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# From *Dengbêj* to Modern Writer: Heritagization of the Kurdish Oral Tradition and Revitalization of the Kurdish Language in the Works of Mehmed Uzun and Mehmet Dicle

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## Abstract

Based on a textual analysis of the selected works of two writers from Turkey, Mehmed Uzun (1953–2007) and Mehmet Dicle (b.1977), as well as interviews with Kurdish writers and folklore collectors, this study focuses on the links between Kurdish folklore and modern Kurdish literature. Following Gregory Ashcroft's take on heritage, I argue that Kurdish writers' approach to folkloric motives has evolved through the impact of growing literary experience, inspiration from world literature and deepening knowledge of the Kurdish oral tradition. What is more, Kurdish literature can be treated as an example of cultural and language revitalization, which – according to Justyna Olko – is based on acting in and through the heritage language. Following Doreen Massey's concept of a progressive sense of place, I identify Uzun and Dicle's strategy as linking the local to the universal, suggesting that Kurdish literature should be analyzed within the context of a political geography beyond nationalism.

**Keywords:** Kurdish literature; Kurds in Turkey; Kurdish oral tradition; language revitalization; heritage

## Introduction

The Kurds, whose population is estimated at around 40 million, comprise one of the largest nations without a state of their own, residing in Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria, the Caucasus, and Europe. In the Republic of Turkey, established in 1923, the Kurdish identity was denied and linguistic violence was committed, impacting the Kurmanji and Zazaki Kurdish dialects.<sup>1</sup> This situation was embedded in Turkey's founding nationalist ideology, Kemalism, which was particularly strengthened after the 1980 military coup.<sup>2</sup> The brutal repressions of the early 1980s led to Kurdish radicalization, culminating in the military conflict between the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) and the Turkish state that claimed over 45,000 lives, including Turkish soldiers, Kurdish guerrillas, and many civilians.<sup>3</sup> From 1925 to 1991, the Kurdish

<sup>1</sup> The Kurdish language and its dialects belong to the North-Western Iranian languages family. As stressed by Haig and Öpengin, "there is no consensus in the literature when it comes to defining and classifying 'Kurdish.'" In their paper, Haig and Öpengin divide Kurdish dialects into five groups: Northern Kurdish (Kurmanji), Central Kurdish (Sorani), Southern Kurdish (which includes varieties such as Kelhuri, Feyli, Kirmashani), Gorani, and Zazaki (110). I follow this classification in my paper. Haig and Öpengin, "Kurdish: Critical Research Overview," 111.

<sup>2</sup> Skutnab-Kangas and Bucak, "Killing a Mother Tongue"; Koivunen, "Invisible War in Northern Kurdistan"; Yıldız, *Kurds in Turkey*; Saraçoğlu, *Kurds of Modern Turkey*; Yüksel, *Dengbêj, Mullah, Intelligentsia*; Zeydanlıoğlu, "Turkey's Kurdish Language Policy"; Hassanpour, *Essays on Kurds*.

<sup>3</sup> Gunes, "Kurdish Political Activism in Turkey," 88.

language was forbidden in Turkey, even in private use, and both children and adults were punished severely for breaking the ban. Public education and all modern initiatives were done in Turkish. For obvious reasons, this policy prevented the development of Kurdish press and literature, resulting in a significant loss of culture, as Kurdish culture had primarily been passed orally for many centuries. However, classical Kurdish Kurmanji literature developed in Kurdish religious schools (*medresas*), which kept functioning underground after being outlawed in 1924. According to Metin Yüksel, in the first decades of the Republic, the Kurmanji language survived mostly due to the efforts of Kurdish *dengbêjs* (traditional oral performers) and *mullahs* who managed to elude the bans, especially in rural areas, alongside Kurdish intelligentsia in the Armenian SSR, Syria and Lebanon.<sup>4</sup> These intellectuals focused on producing a Latin version of the Kurdish alphabet, standardizing the Kurdish language, and collecting and publishing folklore.<sup>5</sup>

In 1991, during the presidency of Turgut Özal,<sup>6</sup> the ban on the Kurdish language was lifted for the first time, allowing for the slow but steady development of a Kurdish press and book market. New hopes for peace arose in 2002 with the coming to power of the Justice and Development Party (AKP). Under the guidance of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, AKP initially demonstrated a will to reform in order to reinvigorate the Turkey-EU accession process. As part of these reforms, the Kurds were allowed to teach Kurdish in private courses in 2005; the prime minister allowed a public TV channel, TRT6, to broadcast in Kurdish for the first time at the end of 2008; the first department of Kurdish was established at Mardin Artuklu University in 2010;<sup>7</sup> and Kurdish was introduced as an elective subject starting from the fifth class of public primary school in 2012. Implementation of these initiatives was, however, often hampered by bureaucratic obstacles. After many twists and turns, this policy finally collapsed when the fragile peace process initiated by the government around 2009 ended abruptly in the summer of 2015, triggering new clashes between the Turkish army and the PKK. After 2015, and especially after the failed coup of 2016, state repression intensified and many Kurdish institutions were shut down, significantly hindering cultural life once again. Nevertheless, the many new Kurdish social and cultural activities encouraged between 2002 and 2015 did not cease completely under the new circumstances. Indeed, gathering the oral tradition and writing literary texts continues, a testament to the determination of the Kurdish people.

Kurdish contemporary prose began developing at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the first Kurdish journals appearing in the Ottoman Empire in 1898.<sup>8</sup> The first Kurdish short

<sup>4</sup> In the initial period after the revolution of 1918, the Bolsheviks recognized all languages spoken by different ethnic groups as potential vehicles for communist propaganda. Thus, from 1920 onward, the Kurdish language was taught in schools in the Armenian SSR, initially by Armenians and then by a growing number of Kurdish teachers. In 1929, Îşak Maragulov (1868–1933) introduced the Latin version of the Kurdish alphabet, which was in use until the 1950s, when the Russian language began occupying the central position in the Soviet republics. This is why the Kurdish alphabet was moved into the Cyrillic script (Yüksel, 294–349). Kurdish intellectuals in the Armenian SSR were often of Yezidi background, as their families had escaped from persecution in both the Ottoman Empire and Turkey. Many were raised in Soviet orphanages and educated following the tradition of Russian Kurdology. Heciyê Cindî (1908–1990), Casimê Celîl (1908–1998) and his children Ordixanê Celîl (1932–2007), Celîlê Celîl (1936) and Cemîla Celîl (1940), as well as Erebe Şemo (1897–1978), Emînê Evdal (1906–1964), and Qanatê Kurdo (1909–1985) are only a few of the numerous Kurdish intellectuals in the Soviet Union; for more, see Boyîk, *Çanda Kurdên Sovêtê*.

<sup>5</sup> Yüksel, *Dengbêj, Mullah, Intelligentsia*.

<sup>6</sup> Turgut Özal (1927–1993), the eighth president of Turkey, was known for his Kurdish origins and numerous attempts to peacefully solve the Kurdish issue in Turkey.

<sup>7</sup> In fact, the department is called Yaşayan Diller Enstitüsü (The Institute of Living Languages) and, after 2016, many Kurdish academics – e.g. Remezan Alan and Mikail Bülbül – were dismissed from work or sought refuge in other countries. For more, see: “Academic Rights Violations in the Field of Kurdish Studies in Turkey,” the report of the Foundation of İsmail Beşikçi.

