

The shifting borders of conflict, difference, and oppression: Kurdish folklore revisited¹

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Why isn't folklore dead yet? Its ability to pull millions of postmodern Westerners into cinemas with fantasy blockbusters and fairytales redux shows that even now the cultural vocabulary of Grimm's fairy tales and the *Arabian Nights* remains a resource for narrating lives, managing fear, and magical thinking. Through global networks, Kurdish society can share these international riffs on folk culture, but the national folklore is not seen through the European or American-style post-ironic lens. Kurdish folklore is a serious national asset, a primary source for collective memory and Kurdish history. At the same time it is viewed with ambivalence, in true Orientalist style.

Folklore matters in Kurdistan because it became an integral part of the nation-building process of the late Ottoman Empire and its successor states, especially Turkey, which then influenced nation-building in Pahlavi Iran. The European romantic nationalism which inspired the process also drove Soviet formulations of nationality, which in turn influenced Kurdish intellectuals in the homelands.² This chapter interrogates Kurdish folklore studies, firstly by describing briefly the politics of folklore, not only in the well-studied field of Turkey,³ but also across the understudied other homelands.⁴ Then I consider how this affects academic folklore study, considering the issues facing scholars seeking to move beyond the Orientalist legacy of the past, especially if, like myself, they are not writing from within the Kurdish nationalist project. Finally I will demonstrate briefly how the methodologies of contemporary folkloristics can be used to identify and analyse texts which take us to the heart of discourses of power, oppression and suffering.

The Politics of Folklore in Kurdistan

The term 'folklore' rightly makes us uncomfortable. We sense its ideological nature as we feel its contradictory forces. Its overtones of positive identity, of belonging and warmth, family hearths and village festivals, mask an inherent 'othering' - folklore as the province of the ignorant, of old women, unschooled men and little children. In national terms, 'we' celebrate it as our heritage even if we are 'modern'. This ambivalence is already present in the work of Johann Gottfried Herder in the 1770s, which set out the key notions of romantic nationalism fundamental to Europe's modernity project.⁵ Long before 1846, when the English antiquarian Thoms coined the word *folklore*, Herder had outlined the essential characteristics of the *Volk* which still resound today: the purity of their ancient traditions, their intimate and long-standing relationship with their homeland, the fundamental importance of their unique and authentic language, the unique spirit of each *Volk* which imparts their distinctive character and framework to which 'we' as countrymen can all belong. Herder's phrase 'one people, one fatherland, one language'⁶ strikes a chord with anyone familiar with Kemalism. But the 'folk' which Herder considered to be the source of 'spirit' were to be distinguished from the 'rabble' in the streets,⁷ and his followers were apt to make a distinction between worthy and vulgar forms of popular culture.⁸ On the gender front, Herder acknowledges the role of mothers in transmitting tradition to children, but assigns women a subordinate, non-intellectual role.⁹ Herder was only one of a succession of intellectuals involved in the construction of a worthy 'folk' without any interest in the lived lives of non-élite persons.¹⁰

As the scholarly construct of the 'folk' developed, so did this 'othering' of its real-life members. Notions of progressive stages of human development were also systematised. By the late nineteenth century Edward Burnett Tylor was arguing that folklore represented remnants of mankind's savage state, and Andrew Lang was writing that where an anomalous cultural survival existed among the

civilised, its explanation could be sought by considering similar practices among more primitive peoples.¹¹ Despite their timeless knowledge, ‘the folk’ – even the European ‘folk’ – may be grateful for the intellectuals’ attention when they come to collect material,¹² since they are incapable of interpreting and evaluating it themselves. Only intellectuals can mediate between past and present and represent the interests of the ‘folk’, who cannot step across the class divide in the same way.¹³ Thus, even outside the colonial project, folklore study constitutes a vehicle of hegemonic knowledge production. The inequality inscribed into such constructions of the folk is still palpable despite the revolutions in thought of the late twentieth century, when ‘history from below’ came to the fore and more engaged scholars sought to explore the dynamics of power expressed in subaltern discourse.¹⁴

Folklore, then, is a polyvalent term: a force for inclusivity but also for othering, the latter directly related to notions of modernity and progress. Since its beginnings, folklore collection has been formulated as a rescue operation because the *Volksggeist* and *Volksdichtung* are in danger due to an event, or process, which ruptures the long-standing *status quo* of folklife.¹⁵ The Kurds’ turn towards folklore during the twentieth century is no exception to this.

Folklore and Nation-Building in the Kurdish Home States

Herder’s heritage, mediated from Europe into the late Ottoman Empire and its successor states, and through Russia into the nationalities policy of the Soviet Union,¹⁶ remains palpable in Kurdish talk about folklore today. In both the Kurdish homelands and the Soviet Union folklore studies were founded on the idea that ‘folklore’ reflects the ‘soul’ of the nation. Contemporary Kurdish nationalist discourse is dominated by two ‘strands’ or traditions, emanating from the movement in Turkey and the quasi-State of Iraqi Kurdistan respectively. Here I will describe the notions of folklore operating in the Kurdish home states (omitting the USSR for reasons of space) until the present day, and then outline how they have been taken up since the 1960s by the Kurdish nationalist movements of Turkey and Iraq.

Interest in folklore in the Ottoman empire had begun in the nineteenth century, with the Tanzimat writers’ desire to find a literature couched in the language of the people rather than the speech of the Ottoman élite.¹⁷ Turkism’s founding ideologue, Ziya Gökalp, was an enthusiast; he amassed a large collection and identified folk literature as the true Turkish literature.¹⁸ As early as 1919 we see Kurdish complaints, made by Kemal Fevzi in the Kurdish review *Jîn* in 1919, that Gökalp had modified Kurdish tales to make them fit Turkish Dede Korkut models;¹⁹ already the cultural artefacts of folklore could be designated national property and thus susceptible to theft. The early Kurdish nationalists were members of the Ottoman upper classes, as influenced as their Turkish counterparts by prevailing European and Slavic ideas; some had studied in Germany. *Kurdistan*, the newspaper founded by Miqdad Midhat Bedir Khan in 1896, aimed to bring the benighted Kurdish masses into the light of modern civilization. As Ottomanism developed into Kurdish nationalism, however, Herder’s concept of folk knowledge became more prevalent; in the pages of the magazine *Jîn* (1919) Kurdish folklore is presented as containing valuable ancient knowledge.²⁰ The idea that all nations deserve self-determination regardless of their level of ‘progress’ is also linked to President Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points.²¹

