

Music in Kurdish Identity Formations

by Dieter Christensen* (New York, USA & Berlin, Germany)

The Kurds, a people without a State, are one of the most numerous ethnic groups of Western Asia, the fourth most numerous after the Arabs, the Turks, and the Persians. There are strong expatriate communities in various European countries and smaller ones elsewhere, as well. State boundaries segmenting the more or less contiguous West-Asian territory where Kurds live, the scattering of exclaves in Caucasian countries, Eastern Iran and Afghanistan, religious diversity, hegemony of dominant national cultures and political pressures of assimilation have all contributed to the potential disintegration of Kurdish peoplehood. However, the awareness of distinct Kurdish ethnicity, distinct from that of other peoples that inhabit Western Asia, has grown among Kurds as well as among their neighbors since the late 19th Century, and especially since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the activities of Western colonial powers in the area. This is an ongoing process in which calls for a state of their own, an independent Kurdistan, are becoming louder.

The political processes are closely intertwined with the self-perceptions of individuals in their relation to larger groups, their cultural identity, and the construction and the choice of such group identities to which individuals feel they belong, or which they project to others. Cultural identity is not always a given for a person, it is often contextually determined and may change with the context, especially in situations of conflict; or it may be hidden or dissimulated in what I call crypto-identity. For Kurds, this is a frequent occurrence, in Kurdistan proper as well in the diaspora.

Substantial numbers of Kurds – people who call themselves Kurds – live in several countries of Western Asia, Iran, Afghanistan, the Caucasus, Central Asia and Europe. This is not the place to trace the historical processes that have led to the present situation of a large people without a State. Suffice it to say that most of the dispersion of this people and the segmentation of their homeland is relatively recent, the work of the 20th Century. Around 1900, most Kurds lived in a contiguous area made up of Northern Mesopotamia, the adjoining Eastern Anatolia, and the Zagros Mountains from Lake Urmia south to Luristan. The only substantial exclave was that of Khorassan in Eastern Iran where in the 17th Century, Shah Abbas had moved thousands of Kurds from the North-Western border of his realm. The only international border cutting through the land of the Kurds at that time was that between the Ottoman and the Iranian empires, and by all accounts it was a very open border, indeed.

World War I pitched the Ottomans against the Zar, the Kurds and the Armenians were left in the middle, and as religion became an issue, many Kurds that were non-Muslims fled East and settled in the Russian Caucasus, especially in what became the Soviet Republic of Armenia. After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the Western powers segmented the spoils into more or less arbitrary slices – disregarding ethnic complexities. The Kurds of the former Ottoman Empire found themselves as ethnic

* Professor Emeritus at Columbia University, New York.

minorities mostly in three new States: the Turkish Republic, Iraq and Syria. Turkey and Syria initiated assimilation policies that did not recognize minorities and banned the use of languages other than the majority language – Turkish and Arabic, respectively – in schools and in publications and public performances of any kind.

Under such conditions, the questions “Who am I? To which people do I belong? How do I want other to see me?” became critical for many.

What, then, makes a Kurd a Kurd other than declaring his cultural identity?

There is, of course, language: “Kurdish” is clearly distinct from Arabic and Turkish, despite some lexical communalities; but major dialects – in particular Kurmanji (“Northern Kurdish”) and Sorani (“Southern Kurdish”), each of which has many regional sub-dialects, are not always mutually comprehensible in spoken discourse, quite apart from the fact that the scripts used – Arabic and Latin – complicate matters for those who are literate. But then there are also languages that are linguistically close to Kurdish but where the linguistic classification – and the self-declaration of their speakers – become political issues: is Hewrami Kurdish? Are the speakers of Zazaki Kurds? Do Zaza consider themselves Kurds? Some do, some don't.

There are other, more tangible ways of expressing ethnic identity, such as dress, not usually operative in every-day diaspora situations, and in the homeland very much subject to regional variation. But what about music? Are there any distinctive aspects of the music whether vocal or instrumental that Kurds practice throughout Kurdistan?

Pan-Kurdish musical forms

There are very few musical forms that Kurds consider their own and which are known to exist with similar characteristics across Kurdistan. To put it differently, there is a great variety of music within the vast contiguous territory that Kurds inhabit, from Northern Syria and Central Anatolia in Turkey to Armenia and the Kermanshah area in Iran, and most of that music will be recognized by Kurds and non-Kurds alike as “Kurdish” (see Christensen 2002b), but at the same time, it is not easy to determine what makes it sound “Kurdish.” There are, however, a few kinds of music that show great and obvious similarities across the whole large area. We can call them “traditional” because they appear to have been practiced in the same way for many decades, perhaps centuries, in the oral tradition.