<sup>8</sup> Chronologically, *Kurdistan* was the first Kurdish newspaper. The first issue was published in 1898 in Cairo; later issues were printed in Geneva and London. Its editor-in-chief was Mikdad Midhat Bedirxan—a member of the

story was published in the magazine *Rojî Kurd* in 1913; the story's author, Fuad Temo, was a co-founder of the Kurdish student organization Hêvî, which oversaw the magazine's publication.<sup>9</sup> The first Kurdish novel, *Şivanê Kurmanca* (The Kurdish Shepherd) by Erebe Şemo, was published in Soviet Armenia in 1935. Due to restrictions between 1923 and 1980, only 20 books were published in Turkey in Kurmanji Kurdish;<sup>10</sup> and between 1980 and 1989, no Kurdish books were published.<sup>11</sup> From the 1970s onward, the Kurdish diaspora began playing an important role in the development of Kurdish culture, with Sweden becoming a center of modern Kurdish literature, publishing 402 Kurmanji books between 1971 and 1997.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to these initiatives, translations of European and other Middle Eastern literary works into Kurdish, which began in the 1930s and were initially translated from already-existing translations published in the official languages of Arabic, Persian, Turkish, or Russian, also contributed significantly to the development of Kurdish prose.<sup>13</sup> As Mustafa İzzedin Resul stressed, these new inspirations were strongly influenced, from the very beginning, by Kurdish fairy tales and other examples of oral storytelling.<sup>14</sup>

Although the role of folklore in the development of modern Kurdish prose is commonly cited in studies on Kurdish literature, the link between the two is rarely explored in detail.<sup>15</sup> The culture's rich oral tradition is identified as both a source of strength<sup>16</sup> and weakness<sup>17</sup> for modern Kurdish prose.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, studies devoted to the various aspects of the Kurdish oral tradition pay no attention to either the link between the oral tradition and modern literature, or their unquestionable aesthetic and revitalizing potential.<sup>19</sup> While it is often stressed that Kurdish folklore coexisted with literacy for a long time,<sup>20</sup> little attention is paid to modern approaches to traditional storytellers, their performances, stories, or language. Instead, research on the modern use of the oral tradition is limited to Kurdish theater in Turkey<sup>21</sup> and Iraq,<sup>22</sup> and to popular culture, such as pop music and TV shows.<sup>23</sup>

Although modern Kurdish writers are not as popular as pop stars, their approach to folklore is creative and deserving of scholarly attention, as it has the potential to enrich our

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prominent Kurdish family of Bedirxans and of the organization known as Kürd Tealî Cemiyetî. The newspaper published 31 issues in Kurmanji Kurdish and Ottoman Turkish.

<sup>9</sup> Ahmedzadeh, *Nation and Novel*, 158; Shakely, *Modern Kürt Öykü Sanatı*, 8.

<sup>10</sup> Galip, *Imagining Kurdistan*, 78.

<sup>11</sup> Ahmedzadeh, *Nation and Novel*, 165.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 155–156.

<sup>14</sup> Resul, "Ara' fi al-qissa al-kurdiyya," *Al-Aqlam*, 19, no. 2–3 (1984): 113, quoted after Shakely, *Modern Kürt Öykü Sanatı*, 26.

<sup>15</sup> In this paper, the terms "oral tradition" and "folklore" are both used, even though folklore usually includes social practices, not just the content of the performance. However, as shown in the following sections, "oral" production is definitely not the only source of inspiration for modern prose, as such also draws on other social phenomena associated with oral performances.

<sup>16</sup> Uzun, *Dengbêjlerim, Zincirlenmiş zamanlar*; Alan, *Folklor û Roman*; Mehmet Dicle, interview with the writer in October 2019 and February 2020; Nemir, "Kurtchizrek."

<sup>17</sup> Alan, *Folklor û Roman*; Mehmet Dicle, interview with the writer in October 2019 and February 2020.

<sup>18</sup> A similar discussion took place in Turkish literary criticism a few decades earlier around folklore's both positive and negative role in the development of modern literature (especially poetry); see the 37<sup>th</sup> issue of the journal *Yazko Edebiyat* (1983–1984).

<sup>19</sup> Rudenko, *Kurdskaya obriadovaya poezija*; Chyet, *And a Thornbush Sprang*; Kreyenbroek, "Introduction"; Allison, "Kurdish Oral Literature" and "The Shifting Borders of Conflict"; Scalbert-Yücel, "The Invention of The Tradition"; Yüksel, *Dengbêj, Mullah, Intelligentsia*; Bocheńska, "What is The Source"; Hamelink, *Sung Home*; Morad, *Stranbêjî in Contemporary Iraqi Kurdistan*; Pertev, *Folklor û Nasnameya Kurdî*; Keskin, *Folklor û Edebiyata Gelerî*.

<sup>20</sup> Allison, "Kurdish Oral Literature."

<sup>21</sup> Duygu Çelik, "The Impact of the Dengbêj Tradition on Kurdish Theater in Turkey."

<sup>22</sup> Rostami, *Kurdish Nationalism on Stage*.

<sup>23</sup> Scalbert-Yücel, "The Invention of The Tradition"; Hamelink, *Sung Home*; Morad, *Stranbêjî in Contemporary Iraqi Kurdistan*.

understanding of Kurdish heritage and literature, revitalize the Kurdish language, and shed light on the oral tradition. While this paper cannot fill the gap comprehensively, it does aim to problematize the topic, analyze selected works of two authors representing different generations of writers, and identify developments taking place in this area. Following Gregory Ashcroft's definition of heritage and Doreen Massey's idea of a progressive sense of place, I argue that Kurdish writers' approach to and application of folkloric motives has evolved through increasing literary experience, inspiration from world literature, and a deeper knowledge of the Kurdish oral tradition, which has, in recent decades, been collected and studied by both young and old across Kurdistan.

As shown here, modern Kurdish literature is an example of language and culture revitalization; it must be analyzed within the context of a not solely nationalist political geography, including the vibrant relations between local and global. I focus mainly on two aspects of heritagization—the literary update of *dengbêj* performance and the progressive sense of place—which are central to the works of Mehmed Uzun and Mehmet Dicle. These authors were chosen for their close and explicit attachment to folklore, which they both treat as an important source of literary inspiration. Their focus on the “how” of modern writing certainly makes them important figures in a Kurdish literary reality often dominated by ideology over aesthetics. Furthermore, this focus also enables us to discuss the process of heritagization, which is very much related to the question of “how” to apply the past in the present. However, as shown in the following sections, Mehmed Uzun perceived modern literature through the lens of the oral tradition in which he was still very much embedded and, at the same time, his approach to oral performance was rather simplistic. He understood this performance as a simple tradition that was dying out and being replaced by literature. According to Mehmet Dicle, on the other hand, the oral tradition was a source of perfection, but one should “follow the leads of modern literature” in order to fully take advantage of Kurdish folklore. Comparing these two approaches reveals a key to the Kurdish literary process and provides us with insight into the changing role of oral tradition in Kurdish society, which is gradually less romanticized and better explored.

This study is based on textual analysis of selected essays and literary works from both Uzun and Dicle, as well as interviews with five authors, 13 folklore collectors, and Kurdish cultural institutions conducted between 2013 and 2021. I also refer to modern Irish and Polish literature, where oral traditions have played an important role in cultural resistance and language revitalization. In addition, I draw from my own background as a translator of Kurdish literature.

