



## Performance Traditions of Kurdistan: Towards a More Comprehensive Theatre History

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## Performance Traditions of Kurdistan: Towards a More Comprehensive Theatre History

*This study addresses the gap in the contemporary scholarship on Kurdish oral and performative culture by, for the first time, presenting a review of some of the performance traditions in Kurdistan. By describing these traditions, the article demonstrates that performance has for centuries comprised a vital and meaningful element of Kurdish cultural life. Further, it shows that a more inclusive approach to writing theatre histories enhances understanding of Middle Eastern and, in particular, Iranian performance culture—for the Kurds, as an Iranian people and the fourth largest ethnic group in the Middle East, play an intrinsic part in the culture of the region. All combined, this comprehension fosters a deeper appreciation and fuller picture of Middle Eastern theatre, in general, and Iranian theatre, in particular.*

### Introduction

The growing interest in the late twentieth century in performance within non-European cultures resulted in research into the performance and theatre traditions of Latin America, Africa, Asia, and lastly the Arab World. Theatre in the Middle East was long ignored by Western theatre scholars who mistakenly assumed that representation of the human body, and therefore theatre, was equated with idolatry and thus prohibited in Islamic thought. This simplistic assumption is dying away as the rich theatre and performance traditions of the region receive increasing attention from scholars. Writing in 1981, William O. Beeman, a pioneering scholar of Iranian performance arts, set out with the aim to counter assumptions that preclude the existence of theatrical tradition in the Middle East or denigrate its importance in Middle Eastern cultures.<sup>1</sup> However, like most scholars of Iranian theatre he has focused exclusively on Persian culture and its theatrical traditions. Those include the Shiite Muslim passion drama known as *ta'ziyeh*, and the comic improvisatory drama of *ru-howzi* or *takht-howzi*.

In his contribution to the *Cambridge Guide to the World Theatre* (1988), Beeman lists the performing arts which came into being in the Middle East after the advent of Islam as: (1) puppet drama; (2) dramatic storytelling; (3) religious epic drama; and (4)

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comic improvisatory drama.<sup>2</sup> This is a recurring list common to most principal works describing the Middle Eastern performance tradition. For instance, in his classic *Namāyesh dar Irān* (Theatre in Iran, 1965), the great Iranian playwright, director, and researcher Bahram Beyzai divides performances in post-Islamic Iran into: (1) *naqqāli*; (2) puppet drama; (3) *ta'ziyeh*; and (4) comic drama.<sup>3</sup> Metin And's *A History of Theatre and Popular Entertainment in Turkey* (1963),<sup>4</sup> which is a major source book on drama in Turkey, resembles Beyzai's in that it focuses on and adds more in-depth descriptions of the traditions of the *meddah*, the puppet-show, the *karagoz* (shadow-play), and the *orta oyunu* (improvised open-air theatre).

While works by Beyzai, And, Beeman, and other prominent scholars of Middle Eastern theatre have contributed significantly to our understanding of the region's performance cultures and have served to negate claims that deny their existence or importance in the context of world theatre, they fail to take into account the large Kurdish population in the Middle East who have a distinct and vibrant cultural life of their own. This omission is in part due to language. Kurdish has a variety of dialects, the main two being Kurmanji and Sorani. The result of speaking a minority language in monolingual states of Iran and Turkey is the removal of Kurdish-speaking people from the attention of Persian and Turkish scholars.

In Kurdish regions as elsewhere in the Middle East, oral performance and verbal art have a long tradition and have historically been the dominant form of performance. As in the rest of the Middle East, this orality coexisted alongside the Islamic emphasis on literacy dating back to the seventh-century Islamic conquest of the region. In fact, in Kurdistan there is no great divide separating the oral and written cultures which have always interacted with each other and also with the cultures of the Kurds' neighbors.<sup>5</sup> The centuries-old exchange between Kurds and their neighbors has resulted in a rich folklore of both unique and shared elements.

While the Kurds have performance traditions in common with their Persian, Arab, and Turkish neighbors, the different varieties appear in different forms or degrees of significance. For example, while the puppet show is considered a main category of traditional performance art in the Middle East, in Iraqi Kurdish theatre histories, at least, there is only a brief mention of a puppet show, which purportedly took place in 1944 in Halabja.<sup>6</sup> In Iran, *ta'ziyeh*, as a Shiite performance art, is limited to only a minority of Kurds in the predominantly Sunni Iranian Kurdistan. As for comic drama, there were performance practices in Kurdistan carried out only by a very small group of artists who acted out satirical plays involving stock characters with a great deal of improvisation.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, there are other performances, like *mirmîran*<sup>8</sup> or *Kawey Asinger*, which, though downplayed or ignored by more conventional theatre histories, have been acted out with great rigor by the Kurds. Therefore, while puppet drama, *ta'ziyeh*, and *ru-howzi* have not had a strong presence in the history of Kurdish performance, there are ancient Iranian traditions that have survived among the Kurds and deserve attention in the discussion on Iranian performance traditions.

Ultimately, while studies of theatre in the Middle East have contributed greatly to our understanding of performance traditions in the region, they have failed to take

into account performance practices common to the Kurds, who constitute significant minorities of the populations in Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria—and which combined make up one of the largest communities in the region. This study responds to this gap in the current scholarship in English concerning Kurdish oral and performative culture, and presents for the first time a review of some of performance traditions in Kurdistan. By describing the wealth of intersecting folk performance traditions throughout the Kurdish regions, which have survived despite decades/centuries of political instability, wars, bad economic conditions, and a lack of national institutions, this paper demonstrates that performance has remained a vital and meaningful element in Kurdish cultural life throughout. Further, it shows that a more inclusive approach to writing theatre histories of the Middle East can enhance our understanding of the region's performance culture. This will lead to the development of a deeper appreciation and fuller picture of Middle Eastern theatre in general, and Iranian theatre in particular.

