

Dengbêjs on borderlands: Borders and the state as seen through the eyes of Kurdish singer-poets[‡]

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Abstract

This article investigates how the Kurdish home, borders and the state are depicted in one of the most important Kurdish cultural expressions in Turkey until 1980: the dengbêj art. The recital songs of the dengbêjs form a fascinating source to investigate how Kurds experienced life on the margins of the (nation-)state. We argue that the songs demonstrate that many Kurds perceived the political geography of the state they officially belonged to as foreign and not as a legitimate part of Kurdish socio-political reality. The Kurdish political geography created in the songs exists in small-scale local structures and alliances, and there is mostly no reference to a common Kurdish cause. Borders are presented as foreign interference in the Kurdish landscape. In the conclusion we suggest that Kurdish fragmented political structure should be understood as a deliberate means to avoid being incorporated in a state structure. This speaks against a (self-)Orientalist interpretation of Kurdish history that defines a lack of Kurdish unity as primitive.

Keywords: Verbal art; self-orientalism; modernity; nationalism; politics.

Dengbêj li ser sînoran: Dîtina sînor û dewletê bi çavên dengbêjan

Ev gotar vedikolê bê welatê Kurdan, sînor û dewlet çawan hatine şayesandin di yek ji girîngtirîn derbirinên çanda Kurdî da li Tirkîyeyê, heta 1980yê: anku dengbêjiyê. Kilamên resital ên dengbêjan çavkaniyekê hijmetkar pêk dihinin bo vekolîna serboriyên Kurdan ku mane li qeraxên neteweyî-dewletan. Em angaşt dikin ku, herçend Kurd bi xwe bi rengê fermî parçeyek ji erdnîgara fermî ne, kilam destnîşan dikin ku gelek Kurd vê erdnîgara siyasî ya dewletê wekî diyardeyekî biyanî dibinin, ne ku wekî parçeyek rewşa ji rastiya sosyo-polîtîk a Kurdîtiyê. Erdnîgara polîtîk ya Kurdîtiyê ku di kilaman da hatiye afirandin pile-biçûk e û, bi piranî bêtir dozeka Kurdî ya hevbeş, ji hevalbediyên deveri pêk hatiye. Di kilaman da sînor wekî destwerdanên biyanîyan li welatê Kurdan hatine berpeş kirin. Di dawiyê de em pêşniyar dikin ku a rast Kurd bi zanebûnê vê siyaseta parçebûyî meşandinê da ku xwe vebidîzin ji bişafîtinê di avahiya dewletê da. Ev nêrîn di derbarê dîroka Kurdan da li dijî şîroyeyên (oto)-oryantalîst e, çikû ew nebûna yekîtiya Kurdan wekî diyardeyekî prîmitîv dibinin.

کوردەوه گۆرانبێژی و شاعیری و روانگه له ولات و سنوور. سەر سنوور دەنگبێژانی

سالی تا ئورکیا له کوردی کولتوری چامسکی گرنگترین له یهکن له چون دهولت و سنوور مکان کوردان، ولاتی که دهکا لهوه باس وتاره نه م لهسەر کوردان ژبانی چۆنیی لهسەر لیکۆلینهوه نۆ پرن و چر سەر چاوهیهکی دهنگبێژ مکان گۆرانبێژکانی. دهنگبێژی هۆنهری: براون نیشان ۱۹۸۰ تۆرکیا به دهولتی فهرمییهی سیاسی جۆگرافیا نه م کورد مکان زۆرینهی که دهکمن لهوه باس گۆرانبێژکان که بلێن دهماوهی نه م. دهولتان سنووری ناو کوردی سیاسی جۆگرافیا. کوردی سیاسی کۆمهلاهی چوار چۆهه له پاسایی بهشێکی و مگ نهک دهکمن، سهیری بیانی ولاتیکی و مگو و مگوو سنوور مکان. پیناکرێ ناماژ هی کورد مسهلهی و کیشه ناوی به شتیکی تنانعت و هاوهه بێک چکۆله ناوچهی کومهلیک له گۆرانبێژکان راستهوخۆ کهر سههیهکی و مگوو دهیی کوردی دابهشبووی سیاسی چوار چۆهه کۆتاییشدا، له. دهگرێن سهیر کوردان خاکی سهر بیانی دهستدرێژی که کورد میژووی سهر له تۆر بیانتالیسته. سلف باهری شیکردنهوهی به دژ نهوش. دهگرێ کوردی دهولتیکی سازبوونی به پیش که بکری سهیر دهکا بهر مند له کوردی بههگر تویی نهبوونی له باس

[‡] This article is a rewrite of a part of the first chapter of Hamelink's dissertation, *The Sung Home: Narrative, Morality, and the Kurdish Nation* (2014). It is based on twelve months of field research in 2007 and 2008. The first chapter, as well as this article, were prepared in cooperation with Barış whose father, Ahmedê Aqutê, is a dengbêj. Barış' interest in his father's kilams means that he has profound knowledge of their meaning and archaic language. The interpretation and translation of the kilams is a result of our shared interest and study.

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Introduction

“You should get to know these mountains.

*(..) Each of them is a shelter for a people
that does not own these mountains,
but has chosen to belong to them.”*

Selim Temo (2013: 1)

“Divide that ye be not ruled.”

Ernest Gellner (Quoted in Scott 2009: 209)

The dengbêjs¹ are singer-poets who used to perform at village gatherings and weddings.² It is a secular oral tradition that almost vanished from Kurdish society in Turkey after 1980, but was revived during the 2000s.³ The art of the dengbêjs is in the first place an art of the imagination that transports one to another dimension. Together or alone, singing one *kilam* (recital song)⁴ after the other, the dengbêjs create a world that calls up and speaks of individual and social living experiences. It is a world in which the geographic location of one’s own living environment forms the central stage, and in which regions outside of this geography are presented as foreign. The kilams create a home, a place of belonging that is contrasted with a *xerîbî*, a foreign place.⁵ They also

¹ The word dengbêj can be translated as “master of the voice”, *deng* meaning voice, *bêj* from the verb “to say”.

² This section is based on Hamelink’s field research, most of which took place in 2007-8. She conducted lengthy interviews with fifty-seven Kurdish singers, most of them in Turkey and several in Germany and France. Of these singers, forty-two were regarded as dengbêjs by the larger public. The others were Alevi aşîks and other types of performers (such as a dervîş and singers of popular Kurdish music groups). She also interviewed Kurdish authors and journalists who wrote about the dengbêjs and used their books as secondary sources (for example Parlnt, 2006; Kevirbirî, 2005; Kızılkaya, 2000), she interviewed program makers at two Kurdish TV channels, and people who were active in promoting the dengbêj art and in setting up new performance opportunities for them. Hamelink followed the Dengbêj Houses (*Mala Dengbêja*) in Diyarbakır and Van by visiting each of them regularly during her research period, and by attending their performances and activities for many days a time on each visit.

³ Based on Hamelink’s interviews. See also Scalbert Yücel (2009: 16) “Like many of interviewees, however, this dengbêj had simply stopped singing after 1980. Collecting and recording were also much more difficult after 1980.”

⁴ Among Yezidis in Armenia, Amy de la Breteque (2012) found that kilam is not defined as music, but as melodised speech. In the context of Kurds in Turkey, Kurdish musicians often refer to kilams as the source and inspiration of their music and Kurdish music generally. Also, singers such as Delîl Dîlanar and Rojda have made modern interpretations of dengbêj kilams and mixed their own voices with old dengbêj recordings. Since Kurdish musicians have interpreted dengbêj kilams as music, we follow them in that and understand the kilam as a recital song.

⁵ The “foreign” in this context can be a place outside one’s immediate environment where one does not know the people. Amy de la Breteque also refers to the concept of *xerîbî* as not necessarily geographic: it “shapes not a geographic space but rather an affective one, clearly dividing the world into two kinds of places - those of the household/village and those of exile” (2012: 138).

sketch a world of village life, local lords, farmers, shepherds, rebellions and warfare that recalls and re-enacts a Kurdish past.⁶

In this article we investigate how the home and the foreign are defined in dengbêj kilams of our corpus. Through the examples that follow, we suggest that the kilams create a Kurdish life world, but that most of them do not yet articulate a nationalist ideology. This can also be concluded from the attitude of political activists; the many songs about local tribal battles made the dengbêj art⁷ unfashionable for some time. The dengbêjs were seen as connected to the old order of Kurdish aghas and feudalism that is defined as divisive rather than unifying. Political activists see aspects of traditional Kurdish society as backward and in need of modernisation. However, instead of defining the fragmented structure of Kurdish politics as primitive and primordialist, one could also explain this feature as an important mechanism to deliberately avoid being incorporated into a central state structure.

Following Scott (2009), we suggest that the fact that the Kurds have no nation-state of their own cannot be explained by sheer failure on the part of Kurdish nobility, but that the element of deliberate choice to avoid and evade the state is also involved. Although this is not a mainstream understanding of freedom and independence in the era of nationalism, it is clearly a no less valuable line of thought. The Kurds did not only resist incorporation in state-structures when they were pressured to do so, they also prevented “states from springing up among them” (Scott, 2009: x) until the early twentieth century. Even though such an understanding of Kurdish history may seem unconventional, we believe that many scholars have already cleared the path towards this conclusion by pointing to the relatively late development of nationalism among the Kurds.⁸ Moreover, the dengbêj kilams occasion such analysis.