Among the Kurds’ new home states, the Republic of Turkey gave perhaps the most coherent formulation of the place of folklore in the life of the State, using Gökalp’s principles.²² After 1923, folklore, like linguistics and history,²³ was co-opted into the nation-building project. This view of folklore as part of the age-old wisdom of the Turkish people permitted it to be used in the construction of a new civic Turkish identity, where loyalties could henceforth be to the Turkish nation-state rather

than to the traditional religious and social structures which had commanded popular allegiance in the Ottoman empire.²⁴ The impact of Kemalist policies on Kurdish culture, the denial of Kurds' existence in Turkey and the ban on Kurdish publication until the 1990s, which have been well studied elsewhere.²⁵

Folklore studies in Turkey took both academic and popular routes. From 1924 it was taught at the Institute of Turcology in the University of Istanbul.²⁶ Georges Dumézil, invited to teach by Atatürk,²⁷ profoundly influenced many of his students, including Pertev Naili Boratav.²⁸ In 1927 the new Folklore Association recruited members nationwide and encouraged them to collect material. Strongly nationalist, it advocated mapping the folkloric cultures with the view of identifying and assimilating non-standard linguistic and cultural forms.²⁹ Its place was taken in 1932 by the 'people's houses' as fora for collection and publication of folklore in many cities.³⁰ At first academics worked closely with these initiatives, but in the climate of popular nationalism of the late 1940s, the academic approach and European training fell under suspicion. Attempts by Boratav to 'de-nationalise folklore' as Öztürkmen says - were seen as a political act and punished as such.³¹

In Iran, the Pahlavi Shahs (1925-1979) imitated Atatürk's centralized nation-building model in many respects, especially in the enforcement of Persian as the sole official language, which included a ban on publication in Kurdish,³² though this was relaxed during periods of government weakness such as 1941-53. Unlike Turkey, of course, Iran has never represented itself as a homogenous state.³³ Interest in Iranian folklore included that of Kurds, seen as an Iranian people. In 1961 Abolqasem Enjavi broadcast a radio appeal for folklore collection;³⁴ listeners responded with enthusiasm. Their findings were broadcast, and then published in the 1970s in a collection called 'The *Treasury of Popular Culture*' (my italics).³⁵ Under the Islamic republic, folklore was apt to be branded *khoraifat* or 'superstition.' Collections were appropriated by State bodies such as the broadcasting agency and Enjavi's programme was discontinued, though some cultural publications such as the Kurdish-language magazine *Sirve* included articles about folklore.³⁶ In 1995, Ayatollah Khamenei spoke in favour of promoting native cultures as a defence against creeping Westernisation, after which folklore studies revived considerably.³⁷ Since Khatami's presidency Iranian Kurds have begun a new wave of cultural activity; with the advent of new technologies and satellite television the PKK's sister party PJAK has gained ground against older Iranian Kurdish political parties, bringing the PKK's cultural ideology with it (see below).³⁸

Syria was a major site of Kurdish ideological production until the mid-1940s. Herder's notions are discernible in the work of the brothers Kamuran (1895-1978) and Celadet Bedir Khan (1893-1951), exiles from Turkey. After the Ararat rebellion in Turkey failed (1927-1930), they embarked on cultural nationalism. Their periodical *Hawar* ('The Call') (1932-1943) published Kurdish folkloric texts, gave scholarly descriptions in the French-language sections, and made explicit its view of folklore as a resource for developing the Kurdish language, since it contained numerous old words not found elsewhere, and unlike more everyday Kurdish, had not been adulterated by foreign words.³⁹ Commentaries were given on how the folklore displayed Kurdish customs or personal qualities. Despite *Hawar*'s undoubted historical importance, its circulation was very small and, even allowing for the practice of reading it aloud in teahouses and *diwankhanes*, it can only have reached a small proportion of Kurds at large. During the 1940s French diplomatic and military personnel worked closely with the editorial team.⁴⁰ Another friend, the priest and teacher Thomas Bois, reflected prevailing attitudes with *The Kurds' Soul Revealed Through Their Folklore*, published in 1946.⁴¹

Iraq presents a very different case study from Turkey, especially before the declaration of the Republic in 1958. Whilst acknowledging the Kurds' existence, the new Iraqi State embraced a pan-Arab historical discourse foregrounding Sunni identity, though it was always 'plagued by the populace's

inability to agree upon a set of foundational myths.’⁴² After 1958 however, folklore was more systematically co-opted into government-controlled mechanisms of state-building. The early Republican period saw an upsurge in journalism, publishing and broadcasting, where leftist intellectuals working with Abdul Karim Qasim saw the emphasis of folk tradition and its collection and documentation as a way of contacting the culture of the masses. Under the Ba‘th, the attempt to achieve hegemony centred on cultural production - history writing, literature, folkloric studies, or art, particularly as it related to reinterpreting the past.⁴³ Their efforts during the 1970s suggest that they saw folklore as a site of popular meaning and relevance which needed to be recaptured from the intellectuals linked to the Communist party who had privileged it before them. Not only did many cultural and academic publications feature folkloric material, but the State even took control of all handcraft production in 1970 through the Institute of Popular Handcrafts.⁴⁴ By comparison with Turkey, there is relatively little scholarship on folklore methodologies used in Iraq; the folklorist Abd al Hamid al-‘Alwaji traced the Iraqi school of folklore to the nineteenth century German tradition.⁴⁵ Some contemporary Kurdish academics were trained in the Soviet Union.⁴⁶

Kurdish Folklore and the Nationalist Movements of Turkey and Iraq

Since the Turkish and Iraqi States made use of folklore for nation-building it is not surprising that the Kurdish movements emanating from these states have done the same.⁴⁷ The 1960s saw many changes in Turkey, notably the reactivation of the People’s Houses closed in 1951.⁴⁸ Meanwhile some publications incorporating Kurdish material appeared; the leftist journal *Dicle-Firat* included folktales, as did journals produced by Kurdish students in the diaspora.⁴⁹ Works on Kurdish studies from elsewhere became more available. In the 1970s many *aşiks* (traditional singers) were part of the flourishing leftist movement.⁵⁰ However, Kurdish culture remained low-status; in everyday life, people felt ashamed of outward signs of ‘Kurdish’ culture (such as traditional clothes).⁵¹ In school, children were taught that Turkish was scientifically proven to be beautiful and high-status; this continues today.⁵² After the 1980 coup and the new constitution of 1982 draconian restrictions were again imposed on non-Turkish linguistic and cultural expression. Cultural production shifted decisively to the diaspora, especially Sweden, where it remained until the 1990s. In Turkey, recordings of traditional performances continued to circulate illicitly, alongside those of political singers.