### *Newroz Carnival Performances*

The most notable of folk performance traditions of the Kurds are the ones that are performed during Newroz, the Kurdish New Year. Two important examples of these performances, which are part of the Kurdish springtime festival, are *Kawey Asinger* (Kawe the Blacksmith) and *mîrmîran* or *mîrmîrên* (king of kings, or playing king). While the Iranian festival of *Nowruz* is celebrated throughout several countries in the Middle East as the beginning of spring, what differentiates the Kurdish version of *Nowruz* from others is its convergence with the legend of Kawe (Kāveh in Persian), the blacksmith who rebelled against the tyranny of King Zahāk, a ruthless foreign ruler. In Ferdowsi's *Shāhnāme* (Book of Kings), Zahāk is possessed by two snakes growing from his shoulders that feed on the brains of two young persons every day. Zahāk's cooks manage to rescue one person each day and send them to the mountains where they continue to live and eventually found the Kurdish nation. It is ultimately Kawe, a humble blacksmith, who rises up against Zahāk's tyranny, using his blacksmith apron as a flag. He later joins forces with Faraydun, a person of royal descent, who leads an army under Kawe's flag and captures Zahāk. In the Kurdish rendering of this myth, however, Faraydun is eliminated and Kawe is celebrated as a Kurdish hero who liberates the Medes, the supposed ancestors of the modern Kurds. Also, whereas in *Shāhnāme* the legend of Kawe is associated with the Mehregān festival, in the Kurdish version Kawe's revolt is linked to the Newroz festival.

Due to its association with the story of Kawe and the victory of the oppressed against the oppressor, Newroz has accrued political significance among Kurds. The myth of Newroz and the legend of Kawe have allowed the Kurdish national movement to trace the origins of the Kurds to the ancient Medes, constructing both an ethno-genesis and a resistance myth for the Kurds.<sup>9</sup> This myth has naturally been celebrated in folk performances throughout Kurdish towns and villages during Newroz festivities. In the folk performances of this myth, the characters included King

Zahāk, a few guards and councils, Kawe, the hero, three boys as Kawe's sons, and others who played the role of townspeople.<sup>10</sup> The modern theatre groups have also drawn on the myth of *Kawey Asinger* for nationalist purposes. It was particularly utilized by Iraqi Kurdish activists in the 1970s and 1980s in order to call for revolution against the Baath dictatorship. For instance, during the four-year autonomy of the Kurdistan region in Iraq between 1970 and 1974, the story of the victory of Kawe was dramatized on Newroz by different theatre groups such as Sulaymaniyah Theatre Group and the Kurdish Arts and Literature Society.<sup>11</sup>

The Kurdish Newroz and the legend of Kawe are examples of the Kurdish myth of origin that has become a key element of the Kurdish national identity and an important factor in Kurdish nation-building projects.<sup>12</sup> Celebrated by several nations throughout the Middle East, Newroz has been reconstructed by Kurdish nationalists to stand for the victory of the oppressed over the oppressor and thus symbolize the contemporary nationalist movement. What was an ancient festival has been transformed into a modern and influential ideological tool in the political arena for the identity construction of the Kurds.<sup>13</sup> The myth of Newroz and the legend of Kawe have in fact contributed significantly to the Kurdish nationalist movement in Turkey, where the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) intellectuals promote shared myths of common ancestry, territory, and history to counter decades of assimilationist policies pursued by Ankara.<sup>14</sup>

Another important example of performances that form part of the Kurdish spring-time festival is *mîrmîran*. *Mîrmîran*, or Mir-e Nowruzi in Persian, bears striking resemblances to the medieval Feast of Fools in which a mock king was elected to rule temporarily. According to Beyzai, Mir-e Nowruzi was a continuation of the pre-Islamic *Barneshastan-e Kuseh* (The Ride of the Beardless Man) festival which, by replacing the ruler with an ugly man who issued ridiculous orders, exemplified people's disdain for the powerful.<sup>15</sup> In spite of its important place in Kurdish culture, Beyzai downplays the significance of this tradition by devoting only a few pages to its discussion and by writing that Mir-e Nowruzi is now only played in some "distant" villages.<sup>16</sup> This is despite the fact that, according to Kurdish sources, *mîrmîran*, also referred to as *paşapaşayeti*, was the single most important theatrical event among the Kurds until at least the 1920s.<sup>17</sup> On the centrality of this festival to the Kurdish performance tradition, it may suffice to say that Gîw Mukriyanî, the Kurdish historian, journalist, and researcher, has used the term *mîrmîrên* as the Kurdish equivalent to the word theatre in English and *masrah* in Arabic.<sup>18</sup>

*Mîrmîran* was enacted in Kurdish regions of Iraq and Iran during Newroz at the beginning of spring. In the nineteenth century, each Kurdish area was governed by a ruler. During *mîrmîran* this ruler was temporarily replaced by an ordinary, sometimes even ridiculous person, chosen from the people of that area to perform in this play, the props of which were provided by the people themselves. The lords and nobility would lend the new king their lavish clothes, accessories, horses, boots, swords, and other valuables.<sup>19</sup> It was customary for the substitute ruler to have some witty and jovial people as his helpers. In this play, there are character types known to the people—the grand vizier, the right and left vizier, secretary, soldiers,

executioners, chorus, clown, and so on. According to Ashurpur, the right-hand vizier was in charge of giving reasonable orders, while the left-hand vizier executed unreasonable and ludicrous orders. For example, the right-hand vizier would declare on behalf of the king that innocent prisoners must be freed, families who were not on good terms had to reconcile, the rich had to pay their due *zakat* to the poor, and everyone had to clean the front of their houses. The left-hand vizier, on the other hand, would give absurd orders such as every man has to shave half of his moustache, all young boys over the age of thirteen have to get married by tomorrow, all city-dwellers have to move to the countryside and the country dwellers have to move to the city.<sup>20</sup>

In his *History of Theatre in Iran*, Floor states that this festival of “false emir” was a three-day festival which was most recently celebrated in the 1890s in the springtime in the Kurdish town of Mahabad.<sup>21</sup> However, different sources give different figures for the length of the festival, which, according to some, ran for the entire thirteen days of the holiday season.<sup>22</sup> According to Pîrbal, the false emir festival started five days before Newroz and ended on the thirteenth day of the new year.<sup>23</sup> As for the coronation of the mock king, it seems, at least in Sulaymaniyah, that the event would take no more than three days. Tenya, for example, writes that in 1912 in Sulaymaniyah, a witty mullah called Mela Biçkol was chosen as king and his coronation was a joyous three-day-long festive occasion.<sup>24</sup> He further explains that during this festival it was customary that the elders of Sulaymaniyah would take control of the city and all their orders would be implemented. This was an occasion for three days of festivities, which started from the city centre where people would dance to the sound of *dihol* and *zurna* for two days. Later, the people would all walk towards *Sarchinar*, near Sulaymaniyah, where fifty springs form a stream that runs through the city. There the king would sit on the throne and various sorts of games would start with the royal accord. The festivities would end with the people’s joyful return to the city to the accompaniment of music.<sup>25</sup>