These distinctive kinds are **sung narratives**, possibly spread widely because their outstanding performers, the dengbejs or beytbejs – loosely translated bards – used to travel widely; and dance songs, perhaps because dance songs are among the most public manifestations of expressive behavior.

Sung narratives

For urban and rural Kurds alike, listening to the recounting of historical events tends to be a deeply moving experience, evocative of what it means to be a Kurd among non-Kurds, and perhaps also to be a member of a particular tribe or lineage to which the narration relates (see Christensen 1975b). The recounting is always a performance for an audience, and calls for highly developed skills. Most important among these skills are a vast memory for names, episodes, and historical contexts; the capability to shape a story into a compelling musical and spoken-prose rendering; the ability to sustain a highly controlled vocal style and to underscore the dramatic content with auditive, mimetic and bodily gestures. Essential is also the ability to sense the mood of the

audience and to understand the requirements of a specific occasion for choosing the appropriate subject and performance style (see Christensen 2002a). The few who have these qualities and exercise these skills are highly respected and widely recognized. Narration may take the form of *hekayat* or *çirok û stran* (tale and song), in which spoken story telling mingles with sung verses or sung narrative.

Purely sung narratives come in three kinds, distinguished by the general character of their contents: heroic songs that deal with battles among men and which, while recounting more or less historical events, glorify the courage, bravery, and honesty of men in usually tragic situations with fatal outcome. These narratives appeal to what many Kurds believe to be specifically Kurdish values of men. The singing of such heroic songs - in Hakkari called *şer*, *mêrxweş* etc. - can serve to reaffirm and project group identity, or it can function as mere entertainment, but in rural, and to a lesser degree also in urban life, it often serves also other distinct social functions.

Not less tragic in their stories, but always involving the love for a woman as a central element, are narratives that are known in Hekkarî as *hajikirinî*, *evînî* etc. They differ from lyrical love songs in that they tell a real story with an unhappy ending, and that the praise of female beauty is marginal in them. In form and musical structure, they are indistinguishable from heroic songs. Only by knowing or understanding the text can they be recognized as "love narratives."

These two kinds of sung narratives rely on the recitation and melodic/rhythmic rendering of prose and their delivery is traditionally a solo performance, unaccompanied by any instruments. Among the stylistic properties are emphatic accents at the end of long phrases and before the singer quickly catches breath for the next phrase.



Audio 1.
Hasanê Erebê Anis
"story and song" (excerpt)
Singer: Kamil Yalcin, zomayê Nator, Hakkari, July 1, 1965

A third kind is usually presented in rhymed verses with religious or fabulous rather than historical content. This group includes narrative poems, often in the form called *qesîde*, but also sung poetry of Kurdish Alevi and of Yezidi.



Audio 2.
Zembil firoş. Qesîde.
Singer with frame drum *erebane*: Seyid Ahmet, from Şirnak. July 6, 1965.

Dances govend

The other broad category of performance that, as a category, is present among Kurds everywhere - as it is among other peoples - and that serves to project group identities is dance. Dancing as a social activity always involves sound, "music," but also much more: the patterned and coordinated movement of people, the setting, the occasion, dress, the explicit content of song texts or the meanings associated with song melodies that are performed on instruments. In any given performance, the participants make choices that are determined, or steered, by how they want to be perceived as individuals or as a group.

In terms of their movements in relation to sound, there are three main types of dances: Those in which two groups of men or women alternate in singing a usually

short melody that is repeated many times. The dancers position themselves side by side, forming a single line holding each other by the hands or touching at the shoulders, the feet moving essentially in place. The song texts are in rhymed verses, and each line is repeated.



Audio 3.
Dance song *Tîl megan, govendê yamilla ya sevik*.
2 and 3 men alternating. Hakkari, July 7, 1965

The second type has a lead singer whose calls are answered by a chorus - often all the other dancers - who form a line similar to that in type 1.

The third type calls for instrumentalists to provide the music for a line of dancers that moves in a wide open circle, with the lead dancer often waving a small scarf. The instruments are typically a pair of oboe and drum – *dehol û zorneh, sez û dehol* - sometimes two drums, and usually played by professional musicians *mitirp* (from Arab. *mūtrib*), but in some areas, a double clarinet *dūzele* may be used instead of the oboe.