The PKK’s cultural programme began in the mid-1980s, with musical groups called *koms*, which aimed to reach the Kurds of Europe as well as the homeland and

‘denoted the folk music as the source of unspoilt national identity. ... The kom musicians identified their mission as stopping the assimilation of Kurdish folk music by the ‘colonists’.’⁵³ Much of the music was contemporary and political and produced in the diaspora.⁵⁴ By the early 1990s the Kurdish movement included some who privileged traditional folk performances and others who considered that it was the revolution itself which should be enshrined in Kurdish art forms. Although the latter predominated, interest in Kurdish folklore and its collection has grown since the 1990s.⁵⁵ Under Turgut Özal’s presidency, Kurdish publication in Turkey was legalised in 1991, which paved the way for various PKK-linked initiatives, notably the establishment of a *Navenda Çanda Mezopotamya* ‘Mesopotamia Cultural Centre’ and a Kurdish Institute in Istanbul. These proliferated to other cities, serving as a platform for Kurdish historical and linguistic study. More *koms* were established throughout Eastern Turkey and independent Kurdish singers were also popularised.⁵⁶ Kurdish parties in local government have devoted considerable resources to cultural activity, such as festivals; indeed their own constituencies have criticised this when times are hard for many constituents.⁵⁷ Diyarbakir’s *dengbêj* house, established to showcase traditional singing, opened in 2007.⁵⁸ Since Turkish State media still associates loaded words such as ‘tribal’ and ‘developing’ with Kurds, valorising Kurdish culture remains a priority for the movement.⁵⁹

Iraqi Kurdistan, which has exercised *de facto* autonomy since 1991, presents a very different case from Turkey;⁶⁰ since that date, the promotion or enactment of Kurdish folklore is not in itself an act of contestation as it is in Turkey. Moreover the Kurdish region's emergence as a quasi-state since 2003 has led to an evolution of state institutions. As early as 1992 local Kurdish TV stations were established; these moved to satellite and multiplied further.⁶¹ Kurdish magazines and newspapers, mostly (like the TV stations) organs of political parties, became numerous over time (though print runs were small) whilst public education replaced Arabic elements with Kurdish ones as resources became available. The Ministry of Culture presides over much folkloric knowledge production; both public and private museums with folkloric collections exist. *Dengbêjî* or traditional singing is less institutionalised than in Turkey, but much of the performance takes place via TV stations belonging to the two dominant political parties, KDP and PUK. Kawa Morad suggests that through these activities the Kurds of Iraq are articulating their claim to statehood, that the collections and museums established since 1991 are seen as assets which help qualify the Kurds for true nationhood.⁶² Thus in both Iraq and Turkey, plus the diasporic spaces dominated by the PKK,⁶³ Kurdish political parties function as gatekeepers to the popular heritage.

The PKK positions itself as definitive prophetic interpreter, claiming ownership of 'art' in Kurdistan. Saritaş quotes PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan:

'In a Kurdistan without the PKK art is dead, and the remaining cannot be called art. The art of the Turkish Republic is an act of invasion. The art of Turkish Republic is an act of suffocation, assimilation and clearance of the existing traditions and activities of people in Kurdistan by the bourgeois. So, art is dead. Therefore emergence of the PKK is the resurrection of the art. It is the source of art, it is the foundation laid down.'⁶⁴

In the same speech, from the early 1990s, he also says that without the party there would be no folk music. Thus the authentic national culture – i.e. folk culture, downplaying regional variation - is the remedy for the act of violence perpetrated by the Turkish state.⁶⁵ Through the movement one can learn not only music and dancing but Kurdishness itself.⁶⁶

Hamelink's penetrating discussion discerns an 'Orientalism of self' in the movement's acceptance of Western and Turkish categories of thinking and its project of modernisation of the Kurdish people. However she adds:

By defining Kurdish modernity as a project exceeding the immediate local political conflict and as a solution valid for all humanity, but originating in Kurdish society, the PKK ultimately attempts to de-Orientalize itself.⁶⁷

Thus we see how Kurdish folklore is a space for morality, and why tension exists between *dengbêj* folk singers and party activists, who seek to limit performance of songs about local conflicts between Kurdish groups which frame *aghas* and chieftains as heroes, in favour of less 'manly' love songs and songs of resistance against the State.⁶⁸

The Politics of Kurdish Folklore Study

The ambivalent relationship between Kurdish nationalism and folklore touches the smaller world of academic study. Most Western Orientalist representations of Kurdish culture by of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – Jaba is an exception - foreground 'folk' elements.⁶⁹ Modern (post 1960s) Kurdish movements were predominantly secular leftists reluctant to privilege the long Kurdish tradition of *medrese* (religious school) learning, considered retrogressive by nationalists since the end of the Ottoman Empire. Currently a strong body of Kurdish literary scholars is stressing the need to work on a wider variety of Kurdish authors and publish texts from recently opened manuscript collections. This expresses not only a need to reclaim Kurdish learned heritage but also as a reaction against the 'folklorisation' of Kurdish culture. Such tension between 'folklore-as-national-asset' and

‘folklore-as-primitive’ need not be incoherent but is rather a dialectic, reflecting the huge role Orientalism has played in the evolution of both Turkish and Kurdish national consciousness.