In Sulaymaniyah, open-air amusements and celebrations were always popular,<sup>26</sup> and traditional festivals such as *mîrmîran* enjoyed the support of Kurdish rulers and were only interrupted by important events such as the death of Şêx Seîd Berzencî, the highest religious authority in the region. His death brought a halt to celebrations, storytelling and gramophones at teahouses, but after the due period of grieving over his death, the carnivals and celebrations were resumed.<sup>27</sup> A relatively well-documented instance of the false emir festival in the city of Sulaymaniyah dates back to the 1920s. Here is how Thomas Bois (1900-1975), the French orientalist, describes this “carnival” based on Tewfiq Wehbi’s account of its performance:

The preparations are entrusted to a special committee, and on the day fixed the people of Sulaymaniyah leave the town for a place where the ceremony is to take place. A king is enthroned and courtiers and a guard are assigned to him. The “king”, sitting astride an ox and accompanied by his court and a large crowd, goes to the encampment where tents and divans have been set up and cauldrons put on the fire. Individuals, disguised as sheep or goats, play the part of these

animals during the whole period of celebration, which lasts three days. The “king” is obeyed without question; he even imposes taxes on people, whether they are present or not. He retains his title until the following year when a successor is nominated.<sup>28</sup>

It is important to note that the Kurdish false king, as confirmed in the above quote, possessed genuine power despite his name, and his rule was respected by local rulers. Edmonds writes that in Sulaymaniyah he was, “often regaled with stories of an annual spring carnival of ancient origin, a kind of saturnalia, which had fallen into desuetude either during or only shortly before the [First World] War.”<sup>29</sup> During Newroz, Edmonds says, “the whole population of Sulaymaniyah would flock out to the Sarchinar springs for a festival which involved the appointment of a Lord of Misrule with very real powers, the temporary upsetting of many of the canons of ordinary behaviour, and the almost complete suspension of normal administration.”<sup>30</sup> This upsetting of official hierarchy of power and norms of behavior was sanctioned by the highest authority of the Sulaymaniyah region—the Baban pashas—until the mid-nineteenth century and after that by Şêx Mehmûd Berzencî, who not only licensed the festival, but also took part in it. Every year in Sulaymaniyah, Şêx Mehmûd himself would give the order to start the festivities and would respect the new king like everybody else.<sup>31</sup> The nobility would also lend the king their valuables, as demonstrated in the case of Ferec Kurdî, a local comic figure and a mock king in the 1920s who wore the clothes given to him by Mistefa Paşa Yamulki (1866-1936), the Ottoman military officer and later minister of education in Şêx Mehmûd Berzencî’s self-proclaimed Kingdom of Kurdistan.<sup>32</sup>

The licensing of the festival by local rulers legitimized the whole representation, wherein the hierarchy of the official order was overturned. This is similar to the sort of performance Terry Eagleton describes as “a permissible rupture of hegemony, a contained popular blow-off as disturbing and relatively ineffectual as a revolutionary work of art.”<sup>33</sup> The subversive play of the carnival consists of temporarily suspending the hierarchical power structure inherent in the practice of everyday life. It proves the importance of such representation, wherein the ruler sees himself reflected through the mirrors of carnivalesque representation. In her review of a similar African performance, Plastow notes that this type of performance presumably was not only cathartic for the participants but also created an acceptable conduit for public opinion to be passed on to higher authorities.<sup>34</sup>

Evrehman Xame was the last king of this festival in Sulaymaniyah, which ended in 1922 after the British officials banned it altogether. According to Hewramî, in an interview Xame stressed that his rule was not an act and it was only called a game to fool the British colonizers.<sup>35</sup> In fact, the mock king had almost absolute power and his rule was approved by the governor of Sulaymaniyah in the 1920s, Enwer Begî Tewfiq Beg, in all but two things: freeing slaves and killing people. However, it did not take long for the British officers to sense the seriousness of the mock king’s rule and put an end to it. It is also possible that the arrest of two Englishmen provoked the British rulers. According to Hewramî, after two Englishmen laughed at

the spectacle they were arrested and only freed after they paid compensation for their disregard of Xame's rule.<sup>36</sup> It is also reported that a British political officer to Kurdistan, Major E. B. Soane, was once allegedly charged 500 rupees for drinking.<sup>37</sup> To mock the king and his authority or to ignore his orders was punishable regardless of the offender's rank. This might have angered the colonizers of the land, who could not tolerate punishment at the hands of the natives. According to Fetah, the British colonizers who watched the festival games and performances from a distance on horseback disapproved of the representation of a king in those performances and as such banned them not only in Sulaymaniyah but in all Kurdish regions. However, this was not the end of the false emir festival. Between 1927 and 1930, in Qeladze, north of Sulaymaniyah, the festival was held and a Bekir Qesab ruled for forty days before his rule was forcefully terminated.<sup>38</sup>

As Amine and Carlson suggest, the banning of local festivals by the European colonizers could be due to their carnivalesque and satiric nature. According to them, the Europeans, with their culturally conditioned idea of theatre, based upon the European tradition, viewed these activities as, at best, quaint local customs unworthy of the name of art, and at worst as "perverse and unpatriotic locations for the expression of subversive and anti-colonial expression."<sup>39</sup> Thus, the official colonial attitude towards such performance traditions was either to ignore or, as in the case of the Kurdish false emir carnival, to outlaw them.