### *Heritage Making and Revitalization in the Oppressed Language*

Modern Kurdish literature and its use of oral tradition are closely linked to other social and cultural practices observed in the Turkish part of Kurdistan in recent years, as well as in other parts of the Kurdish homeland. One of these practices is collecting and publishing texts from the Kurdish oral tradition, which has become increasingly popular in Turkey among many young Kurds wishing to “discover their roots,” “learn their mother tongue,” or “save their culture” from (what they call) the state's “cultural genocide.”<sup>24</sup> Apart from multiple individual initiatives, interest in folklore and collecting material of oral traditions has been advanced in recent decades by Kurdish cultural institutions, such as: Sentera Dîclê-Firatê (Dicle-Firat Center); Mala Dengbêjan (The House of Dengbêjs); Navenda Çand û Hûnerê ya Cigerxwîn (Cigerxwîn Art and Cultural Center); Navenda Çanda Mezopotamya (Mezopotamya Cultural Center); Enstitûya Kurdî ya Stenbolê (Kurdish Institute in Istanbul); Grupa Xebateya Vateyî (The Vate Group); Weqfa Çandî û Lêkolînê ya Kurdî (The Kurdish Foundation for Culture and Research) (Turkey); Enstîtroy Kelepûrî Kurdî (The

<sup>24</sup> From discussions with Bêrîvan Matyar, folklore collector and student at Dicle University (Diyarbakir, Turkey), Kraków, October–November 2019.

Heritage Institute); Binkey Jîn Bo Bûjandinewey Kelepûrî, Belgenamey û Rojnamewanî Kurdî (The Institute of Life For Revitalization of Heritage, Documentation and Journalism, in short: Jîn Institute) (Iraqi Kurdistan); The Kurdish Institute of Tehran; and many other individual initiatives, such as by Salah Payanyanî, who has collected and published Kurdish folklore from Mahabad (Iran).<sup>25</sup> Moreover, various journals devoted to folklore have emerged in Turkey, such as the popular *Folklorê Kurdistan*, *Folklorê Me* and the academic journal *Folklor û Ziman*.

As stressed by Necat Keskin, Kurdish journals have played the role of archiving the Kurdish oral tradition for many years due to a lack of state initiatives. In addition, there are a few publishing houses that pay special attention to Kurdish folklore, such as *Wardoz*, *Nûbihar*, *Avesta*, *Rûpel*, and *Lîs*. The former is especially praised among folklore collectors for not imposing standard Kurdish on content that is often very region specific.<sup>26</sup> There have also been many master's theses on folklore defended at the Institute of Living Languages at the Artuklu University.<sup>27</sup> Collectively, these activities may be perceived as political and cultural resistance to official state policy, which still does not recognize Kurdish identity as part of Turkey's "national" heritage, even though the Turkish entertainment industry has incorporated Kurdish culture; for example, many Kurdish songs have been translated into Turkish and popularized as "Turkish" to both non-Kurdish citizens and the outside world.<sup>28</sup> What is more, these initiatives are also an important part of language revitalization, and as such provide language and folklore documentation, a "corpus" or "collection of examples" that help to imagine how "language is employed in a range of contexts and situations."<sup>29</sup>

The Kurdish oral tradition has been recorded from the *dengbêjs*. *Dengbêj* is a Kurdish term originating in *deng*—meaning voice—and is the present stem of the verb *gotin*, which means to tell—*bêj*. In this paper, I use the word *dengbêj* as a general term that refers to traditional Kurdish performers, both singers and storytellers. In recent years, *dengbêj* has been popularized in Turkey, becoming a symbol of the Kurdish oral tradition. Yet, the word *dengbêj* usually meant a performer who sang<sup>30</sup> or recited without musical accompaniment,<sup>31</sup> and not people who only recounted fairy tales (*çirokbêj*, *çirok*—story). Different terms, such as *dengbêj* or *stranbêj* (the latter coming from the Kurdish word for song—*stran*), might have been very region-specific<sup>32</sup> or, as stressed by Morad in relation to the Badinan region (Iraq), referred to semi-professional or professional performers. The former were believed to compose their own songs and the latter to have performed the songs of others.<sup>33</sup> Very often, the lyrics were intertwined with prosaic language and singing became closer to storytelling. There were some plot lines, such as in the famous *Dimdim*,<sup>34</sup> which could

<sup>25</sup> Based on interviews conducted with representatives of Kurdish cultural institutions between 2013 and 2018. On the role of Kurdish cultural institutions, see Renata Kurpiewska-Korbut, "Socio-Political Role of Modern Kurdish Institution."

<sup>26</sup> Based on my interviews with folklore collectors 2020–2021.

<sup>27</sup> Following the information from Necat Keskin, online communication, May 2020 and December 2020. See also: Keskin, "Kovargeriya Akademîk a Kurdî li Tîrkiyeyê."

<sup>28</sup> Beşikçi, *Türk Tarih Tezi*, 117–118; Korkmaz, "Çifte Stardandın Adı Kürdübesk," 39–48; Yüksel, *Dengbêj, Mullah, Intelligentsia*, 89.

<sup>29</sup> Peter K. Austin, "Language Documentation and Language Revitalisation."

<sup>30</sup> Hamelink, *Sung Home*, 16.

<sup>31</sup> Scalbert-Yücel, "The Invention of the Tradition," 4.

<sup>32</sup> Hamelink, *Sung Home*, 16.

<sup>33</sup> Morad, *Stranbêjî in Contemporary Iraqi Kurdistan*, 52.

<sup>34</sup> *Dimdim* is the famous Kurdish epic about the fall of the Kurdish castle of Dimdim, located in the Mergawer region (South-West of Urmia Lake), to the army of Shah Abbas I. The epic is also known under the titles *Xanê Destezerîn*, *Xanê Lepezerîn*, and *Xanê Çengezerîn* (The Khan of Golden Hands). It was told in different dialects and was very popular among Kurds. It presented the Kurdish Sunni battle with the Shiites in heroic tones and epitomized the final failure as a chance for future victory. It was retold in the form of a novel by Erebe Şemo (1965)

be performed both ways, making a clear-cut distinction between the genres and performers difficult.<sup>35</sup>

Collecting and popularizing folklore entails different approaches to the past, memory, and contemporary transformations of oral tradition. Following Gregory Ashcroft's paradigms,<sup>36</sup> I would like to differentiate folklore collectors, performers, and writers' approaches to dealing with the past – defined as *preservation*, *conservation*, and *heritage* – in oral tradition. According to Ashcroft, preservation is “a protective intervention to maintain the current condition of an artifact,”<sup>37</sup> conservation “preserves purposefully” but entails some changes,<sup>38</sup> and the goal in heritage is “not to preserve anything from the past but to use the past in the present.”<sup>39</sup> Hence, heritage creates a resource and focuses on “the needs of the present that a past transformed into heritage can help satisfy.”<sup>40</sup> This way, heritage can also be very much related to the aesthetic dimension of literary works, as using the past in the present very often entails the question of “how to do so.”

Preservation is the main aim of Kurdish collectors, who often avoid making changes to narratives when recording, deal carefully with the content of oral performance, or seek its most “original” version.<sup>41</sup> For performers and modern writers, on the other hand, their approach can encapsulate all three paradigms. There are traditional performers who are known and acclaimed because they preserve the traditional style of performance. However, adjusting their own oral repository to the needs of the current generation of listeners is also embedded in the tradition<sup>42</sup> and strengthened by modern technology.<sup>43</sup>

The goals of modern Kurdish writers also differ from each other. Whereas Ronî War wishes to retell many oral stories in written form in order to make them more familiar and accessible to students,<sup>44</sup> which can be described as “purposeful preservation or conservation,” Mehmet Dicle is focused on the aesthetic perfection of a new literary text,<sup>45</sup> and Sadiq Êskan collects topics and vocabulary to create modern short stories or cartoon film scenarios.<sup>46</sup> Hence, these authors treat the oral repository as heritage. For others, like

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and transformed into a play by Talat Saman entitled *Qelay Dimdim*, which was staged in Erbil (Iraqi Kurdistan) in 1982 (see more: Rostami, *Kurdish Nationalism on Stage*, 171–179).