⁶ In the interviews and performances, dengbêjs made it clear that they see themselves as guardians of Kurdish history and culture, and as specialists on Kurdish life lived in villages and in the past through their embodied experiences. Also others who spoke about the meaning of the dengbêjs today explained their current position in such terms. Additionally, the kilams the dengbêjs sing show a preoccupation with the home and foreign through their topics and figures. Part of that can be found in the kilams discussed in this article. In her dissertation, Hamelink argues that the dengbêjs “perform tradition” in their performances and in the ways they present themselves, whereas many other people, such as political activists and TV program makers, attempt to make the dengbêjs “perform the nation” (Askew, 2002). These different views on the meaning of the dengbêj art today demonstrate some of the processes involved in Kurdish efforts to build “a distinct national culture” (Scalbert Yücel, 2009: 8).

⁷ In this paper we use the term dengbêj art to refer to the total practices carried out by Kurdish dengbêjs. Many Kurds today use the word *dengbêjî* to refer to this. We felt it is confusing for the non-Kurdish speaker to use the Kurdish term. Also, we did not want to use the word “tradition”, as this is part of the discourse on modernity and nationalism that we wish to deconstruct. The word “art” does not have such connotations.

⁸ Examples are numerous, but Özoğlu (2004) gives an elaborate argumentation for this. For example: “Surely, Kurdish nationalists in the twentieth century made many attempts to provide their cause with historical depth by rethinking and romanticising the nineteenth century Kurdish movements as nationalist. However (...) the cultural and militant activities of various Kurdish groups prior to the Great War were not nationalistic. Furthermore (...) Kurdish nationalism

Our primary concern is to emphasise the element of choice involved in Kurdish political activism that reflects a consistent tendency to keep the state at a distance. This tendency comes to the fore through the dengbêj songs of our corpus. Contrary to self-Orientalist arguments, we stress that the local or regional character of Kurdish politics, and their relatively late interest in forming a national unity, should not be seen as a failure on the part of Kurdish political activism, or as a lack of certain traits and qualities of Kurdish people. Rather, we explain this as a matter of choice, which, we believe, is reflected in the life world that we find in the dengbêj kilams. Our undertaking is thus not in the first place a study of Kurdish oral tradition, but is meant to investigate how ideas about politics, borders, and the state are articulated within the kilams. The corpus is limited to kilams that were sung during Hamelink's research in Turkey (see below).

Of course, we are aware of the limitations of the corpus and of kilams as a source. However, we do think that the kilams give us important insights into how Kurds perceived borders, the state, and political structures in Kurdistan. Below we elaborate on the time frame we speak about. Although kilams are always the product of a specific moment of composition and performance by individual dengbêjs, and thus mediated, they are also always directed to, and engaging with, an audience. This turns them, like all narratives, into sources that reflect the social context of the time in which they are composed and performed (Jackson, 2002; Finnegan, 1992). Kilams are on the one hand characterised by their fluidity: an oral performance is never the same as a previous one. On the other hand, the historical path that was taken to reach that moment of performance is also always present in the material that is presented while performing a certain kilam (Vansina, 1985, 1990).

We begin by discussing what we mean by self-Orientalism in the case of the Kurds, and why we think the dengbêj art can offer us a different understanding of Kurdish politics. We will discuss some characteristics of the kilams that help us understand them and suggest that in their performances dengbêjs draw an imaginary map of a Kurdish centred geography. Subsequently, we discuss four recurring figures that emerge in the kilams: the local leader, the fugitive, the rebel, and the traitor.⁹ Each figure provides an insight into the Kurdish internal political structure, and about the evolving relationship between the Kurds and the state. To conclude, we counter a (self-) Orientalist interpretation of Kurdish history and suggest an alternative understanding.

emerged as a response to the breakdown of the Ottoman state rather than contributed to it" (p.69).

⁹ These figures are chosen from a range of figures that Hamelink (2014) presents in her dissertation. It was outside of the scope of this article to include all of them here. She calls them figures because they are not isolated personalities but return frequently in the kilams, and have the ability to point to larger social developments that speak through them.

(Self-)Orientalism and the dengbêj art

During her research Hamelink found that since the late 1990s, and more strongly in the 2000s, the dengbêjs and their art became the subject of stories produced by political activists on Kurdish history, tradition, and modernity. These activists can be defined as people involved in and related to the Kurdish political movement.¹⁰ The narratives which they produced about the dengbêjs place their art in the context of a global path towards nationalism, modernity, and progress.¹¹ Within this thought, they understand dengbêj art as “tradition”, “oral”, and “heritage”, words that next to their positive connotation are also charged with ideas about backwardness and underdevelopment. In that sense, they relegated the dengbêj art “to the museum”, in Arif Dirlik’s words, since “it is the burden of the past in one form or another that marks a society as traditional, which impedes its ascent to modernity” (Dirlik, 2003: 277 and 1996: 100).

The political activists Hamelink spoke with often explicitly articulated concerns related to modernity and nationalism. For example, they felt that the dengbêjs have the task to contribute to a common Kurdish cause, to develop a nationalist mind-set, and to adapt their performances to current norms. The clearest example of this is that they expected the dengbêjs to refrain from singing kilams about internal tribal conflicts, as these were seen as divisive and as possibly harmful for Kurdish unity.¹² Here, in their attempt aimed at “resolving the tension between the past and the present”, we see that the modern Kurdish political activist is “informed by a Eurocentric teleology of modernity”; in which the dengbêj art and the values it represents “must inevitably be relegated to the past with the victory of modernity as represented by the modern nation” (Dirlik, 2003: 278). If the dengbêj art has “been resurrected once again” (Dirlik, 2003: 278), then, it is expected of the “resurrected” dengbêj art to adapt itself to new political conditions imposed by the on-going conflict between the state and the Kurdish political movement.¹³

¹⁰ We use the term Kurdish movement to refer to the shared goals of a number of different actors. Casier et al. (2011) use the term Kurdish movement to refer to the “pro-Kurdish” organisations including the PKK (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*), BDP (*Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi*), (or DTP (*Demokratik Toplum Partisi*) at the time of Hamelink’s research) and KCK (*Koma Civakên Kurdistan*). On the one hand, these actors have a variety of visions and political positions, ranging from violent action to electoral politics, but, on the other hand, they operate in some ways as a unified voice promoting and supporting Kurdish emancipation in Turkey, and, as such, have managed to “reinforce their presence” (Casier et al., 2011: 104). Watts also shows how since the 1990s pro-Kurdish actors have gained increasing access to government offices and have provided “new access to domestic and international audiences, and new symbolic resources” (2006: 126). She calls these actors “activists in office”.

¹¹ The Kurdish movement offered “an alternative, Kurdified set of national symbols to those of the Turkish state” (Watts, 2006: 132).

¹² As Hamelink (2014) shows in her doctoral dissertation, many dengbêjs incorporated such narratives in their self-definition, but often gave their own twist to it.

¹³ See Hamelink (2014) for more examples.

This approach towards the dengbêj art can be seen as a form of self-Orientalism, and as part of the larger modernity discourse that Scott (2009) tries to deconstruct. Orientalism refers to an intellectual discourse and a popular consciousness in which “non-European societies were characterized (...) not by what they had but by what they lacked—in other words, the lack of one or more of those characteristics that accounted for European development” (Dirlik, 1996: 100). The global economic, political and military dominance of the Euro-American nations translated itself into “an epistemology of power” (Dirlik, 1996: 99), which was defined and studied as Orientalism, following the seminal work of Edward Said, published with the same title in 1978.

In the late Ottoman period¹⁴ the Ottomans mobilised Orientalist thought by presenting the Arab provinces of the empire as in need of progress, civilisation and Ottomanisation. This can be defined as self-Orientalism.¹⁵ The Ottomans perceived the centre of the empire as “western”, progressive, well organised, urban and civilised, whereas they regarded the margins of the empire as “eastern”, lawless, rural, and inhabited by people living “in a state of nomadism and savagery” (Deringil, 2003: 311). Their self-definition was thus shaped by and created through the image of the uncivilised Other modelled after European Orientalist thought. Since the Empire was the object of Orientalist imaginations, and the late Ottomans and early republicans in Turkey adopted Western Orientalist models and performed for an “imagined Western audience” (Ahıska, 2003), one can clearly see the Orientalist legacy at work in the discursive space of Ottoman and Turkish political thought. The nationalist elite in Turkey took upon itself “the ‘white Turkish man’s burden’ in order to carry out a civilising mission on a supposedly backward and traditional Anatolian society” (Zeydanlıoğlu, 2008:158). A recent example of such self-Orientalist views in Turkey can be seen in the following quote by a prominent constitutional theorist in Turkey: “the Ottoman statesmen and intelligentsia recognized the European supremacy in every field of life, and the Turkish avocation of Europeanization or Westernization had already started” (Özbudun, 2009: 81).

Kurdish society and geography was presented by the Kemalist elite as the “East”, the backward, and the least civilised part of Turkey (Zeydanlıoğlu, 2008: 163-165). In her address to the parliament last year, a Turkish politician noted: “You cannot convince me that the Turkish nation (*Türk Ulusı*) and the

¹⁴ During the Tanzimat reforms starting in 1839, “much of what was synthesized into the Ottoman modernity project was the result of historical processes and trends which were taking place already in the eighteenth century” (Deringil, 2003: 316).