### *Barneshastane Kuseh*

According to Beyzai, the festival of *Barneshastane Kuseh* was an ancient Iranian tradition held on 21 November, which was considered the last day of winter in ancient Iran.<sup>40</sup> The performance involved a beardless man (*kuseh*) riding on a donkey with a crow in one hand and a fan in the other, pretending to be hot. The crowds would throw snowballs at him and, at the same time, would bestow him with gifts. Those who gave no donations were splashed with mud by the beardless man. Beyzai associates this tradition with the religious festival of 'Omar *koshān* (the killing of 'Omar) among the Iranian Shiites which celebrates the killing of 'Umar ibn al-Khattāb, the second caliph of Islam, and involves the burning of his effigy. Beyzai writes that the *kuseh* tradition survived centuries after Islam as the *mir-e nowruzi* festival which, like its predecessor, served to display people's hatred towards the king.<sup>41</sup>

*Kose-geldî*, which was practiced in Iranian towns and villages until recently, has also been described in Iranian sources as the shepherds' celebration of the end of the first forty days of winter. Playing musical instruments, ringing bells, and singing songs, a group of shepherds would boisterously pass through the alleyways and streets performing the roles of Kose, Kose's bride, and goats. Kose would wear a long inside-out robe covered with small bells. The person playing the role of Kose would paint his face white and wear a mask made of goat skin with eye and breathing holes. He would also wear a big leather belt and hold a big stick to represent shepherds. The person



playing the role of Kose's bride was usually chosen from among teenage boys aged between twelve and sixteen. The bride would wear women's dress (sometimes a colorful chador) and heavy makeup and would tie bells around his waist and hands. Kose, his bride, and the goats, accompanied by musicians, would knock on people's doors to wish them abundance, wealth, and God's blessing. They would perform different plots at their hosts' homes, where they would receive money and gifts especially from the nobility and the rich.<sup>42</sup>

Salimi, in his book on Kurdish winter rituals, describes several instances of *Kose-geldî* in different towns and villages of Iranian Kurdistan.<sup>43</sup> According to Salimi, Kose is mainly a comic figure who entertains the village people with his makeup, costume, dance, and humor.<sup>44</sup> But on some occasions the village youth change the Kose tradition by turning Kose into a scary figure, usually with the help of fake moustache, beard, and large fur coat. Then they hide themselves while Kose knocks on people's doors and frightens those unfamiliar with the tradition.<sup>45</sup>

In villages of Sanandaj in Iranian Kurdistan, the shepherds hold a *Kose-Kose* celebration in which some of the shepherds and herdsmen are made up in the mosque's *çeqexane* (a little room by the side of the main hall). Kose's make-up and costume is meant to make him look frightening. Accompanied by the youth and children of the village, he starts walking through the streets and knocks on people's doors. A series of questions and answers are exchanged between Kose and the landlord such as:

Kose: *pez be yekane, bizin be dwane,*  
 May your sheep and goats be bountiful,  
*Xûa bereket bida bew derk u bane,*  
 May God bless your household,  
*Selam xawen mal, koset mêwane,*  
 Hello landlord, Kose is your guest,  
*Nabê bêbeş bê, lew xanedane,*  
 He shouldn't be deprived of your blessings.

Landlord: *Kose xoş hatî, fermû danîşe,*  
 Welcome Kose, come on in,  
*Le kwêt hênawe em gişte rîşe?!*  
 From where have you found this beard?!

Here, the shepherd who is standing behind Kose sings comic folkloric songs while Kose makes funny gestures, about which the crowd starts to laugh. The shepherd sings:

*Kose hat û Kose çû, Kose mird û kifnî new*  
 Kose came and Kose went, Kose died and had no grave-clothes  
*Kifn le Kaşan bû, Kaşan rêbenan bû*  
 The grave-clothes were in Kashan, and the road to Kashan was closed

*Koseyan nabe taqew, çawî çu be zaqew*

Kose was put on the shelf, with his eyes wide open.

An early account of *Kose-geldî* in Kurdistan, however, points to a serious purpose behind this tradition among the Kurds. Bois gives an account of a popular midwinter festival witnessed by Ereb Çemo (1897-1979) when he was a child. In this festival, which he calls *Kose-geldî*, “a young man is disguised as a sheik or mullah while another is dressed up as a woman. The two then go from house to house collecting butter, cheese and money ... Everything which has been collected in this manner by the young men is distributed to poor families.”<sup>46</sup> Therefore, while Kose’s witticism and horseplay is the main characteristic of this tradition, *Kose-geldî* is not just entertainment. Rather, by obliging the wealthy farmers to share their wealth with the poor shepherds, *Kose-geldî* is a reminder of communal values of caring for each other on New Year’s Eve. Meanwhile, contrary to Beyzai’s claim that *Barneshastan-e Kuseh* symbolizes people’s dislike of kings and is related to the Shiite tradition of ‘Omar *koshân* and the festival of *mir-e nowruzi*, in the Sunni Kurdish regions of Iran, *Kose-Kose* and *mîrmîran* represent two distinct traditions which existed and survived alongside each other well into the twentieth century.

### *Rain Rituals*

Kurdish rituals such as those of *garwanekî* (cattle-raid) and *bûke-barane* (rain bride) are highly performative and theatrical in nature. *Garwanekî* is a cattle-raid ritual which used to be performed in many villages of Kermanshah, Ilam and also Lorestan (western Iran).<sup>47</sup> This ritual, which went out of practice only fifty years ago, was performed by women during drought to invoke rain. *Garwanekî*, also known as *gorwatenî*, *gaberan*, *gareba*, *gabruwa*, or *gayl rifanin*, literally means stealing cows. This ritual was performed mainly by women in spring and autumn in case of drought or late rainfall. When there was a delay in the onset of rain, women and girls of the village would gather together to arrange the ritual. They would elect a leader among themselves and move to the pastures where cattle belonging to the neighboring village were grazing. They would drive the cattle to their own village and if the cowhands or farmers working around that area intervened they would be beaten by the women. On hearing the news, the women and girls of the village to which the cattle belonged would immediately set off to fight the cow-thieves and take the cattle back. The collector of the ritual suggests that in any case the cow-stealers would ultimately win because they would be better prepared for the fight.<sup>48</sup> However, one might doubt the seriousness of the fight and want to measure the theatrical nature of the ritual. Unfortunately the information existing about this ritual was collected only after it became extinct, which makes a careful observation of it out of the question. In any case, when the victorious group entered their village with the stolen cattle, the celebration would start in the village. The cows would be milked and the milk would then be boiled, mixed with tea, and served to all. A pot of milk would also be poured down the rainspouts to create the illusion of rain. In the meantime, the elders of the neighboring

village would come to plead for the release of the cattle. After successfully persuading the women to return the cattle, they would all stand to pray for rain and the ritual would end with the return of the cows to the neighboring village.

