and performers.

6. Shared Traditions

The Kurds share many of their traditions with other peoples of the Middle East and Central Asia. Many of the long narrative traditions, which have been termed "romantic," "epic" or "heroic," are ubiquitous, such as *Yusof and Zoleykha* and *Leyli and Majnun*. Others are better known in some regions than others, for obvious reasons; the collections show that traditions about the Turkic hero Koroglî (Koroghlu, Gurughlî) are better known in the Caucasus and Iran than in Iraq. As one would expect of an Iranophone people, the Kurds possess many narrative traditions also common in Persian, such as *Farhâd and Shirin*, *Khosrow and Shirin*, *Vis and Râmin*, *Bizhan*

and Manizhe. All of these common traditions have been found in the form of long narrative poems, spoken prose alternating with sung verse, and prose tellings; many also exist in allusive lyrical songs, where the singer takes the part of a protagonist and addresses others. They are also alluded to in proverbs.

Of course, the Kurds use such common traditions for their own purposes, and there are interesting differences from the tellings of other peoples. The large body of traditions about the great warrior Rostam, for instance, portray him as a Kurd. There is good reason to suppose that this belief predates the contemporary Kurdish nationalist discourse, as the Rostam traditions have not received the same attention from nationalists as, say, the *Newroz* (Nowruz) myth or *Mem and Zîn*. Some popular tellings of *Ferhad and Shîrîn* site the action in Kurdistan and present their protagonists as distinctively Kurdish (Mokri 1964, pp. 355-73). A particularly notable example of such specifically Kurdish usage is the tradition of Kawe the blacksmith, the Kâve of the *Shâhnâme*, and the myth of *Newroz*, the Iranian New Year. In the *Shâhnâme* the brave blacksmith Kâve raises a banner of revolt against the tyrant Zahhâk, who has snakes growing from his shoulders which require feeding on the brains of boys. The boys are of course taken from Zahhâk's subjects, and Kâve has already lost most of his children. He rallies the people around the hero Faridun, who eventually kills Zahhâk and becomes king. This is a canonical myth not only for Persian national identity but also for the Kurds. The Kurdish nationalist discourse has placed great emphasis on it and on the *Newroz* or New Year festival in late March, which commemorates it. Drawing on Kurdish, rather than Persian, oral traditions, Kurdish nationalists stress Kawe's roleḶtheir Kawe kills Zahhâk himselfḶas well as his Kurdish identity (e.g. Perwer 1990). The Kurdish Zahhâk tends to be presented as a monster rather than the corrupted hero of the *Shâhnâme*. Kawe's contemporary appeal, as an ordinary working man who raises a banner of rebellion on behalf of an abused people, is clear. In the past, *Newroz* was celebrated with relative freedom by Kurds in Iran and Iraq, but not in Turkey and Syria. However, over the past generation or so, *Newroz* has grown in Turkey from a festival known and observed by some Kurds only, and not always connected with the Kawe myth, to a

symbol of Kurdish identity and rebellion, an occasion of mass political protest and often of violence. The Turkish government has taken the political impact of *Newroz* seriously, attempting to present it as a piece of purely Turkic rather than Iranian cultural property.

The landscape of less elevated Kurdish folk literature also abounds with common Iranian, Turkic and Islamic elements. Among the supernatural figures, heroes of fairy-tales encounter adversaries such as the evil *dêw* (the Persian *Div*), ogres, and other monsters. The mythical bird called *Sîmirx*, the Persian *Simorgh*, is terrifying but often gives help in exchange for favours done. The *perî* or fairy is ambivalent and mischievous; it may cause harm for humans or give help, especially when services are rendered; the same may be said of the *jinn*. Heroes sometimes marry fairy princesses in the course of the story. The benign figure of Khizir or Khidr, known throughout the Islamic world, often provides help and guidance; unlike some other peoples, such as the Arabs of the Gulf, the Kurds often do not distinguish between him and Elyas. Ancient and supernatural elements may be used alongside objects from modern life such as telephones or automobiles with no apparent harm done to the audience's enjoyment (e.g. MacKenzie 1990 II, p. 11).

Less obviously "supernatural" figures occurring in Kurdish folk narratives are also shared with other peoples. These include Mollâ/Hoja Nasreddin, who is also locally known as Bahluli-Zana and Mela Mezbûre, and the bald-headed trickster Kechelok. Many stories are also told about the prophets, especially Solomon; these vary in the number of supernatural elements in them. Some remote historical figures have also accumulated a great many stories. Alexander the Great and Shah Abbas, like Solomon, are often presented as archetypal arrogant kings who are taught a lesson, often by lesser beings. They believe that they are immortal and try unsuccessfully to avoid death, or they attempt to extract tribute from all, even the animals (Celîl 1978 II, pp. 185-99). Like their neighbours, the Kurds portray Alexander as horned; this attribute was clearly felt to be mysterious and inspired various stories, such as that of the discovery of his four horns by his barber, who told Alexander's secret to some reeds growing by a spring. When they were cut they told it to everyone. (Celîl 1978 II, p. 198).