Although we can argue that Kurdish intellectuals, particularly the Bedir Khans, Orientalised the Kurds, it is the Orientalism of hegemonic outsiders which hurts most. Currently significant differences exist between academic studies written from within and without the Kurdish nationalist project. Yüksel 2011, for example, comes from within, examining both folklore and the *medrese* tradition as vectors of survival of Kurdishness. Implicit within the work is a moral stance, of the chronicling of virtuous survival against adversity. The mechanics of this survival are explored in Turgut’s 2009 study of folklore and oral history, whose analytical perspective is closer to the ‘ethnography of speaking’ approach (see below). Other Kurdish researchers base research on fieldwork in parts of Kurdistan not their own, nuancing their field experience and positionality.⁷⁰ Some exemplary studies of Kurdish folk production, especially music (Çakir 2011, Saritaş 2010) are written by Turkish nationals, many not identifying as Kurdish, who form part of the new generation of engaged social science scholars exploring Turkey’s hidden past. And there remain the ‘outsider’ non-Kurdish scholars, mostly European, most recently Hamelink’s engaged analysis⁷¹ of Turkey’s *dengbêj* singers and their ideological context.⁷² Given the Orientalism of past outputs on the Kurds by Westerners, it is we outsiders who have the most to prove and we can hardly complain that some Kurdish scholars consider that non-Kurds should not be studying their culture at all. But the ethnographic ideal seeks diverse positionalities and inclusive study. How then can we take Kurdish folklore studies forward, especially if we are not Kurdish ourselves?

American folklorist Margaret Mills, who has worked in Afghanistan and Tajikistan, puts the position with characteristic clarity:

...nonfolklorists continue to view folklorists as reactionary champions of the past and anti-liberal opponents of liberal nationalism ... In contrast, folklorists perceive themselves as champions of cultural democracy - of the viability of minority cultural systems within large national or transnational economies.⁷³

This aspiration compels Western folklorists to point out how Kurds are ‘folklorised’ by their home states; we also note where Kurdish minorities are ‘folklorised’ by the Kurdish mainstream, which wins us far fewer friends.⁷⁴ Kurdish hegemony, which understandably values Kurdish unity above almost all else, takes a dim view of academic reporting of intra-Kurdish tensions. Criticism is inevitable, but the onus is upon us to make sure that our use of data and discussion of positionality are robust enough to make it groundless.

Folklore invites engaged scholarship from insiders and outsiders alike. As early as 1958 Americo Paredes conceptualised folklore as “politically-charged expressive forms that define the shifting borders of conflict, difference, and oppression” (Briggs 2008: 98).⁷⁵ This speaks directly to Kurdish studies now. Outsider scholars no longer allow folklore research to be a simple exercise in collection and comparison. Kurdish folklorists working within the Kurdish milieu have more leeway; their audience already understands socio-political conditions and cultural meanings. Outsiders, however, have a responsibility to show awareness of social context and power dynamics.⁷⁶ We are morally obliged to make the producers of the folklore we discuss partners in knowledge production as far as possible. This entails constant striving for mutual comprehension in the field and clarity about end product. Working partnerships between ‘outsider’ and ‘insider’ scholars are one way forward (e.g. Kreyenbroek and Rashow 2005 on Yezidi texts) – though rarely will all other community members agree with the insider scholar. New communications technologies enable outsider scholars to remain in discussion with partners in the field, who can often see and comment on the end product. Disagreements inevitably ensue; nevertheless, these technologies which encourage us to see our work as an ongoing process of communication, an utterance in an unending, multivoiced dialogue, may help

to liberate Western academics caught in the bind of measuring academic ‘outputs’ as quantifiable end-product, which our own state infrastructures impose on us.

Contemporary folkloristics, whether we define it as a separate discipline,⁷⁷ or see it as a liminal area on the fringe of several disciplines - has much to offer Kurdish studies. Its liminality enables us to engage with various theories in the social sciences, philosophy and literary studies, since folk genres and indigenous knowledge often play a differing role within the stateless nation from the Eurocentric models suggested by many much-cited theorists. For instance, public discourse in Kurdistan shows a much greater role played by orality than literacy, despite the latter’s huge prestige. Folkloristics offers methods of analysing discourse, in terms of text and practice, which, when applied to Kurdish models, may enable us to scrutinise theorists such as Benedict Anderson or Jurgen Habermass.⁷⁸ Young scholars in Kurdish studies are currently somewhat reverential towards the gods of theory, but in the future there will no doubt be more such questioning going on. With this and the closer relationship between academics and research partners in the field, Kurdish folkloristics may come closer to Charles Briggs’ aim of developing theory and practice so that we can make a meaningful link between, as he puts it, ‘theorising the vernacular’, and ‘vernacular theorizing.’⁷⁹

Text in Context: ‘Open the prison gates!’

To conclude, I will apply folkloristics scholar Richard Bauman’s ‘philology of the vernacular’ to a text to illustrate some of the politics underlying the act of utterance. Bauman, an influential ‘ethnographer of speaking’ (an approach pioneered by sociolinguist Dell Hymes) who has written much about language ideologies, describes a method which pays close attention to text within context, based on the principle that texts are culturally constituted. This is by no means the only way of studying discourse in detail - the critical discourse analysis of Sheyholislami 2011 and Ekici 2015 spring to mind - but it seems undeservedly little known in Kurdish studies. It is important to note that Bauman’s notion of a ‘text’ is a crafted and bounded piece of discourse, marked in some way which enables it to be detached from one context and placed in another.⁸⁰ This notion does not demand that the text be written or that different iterations be word for word the same.

I will discuss a woman’s lament – an extemporised genre but definable as a ‘text’ by Bauman’s criteria. Although a statement from an individual concerning her feelings in the moment, it is also ‘folklore,’ since the women’s lament is melodised in traditional ways and covers established repertoires of language and theme. I will briefly consider the text in a ‘vertical’ perspective - by noting how it relates to previous lamentations (genre conventions) - and then in a ‘horizontal’ perspective, by locating it within sociopolitical discourses of its time. Thus, rather than poetics and performative details I will focus rather on the social and affective politics of the performance. This forms part of what Bauman calls the pragmatics of the text, as opposed to its form and content.