¹⁵ Dirlik explains this as follows: “While the occident/orient distinction, and orientalism as concept and practice, are of European origin, and the term orientalism has been used almost exclusively to describe the attitudes of Europeans toward Asian societies, I would like to suggest here that the usage needs to be extended to Asian views of Asia, to account for tendencies to self-orientalisation which would become an integral part of the history of orientalism. (Dirlik, 1996: 103-104).

Kurdish nationality (*Kürt milliyeti*) are equal".¹⁶ The supposed inequality seems to lie in the fact that the Turkish nation has a state of its own, in which sovereignty is exercised in the name of Turkish nation. In this context, the nation-state is perceived and presented as the marker of political maturity, which has its ground in Orientalist thought that regards nation-building as the peak of contemporary civilisation.

We suggest that this "epistemology of power" is internalised by the nationalist "elite" in Kurdistan of Turkey of which the Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karckerên Kurdistan, PKK*)¹⁷ is the most dominant player. PKK ideology is therefore important in this respect. Abdullah Öcalan¹⁸ depicts the Kurds as lacking certain qualities before the PKK was founded. For example, in a very recent article, Öcalan labels Kurdish political parties in Iraqi Kurdistan as "primitive" and "tribal".¹⁹ He argues that the Kurdish rebellions between 1806 and 1925 were designed by European powers to weaken, control and manage the Ottoman Empire and the Republic of Turkey. By doing so, he denies agency to Kurdish actors involved in these rebellions, and detects in them a lack of knowledge and national consciousness. In another article, he regards the PKK as the means to transform the Kurds into a modernised Kurdish society.²⁰ As stated above, many activists referred to this line of thought in interviews with Hamelink. Likewise, some dengbêjs have stated that they were criticised or at least not welcomed by political activists because of their alleged lack of nationalist awareness, prior to the broadcast of Kurdish TV in 1995. In the early 1990s, Bariş witnessed more than once how Kurdish political activists scolded minibus drivers for playing the records of dengbêjs, because the kilams spoke of internal battle. The rationale was that these kilams were damaging national unity. Once, Hamelink was working with a group of dengbêjs in the Dengbêj House in Diyarbakır and recorded their performance. When she asked for songs about tribes the reaction was clear: they refused to sing them. One of the dengbêjs of the House gave a lengthy explanation of their refusal, which was met with agreement by the other dengbêjs. He said among others:

¹⁶ Birgül Ayman Güler, an MP of the People's Republican Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, CHP*) and a former professor of politics at Ankara University. 2013, 24 January. *Today's Zaman*.

¹⁷ The PKK was officially founded in 1978. Guerilla warfare began in 1984.

¹⁸ Öcalan is the imprisoned leader of the PKK who serves a life sentence on the Imrali island in Turkey.

¹⁹ 2014, 29 January. Kurdish-Arab relations and the laboratory of the Middle East. *Yeni Özgür Politika*.

²⁰ "I have never doubted that the PKK is the contemporary Kurdish rebirth. Founding a party, in that period, was a matter of honour. There were no means available to pose an immediate solution. However, a significant lack of honour was pressing itself at every stage. Almost wherever I looked I sensed ignominy. It seemed like everything was being betrayed. It was certain that something should be done! It was not just the foundation of the party in a narrow sense; it was the foundation of a new way of life". 2013, 27 November. PKK çağdaş Kürt miladının doğuşudur. *Yeni Özgür Politika*.

Our kilams from the past, about the tribes that fought with each other, now show that there was grave ignorance (gelek nezanî hebû). Why? Because they oppressed, you know, their friends, their fellow men, they did bad things to their neighbouring tribes (zordestîyê hevalên xwe kiriye, li merwêya xwe kiriye, li aşîrên keleka xwe kiriye), to become stronger and become the sovereigns of their region. The struggle for power should have been abandoned, but they could not abandon it. Therefore, you must not show any interest in them. (Interview with dengbêj Xelîl, Diyarbakır, 2008).

This statement reveals how some dengbêjs had internalised PKK nationalist discourse about their kilams. As Gunes (2012) and Aydın (2005) emphasise, the PKK had a socialist agenda since it adopted the leftist legacy of earlier Kurdish and Turkish Marxist political movements. According to Gunes (2012: 107), PKK's emergence coincided with socio-economic developments of the 1960s and 1970s in Turkey and Kurdistan, a period in which "the influence of the feudal classes and the 'grip' of traditional identities and values" were in decline. Thus, it is not surprising that the PKK did not only challenge Turkey's political system in general, but it also took a critical stance against Kurdish landlords, political figures, religious leaders and petit sovereigns, and all cultural elements and social values that were considered to be part of that world. This is why the PKK initially had no interest in the dengbêj art. Traditional and feudal cultural elements were considered to be obstacles for national unity and liberation. Scalbert-Yucel (2009: 9) also emphasises that "at that time, the dengbêjs did not appear at all a priority for the PKK, which was a socialist party that fought against feudalism, of which dengbêj were considered to be fully part. Thus, dengbêjs fell into oblivion for a while. (...) the dengbêj never had high visibility among the cultural activities of the Kurdish movement until recently."

To highlight a further point on the attitude of the PKK until the mid-1990s, it is worth emphasising that the PKK "had a share in marginalizing dengbêjî" (Scalbert-Yucel, 2009: 8). For example, a dengbêj who originates from Erzurum stated:

In 1980 happened two things: there was a coup, and the Kurdish movement came into being. And now the dengbêj art was something a bit opposite to the Kurdish freedom movement. The reality is that dengbêjs are connected to feudalism. They sang for the landlord, for the sheikh, and they sang what the public liked. And this really didn't match with the freedom movement. [The latter] regarded it a bit negatively. They didn't do anything but they judged it negatively. And if the public doesn't want to listen, where will the dengbêjs sing? (Interview with dengbêj Osman, Istanbul, 2007).

Another indication for this attitude towards the dengbêjs was that political activists told Hamelink they were initially not interested in the dengbêj art. For example, Zana Ciwan, a singer born in 1955 who was a member of *Koma Berxwedan*, a popular music group that was founded in Europe by the PKK and sang PKK songs (Gunes, 2012), indicates clearly in his interview how it

was only much later in his musical career that he became interested in the dengbêj art. From that point on he was proactive in promoting the dengbêj art, by making television programs about them and by singing in their style. The fact that such an artist, who was involved in cultural activism for many years, only began to pay attention to the dengbêj art in the 1990s, shows that traditional music had not been high on the agenda for political activists.

During Hamelink's research, political activists articulated the view that the dengbêjs had not developed the right attitude and had made "wrong" choices. For example, one of the activists involved in setting up and organising the Dengbêj House in Diyarbakır said it was due to oppression that the dengbêjs stopped singing after 1980, however, in his opinion, they would have continued if they had possessed a different ideology:

They did not have nationalist thoughts. But if they would have been under nationalist influence they would have gathered in that time and they would have started recording by themselves.²¹ (Interview with Zeki Kalan, Diyarbakır, 2008).

Scalbert-Yücel also noticed that "in the 1990s, people interested in folkloric and oral literature were considered 'reactionary' (*gerici*)" (Scalbert-Yücel, 2009: 10).

Although the PKK had established cultural institutions and founded music bands first in Europe and then in Istanbul and Diyarbakır, no reference was made to and no interest was shown in the dengbêj art. We think that this is testimony to the reluctance of the PKK to engage in any activity that might be perceived harmful to its socialist world-view and its revolutionary rhetoric. The main objective of these musical and artistic activities was to build "a new culture (...) on the ground of the guerrilla struggle" (Scalbert-Yücel, 2009: 9). Here it is imperative to mention that this new culture was to be built through a reinvention and revival of Kurdish culture, in which "[M]usic (...) served as a medium through which the PKK's struggle was represented. In fact, music served as important medium for the construction, dissemination and narration of the PKK's contemporary myth that played a key role in the sedimentation of the PKK's national liberation discourse in practice and its embodiment as the Kurds' national struggle" (Gunes, 2012: 112).

This political and cultural distance began to narrow-down shortly before the fifth congress of the PKK, convened in 1995, in which the organisation "detached" itself, from its socialist agenda and adapted a more nationalist character (Aydın, 2005: 103). Only when the PKK gained a substantial support among the Kurds in Turkey and saw no harm in referring to nationalist elements and symbols did it embrace Kurdish cultural elements and perceived no danger in opening up its institutions to "traditional" forms of cultural per-

²¹ "Na, ramana wan netewî nebûn (...) lê eger bi ramanekî netewî bandawî ev çax tişt berhev bikirane, wan bi xwe tomar bikirane!"

formance.²² Interest in the dengbêj art returned in the early 1990s when the Kurdish movement started validating Kurdish traditions as Kurdish “heritage” that were regarded as demonstrating the “authenticity” of the Kurds as a people. From that time, dengbêj kilams started to be collected and recorded, even though this was still only a minor development. With the start of TV broadcasting in Kurdish from Europe, dengbêj art attracted further attention.

During the period Hamelink conducted her research, the dengbêj art also became one of the means through which the Kurdish movement claimed increasing space in Turkey’s public life. The foundation of the Dengbêj House in Diyarbakır is a clear example of the growing visibility of Kurdish culture and language performed and displayed in Diyarbakır’s city centre. The opening of the House in May 2007 attracted much attention from political actors. The mayor Osman Baydemir held the opening speech:

*In every culture, in every region, there are some valuable things that become the reason for a culture and a language to live on, that become the reason for progress of the people. One of those are, in our region, the dengbêjs, for [the progress of] our culture and language. Indeed, we are very much indebted to the dengbêjs who have prevented from dying out this language I am now speaking, this language that today still exists.*²³ (Osman Baydemir, May 2007).