Like those of their neighbours, many Kurdish fairytales follow the common pattern of an unproved hero, often a younger brother, receiving magical help from sorcerers, jinns or animals, facing dragons, monsters, witches and evil monarchs, and overcoming them to win one (or more) princesses. Characters are stereotypical; women are portrayed as wicked stepmothers, witches, passive beauties, resourceful princesses and invincible warriors (in disguise). Kurdish folk narrative often has a degree of social comment, with many stories of cruel lords, lecherous clerics and clever peasants. Many humorous anecdotes make fun of cuckolded husbands, domineering women, and non-Kurds. The moralistic animal fable of the Kalile and Demne collections in various languages is also found throughout Kurdistan.

7. Kurdish Traditions

Narratives of Kurdish history are, for obvious reasons, less widespread amongst the Kurds' neighbours than *chîrok*. Some tales are strongly localized, associating places with a well-known character or giving aetiologies. Often several localities put forward rival claims to be the site of well-known events. Historical prose narratives of past events are still told, but knowledge is often confined to local or family events; many families preserve a body of stories of the past associated with their genealogies. Knowledge of past events is also transmitted via social, religious or political networks.[5]

However, it is the poetry which enjoys a special place in Kurdish hearts. Of the long narrative *dastan*/*beyt* traditions, there are several which are well-known throughout Kurdistan. Amongst these, *Zembîlfirosh* is the story of a handsome young basket-seller lusted after by an older princess, *Kerr and Kulik* is about the deeds of two noble Kurdish brothers, and *Khej and Siyabend* tells of two lovers who elope together and perish on a mountain. However, the two best-known are *Mem*

[5] My own informants who had lived in small Kurdish communities during their youth, cited family, religious networks (such as the Naqshbandi and Qaderi brotherhoods, see van Bruinessen 1992, pp. 203-64), and members of political parties as sources of knowledge, both of news and of historical events.

and Zîn and *Dimdim*. Each is much enjoyed in performance and has been used in Kurdish nation-building.

Mem and Zin

Mem and Zîn, often referred to as "the Kurdish national epic," is the title of a literary poem composed in the seventeenth century CE by Ehmedê Khanî. It is based on a traditional tale, the subject of various *beyt*s, called *Memê Alan*. The oral traditions are often referred to by members of the community (many of whom are unaware of the differences between the two) as *Mem and Zîn* rather than *Memê Alan*. Although there are many supernatural elements in the story, much of it is set in Jezîrê Botan (the modern Cizre in Turkish Kurdistan) and many Kurds believe that there is a kernel of truth in it, that there were once real people called Mem and Zîn, who loved and died young.

The star-crossed young lovers of this story are both exceptionally beautiful. They live far from each other, but are magically introduced when Zîn is brought to Mem. When she is returned home, Mem seeks her on his great horse from the sea, Bor or Bozê Rewan. He becomes the guest and then the friend of the virtuous Qeretajdîn, whose brother is betrothed to Zîn. This brother renounces his claim in Mem's favour. Zîn's father (sometimes her brother) is an emir whose wicked minister Beko has a daughter, also called Zîn. Despite Qeretajdîn's attempts to protect the couple, Beko arranges matters so that Mem is imprisoned and dies. Zîn dies immediately afterwards. When their graves are opened they are found to be embracing. The emir cuts off Beko's head whilst he is peering at the two lovers; a drop of his blood falls and a thornbush grows there, keeping Mem and Zîn apart.

Although this tradition is often described as "epic," its genre has been rightly questioned. Chyet (1991a I, pp. 64-101) examines it according to very strict criteria and makes a convincing case for it to be considered as a Kurdish equivalent of *halk hikaye*, the Turkish "folk romance," a long narrative that blends prose and poetry. It certainly lacks many common elements of heroic epic, notably long martial episodes. Mem himself is hardly a typical "epic" hero, being most often characterized by the descriptions *Memê delal* (Mem the lovely) and *Memeyê nazik* (Mem the delicate) (Chyet 1991a, p. 225). His astonishing beauty, which inspires love, is

what distinguishes him. Episodes in which he proves himself as a hero by feats such as taming the wild horse Bozê Rewan are a feature of some versions only. He is disrespectful to his elders, thoughtless of the welfare of his horse, and excellent at games such as chess rather than battles and hunting. Chyet (1991a I, p. 354ff.) cites several instances of his implicit or overt effeminacy, and points out that it is the hospitable warrior Qeretajdîn who is the more satisfactory Kurdish hero and whose generosity has become proverbial among the Kurds. Although Mem is not a model to be emulated, his attraction for audiences is more likely to lie in the pathos of his situation; he is unable to marry the girl he loves because of constraints of honour. This is also a recurrent theme in Kurdish love lyric and a common enough dilemma in Kurdish society and beyond; for example, folk tellings of *Leyl and Mejnûn*, which focus on the human aspects of the story rather than religious allegory, are common throughout the Near and Middle East.