On a hot day in July 1992 in a house in the collective village of Qush Tepe near Erbil, ‘Samira’⁸¹ laments among family and friends. Only women live in Qush Tepe; all members of the Barzani tribe, they were moved here following deportation to the South of Iraq from their home in Barzan.⁸² They weep for husbands, brothers fathers, sons, never seen since the day in 1983 when Ba’ath Government forces removed all males between the ages of 7 and 70 as a punishment for the Barzanis’ anti-government activities in the Iran-Iraq war.⁸³ Samira rocks back and forth as she laments, weeping inconsolably in between, while friends offer comfort; others then take up the lament, voicing their own sorrows, before everyone falls to talking, explaining their situation to their Western visitor. The text below comprises Samira’s performance from the beginning of my recording, until a second voice joins her.

Keserdar û birîndarê bêcab u su'alên xwe ne
Wa li dunyayê wê babo wê birayao,
Dayka 'Arif ebdal û birîndar e
Heku berê simbêla lê gîr nebû o dayê

We are grieving, wounded for those who don't have answers or questions [asked about them] in the
world o father, o brother
Arif's mother is wretched and wounded
His moustache was not yet grown, mother,

Ne bo xatira Xodê û sê pêxembera bî
Mezinêd hukumet û dewleta
Me ne gotebit derga zindana wa
Bo me veke wey babo wey birayo

It wouldn't honour God and the three prophets
You world leaders,
If we didn't say, open the prison gates
For us, o father, o brother.

Ebdal û birîndar in dayê
Eva sala dehê di zebirînin xo da o
A tikên û tinalîn dayê o

We are wretched and wounded, mother
This is the tenth year of constant pain, oh,
We sigh and moan, mother.

Barzanî xerîbe e ne xudan
Tu nepenî bi me re wa bike o
Ey Xodê, ey Xodê hawara me tu Xodê

The Barzanis are exiled, lord,
Come and help us secretly
Oh God, oh God, we only have you to help us.

Belê namûsa eshabiya ya li me keftiye o
Sere cada xem mastir e û li derga zindanê wa dayê

Our clan's honour has fallen away from us by the roadside,
This pain is worse than the prison gates, o mother

Ebdal û birîndarîn bo me bi tenê
Yêd berê digo wa dayê wa dayê wa dayê o

Wretched and wounded, this is all we have
The older ones were saying, o mother, mother

Xwişka hingo xerîb e bira o
Wa bira wa bira wa birao wa babo

Your sister said she is an exile, o brother
O brother, o father

Wellah mezinêd hikumet û dewleta o
Daykê lava nebine çi xestexana o
Illa bibine ber derga zindana o

Oh you world leaders,
Don't take our boys' mothers to any hospital
Take them instead to the prison gates

Wella daykê lava di birîndar in o
Bi şev û roja di ser birînêd xo
A dikin û dinalîn o

Our boys' mothers are wounded
Day and night we sigh and mourn over our wounds

Talan e û talan e
Talan e mezina û maqwîlan o
Li Barzaniya talan e

This is ruin, ruin
It is ruin, for leaders and important people,
It is ruin for the Barzanis

Hebis û zîndan di bê bace ne, Xurbeta min, xwişkê o
Daikê lava û xwişkê biraya o di bêçare ne o

Oh Ghurbet, my sister, the prisons cost nothing⁸⁴
Our boys' mothers, our brothers' sisters have no way out

Wellah lavêd me qewî kiçekokan in
Nehatibîne hedê zîndana
O berê simbêla lê gîr bibû o

Our boys are much too young

They shouldn't have gone down into the prisons
Before their moustaches had grown

Wellah melakêd daykê lava kerbibûn
Her bo nalenala binê zîndanê o
Heku dest dihavêtine kelek û teniştêd Barzaniya o

The livers of our boys' mothers were slashed
Because on the wailing coming from the depths of the prison
Whenever hands struck the flanks, the ribs of the Barzanis

Her bo xerîba bê cab û soalêd xo me o
Heta dinya li dayka 'Arif xirab dibit o
Destê wê didane ser'êk dayê o

I am exiled for those who do not have questions and answers
Until death comes for Arif's mother
And [she is laid out] with her hands clasped together

Wellah heçyê xerîbiya bivê
Bila bête nav 'eyalê Barzaniya o
Xerîb im bo Barzaniya o

Whoever wants [to see] sadness
Let him come amongst the children of the Barzanis
I am exiled/bereft for the Barzanis

Wellah heku daikê lava êvariya diçine bin girşêd nivînka
Dibên nahêneve li serê sindoqa ye o
Wa dayê wa dayê o

If our boys' mothers go in the evening to the foot of their [children's] beds
They will say that they won't come back in a coffin

Heku daikêd lava gerêd cemedaniyêd sor bilind dîkin
Ligel şwitkêd spî wa daye o
Wa dayê mêlak lê dihelweriyên o
Belê Xodê ruha me nabet o

If our boys' mothers hold up the twisted red turbans
With their white sash, o mother
Oh mother, it makes our hearts crumble away
But God does not take our souls

Dê bila 'ebda te berî xo bideto
Me bi tenê xerîbiyê derga zîndanê
Belê nobedarê zîdana wa li me di xayînin
Wê babo wê bira o

O let your servant go
We only have the grief⁸⁵ of the prison gate
The prison guards are surely betraying us
O father, o brother

Nexo ma jîna me bo çî ye
Piştî qafîla Barzaniya û
Piştî xodanê 'elaga li me avêtîne di munşe'a da o

So what is our life for?
After the deportation of the Barzanis
After they were herded onto a bus, holding only [a few belongings in] a carrier bag

Allah Xodê dilê hungo nerm bibî
Dergê zîdana yan îskêt Barzaniya nişa me bidin
Da dayikê lava bêhîvî bibin o

May God make your hearts soft
So that you show us the prison doors, or the bones of the Barzanis
So that our boys' mothers can be without hope

Eyalê me xerîbe ye li serê cadê
Heta êvarî bêrka di destî da
Bo Soran û bo Goran o

Our children are strangers on the road
Until the evening they have shovels in their hands
[Working] for the Soran and Goran

Wey xerîbiyê wey xerîbiyê
Wey xerîbiyê wey exsîriyê o
Ez nemînim bo Barzaniya o

Oh exile and loss
Exile and poverty
I don't want to live for the Barzanis.