<sup>35</sup> See more: Ordixanê Celîl [Jalîl], *Kurdskiy geroicheskiy epos*.

<sup>36</sup> Ashcroft's paradigms refer mainly to tangible heritage, such as architecture, but I also find them useful for discussing intangible heritage, including the oral tradition.

<sup>37</sup> Ashcroft, “Preservation, Conservation and Heritage,” 4.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>41</sup> As stressed by Ashcroft, “preservation” provokes many questions as to whether an artefact can be really preserved in an unmodified way, or whether it only serves political illusions designed to “preserve the past as it is” (*Planowanie dziedzictwa*, 45). This is very relevant to the process of preserving the Kurdish oral tradition, which is sometimes implemented only in a written form, and thus cannot be called “unmodified.” What is more, the published records of oral performances often do not pay any attention to the social context, and thus they ignore a significant aspect of the role and meaning of oral performance (Hamelink, *Sung Home*, 17–18; Morad, *Stranbêjî in Contemporary Iraqi Kurdistan*, 60–65). However, the intention of collectors and writers is most important to the current study, as this intention impacts their approach to folklore, restricting or allowing changes accordingly.

<sup>42</sup> Uzun, *Dengbêjlerim, Zincirlenmiş zamanlar*; Allison, “Kurdish Oral Literature”; Rostami, *Kurdish Nationalism on Stage*.

<sup>43</sup> Hamelink, *Sung Home*, 287–342; Morad, *Stranbêjî in Contemporary Iraqi Kurdistan*, 133–179.

<sup>44</sup> Personal interview with the writer, Mardin, July 2015. Ronî War was born in 1969 in the village of Dêrika Çiyayê Mazî (Kurdistan, Turkey). He was a representative of the Workers' Association and imprisoned twice. Now, he is in charge of the Ava Publishing House. He translated many works from Turkish into Kurdish and published short stories and novels, among them: *Kuçeçirok* (2010), *Feqiyê Teyran* (2011), *Mem û Zîn* (2011), *Siyabend û Xecê* (2011), *Behlulê Dîwane* (2013), *Deftera Wenda* (2013).

<sup>45</sup> Personal communication with the writer, summer 2015 and 2017, and interviews in October 2019 and February 2020.

<sup>46</sup> Sadiq Êskan was born in 1981 in Qûca Heciyân, near Qoser (Kurdistan, Turkey). He studied philosophy at Çukurova University. His short stories were published in different Kurdish journals, including *Nûza*, *Çirûsk*, *W*, *Tîroj*, and *Persona*, for which he received literary prizes. He also collaborated with Roj TV and Zarok TV, writing



Bahoz Baran,<sup>47</sup> collecting and publishing folklore is accompanied by literary activity; thus, he is simultaneously interested in preservation and heritage. Identifying the different strategies exposes the writers' different tasks impacting the content and aesthetics of their literary works. Acknowledging these different strategies can enrich literary criticism and textual analysis, often simply reduced to a discussion of the quality of contemporary Kurdish literature or, in contrast, the quality of the collection and publication of the oral tradition.<sup>48</sup>

Collecting and studying the oral tradition in order to produce modern texts in a language suppressed for many decades, at best relegated to the space of "home" and thus viewed as incapable of articulating many modern topics, must be perceived as resistance to assimilation<sup>49</sup> and dehumanization,<sup>50</sup> as well as a powerful revitalization practice. This practice can be related to the language usage policy described by Joseph Lo Bianco, which aims to produce new speakers, revitalize old speakers, revitalize old domains and penetrate new domains "beyond the limited confines to which endangered languages have retreated."<sup>51</sup> As stressed by Justyna Olko, "acting in and through the heritage language" is of crucial importance to diminishing the stigma and shame often connected with speaking in a minority language, alongside encouraging other native speakers to use the language both at home and for modern purposes.<sup>52</sup> Many Kurdish people I encountered in Turkey declared that seeing a book in Kurdish and showing it to Turks, who often perceive Kurds and their culture as "primitive" or "tribal," was a source of pride and self-confidence, even if they had problems reading it themselves.

From its beginning, Kurdish modern literature became the source for modern vocabulary, introducing new words and attributing new meaning to existing ones.<sup>53</sup> What is more, as stressed by Farangis Ghaderi, modern Kurdish poetry circulated initially in a printed version and, at the same time, was very often memorized and delivered orally to illiterate audiences.<sup>54</sup> This highlights the deep interdependence of the oral and the written Kurdish worlds; an interdependence still visible. Acknowledging this is important because, as stressed by Furniss:

if we focus upon the interactions between the oral and the written in everyday discourse and in the composition, performance and transmission of crafted languages, 'texts' in the broadest sense, then we do not require the framework which sees writing as a necessary step on the path from the primitive to the civilized and as mark of difference between 'us' and 'them'.<sup>55</sup>

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scenarios for children's cartoon series, including *Ax û Jiyan* and *Pînik û Pîya*. He published *Payîzêr* (2017, a study on the Kurdish Kurmanji calendar) and the novel *Şampaz* (2019). Online interview with the writer, July 2020.

<sup>47</sup> Bahoz Baran was born in Lice (Kurdistan, Turkey) in 1982 and graduated from Artuklu University; he is a folklore collector and writer. He has collaborated with the journals *Folklorê Kurdistan* and *Folklorê Me*, as well as with the *Mezopotamya Foundation*. In 2017, along with a group of friends, he established the Wardozi Publishing house ([www.wardozi.com](http://www.wardozi.com)), the main aim of which is to publish works in the Kurdish language and focus on Kurdish folklore. Baran also works on Kurdish language and folklore terminology. He is author of *Rêzimana Kurmanjî* (2017), *Folklorê Bîşafînê* (2017), and *Motik* (2017). Online interview with the writer, June–July 2020.

<sup>48</sup> I encountered many such debates during my fieldwork in Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Europe between 2013 and 2018, as well as when conducting interviews for this research project (2019–2020). Whereas collectors and researchers tend to accuse certain publications of "being far from the original version and introducing changes," some writers and critics stress that texts are too attached to the oral tradition instead of focusing on modern literary topics and aesthetics.

<sup>49</sup> Yüksel, *Dengbêj, Mullah, Intelligentsia*.

<sup>50</sup> Bocheńska, "Humanising the Actors."

<sup>51</sup> Lo Bianco, "Reinvigorating Language Policy and Planning," 43.

<sup>52</sup> Olko, "Acting In and Through."

<sup>53</sup> Ghaderi, *The Emergence and Development*, 107–123.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>55</sup> Furniss, *Orality*, 140

As shown in this paper, although sometimes perceived as a weakness of modern Kurdish literature due to its “embeddedness in orality and the traditional world,” interconnections can at the same time enrich the literary aesthetics and strengthen the revitalizing potential of language.