The *Mem and Zîn* traditions are set in a world of extraordinary people and supernatural interventions, of royalty and riches. Here is a developed example of a common opening motif (Celîl 1978 I, p. 65; tr. Chyet 1991a II, pp. 460-61):

Her dem, her dem, der deme,	Every time, every time among the times,
Mîrê cina gazî dike: Gelî sazbenda, ez li bextê we me,	The Emir of the jinn calls out, “O musicians, I implore you,
Kîja civat caxîya, ko ûn têda ṛûnên, û saz û sazbenda xwe biĞedlînin, Ğewil ûn bikin ḥikayeta stîya Zîn û Meme.	When you assemble and set to tuning up your *saz*es, tell first the story of Lady Zîn and Mem.”
Saz û sazbend bi hevṛa dibên.	All the musicians said together,
Ya mîrê min, dilê me lîyane,	“O my Mir, our hearts are heavy,”

Bajarê Muxurzemînê bajarekî mezine, gelekî girane,
Ev bajarê hanê li ser sêsid û şest û şeş kuçane,

Her kuçekê li ser sêsid û şeşt û şeş miḥelane,

Her miḥelakê li ser sêsid û şeşt û şeş minarane,

Her minarekê li ser sêsid û şeşt û şeş malane,

Qesr û qonaxê Alan-paşa li ser
çar lengerane,

Du lengerê wî li or-a beḥrane,

Du lengerê wî li serê çîyane,
Ev qesra hane li ser çar -ebeqane,
Her -ebeqekê li ser sêsid û şeşt û şeş odane,

Her enişkê qesrê, kevirekî aqût û
almast têda cîdane,
Ev kevirê hanê, şewqa xwe dide or-a beḥrane.

The city of Mukhurzemîn is a great city, very weighty,
The city contains three hundred and sixty six masses of stone,
Each mass contains three hundred and sixty six town quarters,
Each quarter contains three hundred and sixty six minarets,
Each minaret serves three hundred and sixty six houses,
The castle and palace of Alan-pasha is on four anchors,
Two of its anchors in the middle of the sea,
Two of its anchors on the tops of mountains,

The castle contains four storeys,
Each story contains three hundred and sixty six rooms,
In every corner of the castle is a stone
of rubies and diamonds,
These stones shine out over the middle of the sea,

Her odakê sê katib têda rûniştîne,	In every room three scribes are seated,
Li ser kursîya destê wan ser masane,	In chairs, their hands on the table,
Qelemê wan bînanê jeḥra meṛane,	Their pens like the venom of snakes,
Rojê ḥezara digrin, davêjine ḥebs û singdana, û pênsid ji ḥebsa berdane...	Each day they take a thousand [men] and throw them in the dungeon, and set five hundred free....

Despite the grandeur of many parts of the story, there are also lighter moments. When Zîn is magically transported to Mem's bed by fairies or angels who want to see who is the more beautiful, several versions exploit the humour of the situation, featuring the two arguing over where they are and who is the intruder. One version collected from the Antep area in 1901 has a very developed dispute. It does not seem to be love at first sight; Mem's amazing beauty apparently does not have the usual effect on Zîn. Each demands to know what the other is doing in the bed and threatens to call the guards. They accuse each other of drunkenness, smoking hashish and general immorality. Zîn, anxious about the compromise to her good name, calls her maidens, "O maidens! What hashish-smoker is this that has come to my bed tonight? It's a disgrace! Send news of this to my cousins the Jelalîs, our butchers, so that they will send his arms to the other world for me." Mem retorts, "... as for smoking hashish, whose daughter are you ... that you are taking over my abode?" Each then gives their name and family, and describes their city. They agree to call for their respective servants to test where they are. Of course, it is Mem's servants who reply, because they are in Mem's castle. Zîn immediately changes her tune, throwing herself at Mem's feet and saying, "Don't do to me what I have threatened to do to you!" The exchange of rings as love-tokens then takes place very quickly, and receives far less attention than the conflict between the lovers (von Le Coq 1901, pp. 36-44; tr. Chyet 1991 II, pp. 68-72).

The oral versions of *Mem and Zîn* represent a tragic and affecting tale set in a fantasy Kurdistan. It is easy to see how a good teller could make this very entertaining, but this does not explain what sets this tradition above other tragic love narratives such as *Khej and Siyabend* in Kurdish opinion. The answer seems to be the association of the *Mem and Zîn* oral traditions with the literary epic. Ehmedê Khanî's epic was not the first literary work to be written in Kurdish, but it was clearly an attempt at a new kind of Kurdish literature; it shows awareness of, and pride in, Kurdish identity. In the modern period it has also inspired Kurdish intellectuals, who have seen it as a proto-nationalist text (Ůakeli 1983). Khanî's remarks in the introductory section, criticising Persian and Turkish rule over the Kurds (Bozarslan 1990, p. 56), have been seen as a call to the struggle for Kurdish independence, and the story itself has been read as an allegory, with Mem and Zîn representing the two parts of Kurdistan divided between the Ottoman and Persian empires (Hassanpour 1989, p. 84). It is also a status symbol for Kurdish culture, a work which cannot be dismissed as "folklore." The Memê Alan traditions have basked in its reflected glory and have borrowed elements from it,[6] and have been set apart from other Kurdish oral literature.

Dimdim

The story of *Dimdim* is well known across Kurdistan, and versions have been collected in both Sorani and Kurmanji. Armenian versions are also known. The Kurdish versions are almost all couched in the form of the long narrative poem or *beyt,* or the *cante fable*, of alternating prose and poetry. The core of the story, which can have various additions, is the capture of a fort (called "*Dimdim*" and manned by brave and virtuous Kurds) by the armies of the Shah of Iran. The defenders die heroically. In many versions, the commander of the fort, whose name varies, is called by the title Prince

[6] *Mem and Zin*'s perceived significance as a nationalistic work may also account for the lack of studies of it in the former Soviet Union, where Kurdish nationalism, like other minority nationalisms, was discouraged. In the former Soviet Union, unlike Europe, there are far fewer publications on *Mem and Z"n* than on *Dimdim*. I am grateful to Professor Joyce Blau for suggesting this to me.