In formal terms, it is more accurate to call these lamentations 'melodised words' rather than song, as in Amy de la Bretèque's ground-breaking research on Yezidi laments in the Caucasus (2013), which

uses methodologies from the ethnography of speaking. The melodic range of these laments is rather limited, well under an octave, which may be a mechanism for controlling the content.⁸⁶ Stanzas are short, with a fall in pitch at the end of each verse and a return to the key-note at the end of the stanza. Like the Kurdish *kilam/lawik/stran* songs⁸⁷ which eulogise heroes or sing mournfully of battles and love affairs, they are performed in a melancholic musical mode - indeed there are some shared conventions of imagery. Melodisation of such words is powerful; it inspires tears in others and it may be unlucky or dangerous to use it at inauspicious moments or when vulnerable people are present.⁸⁸

In terms of content, we can observe how Samira uses the lamentation form for her own purposes. This is not quite a funeral text, but is in keeping with gendered discourse of affect common across the Kurdish region and beyond, whereby women articulate their feelings of loss, grief, sacrifice and sometimes blame in melodised form. Into a lament for a dead person they may weave references to previous losses, to sons living far away, to bodily sickness. Samira does not quite admit that the lost menfolk are dead (though some of her neighbours, who were listening, and later joined the lament themselves, did say so in normal speech); mostly she speaks as if they were in prison. This goes beyond the normal idiom of the lamentation genre, where sometimes the dead person is said to be ‘in exile’ or even ‘wounded.’ The women of Qush Tepe lament for all their menfolk, though here Samira focuses mostly on her son.

Punctuated with interjections such as ‘o mother/o brother/o father,’ emotive formulae typical of the genre, this is not a user-friendly text for outsiders. Samira does not give a step-by-step narrative – that is not part of this speech genre – and she uses oblique references such as ‘those without questions and answers’ for the men whose disappearance has not been investigated. However she tells us much about lack of agency and feelings of hopelessness - ‘What is our life for?’ Her pain is described largely in physical terms; in keeping with the conventions of the genre, the women are *birîndar* ‘wounded’, their livers (a seat of emotion as the heart is in the West) are cut up or crumbled away. But they do not need hospitals; instead they need to be taken to the prisons (to see what has become of their men). There has been no answer to their questions; she calls at several points on Mes‘ud Barzani as ‘king of the Kurds’ and also as clan leader (*xudan*, ‘lord’) to help, also to *mezinêd hukumet û dewleta*, the world leaders. Prosaic details add pathos – the boy was so young he didn’t even have facial hair yet, the men were taken away with only the belongings they could hold in a carrier bag. Their *namûs*,⁸⁹ their honour, has ‘fallen away’ from them, she says, and that this is even worse than the grief. This refers to the social impossibility for women of living without men in their households to protect them as heads of families. In Qush Tepe there had been cases of women being raped by security forces, which were surrounded by shame, but on an everyday level the lack of male kin in the household made it impossible for the women to be part of normal society. This issue has also been noted in connection with Anfal widows.⁹⁰

Although she takes us into her personal anguish, Samira also speaks as part of a group. She uses the first person plural – ‘we’ more often than singular ‘I’; *daykê lava* ‘our boys’ mothers’ in the third person are the subject of many of her statements. This is partly to do with her uptake of narrative responsibility in speaking for *daykê lava* as a group; such indirect sentence structures may also be a distancing mechanism like the limited melodic range of the song (see above). Another such mechanism cited by Amy de la Bretèque is the use of reported speech to frame possibly dangerous utterances such as ‘our fate has betrayed us.’⁹¹ There is far less of this in Samira’s lament than in Amy de la Bretèque’s examples, which may be attributable to Samira’s goal of asking for help in revealing what has happened. This is no ordinary funeral lament with a visible body and a known death.

Let us consider what Bauman calls the ‘pragmatics’ of the text. Bauman speaks of significant texts being organised into corpora, which are then ideologised as cultural heritage.⁹² This is not such a text,

despite its similarities to the high-status melancholic *kilam*. Women's laments were, until recently, considered not only to be distressing to hear - they are - but also, in many areas, distasteful and low-status.⁹³ In 1992 I had some difficulty gaining access to funerals to listen to them. Even now, they are not sacralised in the same way as the songs produced by *dengbêj* singers.

Moreover, the practice of such lamentation is not cathartic. Although some of Amy de la Bretèque's Caucasian Yezidi partners said that they even derived some pleasure from it, the Barzani women told me in a later interview that they had had enough of lamentation and wanted to give it up.⁹⁴ Their practice has more in common with the containment of trauma and the need to live with it. The link between affect and discourse which they make by their use of embodied imagery – Samira's reference to the slashed hearts of the mothers – recalls Veena Das' remarks on the way Pakistani women raped during the Partition spoke of hiding 'poisonous knowledge' inside their bodies.⁹⁵

I was not the first foreigner to hear these women lament – they had also lamented during interviews to Western journalists. For mothers to lament, often showing images of their sons, is an immensely powerful act in Kurdish politics, located as they are at the heart of what is considered homely and familiar. The PKK and its sister organisations have made an enormous political impact by turning women's lamentation on its head and having mothers of martyrs dance and ululate for joy and give speeches at funerals, declaring how happy they are that their child has died for the cause. But the lamentation of Qush Tepe Barzani mothers, for a crime against humanity perpetrated by the Ba'th regime, is directly linked to wider Kurdish politics of victimhood.

Following Reinhardt Koselleck's prediction that one day history would be written from the point of view of the vanquished rather than the victors, Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman have traced the evolution of victimhood from the early twentieth century, where victims were seen as cowards, until the present day, when victimhood is a strong moral position from which to speak and bearing witness to human suffering in the face of violence is seen as a virtuous act.⁹⁶ Victimhood has become one of the key elements of Kurdish national discourse; narratives of suffering, whether testimonies of humiliations suffered in prison, or the loss of murdered or martyred kinfolk, have moved from the private into the public arena. In Turkey and Iraq, initiatives which collect witness testimonies to atrocities exist alongside commemorations and memorials. Fischer-Tahir has described how the discourse of genocide has developed in Iraqi Kurdistan over the past two decades.⁹⁷ By the time 'Da'esh' actively attacked Kurdish border areas in 2014, the campaign for international acknowledgement of the Anfal campaign⁹⁸ as genocide had become a cornerstone of the Kurdistan Regional Government's foreign policy. I would argue that these demands for international recognition are part of the way in which the KRG is performing statehood.