This is one of the many examples of the revival of interest in the dengbêj art in the 2000s. The explanations above show how political activists rediscovered the dengbêj art, but could only accept such rediscovery by placing it in a self-Orientalist framework. Dengbêjs were encouraged to act as nationalist actors, and to purify their art from tribal elements. That is why they did not want to sing such kilams during Hamelink’s research, and why kilams about internal warfare continued to be seen as problematic.

In short, the self-Orientalist views internalised in Kurdish political thought define Kurdish political structures before the modern nationalist movement as primitive, primordial and backward. Precisely because the kilams were and still are a topic of debate due to their assumed “tribal” and “divisive” character, we regard them as an important source of differing views on Kurdish politics. Instead of following the self-Orientalist explanations of political activists as well as scholars in Kurdish studies,²⁴ we suggest that this perception could be

²² This was a reaction to the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War.

²³ “Di her çandê da, di her kulturê da, di her herêmê da, hinek tiştên giranbûba bene, ku dibin sêdem jibona jiyana çandê û jiyana zîmên, û dibin sêdema pêşketina gela. Yek ji wan jî, li berema min, jibona çanda min, jibona zîmanê min, dengbêj in, û dengbêjî. Bi rastî, em gelekî dengdar in ji dengbêjan, ku bi rastî wunnebiina, dibik ev zîmanek niha ez pê biaxivim, ev zîmana îro nîm mana”.

²⁴ For example, McDowall (1996: 184): the Turkish state “seriously underestimated the durability of the primordial ties that bound groups of Kurds together.” White (2000: 84): “In so far as they were tribesmen acting completely along traditional (that is, pre-modern) lines, they were acting as the blind instruments of political modernization. It would not seem an exaggeration to describe them as ‘primitive rebels.’” Van Bruinessen (1992: 316): “Kurdish nationalism and, to some extent, radical and populist varieties of socialism had become the dominant discourse

deconstructed by presenting the fragmentation of Kurdish politics until the early 1920s as a different, rather than primitive, understanding of politics and society. In the next section we turn to the primary material for our article: the kilams.

Time, place and perspective presented in the kilams

Central to the performance of a kilam is that each kilam tells a (hi)story; most kilams are understood as real events that happened in either a near or distant past. The dengbêjs emphasised that they learned most of their kilams from one or several masters, who also again learned their repertoire from others. They often had some kilams of their own creation, but usually they did not give these prominence. Kurdish experts Hamelink spoke with regarded the dengbêj art as anonymous and derived from this a sense of collective Kurdish ownership. In 2007, the public places where dengbêjs had only recently started performing, such as the Dengbêj Houses, festivals, and on Kurdish television, the majority of kilams also belonged to this category. As we chose to study the dengbêj art in its present and most public form, we focus on the collectively shared songs and stories of dengbêjs, rather than on individual compositions of a more recent date.²⁵ This article is mostly based on a hundred and twenty kilams from Hamelink's recordings²⁶ and three anthologies written by Kurdish folklore collectors (Özalp, 2011; Kevirbirî, 2001; Aras, 1996). The kilams presented in this article are not given in full. The full versions can be found in Hamelink's dissertation (Hamelink, 2014).

The majority of these kilams are about a specific time and character. Many of the events they speak of can be situated in the late nineteenth and early

among the Kurds; many, moreover, explicitly and sincerely denounced narrow tribal loyalties. This did not mean, of course, the end of primordial loyalties. Nationalism and socialism, rather, came to be used to lend additional legitimacy to traditional authority."

²⁵ With "collectively shared" we refer to the body of kilams that dengbêjs learned from their masters and from each other. During Hamelink's research the dengbêjs mainly sang such kilams rather than their own compositions.

²⁶ Since Hamelink was interested in getting an overview of the topics of the kilams, Zeki Aydın listened to her recordings and wrote Kurdish summaries of the kilams. Aydın has a good knowledge of dengbêj kilams, is fluent in Kurdish, and worked for a local Kurdish television channel as a translator at the time. The summaries he wrote were between 150 and 300 words, sometimes longer. As it would have been impossible to transcribe and translate all the kilams one by one, the summaries supplied Hamelink with a general idea of song topics. For full song transcriptions, she used the anthologies of Özalp and Kevirbirî. They consist of kilams collected from dengbêjs who were also part of Hamelink's research and could therefore also be used as a source of the kilams dengbêjs sing today. If there were kilams within Hamelink's own recordings of which a different version could be found in these anthologies, we used the transcription from the anthologies and made our English translation. In other cases, we transcribed the recorded kilams ourselves. The main aim of this undertaking was to get an idea of what contemporary dengbêjs sing about. Additionally, we used Aras (1996). Although his research is from a much earlier period, Evdalê Zeynikê kilams are such an important part of the dengbêj art today that we found his book to be an indispensable source of information, and thus included it in our corpus.

twentieth century, and the characters that are described in the kilams are often Sunni Kurdish men and women who lived in the Kurdish region that is encompassed within modern-day Turkey. The historical context is the downfall of the Ottoman Empire and the foundation of the Republic of Turkey. Placed in this specific timing, the kilams give shape to ideas about Kurdishness, identity and belonging. Although the kilams tell the adventures of both elite and commoners, most of the kilams are sung as if from the viewpoint of commoners who comment on the events they witness in their near environment. The dengbêjs divided the kilams into *kilamên şer* (war songs) and *kilamên dilika/kilamên evîni* (love songs). Terminology and the meaning of terms vary from region to region, but has become more standardised in recent years due to media attention on this topic.²⁷ Following Yüksel (2011), we divide the *kilamên şer* into battle songs (about internal battles) and rebel songs (about clashes with the state).²⁸

Although the kilams offer the mediated views of a dengbêj on a certain event, and were reproduced and changed in the process of transmission, there are many reasons to assume that parts of the storylines, topics and symbols date from past times. Although idealised, the kilams speak of a past social and political world. They speak of caravans, horse riders, tribal alliances and other features that no longer exist today. In the kilams where a specific time is given or can be reconstructed, this timing falls primarily between roughly 1850 and 1930 for our selection of kilams, with some exceptions. The historical events that receive most importance are internal battles taking place during this time period, and the rebellions against the Turkish government between 1920 and 1930. Most dengbêjs learned the kilams from their masters, composing only a few themselves, thus most kilams date back at least one or two generations. The political views that speak from the kilams do not have immediate reflection in today's political climate, but seem rather to refer to past moral narratives. There are old recordings of famous dengbêjs like Şakiro, Karapetê Xaço, Reso and Huseyno. Many dengbêjs made use of these recordings to enhance their knowledge, or to learn kilams by heart. The recordings were copied and distributed individually, through radio stations, and nowadays through television and the internet. The dengbêjs thus have direct access to at least

²⁷ For example, Allison (2001) found the word *stran* as the most common term. From her description it seems that the term *stran* among the Yezidi in Iraq is comparable to the term *kilam* in Turkish Kurdistan. She mentions that “in much of Turkish and Syrian Kurdistan these *stran* are known as *lawiq/k*”. Although we occasionally heard the term *lawiq*, nowadays *kilam* is much more commonly used.

²⁸ Allison (2001) divided the topics of songs among Yezidi oral performers in Iraq into three main categories: battle, love and death. Although much of what Allison writes is also valid for the dengbêjs in Turkish Kurdistan, the category of death did not precisely fit the kilams we investigated. Death is a theme that arises in both love and battle songs, and when Hamelink asked the dengbêjs if a certain song was a “kilama sine”, a song of mourning, they replied that it was a love or battle song in which someone had died, and not a song of mourning. This seems to be connected to the fact that songs of mourning are regarded as the sole domain of women in Turkish Kurdistan.

some older recordings. This does not mean that they uncritically adopt kilams from others. They are selective in what they sing, and leave out certain kilams that are too much in contradiction with current views.

A Kurdish geography: place names and landscape marks

The kilams as a collective create a Kurdish landscape by drawing an imaginary map of the local geography, in which the Kurdish local environment occupies centre stage. Through the continuous mentioning of place names and physical marks in the landscape during a performance, the dengbêjs draw a map of the Kurdish region. On hearing a kilam with all its details, past listeners²⁹ would have been able to follow the journey in their imagination. An example is the below mentioned kilam *Silêmanê Mistê*, that is rich in landscape descriptions. The roads the protagonists take, the landscape, and the villages they pass, are described in detail. This is how the kilams created a map of the local environment that may have functioned as reference points for listeners, as the kilams could make one aware of the larger picture of one's own living environment. It also shows that the local environment was perceived as a reality of its own, without immediate reference to the states and larger political systems it belonged to.

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In the selected kilams from Hamelink's recordings, we encountered 55 kilams with place names. Most of them are situated in Turkish Kurdistan, and only a few outside of this region. As we do not have full transcriptions of these kilams, there are likely to be more place names mentioned than we counted, therefore we also examined the first 84 kilams of the *Antolojiya Dengbêjan* (2011). We have listed them in the table below. The numbers after the place names refer to the total number of times they occurred. The place names in these kilams demonstrate that the majority are about Kurdistan in Turkey with Diyarbakır, Muş, and the Serhat region³⁰ at its centre. From the total of 180 times that a place name was mentioned, 36 times these were places outside that region. From these 36 times, 17 times they were places in Syria, and 8 times places in Turkey. The foreign places are usually mentioned in the kilams to refer to something the place symbolises (for example the prison of Bursa, the oranges of Dört Yol). Iran and Syria are often mentioned as possible places to escape to. Ankara is mentioned twice and Istanbul just once.