Goldenhand, *Khanê Lepzêrîn/Khanê Chengzêrîn*, and the whole story is often known by this name.

Many, if not most, versions of the story contain enough details to link them with the siege and capture of a Kurdish fort commanded by Emer Khan, ruler of Baradost, by the armies of Shah Abbas in 1609 C.E. The Shah wished to curb the power of the Mukri and Baradost principalities, and Emer Khan had refortified a ruined fort on *Dimdim* mountain, some eighteen km south of Orumiye in Iran. After capturing the fort and massacring the inhabitants, the Shah settled a Turkish tribe in the area, which further weakened the Kurdish principalities. These events are all recounted in written sources, which is most unusual for a Kurdish oral tradition.[7] However, the fact that the story is attested by written sources has been irrelevant to the vast majority of the Kurdish audience of the *beyt* of *Dimdim*, who would have believed it was true anyway. For the traditional Kurdish audience, the *beyt* of *Dimdim* is *literature*, a historical event fashioned into a romance, aesthetically pleasing and resonant with powerful themes. It is the modern Kurdish audience, literate and educated in schools, which needs the reassurance of written sources to endow *Dimdim* with historical value.

Dimdim is much more than its core story. The figure of Prince Goldenhand himself predates Shah Abbas' capture of the Kurdish fort. This title is given to Asad-al-Din Kelabi, who had recaptured Hakkari from Ak-Koyunlu control in the late fifteenth century, by Sharaf Khan Bedlisi (Sheref Khan Bitlîsî) in his history of the Kurds, the *Sharafnâme*, finished in 1596 (Bedlisi 1985, pp. 129-32). Interestingly, this Prince Goldenhand is also associated with the capture of a strategic fortress, though he is the victor, having entered the fortress disguised as a Christian. Bedlisi, writing a little more than a century after these events, seems to have found his epithet mysterious and accounts for it by a story (which he acknowledges to be hearsay) that the Khan won favour with the Sultan for his prowess in battle. Similar explanations are found in some of the oral versions. The need to explain this epithet in a rational way indicates that its meaning has been lost; it may be far older even than Asad-al-Din Kelabi. Prince

[7] This is recorded by Shah Abbas' official historian Iskandar Monshi Torkman. See Hassanpour 1990 for details.

Goldenhand himself is not the only element in the *beyt*s of *Dimdim* which is demonstrably older than the siege of the Baradosti *Dimdim* by Shah Abbas. The *motif* of the Khan tricking the Shah by asking him for a patch of land the size of an oxhide, and then cutting the oxhide into such thin strips that when they were put end to end they measured out a substantial site for the fortress, is used in Virgil's *Aeneid* in connection with the founding of Carthage (I: 368).

Although these examples demonstrate that parts of the story are very old indeed, any search for an *Ur-Dimdim* will inevitably be fruitless. The story has been constructed differently in different contexts; there are several *oikotypes*, "subspecies" of the story as it were, coming from various areas, each adapted to the conditions of its own environment. Ten of the versions published since 1860 show many variations, not only in the plot, but also in style. Of these ten, one has its provenance in Turkey, another seven in Northern Iraq, and two others in Iran. The version from Turkey (Jaba 1860) is a prose account of the defence and eventual defeat of the fortress of *Dimdim*, in the area of Hakkari, in the time of Shah Isma'il (the early sixteenth century). It sites the action near its own area, not in the Orumiye area. The versions from Iraq, some of which were collected in the former Soviet Union,[8] describe how the Khan, with the Shah's permission, builds the fortress, but as his power grows, the Shah sends an army against him. They locate the action in Iranian Kurdistan, but some emphasize the role of tribes and places in Iraq; for example, the Khan is said by some to come from Amadiya. The two versions from Iran (Mann 1906, pp. 1, 12) are in the Mukri sub-dialect of Sorani and one presents the Kurds' resistance to the Shah as a holy war.

The Mukri poem stands out from the others, not only in terms of dialect; it uses the rhyming system of most Kurdish folk narrative poetry, but whereas many of the Kurmanji versions are almost uniform in line length, the

[8] Celil 1961, p. 120ff; Celil 1978, pp. 164ff, 177ff were performed by men who fought alongside the Iraqi Kurdish leader Mulla Mustafa Barzani during the brief life of the Republic of Mahabad (1946-7); when this fell, they followed him into exile in the former Soviet Union.

Mukri poem has an introductory section where the lines are far longer. It opens (Mann 1906, p. 12):

Dilim ranawestê li ber ewê Ḥemê, li ber ewê janê Bangêkim we ber xudayî, ewî dî kem ber pêxemberî axirî zemanê,	My heart cannot withstand this pain, this sorrow, I call on God, I call again on the Prophet of the end of the world,
Bangî dîm we ber çakî germênê û le kuêstanê,	I call on the holy one of winter quarters and high summer pastures,
Bangî dî kem we ber Pîr Su£êmanî li Banê,	I call again on Pir Suleyman of Bane,
Bangî dî kem we ber Su£tan Semedî malê xoî dakird li deştî Wurmê dige£ kewne Lacanê...	I call again on Sultan Semed who dwelt on Urmiya plain by ancient Lajan...