*Bûke-barane* is another Kurdish rain ritual which used to be performed by young girls in Kurdistan at times of drought. In this ritual, young girls would surround a wooden doll dressed in a Kurdish woman's costume and sing songs asking her to make rain. In some versions of the event, children would take the wooden doll door-to-door and people would respond by pouring water over it.<sup>49</sup> Some of the songs sung during the ritual went like this:

*Bûke baran awî dewê*  
Rain bride wants water  
*Awî naw dexlanî dewê*  
She wants the water for crops.

Or,

*Helaran Melaran*  
*Xwaya dayke baran*  
O God make rain  
*Bo feqîran û hejaran*  
For the poor and needy.

The association of women with water is seen in another rain ritual which, however, is not particular just to Kurds as it has been seen to have taken place in other Iranian towns as well.<sup>50</sup> This ritual is characterized by marrying girls to lakes that were drying up. It is recorded by the Kurdish-Iranian writer, Ali-Ashraf Darvishian in his autobiographical novel, *Sâl-hâ-ye Abri* (Cloudy Years). In the novel we read about Nazke, an old woman who was wedded to a lake when it was about to dry. Nazke narrates,

They sat me on a horse and took me to the lake and performed the wedding sermon. I slept at the lake for forty days and each day I woke up before sunrise, undressed and washed my body in the lake seven times. A small hut was set up for me and Kaw Lake ... But it did not help ... The lake dried out little by little. People lost their farms to drought.<sup>51</sup>

### *Ta'ziyeh, Religion, and Kurdish Lamentation*

The tradition of *ta'ziyeh*, a text-based religious drama performed by the Shiites in Iran, has been celebrated by scholars as an important and distinct Iranian performance tradition, with origins in the ancient Iranian tradition of *Sug-e Siyāvash* (Mourning Siyāvash).<sup>52</sup> In Ferdowsi's epic, *Shāhnāme*, Siyāvash is a splendidly handsome and honorable prince who, betrayed by his family, is forced into self-imposed exile in

the mythical land of Turān where he meets an unjust death. The news of Siyāvash's death in exile prompts outbursts of grief and anger in Iran for many years to come. According to the tenth century historian, Narshakhi (ca. 899–959), Siyāvash had been mourned in Central Asia for thousands of years:

People of Bukhara have strange hymns about the murder of Siyāvash and musicians call those hymns *Kin-e Siyāvash* (The Vengeance of Siyāvash) ... Every year, on the dawn of the New Year's Day, the magi of Bukhara ... sacrifice a rooster for Siyāvash. The people of Bukhara have several hymns about his murder which are known in the entire realm ... The qawwals (storytellers) call them the Crying of the Magi.<sup>53</sup>

Like *ta'ziyeh*, Kurdish funeral rites contain traces of *Sug-e Siyāvash* which, as described in *Shāhnāme*, involved crying, scratching, and injuring the body, mourners throwing earth on their heads, women pulling or chopping off their hair, cutting off the tail of the deceased's horse, wailing, describing the good features and traits of the deceased, singing and playing musical instruments. This tradition is more elaborate among the Lor and the Lek (mainly in the Iranian provinces of Ilam, Lorestan, and Kermanshah), whose tradition of *çemerî* or *çemere* bears striking resemblances to the ancient mourning ritual.<sup>54</sup> An account by Claudius Rich (1787-1821), who was in Iraqi Kurdistan in 1820, attests to the deep roots of the *çemerî* tradition among the Kurds:

As I was going to the palace today, I saw at a distance three military standards moving along. I imagined a large body of troops was on the march; but to my great surprise, I was informed it was a funeral. This custom is peculiar to Koordistan. In Kermanshah they accompany the body to the grave with music and singing.<sup>55</sup>

Another Kurdish mourning ritual that may have roots in the ancient *Sug-e Siyāvash* is *kotel*, which was usually performed on the occasion of the death of heads of families and ashirats.<sup>56</sup> In this ritual, a caparisoned horse with the deceased's guns and other important belongings placed on it was walked around in a circle or towards where the corpse was placed. In *çemerî*, this is accompanied by the mournful singing of women and the playing of *zurna*. Today at typical Kurdish funerals the rites are not as elaborate as in *çemerî*, which itself is losing popularity among the Lor and the Lek. However, crying, injuring the body, women pulling at their hair, and lamentation are still considered social duties by many. Kurdish lamentation is performed by women who may or may not be related to the deceased. They usually sing about the deceased and his good features and traits, coaxing the funeral attendants to cry. Such ritual mourning services serve as a valuable mechanism for remembering the deceased and purging the grief.

Despite the highly dramatic nature of Kurdish mourning rituals, they are rarely discussed in studies of Iranian performance traditions, which focus on *ta'ziyeh*, another derivation of *Sug-e Siyāvash*. Furthermore, the fact that *ta'ziyeh*, as a religious drama,

has survived in Iran despite the conservative Islamic restrictions on music has also fascinated scholars such as Beeman, who describes *ta'ziyeh* as the most prominent approved form of musical performance in the Persianate world.<sup>57</sup> In a chapter that deals with approved forms of performance in the Persianate world, Beeman only makes a passing remark about the function of music in Kurdish religious ceremonies.<sup>58</sup> This is unfortunate given the fact that, as Beeman himself notes, music is central to the numerous mystical sects that exist among the Kurds.<sup>59</sup>

Unlike in *ta'ziyeh*, in which music does not accompany the singing, in Kurdish sufi ceremonies the participants engage in a type of dance, or *sema*, which consists of moving the body backward and forward, and is performed in a state of trance accompanied by the rhythmic sound of *def*, songs, and saying of *dhikr*. These spiritual Sufi ceremonies are performed in *khanaqahs* in two separate rooms, one for male *def* players, singers, and participants, and the other for their female counterparts. Followers of *tariqa* may hold *mevlûdî* to celebrate the Prophet Mohammad's birth at their homes, with *sema* being an essential part of it. Among the Kurdish Ahl-i Haqq, the music, while not a necessary part of religious ceremonies, is performed to enhance and elevate the spiritual atmosphere.<sup>60</sup> This is similar to the Yezidi recitation of religious texts to the accompaniment of music.<sup>61</sup>