The utterances of Qush Tepe women, speaking from their position as Barzani widows, constitute important texts in Kurdish politics of victimhood. Journalists and researchers visiting Qush Tepe were channelled there by KDP connections wanting to show us Kurdish suffering; the women were happy to reveal their suffering to outsiders for the sake of discovering the truth about their loved ones. By addressing us, they are convoking new audiences, though in 1992 they were not yet consciously speaking to a developed Kurdish national discourse of suffering, as victims now do. The 'we' Samira refers to are the boys' mothers, Barzanis, and not (yet) the whole Kurdish nation; she speaks of the Soran and Goran, Kurds from other regions, as 'others' that they work for.

Anfal widows are also evocative figures in these politics, as are the people of Halabja, site of the infamous chemical bombing of 1988. Later, Mes'ud Barzani's envoy Dr Mohammed Ihsan, found mass graves of the Barzani men and the women of Qush Tepe were rehoused in Barzani ancestral areas.⁹⁹ However, prominence in the discourses of victimhood is not always a guarantee of 'voice' or

agency; Anfal widows asserted that despite their reverential treatment as a symbol of Kurdish suffering, their concerns were not always heard;¹⁰⁰ in 2006 the people of Halabja demonstrated against the KRG, claiming that they were being used for raising international funds but were not seeing the benefits.¹⁰¹ This recalls Das' argument that the women raped during the Partition of India were felt to embody the nation, but their own voices were effaced.¹⁰² It is within such a charged discursive environment that we should locate utterances by victims such as the Qush Tepe women.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have outlined the continuing political importance of folklore in Kurdistan and the politics surrounding Kurdish folklore studies. I have striven to show that the methodologies of folkloristics scholars, including the ethnography of speaking, constitute a type of discourse analysis which can be applied to texts lying outside the comfort zone of cultural heritage. Such texts show us the evolving negotiations and contestations of subaltern individuals and groups – Paredes' shifting borders of conflict, difference and oppression. They also reveal how deeply texts are embedded in cultural politics – as Bauman says, texts are culturally constituted. Ultimately, they demonstrate clearly how artificial it would be to make a 'Great Divide' between political and cultural studies. As scholars embrace such engaged methodologies, 'folklore' moves at last from the polluted backwaters of Orientalism into the mainstream of Kurdish studies.

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² Kurdish cultural work in the USSR, the principal source of Kurmanji (Northern Kurdish) literature until the 1990s, was state-supported; in the homelands Kurdish cultural production was by its very nature an act of political contestation.

³ Cf. Başgöz 1972, Öztürkmen 2005, Yüksel 2011, Hamelink 2014.

⁴ I omit the USSR only for reasons of space.

⁵ See Bauman and Briggs (2003:163-196) on Herder, linguistic ideology and modernity.

⁶ *Sämtliche Werke* 18: 347, cited in Bauman and Briggs (2003: 193).

⁷ In: *Folk Songs* (1778), quoted by Storey (2003: 4).

⁸ Storey cites William Motherwell (1827) and Francis James Child (1857) (2003: 5).

⁹ Bauman and Briggs 2003: 177.

¹⁰ Storey 2003: 14.

¹¹ Dorson 1968: 196, 206. Both are cited by Storey (2003: 6-7).

- ¹² Storey 2003: 5-6.
- ¹³ Storey 2003: 13-15; Bauman and Briggs 2003: 193-195.
- ¹⁴ For example, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Edward Said and Partha Chatterjee.
- ¹⁵ For Herder and those who followed him, this was urbanisation and the industrial revolution.
- ¹⁶ The Soviet Union was the source of broadcasts received by Kurds elsewhere, and numerous Iraqi Kurdish scholars were educated there.
- ¹⁷ Başgöz 1972: 163-164.
- ¹⁸ Başgöz 1972: 165. Gökalp published folklore in the form of tales for children, to influence the younger generation (Çakir 2011: 11).
- ¹⁹ Çakir, *loc. cit.*
- ²⁰ Çakir 2001:20; see also Hakan Özoğlu 2004 and Strohmeier 2003 for the evolution of these ideas through other periodicals.
- ²¹ Strohmeier 2003: 152.
- ²² For his activity within the *Türk Ocakları* or 'Turkish Hearths' movement and its influence on the Young Turk government and Mustafa Kemal, see Öztürkmen 1992: 183.
- ²³ The Turkish Language Society and the Turkish Historical Society, both established in 1932. See Üngör 2011: 229-230 for the discourse glorifying Turkishness.
- ²⁴ For Gökalp's theories see Heyd 1950:104-148.
- ²⁵ E.g. Zeydanlioğlu 2012.
- ²⁶ Directed by Fuat Köprülü (Başgöz 1972: 169).
- ²⁷ From 1928 to 1931, he taught comparative religion, religious history and folk traditions of the Caucasus (Birkalan 2001: 42).
- ²⁸ (Birkalan 2001: 42).
- ²⁹ Başgöz 1972: 171.
- ³⁰ For People's House activity in Diyarbakir during the early Republic, see Üngör 2011: 232-240.
- ³¹ Accusations included: belittling Namık Kemal by planning to include folk poets in his commemoration, his emphasis on resistance against the state in ancient Turkish legends especially Koroğlu, his correction a student's comments on Ziya Gökalp and his citation in class of *kızılbaş* (i.e. Alevi) poets (Öztürkmen 2005: 200-201; Birkalan 2001: 55-57).
- ³² For the Iranian equivalent of the Turkish 'Sun Language Theory' see Hassanpour 1992: 125-130.
- ³³ The Kurds' existence was acknowledged, though by 1960 Kurdish was still being classified as a 'dialect' of Persian.
- ³⁴ Enjavi dates, background presided over by Fuat Köprülü
- ³⁵ '*ganjinayi farhange mardom*', 1973-1977. A large archive was amassed in this way.
- ³⁶ The possibility of folklore being 'superstition' had also exercised the writers of *Jîn* (Çakir 2001:20).
- ³⁷ Omidsalar 2006: 425.
- ³⁸ Ahmadzadeh and Stansfield 2010: 22-26.
- ³⁹ Çakir 2011: 22.
- ⁴⁰ See Tejel 2006 for details.
- ⁴¹ *L'Âme des Kurdes à la lumière de leur folklore*, Cahiers de l'Est, Paris.
- ⁴² Davis 2005: 38.
- ⁴³ Davis 2005: 21
- ⁴⁴ Davis 2005: 21.
- ⁴⁵ Davis 2005: 311 n.4.
- ⁴⁶ For example, Dr. Shukriya Rasul and the literary scholar Dr. Maruf Khaznadar.
- ⁴⁷ *Hawar* and other early nationalist productions remained little known in Turkey at least until the 1960s.
- ⁴⁸ (Öztürkmen 1992: 187-9).
- ⁴⁹ The content reflected the politics of the editorial board (Çakir 2011: 24). See Çakir 2011: 27 n.79 for *Azadî*, a Marxist magazine produced in 1979.
- ⁵⁰ Çakir 2011: 12.
- ⁵¹ Saritaş 2010: 110.
- ⁵² See Kanakis 2013 for details of this cultural diglossia.
- ⁵³ Saritaş 2010: 107.
- ⁵⁴ Güneş 2012: 113.
- ⁵⁵ (Scalbert-Yücel 2009: 22-25).
- ⁵⁶ Güneş 2012: 113.
- ⁵⁷ See Watts 2010: 157-158. on Newroz in Diyarbakir.