This introductory section goes on to invoke various holy figures in addition to the local saints, including Hasan, Hoseyn and Ali, and Khidirelyas (see above). According to Oskar Mann (1909, p. 22 n. 1) this opening is quite popular, but it is very different from the opening of many of the Kurmanji poems, a typical one of which begins thus (Celîl 1960, p. 101):

Xurmîne xweş xurmîne	Here's a sound, a sweet, sweet murmur
Mesela Khanê Çengzêrîne,	The story of Prince Goldenhanded
Eva raste, derew nîne.	Here's the truth, there is no lying.
Khanek hebû ji muquriya,	Once there was a Mukri prince
Çol û besta digeriya	Wandering through the open country
Li cî-wara ne hêwiriya.	He never stayed long in one place.
Khan rabû liKẌurdistanê	He got up and out of Kurdistan
Çû ba şahê Îranê	Went off to see the Shah of Iran
Bibê xweyiyê mal û Khane.	To find himself a house and home.

This Kurmanji version, and others like it, move straight into the story. They do not necessarily cut straight to the siege; some chronicle the development of the relationship between the Khan and the Shah, and its breakdown, in some detail. The Khan may win favour with the Shah, and sometimes his golden hand as well, by protecting the Shah's horses, or fighting a lion. Introductory formulae, if they exist at all, are short. The Kurmanji versions of this *beyt* overall are less lyrical and allusive than the Mukri poem. Much of the Mukri poem consists of soliloquy, or of listings, such as when the Khan looks out and sees first one rider, then another, from different places; each is described one after the other. There is a great deal of repetition for poetic effect rather than plot advancement. Typical of this is the eulogy of *Dimdim* itself, part of which is given here (Mann 1906, p. 16-17):[9]

Dimdimim berdî debêye	My *Dimdim* is a rock like a powder- flask,

[9] I have attempted to reconcile Mann's orthography with current systems of transcription; I have preferred *y* to Mann's "; ordinarily, Kurmanji conventions would have , but Mann clearly intends more than , and Sorani conventions are less clear-cut for Latin script.

Karîtey geye Kûkeye	Its beams stretch as far as Kuke.
Xan bi xezayê meşẍule.	The Prince is waging holy war.
Dimdimim berdêkî xiṛe	My *Dimdim* is a round rock,
T'ûar -erefî lêwe biṛe,	Surrounded on all four sides,
Beheşte bi şîr bikiṛe	Win paradise by your sword!
Xan bi xezayê meşḤule	The Prince is waging holy war.
Dimdimim berdêkî şîne	My *Dimdim* is a blue-green rock,
T'ûar zistane, pênc hawîne	For four winters, for five summers,
Têda Xanî Lebzêrîne	Prince Goldenhand has been inside it,
Zeferiyan pê nebirdîne.	They have won no victory over it.

The Kurmanji versions have soliloquies and emotional passages too, but the Mukri poem has fewer narrative sections in between. The listener needs more background knowledge of the plot to understand the poem than (s)he does for most of the Kurmanji poems. Of course, lyrical elements are not the exclusive province of Sorani narrative traditions; Kurmanji narratives sometimes have them too. The point here is that even when very little performance data is available, the same narrative tradition can be seen to have a range of different treatments in different areas. Research with audiences would be needed to ascertain whether the emotions aroused by the Mukri *Dimdim* are different in nature or intensity from those aroused by the Kurmanji versions, and how this would vary in different areas.

Given the lack of "oral literary criticism," or studies of audience response to *Dimdim*, we must look elsewhere for indications of its contemporary meanings for the Kurds, and we find these in the modern tellings. It has been the subject of novels and poetry (Shemo 1966, Dost 1991). One particularly interesting version, whose emphases reveal something of patriotic Kurdish preoccupations, is that "edited"

and published in 1970 by Jasimê Jelîl, a poet and folklorist living in the former Soviet Union (republished in Arabic script in 1982). Like some of the oral versions, the need to explain difficult words results in rationalistic explanations; however, unlike the Mukri, Iraqi and Anatolian versions, the name Goldenhand comes from a trial in which the Khan shows a horrified Shah his bravery in holding a red-hot coal unflinchingly in his bare hand. This is one of various proofs of his heroism and an important episode in the relationship with the Shah, which is carefully developed. The name *Dimdim* itself is also explained, as an onomatopoeic word for the noise of a stone dropped from the castle down into the valley.

Social concerns are also evident in this version. The lovely Gulbihar, the Khan's wife, is the daughter of a simple shepherd; beauty is not only found amongst the nobles, says Jalîl. The hierarchical system is also implicitly criticized; the Shah is in many ways reluctant to fight the Khan but is forced to do so by the system in which he lives. It is easy to discern the socialist focus here. When all is lost for the fortress, Gulbihar escapes with her children, having made an impassioned speech to the Khan, saying that women are as strong as men and that she will face the future and bring up their sons alone. This latter point is not merely ideological but also highly resonant; many Kurdish women are left with children, either through their husband's death or his joining resistance forces, and this is an important area of the Kurdish experience.