It seems justified to conclude from our sample that the imaginary landscape of the kilams focuses on the Kurdish socio-political experience, and that

²⁹ We refer here to the time before the 1980s when the social structure of villages was still vibrant in Turkish Kurdistan, when the dengbêjs still played an important role for people living in villages, and when it was more difficult to travel to other regions. After this period the dengbêjs lost much of their past importance. Current listeners often lack knowledge of the kilams, the archaic language, and the Kurdish place names, to be able to immediately understand them. Only elderly listeners who are used to the kilams will be able to have a similar experience.

³⁰ Welatê Serhedê is used in Kurdish to refer to the highlands around Muş, Van and Agirî. This geographical term is not familiar to Turkish speakers.

the Ottoman Empire and Turkey do not appear as important places in the kilams. This Kurdish geography does not take the shape of a larger Kurdistan as a socio-political entity, but of smaller local structures that must have resonated with the dengbêjs' and their audiences' everyday reality.

Table 1. Place names mentioned in 84 kilams

Aydin	Hama	Ridwana river
Besra 2 (Basra)	Hamûdê 3 (Amuda)	Şam 4 (Damascus)
Batman	Hauran	Sarusiya
Bedlîs (Bitlis) 2	Hedhedik	Şengal mntns 4
Bêkende mountain	Heka (Hakkari?)	Şerefdin 4
Beirut 2	Heleb 5 (Aleppo)	Serhed 8
Beytulşebab	Hezro (Hazro)	Sêrt 2 (Siirt)
Bexdad (Baghdad)	Iran	Şinoza
Bilêder	Kayseri	Şipan
Bingol 6	Kevir	Swereğ 2 (Siverek)
Bîreka Qîrê	Kilîskende	Stembol (Istanbul)
Bişêrî	Kolê village	Sûriye/Binxetê 3
Botan 3	Kop	Şûşan
Bulanix 2 (Bulanik)	Kosedax 2	Tersus (Tarsus)
Bursa	Licê	Tetwan (Tatvan)
Cizîra 3 (Cizire)	Medina	Tirkiye 2 (Turkey)
Dêrezorê	Meka	Tûtax (Tutak)
Dêrik 3	Melazgir 5	Qaf mountain
Diyarbekir 14	Meletiyê (Malatya)	Qamûşla (Qamishli)
Dortyol	Meleto	Qaranliq
Enqera 2 (Ankara)	Memediyan river	Qazgol
Entab (Antep)	Meraş (Maraş)	Qerejdax 3(Karacadag)
Erdîş (Erciş)	Mêrdîn 7 (Mardin)	Qerekilise(Karakilise)
Erzirom 3 (Erzurum)	Meteranî	Qers (Kars) 2
Farqîn 2 (Silvan)	Midyad	Qubin (Beşiri)
Firat river 2	Mîrezilya	Wan 2 (Van)
Gire Xane	Mosul	Xinis (Hinis)
Girîdax 2	Murade rivier 2	Xozan
Goksu	Muş 11	Xuruc village
Gola Xelîl	Nardizî	Yemen

The figure of the local leader

In many kilams the local leader³¹ is the main protagonist. Surmeli Mamed Paşa, Bişarê Çeto, Cemilê Çeto, Silêmanê Mistê, Memê Emê, Filîto Quto,

³¹ The figure of the “local leader” is based on the following songs: From Hamelink’s recordings: *Kuştina Mihemedo bavê Meys* and *Elhîyê bavê Şêxmus* by İbrahimê Pirikê (Diyarbakır, May 2007, nr.45 and nr.27), *Haso Axo Mala Nasir* by Ahmedê Aqutê (Istanbul, April 2007, nr.5), *Şerê bersê mala Têjo û Siloyê Sedikê* by Üsivê Farê (Diyarbakır, May 2007, nr.44), *Kilama Xezalê* by Memik Ganidağlı (Pazarçık, May 2007, nr.60), *Denrêşê Evdî* by dengbêj Bedir (Van, July 2008, nr.192), *Şêx Tabir efendî* by Apê Silhedin (Van, July 2008, nr.195), *Mihemedê birayê Gulnazê* by dengbêj Bedir (Van, July 2008, nr.197), *Silêmanê Mistê* by dengbêj Xalitê Xerzê (Diyarbakır, June 2007, nr.109), From Kevirbirî 2001: *Filîlê Quto* (p.57), *Emê Gozê* (p.23), *Evdilê Birabîm* (p.47), *Bişarê Çeto* (p.85), by Salihê Qûbînî. From Aras 1996: *Lo miro* (p.55), *Minê li bajra nexşê nexşivanê* (p.77), *Wey Xozanê* (p.92), *Evla Begê mîrê zîrav* (p.104). From Yüksel 2011, *Îskano* by Reso (p.134).

Ferzende Beg, Eliyê Ûnis are all legendary heroic leaders about whom a variety of kilams exist. The leader appears in the kilams as someone remarkably close to his people and he is both praised and criticised. Praise is given regarding the battles in which he took part and the way he courageously fought with a host of enemies. The battles about which the dengbêjs sing broke out for a variety of reasons. Many kilams relate clashes between tribes, clans and families. Others are about clashes or the collaboration of tribes and individuals with the Ottoman or Turkish governments. In our selected kilams the names of the heroes are of people who lived in a relatively recent past, often in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Battle songs are characterised by the many detailed names of people and places which are often part of stock elements and repeated frequently so that they cannot easily be forgotten. The dengbêjs emphasise the accuracy of the kilams and of the people they sing about. As the figures of these kilams lived relatively recently they can sometimes be verified by historical sources such as written reports, eyewitnesses, or people who had heard about them from eyewitnesses.³² Tribal enmities and battles are presented as an accepted part of social life, even if criticised for failures and unwise choices. Battle songs sketch a socio-political world in which local and small-scale connections occupy central stage and overshadow larger political concerns.

In the kilam *Silêmanê Mistê*, a young hero from the House of Dîbo of the Elikan tribe was killed after he looted the farms of the House of Faro of the Pencînaran tribe. The kilam takes place in the early decades of the twentieth century³³ in the Xerzan region around Batman. Silêman's mother Xatê is the one who mourns his death in the kilam and sings about the battle and its fatal outcome. She relates how Silêmanê Mistê dresses and arms for the battle, he is well-prepared. He and his three companions aim to attack a neighbouring tribe. The kilam describes the road these four men take from their houses to the hills in the Kolik Mountain. In the hills the young men sit down to discuss what to do and how the booty will be divided. When they have outlined their plans, they descend to the plain of Xerzan and go to nineteen farms that belong to the Pencînaran tribe:

Şênvr û mişêvîreteka giran danîn³⁴

Sê heb şade şûtên Silêmanê Mistê

Bavê Xelîl, Gula mala Dîbo bene

xve berdaye Dêsta Xerzan

Peşîya terş û talanê Xatimîyan

Peşîya terş û talanê Mala Keran

Peşîya terş û talanê Mala Faro

Ga û gamêşê nozde cotan ji Gola Modê

Then they engaged in tough bargains and discussions

The three hot-shot gunmen of Silêmanê Mistê

Father of Xelîl, Rose of the House of Dîbo

They descended to the Plain of Xerzan

And they looted the Xatimîs

They looted the House of Keran

They looted the House of Faro

Oxes and bulls of nineteen farms of the Lake Modê

³² Kevirbirî (2001) and Aras (1996) for example worked on the historical verification of some kilams.

³³ This event should have taken place before 1920. In that year Cemîlê Çeto was arrested together with his four sons. (Tansel, 1991: p.142)

³⁴ From Kevirbirî (2001: 63-67).