### *Storytelling*

Dramatic storytelling is a common tradition across most countries in the Middle East. It may be considered a native theatrical tradition of the region and in form lies closest to Western-style theatre.<sup>62</sup> The storyteller is known by names such as *qawwal*, *gouwâl*, *meddah* and, more commonly, *hakawati* in Arabic, *aşik* in Turkish and *naqqâl* in Persian. According to Amine and Carlson, although storytelling is not text-based, it clearly contains many features of drama including role-playing, epic narrativity, body language, interplay between illusion and reality, high/low rhythms, songs as instruments of blockage, structural fragmentation, and a committed audience.<sup>63</sup> Friederike Pannewick's description of narrative characteristics of *hakawati*, as quoted by Amine and Carlson, demonstrates its animating quality, as the *hakawati* has to take into account that his clientele will desert him if his performance does not meet their expectations. Thus, he has to design his narrative performance in such a way that he can prevent his audience from losing interest by increasing the dramatic tension whenever necessary.<sup>64</sup>

In Kurdistan, the narrator-performers who present long epic songs without musical accompaniment before a live audience are known as *dengbêj*, or *şair*.<sup>65</sup> In the past, because most of the *dengbêjs* were illiterate and a large proportion of Kurdish folk literature still unwritten, these performers specialized in memorizing and reciting vast repertoires of songs, legends, and poems of Kurdistan. Trained in certain schools,<sup>66</sup> the *dengbêjs* used to have patrons who supported and took care of them and were, in return, praised in their *dengbêjs'* songs. On the Kurdish *dengbêj* in the first decade of the twentieth century, Oscar Mann writes:

It seems that among the Kurds ... there was and still is a type of singing school, in which they cultivate popular epic poetry. Young people with fine singing voices betake themselves to a master ... to follow his instruction, and learn the repertoire of these masters exclusively by oral tradition ... the field where the art of recitation thus learned may be first practiced is in the houses of notables, who gladly pass the evening by listening to the singing of bards and generously repay the latter with *Khalat* (=gifts). Moreover, in the villages the bard contents himself with a plate of rice as payment for his recitation. In the towns, there are also coffee houses in which only tea is served which are packed full with people who have come primarily to hear the performance of whatever singer happens to be there.<sup>67</sup>

The storytellers would employ a range of dramatic techniques such as gestures and different voices for different characters. For example, in his study of voice and the speed of verbal discourse during the storytelling of *Mem û Zîn*, Chyêt writes:

When Mem awakes to find that Zîn is gone, the narrator-performer loudly interjects Ey-wah! (woe is me): he alters the pitch of his voice ... moreover, although at the beginning of the story the narrator-performer speaks slowly and deliberately, when he gets to Mem and Zîn's argument over who has come to whom, he is speaking quickly and excitedly: thus he alters the speed of his verbal discourse.<sup>68</sup>

Traditionally in the Middle East, storytelling was highly interactive, as audiences were encouraged to comment upon or even participate in the presentation of the story, which was interrupted from time to time in order for the performers to collect donations from the spectators. The material in such performances varied from legends to folktales, to history to popular anecdotes.<sup>69</sup> In Kurdistan, apart from countless folktales, folk songs, folk dances, poems, riddles, and proverbs, there are a number of widely known folk romances told in a combination of prose and sung verse. Some of these narratives, including *Leylî û Mecnûn* and *Yusuf û Zilêxa*, are also shared by neighboring peoples such as the Armenian, Nestorian, Chaldean, and Jacobite Christians, as well as by the Kurdish Jews. There are also long Kurdish narratives, such as *Mem û Zîn*, *Dimdim*, and *Xec û Siyabend*.<sup>70</sup> The Kurdish tradition therefore lies in the middle of a much wider one, without which the full story cannot be told.

Storytelling has been the most common and popular form of performance in many parts of Kurdistan. Many of the Kurdish emirs and feudal landlords were patrons of the arts, hosted performances of both literary and oral material, and had their own court poets sing their praises, as befitted their status.<sup>71</sup> Şukriye Resûl, for example, states that the court of Ewrehman Paşa, one of the greatest rulers of the Baban principality, was always well attended by the *beytbêj*, singers and poets such as Elî Berdeşanî, Cemşîd, and Heme Asmanî, whose poems, known as *beytî meclîs*, recorded the events and epic battles fought by the Kurdish prince.<sup>72</sup>

The best season for storytelling was long winter evenings and the holy month of Ramadan, just after the breaking of fast when the local people would gather in coffee-

houses. The stories told and enacted by the storyteller were mainly folktales and histories of local heroes. A popular saying among Kurdish Jews is, "Two things are necessary in winter, fire and folktale; fire to warm the body and folktale to warm the heart."<sup>73</sup> In Iranian Kurdistan, reading stories from Ferdowsi's epic *Shāhnāmeḥ* was so popular that each great family in Kermanshah had their own *Shāhnāmeḥ-khān*. Many verses of *Shāhnāmeḥ* stories told by Kurdish storytellers, according to Floor, were translated into Kurdish.<sup>74</sup> Izedin Mistefa Resûl recounts how during the nights of Ramadan, the storytellers would narrate stories about the heroes of *Shāhnāmeḥ* such as Rustemî Zal and Zorab in the big coffeehouses of the Kurdish cities.<sup>75</sup> He describes how the performers were able to completely engage their audiences, who would divide into separate groups that cheered for different characters and grieved for their demise.<sup>76</sup>

In Kurdistan, the performers of prose narratives are called *çirokbêj*. The *çirokbêj* were usually itinerant performers who wandered on foot from city to city, selecting public places to present their tales, with a strong theatrical element including improvised dramatic action, impersonation, singing, and dancing, usually accompanied by a tambourine and flute. Such performers enjoyed lower prestige than the *dengbêj* and, like the *aşik*, seem to have disappeared.<sup>77</sup>