The keynote of this modern telling, however, is the characterisation of the Khan himself as an idealized Kurdish hero. In the first section Jalîl says (Celîl 1982, p. 1; tr. Kreyenbroek):

Bejn bilind bû ew Ğefat û mêrxas,	He was tall, brave and courageous,
Hebû me'rîfet reḥm bû bêqeyas,	A man of honour, of unparallelled generosity,
Alîkar bû ew piştemêr bû Kurda,	Giving help freely, offering support to the Kurds.
Ṯezkirî bû ew nav eşîreda,	He was much loved among the tribes.

Tunebû bende jê ḥeznekira,	There wasn't a humble Kurd who didn't love him.
Xweyî nav hurmet bû bendara bira.	He had great dignity, but he was a brother to the ordinary people.

This type of Kurdish hero with the common touch is modern, and the community he lives in at the beginning is an idealized one set in the mountains, with blue skies and birds flying freely. His good qualities are illustrated by his actions during the story, and he is defeated only by treachery and the cunning of the enemies who surround him. An important aspect of many Kurdish discourses is the (justifiable) perception of being surrounded by enemies on all sides, and of seeking the limited refuge of the mountains, an image used by Khanî; thus *Dimdim* can easily be (and has been) read as an allegory of Kurdistan.

Dimdim contains powerful themes which inspire Kurdish nationalism; one noted Kurdish scholar (Rasul 1979, p. 52) describes it as "the greatest of the Kurdish *dastan*s." Although an early literary poem was composed about the fall of the Celali fortress, attributed to Feqiyê Teyran (Celîl 1967, pp. 67-72), it has not had the impact of Khanî's poem, and does not seem to have affected the status and content of the oral *Dimdim* traditions in the same way as Khanî's poem affected Memê Alan.

The *Mem and Zîn* tradition will remain important for the Kurds because of Khanî. However, the story of *Dimdim*, which lends itself so well to allegory, may well give Kurdish writers more creative scope than the story of the two star-crossed lovers. If folklore continues to provide inspiration for Kurdish nationalists (and there is no reason to doubt it), we can expect to see the *Dimdim* story become a potent nationalistic symbol.

8. Kurdish Lyric

Events of modern history, especially the nineteenth and early twentieth century, are sometimes commemorated in long narrative poems (for example the Twelve Horsemen of Merîwan, and a "Barzani *beyt*" which glorifies a clan

prominent in religion and politics, exists in Northern Iraq) but more often they survive in the form of lyrical songs. Although such songs remain popular and are performed more often than the long narrative poems, many describe local events and personalities. They contain many stock elements, and often little background information within the song itself; performers sometimes contextualize them for modern audiences by a brief introduction. Many of these lyrical traditions are very conservative; the audiences expect the performers to conserve the original composition. However, it may be that the allusive nature of the songs and their need for contextualization makes them harder to preserve intact than narratives, which at least have the course of the story as a mnemonic. If they have a shorter life-span than narratives, this may explain why the vast majority of the surviving songs refer to the last two centuries only.

The presence of stock elements in the songs and the audience's conservative expectations do not rule out creativity in performance, though it is hard to perceive this from those collections which give texts alone. For example, in the tradition of lyrical song or *stran* performed primarily by the Yezidis of Northern Iraq, which was once also widespread in Turkey (where it was usually called *lawik*), audiences respond to such devices as a speedy delivery with very little pause for breath, and extremely long melismas near the ends of lines. Comparison of different performances of the same song shows that singers can be individualistic, or even idiosyncratic in style. Audiences also have strong opinions about the strength and quality of individual singers' voices.

Many of the martial lyrics concern battles between tribes or between a tribe and Government forces. The version of a song about the two brothers Bishar and Jemîlê Cheto which was collected by Basil Nikitine (1947, p. 40-41; unfortunately, only published in its French translation) opens with a statement by Bishar:

> "...Brothers, we are at war. I am Bişar, blond Bişar. I can no longer live with the Turkish government, with its tricks and prevarications. Let it be understood for my soul and body: I will not fire on the rank and file. They are only the children of the State. I will fire on the *Kaimakam* (district governor), the *bınbaşı* (colonel),

> the *yüzbaşı* (captain), the *mülazım* (lieutenant). I will rebel openly from my fortress, like a tiger waiting to pounce behind a rock... Misfortune falls on the world every three days." Cemîl calls out three times: "Bişar, o brother, get up, we must accomplish something great so that our name is known through the world.... Brothers, we are at war."
> Cemîl calls out to Bişar: "Brother, you know that one Friday the shaikh came to our house [to bless it]. Keep hold of your Martini rifle, don't move the Mauser from your shoulder, do not fire on the rank-and-file, they are the children of the State. Look at all the ones whose sword hangs by their side, whose belt is sewn with gold and silver, throw those ones down...."

This song is typical of the martial lyrics in its direct speech, its declaration of pride and determination, its exhortatory sections, and its lack of explanation of why the fight is taking place. Sometimes it is not a protagonist but a witness who speaks, often a woman. The primary focus of such songs is often the prelude and aftermath of battle; accounts of the battle tend to be vivid and impressionistic, but not fully descriptive. Nikitine (1947, pp. 42-3) has the following song about an intertribal battle:

> In the gorge of Bernava, bare and white as a stone slab, look at him, father of Solhê, well- armed, riding an Arab horse, with his breastplate and trappings. Celal ed-Dîn cried out to Feqî Obeyd, "Hurry, the moment has come." It is a difficult moment, beware of Osmankî Zoro. He is not reliable, like his father... The gorge is wrapped in mist. Listen to the sound of the Martini rifle, firing *kice-kice* from the shoulder of brother Osman...Osman, killer of men. There is a pool in the gorge, look, the way to retreat is beyond it. It is time the reinforcements of Ghaydaî hill came to us....