What is more, Olko considers “acting in and through the heritage language” an important task for both native speakers and foreign researchers focused on a specific culture or social reality expressed in a language, stressing that it opens the way for more fruitful collaboration between the two and an exchange of inside and outside perspectives on the studied subject. Hence, “working in and through the heritage language” together can be very empowering for the former and eye-opening for the latter.<sup>56</sup> Translating Kurdish literature into a foreign language very often involves close cooperation between the translator and writer, especially if the translator is not a native speaker of Kurdish. As writers tend to use regional vocabulary, difficult to understand using existing dictionaries, close cooperation between the two and the documentation of many expressions contribute to our knowledge of the Kurdish language and culture. This can be associated with the collective efforts of native speakers and foreigners to “act in and through the heritage language” to popularize and enhance its use.

According to the Irish writer and folklore specialist Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, literary works can offer “interpretations of the oral literature” and “throw light on the folklore sources,”<sup>57</sup> not only on modern texts. She identifies a few ways in which modern Irish writers apply folkloric motives, which I enumerate below with some additional observations from Kurdish literature:

- a) Retelling of folktales or legends, popular in children’s literature and, as mentioned above, the works of Kurdish writers like Ronî War.<sup>58</sup>
- b) Parodying folk narratives, visible in short stories by Helîm Yûsiv<sup>59</sup> and Hesenê Metê.<sup>60</sup>
- c) Using the images, motifs, and expressions (songs, idioms, and proverbs) derived from traditional stories metaphorically, in order to extend the meaning of contemporary texts, and atmospherically, to enhance and embellish the texture and extend the “semantic reach of the new text, giving it a universal metaphoric resonance.”<sup>61</sup>
- d) Applying oral narratives in the structure of the work;<sup>62</sup> for example, in the novel *Rojek ji Rojên Evdalê Zeynikê* (*One Day of Life of Evdalê Zeynikê*) by Uzun and the short story “Nara” by Dicle, discussed below.
- e) Transferring social practices connected with *dengbêj* performances to literary works in a way that inspires the structure of the text, for example in Uzun’s novel *Hawara Dicleyê* (*The Call of The Tigris River*). This is not typical of Irish literature but is applicable to the Kurdish situation.

Finally, as shown in the following sections, Kurdish literature is today created not only for Kurds. Writers also have foreign readers and the universal dimension of their work in mind, as having books translated and published in other countries is a source of joy, pride, and hope, and may thus be perceived as an empowering practice.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Olko, “Acting In and Through.”

<sup>57</sup> Dhuibhne, “Some Hardcore Storytelling,” 210.

<sup>58</sup> See more on this subject in chapter three of Alan’s book *Folklor û Roman*, 83–136.

<sup>59</sup> Helîm Yûsiv is a Kurdish writer from the Syrian part of Kurdistan. He was born in 1967 in Amûd, studied law at Halep (Aleppo) University and migrated to Germany in 2000. He is the author of novels and short stories, including: *Mirî Ranazîn* (1996), *Sobarto* (1999), *Mem Bê Zîn* (2003), and *Tirsa Bê Diran* (2006).

<sup>60</sup> See Remezan Alan’s analysis of short stories by Helîm Yûsiv and Hesenê Metê, *Folklor û Roman*, 140–143.

<sup>61</sup> Dhuibhne, “Some Hardcore Storytelling,” 212.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Based on multiple discussions with Kurdish writers from 2009 to present, including: Hesenê Metê (Stockholm 2009, 2015; Kraków 2012), Sherzad Hassan (Erbil, Iraqi Kurdistan, 2014; Kraków, 2019), Eta Nehayî (Sine (Sanandaj),



### *From Oral Tradition to Modern Kurdish Literature: Mehmed Uzun and Mehmet Dicle*

In this section, I focus on Mehmed Uzun and Mehmet Dicle's approaches to literature and oral tradition. For both authors, literature is primarily an aesthetic tool for discussing the difficult Kurdish reality, rather than an ideological one. However, what they transfer from the "oral" to the "literary" world is not simply a topic told anew in prosaic language or in written form. Instead, these writers are interested in engaging the oral experience to promulgate emergent Kurdish literary aesthetics and associated genres, which include the novel and short story respectively. This intention is expressed in their essays and statements, and is notably visible in their works, in their care for the novel and short story form; as such, they can both be considered "modern writers." At the same time, today their efforts can be evaluated quite differently by readers. For some critics, Mehmed Uzun was not a successful modern writer because he was caught between oral storytelling and modern writing.<sup>64</sup> However, I insist that his output has yet to be properly examined and contains very interesting views on incorporating Kurdish orality into literature and revitalizing the Kurdish language. What is more, instead of drawing a strict border between "modern" (literary) and "traditional" (oral), or "successful" and "unsuccessful," I suggest identifying and discussing Uzun and Dicle's different stages of spontaneous and/or deliberate embeddedness in oral tradition. Reading and analyzing their essays, statements, and works enables us to discuss the continuity and change in their approaches to the place of folklore in modern Kurdish literature. It must be remembered that, today, even Kurdish traditional performance functions in a fully modern way via printed publications, online networks, recordings, and participation in the global cultural festivals.

#### *Seeking beauty in simplicity: Mehmed Uzun and his idea of a literary language.*

Mehmed Uzun is an important figure in the history of modern Kurdish prose.<sup>65</sup> Born in 1953 in the town of Siwerek, he was raised in a solely Kurmanji and Zazaki speaking environment until primary school. Indeed, it was only after his teacher slapped him for speaking Kurdish at school did Uzun realize the language ban existed.<sup>66</sup> Hence, like many young Kurds, Uzun abandoned his mother tongue during his school years in favor of Turkish; he only returned to Kurdish years later when editing a literary journal, an activity for which he was sentenced to eight months in prison in 1976. As a result, he fled the country and settled in Sweden, where he began his literary career in the 1980s by publishing several novels: *Tu* (You, 1985), *Mirina Kalekî Rind* (Death of an Old Rind, 1987), *Siya Evînê* (The Shadow of Love, 1989), *Rojek ji Rojên Evdalê Zeynikê* (One Day of life of Evdalê Zeynikê, 1991), *Bîra Qederê* (The Well of Faith, 1995), *Ronî Mîna Evînê Tarî Mîna Mirinê* (Light Like Love, Darkness Like Death, 1998), and *Hawara Dicleyê* (The Call of the Tigris River, 2002). Moreover, he authored a stylized *destan* called *Mirina Egîdekî* (Death of a Hero), along with many essays on Kurdish

Iranian Kurdistan 2017; Kraków 2018), Jan Dost (online communication, 2013–2019), Helîm Yûsiv (online communication, 2013; Frankfurt 2017), Mehmet Dicle (Istanbul 2015, 2017, 2019; Kraków 2018).

<sup>64</sup> See, for example, Remezan Alan's work *Folklor û Roman*, 83–136.

<sup>65</sup> Today, some Kurdish readers and critics believe that Uzun's fame as a Kurdish writer from Turkey was not necessarily due to his literary skills, but instead to certain social and political circumstances. Remezan Alan stresses that, for Turkish audiences, it was more recognizable to be a friend of Yaşar Kemal Uzun, and thus Uzun became a suitable figure to represent Kurdish literature. His novels were immediately translated into Turkish, becoming popular among Kurds who had lost knowledge of their mother tongue. Moreover, at a time when the novel was gaining popularity in Turkey, the Kurdish public wanted an author that could represent Kurdish culture to the Turks. Online discussion with Remezan Alan, December 2020.