- ⁵⁸ See Scalbert-Yücel 2009.
- ⁵⁹ See: Yeğen 1999; Aykan 2013.
- ⁶⁰ For these events, see McDowall 1997: 368-396.
- ⁶¹ See Sheyholislami 2011 for a full account.
- ⁶² Morad, personal communication from a PhD thesis in preparation, 2015.
- ⁶³ (especially the 'Rojava cantons' in Syria, Kurdish organisations in the diaspora, and PJAK's constituency in Iran)
- ⁶⁴ Saritaş 2010: 65. (*ibid*: 66).
- ⁶⁵ Saritaş 2010: 106.
- ⁶⁶ See Saritaş 2010: 111 and Kanakis 2013 for young people who have learned 'Kurdish culture' from the movement. See also John Hutchinson on cultural nationalism (1994: 128).
- ⁶⁷ 2014: 66-67.
- ⁶⁸ Although grateful for their newfound public respect, not all *dengbêj* are happy to be co-opted into the Kurdish cause. (Hamelink 2014: 165-6).
- ⁶⁹ Jaba's publication of 1860 and his manuscript collection, now held at the State Library in St Petersburg, reflect his collaboration with the scholar Mehmud Bayazidi.
- ⁷⁰ E.g. Morad on Iraqi Kurdistan (PhD thesis in preparation).
- ⁷¹ 2014: 72.
- ⁷² Hamelink 2014.
- ⁷³ 2008: 15-16.
- ⁷⁴ Based on my own experience (cf. Allison 2001: 38).
- ⁷⁵ Paredes' call to a more engaged folkloristics was taken up by very few and he was later erased from folklore genealogies (Briggs 2008: 98).
- ⁷⁶ For a sensitive discussion see Mills 2012.
- ⁷⁷ Briggs 2008: 91-96.
- ⁷⁸ Baumann and Briggs' notion of entextualisation enables the study of both literary and folkloric discourse by collapsing the distinction between 'oral' versus 'literary'. For an interrogation of Benedict Anderson's work see Allison 2013.
- ⁷⁹ Briggs 2008: 101.
- ⁸⁰ Bauman 2008: 30 Barber 2007: 22.
- ⁸¹ A pseudonym.
- ⁸² For details surrounding the events of the Treaty of Algiers see McDowall 1997: 337-340.
- ⁸³ The BBC documentary 'Saddam's Road to Hell' (2007, available on YouTube) dates the massacre to August 1993.
- ⁸⁴ This may mean that it was easy for the state to imprison the men, or in the context of the current demand, that it would be easy to take the women to the prisons now.
- ⁸⁵ The polyvalent word *xerîbî* denotes strangeness, bereft-ness, estrangement and exile. Amy de la Bretèque unfailingly translates this as 'exile'; my translation varies with context.
- ⁸⁶ Amy de la Bretèque cites Alexandra Pillen's observation that Kurmanji-speaking women from Turkey use a limited vocal range when they describe traumatic experiences (oral presentation, 2012, cited in Amy de la Bretèque 2013: 112).
- ⁸⁷ The terminology varies – see Hamelink 2014: 72.
- ⁸⁸ Amy de la Bretèque 2013: 107-112.
- ⁸⁹ See King 2008 for a discussion of *namûs*.
- ⁹⁰ For Anfal widows' discourse see Mlodoch 2012.
- ⁹¹ 2013: 104-7.
- ⁹² 2008: 31.
- ⁹³ Amy de la Bretèque's description of Yezidi funeral songs in Armenia includes songs performed by men and accompanied by the *duduk*, a double-reed wind instrument regarded as ancient and folkloric. Men and women considered the entire repertoire an important part of Yezidi duties of honouring the dead (2012: 88-97).
- ⁹⁴ Interview, Qush Tepe, 27 July 1992.
- ⁹⁵ 1997: 84.
- ⁹⁶ Fassin and Rechtman 2009.
- ⁹⁷ Fischer-Tahir 2009.
- ⁹⁸ A campaign of disappearances and deportations by the Ba'ath government against the Kurds. MacDowall 1997: 357-360 has details.
- ⁹⁹ See BBC documentary 'Saddam's Road to Hell' available on YouTube.
- ¹⁰⁰ See Mlodoch 2012.
- ¹⁰¹ Watts 2012.

¹⁰² The women occupied an 'unspeakable and unhearable...zone' (1997:88).