*Ji xata diya xwe re lawo
vê sibê diyarî anînê*

*And they presented the booty, oh son,
This morning to Xato, his mother, as a gift*

Xatê praises him as the Rose of the House of Dîbo, a division of the Elikan tribe. She describes him as a brave hero who went to loot the neighbouring farms and came back to present the booty to her as a gift. She articulates support and praise for his actions. However, the looting is met with an attack led by Cemîlê Çeto, the famous leader of the House of Faro, who mobilises seven other families. The attack results in the untimely death of the hero. Xatê therefore also rebukes Silêman in this kilam, telling him it was “ignorance” to loot the farms of the House of Faro, as they are “murderers”. After her son is killed, she incites his cousin to avenge him:

*Dibê: Xatê rebenê, termê Silêmanê Mistê
Bavê Xelîl Gula Mala Dîbo
Li serê Çiyayê Kolik
li Mexera Bênderokê mayê
Were ba weylê
Xatê dibê, Emê lawo memanî
Tu bala xwe bide Cemîlê Çeto
Bavê Feremez bi tan û niça îro
çi bi serê kekê te ve anî
Tu bavê diya xwe bîyo lawo
Şerê xwe bikin îro bi giranî
Belkê Xwedê Teala siûd û îqbalê
ji te re li hev dâ anî
Te heyfa Silêmanê Mistê Bavê Xelîl
Gula Mala Dîbo bi destê xwe hilanî*

*[Emê] says: [You] poor Xatê, the corpse of Silêmanê Mistê
Father of Xelîl, Rose of the House of Dîbo
Has remained on the Kolik mountain
In the small forest of Bênderokê
Oh my!
Xatê says, Emê, my son
See what Cemîlê Çeto,
father of Feremez, today
has done to your brother
May you be my father, my son³⁵
Fight bravely and tough today
May God bring the oaths and chances
on your side
You revenge Silêmanê Mistê, father of Xelîl
Rose of the House of Dîbo, with your own hands*

Emê then kills Cemîl’s newly-wed young brother Genco. The one who died in retaliation for Silêmanê Mistê’s death is Cemîl’s own young brother, who was just married, the henna still fresh on his hands. Xatê describes the battles in detail, and ends with the following lament:

*Heyfa min nayê li kaxîna Silêmanê Mistê
Bavê Xelîl, Gula Mala Dîbo,
heyfa min tê li vê hêyî
Çardara Silêmanê Mistê
Bavê Xelîl Gula Mala Dîbo
Girêdane, dar nebû çar darên Gêncoyê Çeto
Birine Eynqesra Bavê Şebo
Lawo bi xwe re birine nav beyara*

*I do not pity that Silêmanê Mistê is killed
The father of Xelîl, Rose of the House of Dîbo
[But] I pity [the following]:
did they not have any wood to use for a coffin
for Silêmanê Mistê, father of Xelîl, Rose of Dîbo
Like they did for Gêncoyê Çeto
And carried him to Eynqesra of Father of Şebo
Whereas they took my son’s body and left him in the open*

³⁵ In Kurdish, people may call each other “*bavê min buyo*” or “*diya min buyo*” to express their love and affection; it is not meant to be understood literally.

The expression “I do not pity that., but I do pity that...” is common in these types of kilams. The death of a warrior is regarded as a possible consequence of a heroic battle that is naturally very painful, but can in a way be accepted. But certain circumstances or consequences of the hero’s death are more difficult to accept. In this kilam, Xatê reproaches Cemîlê Çeto for not giving her son proper treatment after he died, whereas he was as much a good man and fighter as Cemîl’s brother.

In several ways, the figure of the local leader thus shows that local alliances and enmities were common and accepted, and that a battle between Kurdish tribes was in itself not condemned. Since there are many kilams about tribal battles that seem to be songs praising Kurdish local heroes, they must have been popular among the audiences of the time. The fact that they were not regarded as creating divisions, but as offering praise for the tribe or family, demonstrates that local political structures were central to the life worlds of the people the kilams speak of.

Kurdish outlaws³⁶ and the state

Next to the many kilams about relationships among the numerous tribes that made up the Kurdish socio-political landscape, there are also many kilams that speak of the relationship between the Kurds and the Ottoman and Turkish state. We discuss this relationship through the figures of the fugitive, the rebel and the traitor. We did not encounter many kilams in which Ottoman and Turkish individuals are personified. Mostly, they are referred to as soldiers, as *Rom* (the most commonly used term to refer to Ottomans/Turks in the kilams), as *bukumet* (*government*), or as Mustafa Kemal. This again points towards the distant relationship displayed in the kilams between the Kurds and the state.³⁷

State borders are often mentioned in the kilams as places of escape. One could take advantage of the political reality of borders by exchanging one tax system for another one, by escaping one government and hiding in another country until the impending punishment was barred or forgotten, or by hiding in one country until the time was ready for revenge in the first country.³⁸ Borders as escape routes do not only emerge in battle and rebel songs, but also in

³⁶ We use the word outlaw to refer to a person who willingly operates outside established norms, who is a fugitive trying to escape from the law.

³⁷ “The central government officials were, and are, distrusted, and have not been able to replace the traditional authorities” (van Bruinessen, 1992: 69).

³⁸ See also O’Shea: “Kurds could in certain respects be claimed to have benefited from their frontier location, both in the era in which Kurdistan acted as a buffer zone between rival empires, and later, by exploiting their proximity to international boundaries. (..) Political advantages have been largely two-edged, allowing Kurds to seek the support of rival imperial powers to achieve their own ends, but allowing the imperial powers to combine forces to defeat them” (2004: 20).

love songs. For example, in the song Dewrê,³⁹ two lovers who cannot marry, lament their fate and dream of escaping the pressure of their relatives:

Ti yê were bigre destê min

Come and take my hand

Em ê welatê xwe rizgar bikin berin⁴⁰

We will free ourselves from our country and go

Em ê xwe havên Girê Kemalîyê

We will go to the Hill of Kemalîyê

derkevin bidûd berin

And we will pass the border

Xilas kin cem birayê xwe nav Eceme ax

[We will] rescue [ourselves] among our brothers in Ecem (Iran), oh

The fugitive

The figure of the fugitive⁴¹ emerges in many rebel songs. An early kilam (the event can be situated in the late nineteenth century) in which this figure is present is a kilam ascribed to Evdalê Zeynikê about his patron Surmeli Mamed Pasha. In the kilam *Lo Mîro* the Pasha and his son Evdila Beg escape from a battle they join in the Erzurum region. The two are in an awkward situation and attacked by groups from all sides. The only chance for escape seems to be across the Iranian border, even though the relationship with the Iranians is also far from straightforward. The kilam sheds light on the troubled position of a pasha with conflicting loyalties.

Lo Mîro⁴²

Oh Mîr

Hayde bavo, axayo de şîyar be

Hey father, mount your horse, oh agha

Mîrê min şîyar be

My mîr, mount your horse,

Ji şîyara şîyarekê rindî karîbar be

Be the most handsome and ready rider among the riders

Di ser dêlbujiyê Erebi hur da xar be

Lean down on your horse crazy Erebi's neck (...)

Bavo bajo! Axayê min bajo!

My father, ride! My agha, ride!

Mîrê min bajo!

My mîr, ride!

Konaxa kekê min Iran e bajo!

Your destination is Iran, ride!

Binê bavê Erva Begê Mîrê Zirav da

Under Erva Beg's father, the tall king,

Şev-xîn lêketye

[the horse] became sick of exhaustion

Zîn û pûsata weldîgerîne

It is anxiously turning [shaking its] harness and armour

Dikim-nakim teng û bera qe nagire

No matter how hard I try, I cannot get the saddle steady

Erva Begê bi sê denga kire gazî

Erva Beg called over and over:

³⁹ Hamelink recorded another version of this song in May 2008 in Diyarbakir, sung by Remezanê Hazroyê. As we had no full transcription, we present here a version by Hesenê Kufercînî from *Antolojîya Dengbêjan* (2011: 200). The two versions are quite similar.

⁴⁰ Literally, this line appears to mean “we will liberate our country and go.” However, the intended meaning that we derive from the content of the entire song is as we translated it. Probably, the accent of the composer caused a difference here.

⁴¹ The figure of the “fugitive” is based on the following songs. From Hamelink’s recordings: *Bavê Faxrîya* and *Musa Beg* by Ahmedê Aqutê (Istanbul, April 2007, nr.7 and nr.15), *Îsmailê Êyo bavê Orbanê* by Seyidxanê Boyaxçî (Diyarbakir, May 2007, nr.49), *Xêlya* by Salihê Qûbînî (Doğubeyazıt, June 2007, nr.120), *Bavê Salih* (Diyarbakir, June 2007, nr.103), *Bavê Hiznî sivarê Beşo* by dengbêj Xalitê Xerzî, (Diyarbakir 2008, nr.203). From Kevirbirî 2001: *Çûro û Fesîbê Mihê Mîrzê* by Salihê Qûbînî (p.117), *Ferzendê Beg* (p.137). From Aras 1996: *Lo mîro* (p.55-59).

⁴² From Aras (1996: 56-57).

<i>Go: Surmeli Mamed Paşa bavo!</i>	<i>He said: Surmeli Mamed Pasha, father!</i>
<i>Wê ji bal û bevalê me çawa be?</i>	<i>What is going to happen to us?</i>
<i>Li kêleka me ya rastê esker Romê ye</i>	<i>On our right side are Turkish soldiers</i>
<i>Li paşya me eskerê Heçî Usiv Paşa</i>	<i>On our back there are the soldiers of Heçi Üsiv Pasha</i>
<i>ÿê Sîpîkê</i>	<i>from the Sipîkê tribe</i>
<i>Sofî Paşayê Hesênî, Temo ÿê Cibrî ye.</i>	<i>And Sofî Pasha from the Hesênî, Temo from the Cibran</i>
<i>Wê ji bal û bevalê me çawa be?</i>	<i>What is going to happen to us? (...)</i>
<i>Axayê min sîyar be! Mîrê min sîyar be!</i>	<i>Mount your horse, my Agha! Mount your horse, my Mîr!</i>
<i>Ji bo malê dunê ne sefil</i>	<i>You may neither be sad about the property you leave behind</i>
<i>Ne jî tengezâr be</i>	<i>nor may you despair</i>
<i>Bira felek bi te ra yar be</i>	<i>May fortune be your friend</i>
<i>Nebû bira çend saleka li erdê Iranê</i>	<i>If not, then let it be, for some years in Iran</i>
<i>Kafirê Ecem bi te ra neyar be baje!</i>	<i>Let these infidel Persians be your enemies. Ride!</i>

Surmeli Mamed Pasha is rousing his horse until he is sick of exhaustion. On the anxious call of his son Evla Beg he promises that they will make it. On their right side are Ottoman soldiers, on their back the soldiers of three Kurdish tribes. The Han of the Circassians is also hunting them. Altogether the situation is rather desperate, but the father and son seem to be able to reach Iran before they get caught. The kilam demonstrates that Surmeli Mamed Pasha and his son are persecuted from all sides: the Ottomans, enemy Kurdish tribes, and Circassians. At the moment of the escape, all of them are described as enemies. As van Bruinessen (1992), MacDowall (1996) and others have shown, Kurdish tribal leaders made alliances with a range of different parties, be them Kurds, Turks or other groups.