Yaşar Kemal (1923–2015)—Turkish writer of Kurdish origin, known for his interest in Turkey's different ethnic groups, their languages and folklore. He authored many novels, including: *İnce Mehmed*, 1955, *Yer Demir Gök Bakır*, 1963, *Al Gözümlü Seyreyle Salih*, 1976, *Karınca'nın Su İçtiği*, 2002, along with various essays and reportages.

<sup>66</sup> Uzun, *Zincirlenmiş sözcükler*, 84.

literature, language, and oral tradition. In 2005, he returned to Diyarbakir, where he died of cancer in 2007.

Speaking of his initiation to literature, Uzun mentioned research on oral tradition, emphasizing that his main aim was to “transfer to novel the richness of oral tradition in a proper way.”<sup>67</sup> Like Kurdish history, oral tradition was at the center of his interest, and folklore shaped not only the subjects but also the language and structure of his novels.<sup>68</sup> He became one of the best-known Kurdish writers from the Turkish part of Kurdistan, and his works have been translated into Turkish and several other languages. Recently, Uzun’s novels have been criticized by some readers and critics for their naïve style and idealization of characters. However, we should remember that Uzun’s output marked the beginning of Kurdish modern prose written by Kurds from Turkey. Creating Kurdish modern literature was no easy task. Regardless of political obstacles, literary activity was relatively new for Kurdish society, and apart from classical literature and a few examples of modern writing, there were no books from which to seek inspiration. Except for the small number of educated, elite Kurds who knew how to read and write in Kurdish, there were few others who could. Hence, Uzun came up with the idea of using simple, condensed language, which he explained in the following ways:

1. As an inspiration from Kurdish oral tradition: “I think, I have learned one thing [from the *dengbêjs* – JB], the simple and plain words of *destan*, *stran*, and *kilams* provide the most beautiful expression of feelings linked to place and context”;<sup>69</sup>
2. As a result of a historical process and the unavoidable forgetting and memory loss, which can be discovered and unearthed like ancient ruins;<sup>70</sup>
3. As a result of the difficult Kurdish experience of terror and fear:

People living in a reality dominated by fear learn, due to such conditions, the art of speaking a little and telling the essence. This art is, at the same time, the most important inheritance passed on to us by human history. What has been left is scarcity and the core meaning of words. Wordiness and language diversity have been lost. And the main feature of common human heritage is that which remains, the essence.<sup>71</sup>

These remarks are useful in analyzing Uzun’s approach to oral tradition and literary output. Uzun considered proverbs, which he described as being “of condensed meaning,” to be the essence of the Kurdish language.<sup>72</sup> In the first Kurdish magazines, importantly, intellectuals often discussed proverbs in relation to the Kurdish national idea.<sup>73</sup> Uzun’s approach corresponds with Walter Ong’s characterization of proverbs’ mnemonic role as rhythmically balanced “patterns of retention” that helped the traditional storyteller remember his performance.<sup>74</sup> What draws attention is that Uzun discussed the role of proverbs in an essay in which he described his own efforts to recall his mother tongue. Indeed, today “patterns of retention” can help not just to remember a performance but mainly a mother tongue.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>68</sup> These two topics are closely interrelated. As stressed by Yüksel, *dengbêj* performances offered the version of Kurdish history resistant to the one presented in official Turkish sources, *Dengbêjs*, *Mullah*, *Inteligentsia*, 96–107. Presenting an alternative Kurdish history became the main task in Uzun’s novels *Sîya Evinê* and *Hawara Dicleyê*.

<sup>69</sup> Uzun, *Dengbêjlerim*, 73. The Uzun essays I quote in this article were written in the Turkish language. All translations in this paper, from both Kurdish and Turkish, were done by the author. The original Kurdish literary pieces are provided in the footnotes.

<sup>70</sup> Uzun, *Zincirlenmiş zamanlar*, 71–82.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> See more: Klein, “Proverbial Nationalism,” 7.

<sup>74</sup> Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 34.

Hence, proverbs and rhythm can be extremely useful in both literature and language revitalization. Uzun transferred proverbs to his novels, believing they provided knowledge of language, history, and Kurdish identity, along with the power to resist policies of annihilation.<sup>75</sup> Moreover, Uzun's remark that traditional narratives "provide expression of feelings linked to place and context" can be understood in relation to the contextual and allusive character of oral performances<sup>76</sup> or the so-called "oral communicative moments."<sup>77</sup> Obviously, Uzun identified oral experiences as important to the development of modern Kurdish literature and the revitalization of its language and culture. Yet, he thought of literature as following the many features of oral performance, incorporating an abundance of proverbs or a dependence on contextuality. Furthermore, Uzun perceived writing as a continuation of oral performance, describing both as "incessant storytelling" and "power of simple words."<sup>78</sup> It is also clear that he understood his role as a Kurdish writer as being the direct successor of traditional storytellers. In the following sections, I show more examples of Uzun's direct embeddedness in the oral tradition.

Uzun implemented the "simple and condensed language" idea, which consists of short, simple sentences easily understood by those learning to read in their mother tongue and others learning Kurdish, in his work.<sup>79</sup> Some of his novels even begin with very simple repetitive phrases, as if inviting the reader not to lose self-confidence and carry on reading. For example:

My name is Ehmed. Ehmedê Ferman. Ehmedê Fermanê Kîkî. In other words, Ehmed is my name. Kiki comes from Kikan, which is the name of my clan. I also have a few other names, like *dengbêj* of the journal or bard of Hawar.<sup>80</sup>

Or:

Baz.

Kevok.

We will call the first one Baz and the other one Kevok. Baz and Kevok. Two names and two people: the middle-aged man and the young woman. Two names, and the two protagonists of our novel. Our novel will tell the story about Baz and Kevok.<sup>81</sup>

These repetitions are also rooted in the oral tradition, in addition to the likelihood that they were also inspired by the literary style of Yaşar Kemal.<sup>82</sup> However, here repetition is employed with a purpose different from remembering stories and formulas.<sup>83</sup> Instead, the

<sup>75</sup> Uzun, *Zincirlenmiş zamanlar*, 55.

<sup>76</sup> Ong, *Orality and Literacy*; Allison, "Kurdish Oral Literature."

<sup>77</sup> Furniss, *Orality*, 166

<sup>78</sup> Uzun, *Dengbêjlerim*, 86–88; *Zincirlenmiş zamanlar*, 78.

<sup>79</sup> I was, myself, learning Kurdish from Uzun's novels.

<sup>80</sup> "Navê min Ehmed e. Ehmedê Ferman. Ehmedê Fermanê Kîkî. Yani Ehmed navê min e. Kîkî jî ji Kîkan tê, navê eşîra min e. Hin navên min ên din jî hene: dengbêjê kovarê, stranvanê Hawarê û hwd." Uzun, *Rojêk ji rojên Evdalê*, 11.

<sup>81</sup> "Baz.

Kevok.

Em ê ji yekî re bibêjin Baz, ji ya din re jî Kevok.

Baz û Kevok. Du nav, du însan; zîlamêkî navsal û jineke ciwan. Du nav, du insanên sereke yên romana me. Romana me dê qala serbûriya Baz û Kevokê bike." Uzun, *Ronî Mîna Evînê*, 9.

<sup>82</sup> The very short, repetitive sentences used by Uzun might have been inspired by Yaşar Kemal's works. For this suggestion, I am very grateful to Remezan Alan, email discussion with Alan, December 2020. In his paper "Romanek û Têkçûna Masûmiyeteke," Alan criticized the excess of repetition in Uzun's language, describing it as a weaknesses of the literary style, 203.