Protagonists in these battles are invariably heroic; confident and brave, and, if their appearance is described, beautiful. Although their names, and the sites of battles, are carefully

preserved, they are described in terms appropriate to the lyrical genre. It is not the purpose of the lyrical genre to give information about the historical individuals.

Lyrical love songs

With a few exceptions, such as those songs where *Mem and Zîn* or Khej and Siyabend declare their love for each other, Kurdish love lyrics are about historical individuals, who lived within the last two centuries or so. In these songs we can see the interplay of true stories with the conventions of this form of oral literature. These lyrics describe heterosexual love, and often deal with the conflict between a lover's wish for union with the beloved in conflict with his/her social duty of marriage with another. Sometimes there is another reason for the lovers' separationḶthe illness or death of the beloved, or events may have sent him/her far away. The songs are firmly rooted in village or tribal life, with many small and everyday details. They may contain the words of the woman or the man, or both in conversation with each other. A typical example is the song of Besna, a young woman of the Omeri tribe (near Mardin, Turkey), who complains bitterly about having been married off to an old man. (Collected from the well-known singer Ehmedê Fermanê Kîkî, Bedir Khan 1933).

... Werê kutiyê dilan vekin,	... Come, let us open the boxes in our hearts.
Ji derdê dinyayê, biqul û birîn e,	Pained and injured from the griefs of the world,
Feleqa min dawî nîne, dinya derewîn e,	Alas, I have no future, the world is false,
Bavê min xêrê bike, xêrê nebîne,	Let my father do good but never get it,
Genim biçîne, zîwana reş hilînê,	Let him sow wheat and reap black weeds,
Çima ne dam torînê mala Ṯesen aḪa	Why didn't he give me to the young man from Hesen Agha's house,
Xortê di Omerîyan, simbêlsorê ser Xanîya,	A young Omerî man with red moustache up on the flat roof,
Ez dam Brahîmê Temo, mîna gayê pîre,	But he gave me to Ibrahim Temo, who is like an old ox,
Dranê wî ketine riya wî a spî di hinarê rêyê min rabûne...	His teeth all gone, his white beard scratches my cheek...

After some years of this marriage, Besna eloped with a young man. There is more than one tradition of lyrical songs about her (Bedir Khan 1933; Cigerxwîn 1988, pp. 151-53).

Some lyrical songs express conflicting emotions, which makes them all the more convincing. For example, there is a tradition of songs called *Xerabo*! (Bad boy!) where a young girl rebukes her beloved, usually for marrying another. In one Omeri variant the girl says:

Xerabo, weleh, tu xerabî.	Bad boy, you really are wicked.
Tuê ji dinyayê, ji alemê xirabtir î.	You're worse than the world, worse than the universe.
Tu ji koma pismamê mi çêtir î.	You're better than my cousin's lot [i.e. her in-laws].

She curses him at various points for having married another, wishing sickness and death on him. Yet later she says:

Xwedê teyala bike, Rebî, heçi ji xerabê min re bêje "Tu xerabo" *Bila karîn û warîna zarokê nêr tu care dimala wan de nabo!* *Bila sed olçek genimê sor li bine beriya* *Mêrdînê biçîne, li şwîne bila qerezîwana reş nabo!* *Êmayî, bila kuliyê par û pêrar lê rabo!*	May God grant that whoever says to my bad boy "you are bad," May there never be the cries of a boy-child in their house! If they sow a hundred measures of red wheat down before Mardin, let there be no black buckwheat in their plot! For the rest let the locusts of last year and the year before attack it!

and:

Heçî ji Xerabê mi re bêje:	Whoever says to my bad boy
"Tu baş î, tu pirî genc î,"	"You are good, very handsome,"
Xwedê teyala bike, Rebî, kulmek garîsêli pişta mala biçine,	May God grant, if they sow a fistful of millet behind the house,
Li şwîne sed olçek genimê sor hilîne,	Let a hundred measures of red wheat grow up on their plot of land;
Bi ofara bînî qîza şêxkî, aḤakî ji xwe re bîne...	That the grain left on the threshing-floor is enough for him to marry the daughter of a *shaikh* or *agha...*

The complexity of emotion and the forthright nature in which it is expressed in these songs give an impression that a real individual is speaking. This "realism" is itself a convention of the genre.

Another convention of the lyrical love songs which is very noticeable is the description of desirability,which raises the issue of gender. Both men and women are said to be beautiful, tall, as imposing as a tree (or a minaret!), like a rose or the wild basil, but the descriptions of women and their bodies are much more intimate. The question of voice is importantḺthe songs are composed by men, sung by men, but the description of women's desirability is very often put in the mouths of women. Sometimes they describe their hairstyle, make-up or jewellery, sometimes their bodies.