The fugitive also plays an important role in kilams from the early period of the Turkish Republic. After the Kurdish rebellions⁴³ that began in the 1920s, people tried to escape from the hands of the Turkish government by fleeing across the border. A well-known kilam is *Bavê Fexriya*, “Fexriya’s father”. The kilam speaks of Zêro, an Armenian woman who secretly fell in love with this married man and continues to love him after his escape to Syria:

<i>Ji xêra mala xweziyê Xwedê re⁴⁴</i>	<i>I wish in the name of God</i>
<i>Hikûmeta Cîmûriyetê</i>	<i>That the government of the Republic</i>
<i>fermana min jî rakira</i>	<i>would also uproot me</i>
<i>Ez ê çend saleka</i>	<i>So that all those years</i>
<i>Bavê Fexriya re</i>	<i>I would have been with Bavê Fexriya</i>
<i>Bi mehkûmê sere çiyê</i>	<i>The fugitive in the mountains</i>

⁴³ In the Treaty of Lausanne, which was signed after laborious negotiations in July 1923, Turkey emerged as a sovereign state, but the Kurds were bitterly disappointed by the Treaty, in which none of the promises made to them had been fulfilled (White, 2000: 73; Zürcher, 2004: 170). The sultanate was abolished, and Kurdistan was divided over Iran, Syria, Iraq and Turkey. The profound feeling of disappointment and lost hope among the Kurds led to a series of rebellions starting in the 1920s. .

⁴⁴ From Kevirbirî (2001: 108).

*Min ê pê re sere xwe daniya
Li ser dara mîrata modolîyê*

*Together with him I would have laid down my head
On doomed wooden branches [as a pillow]*

Zêro wishes that she could have been a fugitive like him, so that she could have joined him in his destiny. Clearly, she regards the condition of the man she loves, or possibly of herself, not as dishonourable or condemnable. The “government of the republic” is not *her* government, but a foreign power deciding her and her lover’s destiny. Instead of siding with that government, she sides with the fugitive and prefers to be uprooted with him and join him as a fugitive.

The rebel

Another figure that shows how the relationship with the state is depicted in the kilams is the figure of the rebel. Naturally, not all rebels⁴⁵ managed to escape. Some were caught, and many were executed or forcibly exiled. A hero one often hears about in the kilams is Bişarê Çeto, the leader of the Pencînarî tribe, and for some time on the run from the Ottoman government. After his first arrest he finds a way to escape from prison, but he is arrested again. This kilam takes place after the second arrest and is a good example of how a hero is criticised for being caught, and challenged to do better. Bişar, son of Çeto,⁴⁶ is in the prison of Bitlis and his father comes to see him.

Çeto dibê: Bişaro lawê⁴⁷

Çeto says: Bişar my son!

Bejna Bişarê Çeto, Bişarî Axê

The tall figure of Bişarê Çeto, Bişar the Agha

Kulîlka di nava kûnciya

Is a flower among sesames

Hêşîn dike li Gozêlderê, li Marîbê,

that sparkles in Gozêlderê, in Marîbê,

Li ‘Eynqesrê, li Kêşa Xerzan, li Birincîyan

In ‘Eynqesrê, in the Xerzan Plain, and in Birincî

Dema ku Bişarê Çeto, Bişarî Axê

When Bişarê Çeto, Bişar the Agha

Dibû mehkumê sere çiya

Had become a fugitive⁴⁸ in the mountains

Gelekî dilê min bi rehma Xwedê xweş bû

I was expecting God’s blessings

Min diqo qê wê bişyê eskerê Eliyê Ünîs

I thought that he would surely join Eliyê Ünîs’ soldiers

Bibe qenmê Çiya

And become a part of the mountain people

⁴⁵ The figure of the ‘rebel’ is based on the following songs: From Hamelink’s recordings: *Seydaxanê Kerr* by Îbrahîmê Pîrikê (Diyarbakır, May 2007, nr.25), *Şerê Navala Kela Reşê* by Mihemedê Şêxanî (Diyarbakır, May 2007, nr.47), *Şerê serhildana Zûlanê* and *Ferzêndê Beg* by Memê Bazîdê (Doğubeyazıt, July 2007, nr.122 and nr.130), *Rîzayê Xêlîd* by dengbej Alî (Van, July 2008, nr.199), *Barê Salîb*, *Xwîna Şêx Ahmedê*, *Barê Heyder Begê*, *Qudret*, (recorded in Diyarbakır in June 2007, nr.103, 104, 107, 108). From Kevirbirî 2001: *Bişarê Çeto* (p.85), *Raperîna mala Eliyê Ünîs* (p.93), *Ferzêndê Beg* (p.137).

⁴⁶ Üngör (2009) writes that Bişarê Çeto had provoked the feud between the Elikan and Pencînarî tribes and had: “telegraphically expressed his joy over the 1908 revolution in the hope of being left alone by the government. Together with his equally trigger-happy brother Cemil Çeto, they were known for their extortion of Armenian, Kurdish, and Syriac villagers in the region.”

⁴⁷ From Kevirbirî (2001: 85-89).

⁴⁸ The first meaning of the word *mehkum* is prisoner, but its second meaning refers to fugitives and outlaws, which is the correct translation regarding the content of the song.

At first, Bişar's father Çeto conveys the important position of his son and his pride in him. But after he learns the fact that Bişar was arrested he is deeply disappointed that his famous son did not manage to stay out of the hands of the government. "People of the mountains" is a term used for those who are on the run from the state, rebels or fugitives who are praised for their heroism because they were able to escape, whereas arrest by the government is embarrassing and brings shame on a family. Çeto accuses his son of not having taken appropriate care, of hiding with the wrong person, and of letting himself be arrested. Bişar feels insulted by his father's reproaches and defends himself by reminding him of all his earlier heroic deeds. When Çeto continues to insult him, Bişar tells him to go back home and tell his wife Gulê to visit him in prison and smuggle a gun inside. In another kilam about this same event, the dialogue is between Bişar and his wife Gulê, which follows a similar vein. Gulê challenges Bişar and tells him how he used to think big of himself, and she believed his bold words. But she felt heavily disappointed after seeing that he could not save himself, and blamed him for being arrested and for embarrassing his house and her name:

<i>Lê beyla malxerabo îro min nişanibû⁴⁹</i>	<i>Oh your house may be destroyed, I would not know</i>
<i>Tu qelsê temamî mêran î (...)</i>	<i>(that) you are the weakest of all men</i>
<i>Îro dor li te girtin, te bi hêstîrî digirtin</i>	<i>Now, they surrounded and captured you,</i>
<i>Destê te girêdan navê te ji min ra</i>	<i>Handcuffed you, and, they have delivered your name, to me,</i>
<i>Îro bi hêstîrî anîn</i>	<i>as the captive today</i>

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Against the accusations of his wife, Bişar tries to defend himself by mentioning all the heroic deeds he accomplished and by trying to remind her that he is not the weak person she imagines him to be after his arrest. Both his father and his wife challenge him, and seem to want to encourage him to break out. Because finally, when he manages to break out, he is praised as a hero:

<i>Hepsa Belîsê têr î tijî ye</i>	<i>The prison of Belîs is overfull</i>
<i>Xilas nabe ji tirka, ji kurmanca,</i>	<i>There is no end to the inflow of Turks, Kurds,</i>
<i>Ji axe û axalera</i>	<i>aghas and landlords,</i>
<i>Ji teketûkê qizîlbasha</i>	<i>and a few Qizîlbash</i>
<i>Bişar di 'eynî deqê de</i>	<i>At that same moment Bişar</i>
<i>Gasî dikir li topa erqedaşa</i>	<i>Was calling all of the friends</i>
<i>Temamî destê xwe li hev didan</i>	<i>All of them were clapping their hands</i>
<i>Digotin: yaşa ji te re Bişar Axao, yaşa</i>	<i>They were saying: long live Bişar Axao, long live!</i>
<i>Ji wê rojê betakê wê îro</i>	<i>From that day until today [this event] has been written down</i>
<i>Yazmiş biye li paytextê tirko</i>	<i>[In the documents of] the Turkish capital,</i>
<i>Li Xopana Enqerê</i>	<i>In that ruin Ankara</i>
<i>Li qapîyê Hepsa Belîsê qeyd biye</i>	<i>It has been registered at the door of the prison of Belîs (Bîllîs)</i>
<i>Li kitûkê Mistefa Kemal Paşa</i>	<i>And in the logbooks of Mustafa Kemal Pasha</i>

⁴⁹ From the CD *Ji bo bîranîna dengbêj Husêno* (2003) by Delil Dilanar.