<sup>83</sup> Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 66.

repetitions introduce the protagonists, explain words and the overall content of the novel in the simplest possible way. In the second quotation, the text is called “our” novel, which is a good example of an expression addressing listeners in order to establish close contact between them, the performer, and the story being told. Following Furniss, we may say it is “a simulacrum of orality,” which “attempts to imitate the moment of communication between speaker and listener.”<sup>84</sup> In Uzun’s novel, this encourages the reader’s familiarity with a new form of artistic expression and—as in the case of oral performance<sup>85</sup>—invites them to interact with the text and author.

Moreover, when introducing certain images, Uzun explains them by evoking certain associations:

The leaves were dancing in front of me; they fell from the branches gradually and, swirling in the air, they reached the earth.

Wasn’t life the same? With my eyes fixed on the dance of the leaves, I was wondering in my dream. When the time comes, the life of a human separates from the living tree and falls down to the earth. The leaves cease to exist, but the life of the tree continues, and the next spring, new leaves begin to sprout.<sup>86</sup>

In the above quote, Biro, the protagonist of *Hawara Dicleyê*, becomes a guide to the images’ meanings, which are thus devoid of ambiguity and easy to interpret. Furthermore, in one of his essays on Heinrich Schlieman<sup>87</sup> and Austen Henry Layard’s<sup>88</sup> archaeological discoveries, Uzun emphasized the role of “unearthed stories,” which ran parallel to his perceived role as an emerging writer. This meant creating a novel out of a language and cultural reality that had been buried alive, despite a richness rooted in that bequeathed by previous civilizations.<sup>89</sup> What he was interested in was not just an exhumation and preservation of a dead corpse in order to “to decorate” the contemporary reality as a kind of museum exhibit, but rather “giving this body a new breath.”<sup>90</sup> Hence, Uzun’s output may be related to conservation and heritage, as defined above. He devoted his efforts to seeking beauty in simplicity, rooted—as he believed—in oral Kurdish performance. Simplicity he believed to be the first step in creating literature in Kurdish and revitalizing the language. He wished to encourage his contemporaries and future generations to return to their mother tongue, using it not only “at home” but for modern purposes as well. Yet, such a return could not be inspired by very difficult literary texts incomprehensible and discouraging to the majority of Kurdish audiences. Rather, his work was supposed to be a guide to literature

<sup>84</sup> Furniss, *Orality*, 141

<sup>85</sup> Rostami, *Kurdish Nationalism on Stage*; 45. As stressed by Mari R. Rostami, storytelling and oral performance in the Middle East were very interactive, encouraging the audience “to comment upon or even participate in the presentation of the story.”

<sup>86</sup> “Mina ku pel li ber min rabûbin govendê, ew hêdî hêdî ji çeqilên daran vediqetiyên, li hewayê çiv didan xwe, bi qasî kêliyekê dizivirîn û diweşiyên erdê.

“Ma heyat jî ne weha bû? Ez, çavê min li ser govenda pelan, di xewna xwe de fikirim. Gava wext tê, heyata insanekî ji dara jîndar a insanîyetê vediqete û diweşe erdê. Heyata pelan kuta dibe, hayata daran devam dike da ku dîsan, bihareke din a bê, pelan bibişkovîne.” Uzun, *Hawara Dicleyê*, 130.

<sup>87</sup> Heinrich Schlieman (1822–1890)—a German businessmen and passionate archaeologist. Following Homer’s *Iliad* and description of Troya, Schlieman discovered the ruins of the ancient town on the Hisarlik hill in 1873. In 1876, he discovered the Shaft Graves in Mycenae (Greece).

<sup>88</sup> Austen Henry Layard (1817–1894)—British archaeologist, politician, diplomat, and excavator of Nemrud and Niniveh (1845–1851), where he uncovered the remnants of the Ashurbanipal library.

<sup>89</sup> Uzun, *Zincirlenmiş zamanlar*, 91–92.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

rooted firmly in the familiar—the Kurdish oral tradition. If we consider the many young people who now collect works of the oral tradition and create modern Kurdish literature in Turkey and abroad, Uzun’s efforts have clearly born fruit. Finally, Uzun’s views on literature, as expressed in his essays, prove that his output was not necessarily “naïve”; it was, instead, based on the “idea of simplicity.” For Mehmet Dicle, in contrast, folklore is no longer a source of simplicity.

*Mehmet Dicle: Continuation and change in the approach to literature and oral tradition*

Born in 1977 in the village of Çolaxa near Bismil and raised in Hezro, a small town located 70 kilometers northeast of Diyarbakir, Mehmet Dicle belongs to a young generation of Kurdish writers. He has authored three short story collections – *Asûs* (2005, 2010), *Nara* (2010), and *Ta* (Fever, 2013) – and is currently working on a novel. In contrast to the previous generation of writers who, like Mehmed Uzun, began their literary careers in the 1980s, Dicle encountered the slightly more positive environment of the early 2000s to engage in Kurdish literature, and he did not leave Turkey. Furthermore, he had access to many more Kurdish literary works, folklore collections, and critical articles published in Turkey since the late 1990s. There were also more translations of world literature into both Turkish and Kurdish, including the Kurmanji editions of Sorani Kurdish novels from Iraq and Iran. Dicle could cooperate with Kurdish journals relatively freely (without being arrested or sentenced to prison) – journals such as *Jiyana Rewşen* (Enlightened Life) or *Rewşen-name* (Enlightening) – as well as publishing houses (e.g., Aram and Avesta) and Kurdish institutions, such as the Kurdish Institute in Istanbul.<sup>91</sup> After graduating from Istanbul University, he took up work as a high school teacher in a public school. In 2015, in Batman, I interviewed a group of young writers and artists (born in the 1980s) associated with the literary journal *Jehr* (Poison). In these interviews, I was told that Mehmet Dicle, his short stories, and his style constitute their main literary inspiration, which highlights his considerable impact on the youngest generation of Kurdish readers and authors.

Additionally, in recent decades, Uzun’s fascination with folklore has not only been acknowledged and popularized among Kurdish audiences, but also criticized by other authors and literary critics. In Hesenê Metê’s<sup>92</sup> short story “Êş” (Pain), which, amusingly, discusses the painful process of becoming a writer in the Kurdish diaspora, there appears a figure of an author resembling Mehmet Uzun who calls on writers to study folklore and turn toward traditional storytellers for inspiration. Yet, in a public meeting with his readers, the fictitious writer (or “the writer invented by Metê”) was absolutely unable to grasp the criticism of a Kurdish farmer, who aptly mocked the content of one of the author’s metaphors, indicating his ignorance of both agriculture and literary rules.<sup>93</sup> Importantly, Metê, who also started his literary career by retelling oral stories in a book entitled *Ardû* (Firewood, 1991), contributed to the development of Kurdish literary language by suffusing it with irony and portraying the traditional Kurdish reality—so often idealized by Uzun—in much darker tones.<sup>94</sup> Remezan Alan also criticized Uzun’s *Rojek ji Rojên Evdalê Zeynikê*<sup>95</sup> and *Hawara Dicleyê*,<sup>96</sup> describing the first as an example of the “ethno-novel.” Here, Alan suggested that *Rojek ji Rojên Evdalê Zeynikê* is not yet a fully-fledged work of modern literature, but

<sup>91</sup> The Kurdish Institute in Istanbul (Enstîtuya Kurdî ya Stenbolê) was established in 1992 to support the Kurdish language. It organizes Kurdish language courses, publishes Kurdish textbooks, journals and dictionaries, and supports research in Kurdish linguistic that brings together academics, writers and teachers from Kurdistan and abroad.