The breasts are a focal point of such descriptions. Besna says:

Sîng û berê min sipî ne, mîna çira şîr in,	My breasts are white as the fresh milk
Mina sêvê Melotê, şevê Qanûnan li ber serê nexweşan,	Like the apples of Malatya, on nights at the bedside of the sick,
Hem tirş, hem teḥl û hem şêrîn in...	At once acidic, sour and sweet...

Kherabo's lover compares her nipples to juicy grapes; both Kurmanji and Sorani songs often compare breasts to fruitḶnot just apples and grapes, but also melons and lemons. There is clearly a fantasy element here, as few Kurdish women could be expected to list their attractions so clearly in public, but many Kurdish traditions about love, not only the lyrical songs, are fairly explicit. One of the many dance-songs about girls, *Kênê*, declares, "By day you are my mattress, by night you are my quilt."[10] There are also ribald songs in Kurdish, though they are not well represented in the collections for obvious reasons.[11]

Kurdish lyric, set in the villages and pastures, describes a way of life which has now ended for most Kurds. Part of its appeal lies in its evocation of this rural past.

Lamentation

Lamentation after a death is a social duty for Kurds of all religions, and it is the special province of women. Such laments are extemporized and should be distinguished from the lyrical eulogies sung by male singers in ordinary performances. They are performed at specific time intervals after the death, with different performance conventions in different areas. This material lacks prestige and there have been few publications on it (Rudenko 1982; Allison 1996); it is also possible that performers might feel that recording it could bring misfortune.

Some laments, sung by a semi-professional rather than a close relative, have been collected in Tbilisi (Jelîl 1978 I, p. 490ff.). These consist of short, poignant images, and are often highly allusive. Many depict exile and desolation for the deceased or the family:

[10] *Bi roj tu doÛeka min "/ bi Ûev tu lih fa min";* from a recording of a Sinjari singer circulating in Badinan, 1992 (my collection).

[11] See Makas 1926, p. 95 for a rare example: a song addressing the female genitals, apparently sung by young boys to embarrass and annoy girls. Epithalamia might be another source of ribald material.

Çiya gotê çiya,	Mountain said to mountain,
Go: “Ka xelqê li van ciya?”	“Where are the people in these places?”
Me go: “Birîndarin, nexaşin,	We said, “They are wounded, sick,
tapa wan tinene, mevê şandîye bilindciya, gelo kî êlêra dagerîya?”	they cannot move, we sent him [the deceased] away to the high places, but which clan has he come down with?”

Others are of joy which turns to sadness; the motif of a wedding, the archetypal time of joy in Kurdish folk literature, is often used:

Xerîbê min pak veṛêkin,	Make my exile clean and tidy.
Deste kincê zevatîyê lêkin,	Put bridegroom’s clothes on him,
Ax û berê giran şakin.	Let the dust and heavy earth rejoice.

The imagery of laments is very similar to that of other Kurdish oral poetry. The dead are described in the same terms as the beloved of the love lyricsĻbeautiful and desirable. The mountains, the pastures, the plains, and the plants and animals within them all have their own associations and meanings. Scholars have barely begun to map out this literary landscape, which seems to be quite consistent over large areas of Kurdistan.ş

9. The Future of Kurdish Oral Literature

In the past century, Kurdish oral literature has faced many threats, apart from the upheavals mentioned above. Some scholars consider literacy to be a danger for oral poetry in general. Indeed it has been remarked that paradoxically the relative underdevelopment of Turkish Kurdistan and lack of educational opportunity there have favoured the survival of Kurdish oral traditions (Chyet 1991a I, p. 414). However, in

many societies, literacy can coexist with oral composition and performance. The decline in performance and composition in Kurdistan may not be due to literacy *per se* as much as to education systems which valued modernism and perceived folklore as primitive, and to the arrival of other forms of entertainment, especially radio and television.

In 1940 Roger Lescot (1940, p. vi) predicted the demise of oral literature, along with the decline of patriarchal and tribal systems. Various scholars, notably Vilchevsky, have seen folklore, with its praise-poetry and tribal heroes, as a means of consolidating the power and influence of the aghas and begs (in Nikitine 1956, p. 258) and it is likely that some progressive Kurds find it offensive for this reason. An alternative to this is to see it as the verbal art of the common people, as opposed to urban literate elites, and it has also been promoted as a typically Kurdish and rural cultural element, in contrast to the more urbanized and centralized Persian, Turkish and Arabic cultures.

In recent years a broader spectrum of Kurdish media has arisen; its performances of traditional material and its many references to images and episodes of oral literature entertain those who are already familiar with it. It also educates the many urban Kurds in Kurdish "folklore" using the traditional imagery of the oral literature. Satellite TV in particular is an important unifying factor for "Kurdishness" as it is the first medium which has the capability to reach all of the homeland. It plays an important part in the preservation of traditions and increases their prestige, but, like the other media, it encourages the notion of universally "correct" versions, threatening local oikotypes. Its language of folkloric imagery, (the mountains, flowers, the village, oppressive forces, resistance fighters), designed to reach urban as well as rural Kurds, is far simpler, in range and syntax, than the images of the oral literature. The standardisation of the Kurdish experience will inevitably lose much local variety but is necessary for nationhood, and satellite TV is one of the few means at the Kurds' disposal to bring this about. Local identities can still persist, but, for nationhood to exist, a national identity would need to be created which had meaning for all Kurds; oral literature is playing a crucial role in the Kurds' attempts at its formation.