In the story of Bişarê Çeto, the criticism of his father and wife made him so angry that he regained his strength, and became again the hero they wanted him to be. The last stanza sketches the relationship with various others. The prison of Bitlis was filled not only with Kurds, but also with Turks and some Qizilbash⁵⁰ (who did not live in near proximity and may therefore have not been many). The mentioning of imprisoned aghas points to the harsh measurement of the government towards the ruling class many of whom were killed, forcibly resettled, or imprisoned. The kilam turns Bişarê Çeto into a hero not only for the Kurds but also for the other prisoners, who did not speak Kurdish, congratulating him in Turkish. The kilam says that his rebellion was noted in the government registration and ridicules the new capital Ankara (“that ruin”), and the leader of the Republic.

To conclude, the state is foreign to Bişarê Çeto and his father and wife. Imprisonment by that state means he will lose face and destroy the good name of his family. Escaping from the hands of the state turns him into a “person of the mountains”, a hero on the run, and someone who will be remembered.

The traitor

Another regularly recurring figure in kilams about clashes with the government is the figure of the traitor,⁵¹ who betrayed his own people (often relatives or members of the same tribe) to the government. The topic of betrayal points on the one hand to frequent collaboration with the government, and on the other to the fact that this is strongly condemned. A famous example is that of Emînê Pêrixanê, also known as Emînê Ehmed. Emîn and Evdile are two of the six sons of Pêrixane⁵² who competed for succession. Evdile is portrayed as a good and popular man who is expected to become the leader of their tribe, the Reman. Emîn is jealous as he himself wants to be the successor. He has collaborated for a long time with the government, and it is said that because of his alliance with the cruel Turkish commander Samir Bey, hundreds of houses were destroyed. Eventually he betrays his own brother who is then killed by Turkish soldiers. His mother laments his death:

⁵⁰ Qizilbaş, lit. redheads, were adherents of a Shiite sect, today known as Alevi.

⁵¹ The figure of the “traitor” is based on the following songs: From Hamelink’s recordings: *Bavê Salih, Xwîna Şêx Ahmedê, Qudret*, (recorded in Diyarbakır in June 2007, nr.103, 104, 108). From Kevirbirî 2001: *Emînê Pêrixanê* (p.47), *Şerê Nevala Qeremûsê* (p.75). From *Antolojiya Dengbêjan* (2007): *Mala paşê* by dengbêj Cahîdo (p.25), *Lezgin û Ebûbekir* by Emînê Hecî Tahar (p.54), *Dayê dêranê* by Evdilhadiyê Arzûoxlî (p.74), *Tahir bira* by İbrahîmê Pîrikê (p.154).

⁵² Üngör (2009): “There were also intra-tribal intrigues and power struggles, most notably in the Reman tribe. Its famous female chieftain Perikhan, widow of Ibrahim Pasha, had six sons who competed for succession (.). In order to succeed their mother, the sons had to outclass each other in the ability to exert power and express leadership qualities. Of all her sons, Ömer was known for his ferociousness. (.) In the summer of 1914, the government declared him *persona non grata*” (p.61)

Perîxanê dibê: wey li mine axao⁵³
Kula li ser kula derda li ser derdao
De rabe kuştîyo bê heyf mao
Kula Eminê Ehmed birayê xayîn
di dil de mao

Perîxanê says: woe me, agha
You, sorrow upon sorrows and pain upon pains
Stand up, you the murdered but not avenged
You who is gone with the grief inflicted by Emin of Ehmed
that treacherous brother, in your heart

The figure of the traitor also emerges in the kilam *Bavê Salih*. A group of rebels to which Salih's father belonged, came from the Zîlan valley. They were fugitives from the Agirî rebellion which took place between 1926-1930, and survivors of the twenty-five villages in the Zîlan valley that were destroyed by the Turkish army. They had settled in the village Talorî, south of the town of Muş. Bavê Salih had been one of the leaders of the rebellion. Many of his fellow men had managed to escape. In the aftermath of the rebellion the Turkish army searched for specific individuals whom they believed had played an important role during the fighting. However, as the army was afraid of instigating more unrest by openly searching for those men, they attempted to motivate local aghas to go after the rebels. In this case the traitors were some leaders of the Badika tribe, and all of the Xiya tribe. The leaders of these tribes had the order to kill Bavê Salih and were thus collaborating with the Turkish army in hunting the rebels. When Bavê Salih hears about the conspiracy he decides to fight. His brother, nephew and son have already escaped to Syria. During the battle Bavê Salih is killed and the survivors follow their relatives to Syria:

Kesekeî xvedanê xêra tune
çibabekê bişîne binxetê cem Bavê Silbo
birayê dilşewitî
Dibê mala te xera bibê
Agirê kulê bikeve
mala Emerê Mihê lawê Perîxanê
Eşîna Xiya, giregirê Badika
Derbek dane li bejn û bala Bavê Salih
peyayê mala Ûsivê Seydo

There is no one of good will
to send a call beyond the border to Silbo's Father
the brother with a burned heart
To say "you the doomed!"
May the fire of sorrow and pain
besiege the house of Emerê Mihê, the son of Perîxan
And also the Xiya tribe and the leaders of the Badika tribe
They shot Bavê Salih
the man of the house of Ûsivê Seydo

Hedo, probably Bavê Salih's wife, explains that help should have come from across the border, where his brother is. But neither can she find anyone who wants to go to give notice, nor can she write him a letter. Afterwards we learn that Bavê Salih does not receive any support and Heddo returns to the reality of his death and curses the tribes that have killed him. Now that he is dead, who is to take care of the family? Who can support her and her relatives?

Through the figures of the fugitive, the rebel and the traitor in the kilams, we can see how the state appears as a foreign force. Joining the "people of the

⁵³ From Kevirbirî (2001: 51-52).

mountains” was an honourable destiny and crossing the state borders a frequent undertaking with the aim to flee government persecution. As for the figure of the traitor, cooperating with the government is presented first as dubious and later as treacherous; the enemy of the Kurdish outlaw came to be more defined as the Turkish state exclusively. At the same time, the numerous kilams that discuss traitors show that many Kurds still regarded the Turkish government as a possible supporter for the expansion of their power. One sees that on the one hand that a nationalist ideology did not yet emerge in the kilams,⁵⁴ but on the other that collaboration with the government increasingly came to be defined as betrayal and was bitterly condemned.

Conclusion

In this article we investigated dengbêj kilams to see how the home and foreign are depicted in Kurdish oral tradition, and what this depiction tells us about views on Kurdish political structures before nationalism became the dominant ideology and before self-Orientalism became an influential way of looking at Kurdish society. This adds an important element to Scott’s argument, since he was criticised for not incorporating local viewpoints. The kilams refer to events of which many can be situated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. They sketch a life world that revolves around local and small-scale alliances. The near environment of the home emerges as the centre of the kilams, rather than larger political structures. Local heroes are celebrated and enmities and battles among tribes are not seen as inherently problematic. Borders and the state are depicted as unwelcome foreign interference in local issues, and therefore resisted. The figure of the local leader, the fugitive, the rebel and the traitor, point to important aspects of the socio-political life in Kurdistan which remained out of direct control of the state.

Social practices like the reluctance and even resistance to being incorporated in the spheres of state influence, the inclination to avoid being ruled, regulated, taxed, conscripted, and contained by formal state borders, could all be seen as deliberate attempts to keep the state at a distance. For instance, switching sides between imperial powers was a frequent practice for local rulers who occupied the margins of the empires and crossing state borders has been a common practice for the Kurds who live in borderlands. Many Kurds have grown up hearing stories of outlaws, bandits and ordinary peasants, who used to take shelter in the mountains of Kurdistan to escape state laws and obligations. These topics also emerged in the kilams. We suggest that these social and political practices of most Kurds until the 1930s is a testimony to their determination to escape the control of the (nation-)state.

⁵⁴ Songs about a united Kurdistan emerged in the songs of Kurdish music groups *koms* beginning in the 1970s (Saritaş, 2010, Aksoy, 2006), and cannot yet be traced in dengbêj kilams, apart from those composed recently by individual dengbêjs. The latter were not sung much during Hamelink’s research; the value of the dengbêjs was mostly sought in older kilams.

The divisions among Kurdish factions have been a consistent feature of Kurdish politics up to the early twentieth century. The wish to remain autonomous appeared to be stronger than the search for shared Kurdish interests. In Kurdish political discourse this feature is explained as a trace of primitivism and a lack of civilisation. Academics in Kurdish studies also often followed this line of thought (see above). Scott's argument is a deconstruction of such "civilisational discourses" that regard people who remained outside of the influence of central states as barbarian, raw, and primitive (Scott 2009: x). Instead of explaining Kurdish history in terms of a "lack" of unity, we suggest that it may be more accurate to see this history as a deliberate choice to avoid the state.

We believe that there are expressions of political activism free from the dichotomy of sovereignty and statelessness. Resistance to political centralisation reflected in the practices outlined above is one such expression. In the Kurdish case, exercising political autonomy revealed itself as evading the state. As Arendt (1998: 234) suggests:

If it were true that sovereignty and freedom are the same, then indeed no man could be free, because sovereignty, the ideal of uncompromising self-sufficiency and mastership, is contradictory to the very condition of plurality. No man can be sovereign because not one man, but men, inhabit the earth...

Therefore, in the case of the Kurds, the tendency towards remaining autonomous could testify to a notion of freedom as the will to evade the state. Not having a state of their own and not attempting to found one until the early twentieth century might, after all, just be an alternative vision of freedom.

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