Performances of instrumental dance music of the kind described are widely, though not universally known in Kurdistan and Kurdish communities elsewhere, but the practice is not originally or typically Kurdish. It is shared within a vast area from India to Central Asia to South-Eastern Europe to East Africa.

*
* *

The musical practices that I have described so far are those of Kurds in the middle of the 20th Century, and I describe them from the perspective of an outsider, such as an ethnomusicologist. At that time, some 60 years ago, few Kurds could be aware what music other Kurds, perhaps just a few miles away, would practice. Only itinerant bards and derwishes and the *mitirp*, professional musicians, transcended the narrow local boundaries of musical knowledge and awareness. Music had almost no role in expanding social identity beyond the local, or at most, the regional.

Then the media entered the realm of Kurdish music. In the Turkish Republic, broadcasting in Kurdish and the production of Kurdish recordings remained prohibited into the 1990s, but in the late 1930s, Radio Yerevan developed a program of recording Kurdish artists and presenting them in setting customary for radio – singers with instrumental accompaniment, large choruses that performed dance songs. Radio stations in Iran and in Northern Iraq followed suit, and for the first time, music that identified Kurds and with which Kurds would identify, was heard and accepted across regional, dialectal and political boundaries, thereby expanding the individual awareness of Kurdishness.

In 1958, in the mountains of Hakkari, a rather isolated part of Kurdistan without electricity, singers had already learned narrative songs “from the radio”, be it Yerevan, Iran or Iraq. The stories were said to have happened in places far away, beyond their personal experiences, but always in Kurdish places which they now could identify.

Since the 1960s, labor migration and political persecutions have moved large numbers of Kurds to European cities. An estimated 50,000 Kurds live now – 2007 – in

Berlin. Among them are Kurds who hide their Kurdish identity for fear of persecution in Turkey, but the vast majority participate in public events which bring Kurds together, in particular, to celebrate Newruz, the Kurdish/Iranian New Year on 21 March. Music and dancing are the central communal activities on these occasions, and the specific forms of music and dance are those common to most participants: the singing of narratives, and communal line dancing in a circle to the sounds of drum and oboe (*dehol û zorne*), now often replaced by a synthesizer.

Common forms of Kurdish music making are adapted to the urban diaspora situation, and actively used to broaden, shape and maintain a trans-regional Kurdish identity. Through the media – tape recordings and compact discs, increasing also radio, television and the internet – this process and its products also feed back from the diaspora to Kurdistan proper, affecting how Kurds understand themselves as individuals and as members of a people.

And music newly adopted into the scope of Kurdish practices can serve to foster Kurdishness, too: At a recent Newruz celebration in Berlin, a young man performed a rap act in which he exhorted his audience to speak Kurdish: *yek – do – sê – çar – Kurdî beje!* One –two – three – four – speak Kurdish!! And with this, he attracted especially the very young, those most prone to lose their mother tongue in the diaspora.



[Video mp4 H264]



QuickTime

Video example 1.

a: Circle dance at the Newruz celebration of the Komkar association, Berlin, March 2007

b: Rap song *Yek do sê - Kurdi bêje* at the Newruz celebration of Komkar, Berlin, March 2007

Click in the window to play the video inside. Requires adobe reader 6 and +

Otherwise click here :



QuickTime

References

Boğaziçi Gösteri Sanatları Topluluğu – Müzik Birimi.

2004 *Eyhok. Muzika Gelêrî ya Hekariyê. Traditional Music of Hakkari.* Book, 164 pp., and 2 compact disks. Istanbul: Kalan.

Christensen, Dieter

1961 Kurdische Brautlieder aus dem Vilayet Hakkari, Süd-Ost Türkei. *Journal of the International Folk Music Council* 13: 70-72.

1963 Tanzlieder der Hakkari-Kurden. *Jahrbuch für musikalische Volks- und Völkerkunde* 1: 11-47.

1965 *Kurdish folk music from Western Iran.* New York: Ethnic Folkways Library FE 3103. LP record with 19 pp. Notes.

1967 Zur Mehrstimmigkeit in kurdischen Wechselgesängen. In: *Festschrift Walter Wiora.* Kassel: Bärenreiter. Pp.171-77.

1975a Ein Tanzlied der Hakkari-Kurden und seine Varianten. *Baessler-Archiv* 23:195-215.

1975b Musical style and social context in Kurdish songs. *Asian Music* 6: 1-6.

2002a Musik und Gesellschaft in Zentralkurdistan um 1960. *Kurdische Studien* 2,2: 57-74.

2002b Kurdistan. In: *Garland Encyclopedia of World Music* vol. 6 pp. 739-52.