Perhaps the most prestigious and popular oral genre in Kurdistan is poetry. The long narrative poems are called *beyt* in Sorani and *qewl*, or *hozan*, in Kurmanji.<sup>78</sup> Some *beyts* are about the history of a region and important events in the lives of the noble families who ruled the region. These are told by the *beytbêj*, who are considered to be local historians. They recount the glories of the past and so imbue their people with a sense of local pride and unity. However, praise-poem and heroic recitations were used in particular to honor the nobility who were patrons of local poets and artists. Every great house in Kurdistan had its own poet who would narrate their oral history. The *beytbêj* would sometimes narrate romantic epics or historical narratives in public places such as mosques and tea-houses. Between 1901 and 1903, and in collaboration with Javad Qazi, the German Kurdologist Oskar Mann collected nineteen *beyts* as told by a local *beytbêj* named Rehman Bekir in Mahabad, and along with six Kurdish legends published them in a book called *Die Mundart der Mukri*.<sup>79</sup>

The tradition of Kurdish storytelling has been the subject of a few academic studies that all contribute to a better understanding of how power relations and everyday politics are articulated through, and played out in, cultural productions and via cultural activism. Hamelink, for example, investigates the lives and songs of *dengbêjs* to understand the socio-political transformations that Kurdish society in Turkey went through over recent decades.<sup>80</sup> Likewise, Metin Yüksel's thesis delineates the *dengbêj* tradition as one of the important means for the dissemination of Kurdish culture, history and memories in the public sphere through generations, and in the preservation of Kurdish identity and cultural forms.<sup>81</sup> According to Yüksel, the Turkish state's denial of Kurdish identity, language, and culture has reinforced the already existing and strong Kurdish oral culture that has come to be the only communication channel, instrument, and/or means through which Kurds could have expressed themselves. The importance of the *dengbêj* tradition as a medium of expression is confirmed by Aras, who has examined the role of oral narrative genres of lament, and *dengbêj* per-

formance as the medium of traumatized people in the Kurdish community to speak about, share, and disseminate stories of their experiences of enduring pain and suffering.<sup>82</sup> He also shows how the *dengbêj* tradition became a politicized narrative genre and performance through which performers criticized and attacked the Turkish state policies by glorifying the Kurdish revolts and praising leaders of the revolts, Kurdish history, culture, and language.<sup>83</sup> Scalbert-Yücel has also analyzed the reconstruction of the tradition of *dengbêj* in Diyarbakir partly due to its selection and revitalization by Kurdish nationalists as part of the process of building a distinct national culture and “construction of a specifically Kurdish tradition.”<sup>84</sup>

Among the Kurds, storytelling has played an important role in the preservation of Kurdish culture, history, and memories, and their dissemination in the public sphere. Not only that, in Turkey it has been used as a form of resistance against the state and to make calls for revolution. By concentrating on the experiences and perspectives of ordinary Kurds, previous studies of *dengbêj* highlight the agency of the non-elite Kurds and place particular emphasis on Kurdish culture as an important terrain for retrieving marginalized voices of dissent. It is especially important to locate and retrieve these voices in the case of the Kurds because academics and historians of the Middle East tend to focus on the region’s major powers to the exclusion of the marginalized Kurds, whose “version of, or role in history is not really covered” in mainstream histories, to the detriment of understanding the history and culture of the region in the process.<sup>85</sup>

### Conclusion

Despite a wealth of Kurdish traditional folk performance existing in a variety of forms and contexts, conventional histories of Middle Eastern and in particular Iranian performance traditions rarely mention or delve deep into Kurdish performances. This is truly unfortunate given the fact that these performances have their origins in ancient Iranian traditions and thus their inclusion in theatre histories provide a deeper understanding of Iranian performance culture. Now that attempts have been made by independent Kurdish researchers to document Kurdish traditions, such as the *garwanekî* rain ritual, the broader scholarly community must take such research into account so that forgotten accounts of Kurdish and other minority performance traditions may be uncovered and those that are still in existence recorded. Following this path will fill in great gaps and further advance knowledge of Kurdish, Iranian, and Middle Eastern performance studies.

### Notes

1. Beeman, “A Full Arena,” 361-2.
2. Beeman, “(Theatre in the) Middle East,” 664.
3. Beyzai, *Namāyesh dar Irān*.
4. And, *History of Theatre*.
5. For instance, Kurdish oral ballads such as *Dimdim*, *Mem û Zin* and *Xec û Siyamend* have inspired several literary creations in classical and modern literature while many other popular ballads have



drawn on narratives common in Arabic and Persian literatures including, *Léyli w Mecnûn*, *Şêxî Senan*, *Yûsif û Zilêxa*, and *Ferhad û Şîrîn*.

6. Tenya, *Şano u Şanoy Kurdewarî*, 27.
7. For example there are references to a Nasreddin-like comedian in the city of Sulaymaniyah in the second half of the nineteenth century called Ehmedî Korno, who is described by Tewfîq Wehbi as “a great comedian” (Restûl, *Silêmani le Edebi Folkilorda*, 78). He narrated comic stories and played out the plots along with a few others like Ferec Kurdî and Cefer Leqleqzade. From what is written about Korno it seems he was a very well-known figure in his time and one who was invited by the notables of Sulaymaniyah, such as Osman Paşay Caf and Şêx Mistefay Neqîb, to perform at their houses (Kerîm, *Geşesendîni Dramay Kurdî*, 61).
8. For the transliteration of Kurdish words and names, I have opted to use the Latinized Kurdish Alphabet which is also used by the Library of Congress. See <https://www.loc.gov/catdir/cpsol/romanization/kurdish.pdf>. Also, in the case of common words between Kurdish and Persian, such as Newroz and Noruz, or dihol and dohol, I have opted to use Kurdish pronunciation unless referring to them in the Persian context.
9. Aydin, “Mobilising the Kurds in Turkey”.
10. Jaffar, “Le Theatre Kurde”.
11. Ehmedmîrza, *Şanoy Kurdî-Silemani*, 58, 129.
12. See Bozarsalan, “Some Remarks”; Hirschler, “Defining the Nation.”
13. Aydin, “Mobilising the Kurds in Turkey.”
14. Romano, *Kurdish Nationalist Movement*, 130–31.
15. Beyzai, *Namâyesh dar Irân*, 53.
16. *Ibid.*, 40, 53.
17. Pîrbal, *Mêjûy Şano*, 20.
18. *Ibid.*
19. Ashurpur, *Namâyesh-hâ-ye Irâni*, 32.
20. *Ibid.*, 37.
21. Floor, *History of Theater in Iran*, 92–3.
22. Ashurpur, *Namâyesh-hâ-ye Irâni*, 44–5, 92–3.
23. Pîrbal, *Mêjûy Şano*, 19. In his monumental study of religion and mythology, Sir James Frazer describes the old tradition of temporary kings as a modified form of the old custom of regicide which was practiced such diverse places as Cambodia, Siam, Samarcand, Egypt, Morocco, and Cornwall. This tradition, according to Frazer, is a fertility cult common to almost all mythologies in which the death and resurrection of the king/god is the personification of the rebirth of earth in the spring (Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, 283-9). These rites, as Frazer states, have been most widely and solemnly celebrated in Western Asia and Egypt where the gods of Osiris, Tammuz, Adonis, and Attis represented the vegetable life and its yearly decay and revival (*ibid.*, 325).
24. Tenya, *Şano u Şanoy Kurdewarî*, 45.
25. *Ibid.*, 45–6.
26. Edmonds, *Kurds, Turks, and Arabs*, 84.
27. Teymûr, “Derwazeyêkî Rixney,” 68.
28. Bois, *The Kurds*, 68.
29. Edmonds, *Kurds, Turks, and Arabs*, 84.
30. *Ibid.*
31. Teymûr, “Derwazeyêkî Rixney,” 64.
32. Tenya, *Şano u Şanoy Kurdewarî*, 46.
33. Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin*, 9.
34. Plastow, *African Theatre and Politics*, 26.
35. Hewramî, *Dramay Kurdî*, 296.
36. *Ibid.*
37. Tenya, *Şano u Şanoy Kurdewarî*, 47.

38. See Teymûr, "Derwazeyêkî Rixney." The source does not explain by whom and for what reasons the festival was brought to an end.
39. Amine and Carlson, *Theatres of Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia*, 52.
40. Beyzai, *Namāyesh dar Irān*, 40.
41. *Ibid.*, 40-41, 53.
42. Heidari, "Kuse Nāqāldi dar Ostān-e Markazi."
43. Salimi, *Zemestān dar Farhang-e Mardom-e Kurd*.
44. *Ibid.*, 99-101.
45. *Ibid.*, 104.
46. Bois, *The Kurds*, 68-9.
47. All the information about *garwanekî* here is based on fieldwork done by Mahmud Zarifian ("Symbolic and Mythical Ritual of Garwanekî"), Professor of Linguistics at the University of Tehran and the director of Radio Kermanshah. He conducted his fieldwork in villages of the Kermanshah, Ilam, and Lorestan provinces in western Iran.
48. Zarifian, "Symbolic and Mythical Ritual of Garwanekî," 206.
49. Some claim that the doll in this ritual is the symbol of Anahita, the goddess of water, and that the ritual dates back to the Zoroastrian era. See Azimpur, *Buka Bārāna*.
50. This tradition, which might have its origins in Mithraism, has been performed in the Iranian villages of Golpaygan, Arāk, Tafresh, Malāyer, Tuyserkan, Mahalāt, Khomeyn, Delijān, Isfahān, Dāmghān, Shāhrud, Yazd, Shahrekord, and Chārmahāl. See Afāzeli, *Tusheb-i az Tārikh-e Golpāygān*.
51. Darvishian, *Sāl-hā-ye Abri*, 559.
52. See Beeman, "(Theatre in the) Middle East"; Mesküb, *Sug-e Siyāvash*; Sattāri, *Zamineye Ejtēmā'īye*.
53. Cited in Beyzai, *Namāyesh dar Irān*, 30.
54. Farokhi and Kiyayi, "Marāsem-e Chamar dar Ilam," 22-5; Sagvand, "Ā'in-hā-ye Sugvāri," 10-13.
55. Rich, *Narrative of a Residence*, 301.
56. Pīrbal, *Mējūy Şano*, 20.
57. Beeman, "Music at the Margins," 148.
58. *Ibid.*, 151.
59. *Ibid.*
60. Hooshmandrad, *Performing the Belief*, 35.
61. Kreyenbroek, "On the Study of some Heterodox Sects"; Allison, *Yezidi Oral Tradition*.
62. Izedin Resûl, the distinguished Kurdish scholar, believes the traditional storytelling to be an apt introduction to any study of Kurdish theatre. See Resûl, *Lêkolînewey Edebî Folklorî Kûrdî*, 42.
63. Amine and Carlson, *Theatres of Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia*, 20.
64. *Ibid.*, 21.
65. Chyet, "And a thornbush sprang up between them," 9.
66. Jwaideh, *Kurdish National Movement*, 24.
67. Chyet, "And a thornbush sprang up between them," 10-11.
68. *Ibid.*, 110.
69. Amine and Carlson, *Theatres of Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia*, 16.
70. Allison, *Yezidi Oral Tradition*, 13.
71. *Ibid.*, 10-11.
72. Resûl, *Silêmani le Edebî Folkilorda*, 10.
73. Floor, *History of Theater in Iran*, 101.
74. *Ibid.*, 103.
75. Resûl, *Lêkolînewey Edebî Folklorî Kûrdî*, 41.
76. *Ibid.*, 42.
77. Allison, "Kurdish Oral Literature."
78. *Ibid.*
79. Mann, *Die Mundart der Mukri-Kurden*. In Iran, several researchers including Hêmin the poet, Abdollâh Ayubiyân, and Qâder Fattâhi Qâzi have embarked on collecting local *beyts* that are at risk of disappearance.

80. Hamelink, "The Sung Home."
81. Yüksel, *Dengej, Mullab, Intelligentsia*.
82. Aras, *The Formation of Kurdishness*.
83. *Ibid.*, 127.
84. Scalbert-Yücel, "The Invention of a Tradition".
85. O'Shea, *Trapped Between the Map and Reality*.

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