<sup>92</sup> Hesenê Metê (1957)—born in the town of Erxanî (Ergani, Kurdistan, Turkey) after the military coup of 1980 he went to exile, initially to Iran and then to Sweden. He is an author of short story collections *Smirnoff* (1991), *Epîlog* and novels *Labîrenta Cinan* (1994), *Tofan* (2000), *Gotinên Guneşkar* (2007), *Li Derê* (2011). He translated into Kurdish works by Alexandr Pushkin and Fiodor Dostoyevski.

<sup>93</sup> Metê, “Êş,” in: *Epîlog*, 46–47.

<sup>94</sup> See: Bocheńska, *Między ciemnością i światłem*, 327–337, or “In Search of Moral Imagination.”

<sup>95</sup> Alan, *Folklor û Roman*, 83–136.

<sup>96</sup> Alan, “Romanek û Têkçûna Masûmiyeteke,” 201–215.

instead falls in between oral tradition and modern literature; nothing more than “a written down oral story.” Alan identified many weaknesses in Uzun’s style and the “ethno-novel,” including the domination of direct pedagogical instructions over aesthetics, obvious anachronisms rooted in mixing the past with modern ideologies, and the lack of comic qualities.<sup>97</sup> These new books, literary discussions, and emerging literary criticism all had an impact on young Dicle.

Like Uzun, Dicle emphasizes the role of oral tradition in shaping his childhood imagination in Hezro. Dicle’s father was a *mullah*, thus Mehmet was sent to a religious school as a young boy, where he became familiar with the Kurdish classical tradition, including the works of Ehmedê Xanî<sup>98</sup> and Melayê Batê.<sup>99</sup> As a student, Dicle participated in and organized literary meetings to discuss both Kurdish and world literature.<sup>100</sup> Importantly, these sources of inspiration correspond with the three groups responsible for saving the Kurdish language, as described by Yüksel: *dengbêjs*, *mullahs*, and the intelligentsia. We find their representations in Dicle’s short stories.

Furthermore, Dicle in particular cites Latin American writers – such as Jorge Amado (1912–2001), Gabriel García Márquez (1927–2014), Jorge Luis Borges (1899–1986), and Carlos Fuentes Macias (1928–2012) – as important sources of inspiration, as well as the American novelist William Faulkner (1897–1962) and the Turkish short story writer Sait Faik Abasıyanık (1906–1954). In comparison, Mehmet Uzun only occasionally referred to foreign authors such as Thomas Mann,<sup>101</sup> Leo Tolstoy, or Gustave Flaubert in his essays;<sup>102</sup> however, as a writer, Uzun mainly relied on Yaşar Kemal and his multi-ethnic image of Anatolia.<sup>103</sup>

What follows is Dicle’s approach to the oral tradition. Clearly, the young writer focuses less on folklore and more on what he calls the “Kurdish collective subconscious”:

Until now, I have been working on the collective subconscious because I believe this is what makes us a nation. What I mean by collective subconscious is cultural codes, which consist of many elements, starting with narration and ending with reflections, witty sayings, aesthetic tastes, revenge, love, pleasure, and pain. Although most things that, for centuries, happened to our society have been forgotten, they are still hidden somewhere in our subconscious. I feel indebted to these experiences or “spirit,” as one may say, and I feel obliged to turn them into literature.<sup>104</sup>

Hence, oral storytelling becomes a source of aesthetically expressed knowledge rooted in psychological, ethical, and national experience:

The impact of Kurdish folklore on our national identity was much stronger than the influence of literacy. What is more, folklore, the greatest masters of whom were the *dengbêjs* and *çirokbêjs*, is important for refining the literary language. I believe that oral performance constituted such a perfection, that as modern writers we have yet to reach in our writing. For me, the Kurdish oral tradition is an endless ocean of inspiration. It is a treasure trove of language, topics, styles of narration, sources of cultural knowledge, and Kurdish identity. However, the modern writer can easily get suffocated

<sup>97</sup> Alan, *Folklor û Roman*, 83–136, “Romanek û Têkçûna Masûmîyeteke,” 201–215.

<sup>98</sup> Ehmedê Xanî (1652–1707)—Kurdish Kurmanji classical poet, author of the famous love poem *Mem û Zîn* (1695), which is an icon of Kurdish literature. He was also the author of the first Arabic-Kurdish dictionary for Kurdish children, entitled *Nûbihara Bîçûkan* (1683) and *Eqîdeya Îmanê* (The Path of Faith).

<sup>99</sup> Melayê Batê (1417–1491)—Kurdish classical poet from the Hakkari region.

<sup>100</sup> Dicle, *Nûserekî Qewîn: Mehmet Dicle*, interview by Çetoyê Zêdo.

<sup>101</sup> Uzun, *Zincirlenmiş zamanlar*, 28.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>103</sup> Uzun, *Nar çiçekleri*, 141–153; Bocheńska, *Między ciemnością i światłem*, 201, 261.

<sup>104</sup> Dicle, *Nûserekî Qewîn: Mehmet Dicle*, interview with the writer.



in this ocean if he does not possess sufficient literary skills, if he is not able to take advantage of folklore, following the leads of modern literature.<sup>105</sup>

Dicle's statements make plain that he is definitely not on a "search for simplicity." Oral tradition is no longer perceived as "simple"; instead, it has become the epitome of perfection. However, according to Dicle, writers are expected not only to know their language and culture, but also possess the literary skills to properly utilize the oral experience in modern literature. Yet, even though Dicle treats oral tradition as an important source of inspiration, he does not view literature as a direct continuation of orality. Rather, he finds that literature needs its own rules and tools to select what is useful from the oral tradition and disregard everything else. Therefore, Dicle's approach could be related to Ashworth's idea of heritage. What is more, it exposes both nearness to and distance from the oral tradition and, as the writer told me in another conversation, also entails critical reflection and modifications.<sup>106</sup> Speaking of Mehmet Uzun, Dicle stresses the importance of his literary characters' embeddedness in early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Kurdish history and the Kurdish oral tradition. He acknowledges the role of Uzun's simple language, but adds that, as a writer, Uzun represented "a very romantic and naïve personality."<sup>107</sup> In the following sections, I compare both writers' application of certain motives and language to expose the transformation of oral tradition in the structure of their literary texts.

### *The Dengbêjs: Masters, Narrators, and Literary Characters*

#### *Mehmed Uzun: Inventing the dengbêj perspective*

The *dengbêjs* became a very important source of inspiration for both Mehmed Uzun and Mehmet Dicle. The traditional storytellers and their voices are the protagonists of two of Uzun's novels and a book of essays in which he tracked and interpreted his own inspirations, presenting storytellers as elements of the collective Kurdish social and cultural experience that must be acknowledged by both future generations and Kurdish heritage makers. Each essay introduces a *dengbêj*, delves into his life and performances, and discusses his impact on Uzun. We encounter both famous and little-known figures, such as Apê Qado, Evdalê Zeynikê, Alihan, Rifatê Darê, and Ehmedê Fermanê Kîkî. However, Uzun stressed that other artists also had an impact on him.<sup>108</sup> Interestingly though, *dengbêjs* are described in his essays as representing only past, dying traditions. We understand that, for Uzun, it is modern Kurdish literature that should replace them.

Apê Qado, to whom Uzun listened in his childhood, taught him how to intertwine reality with fiction and bridge the past, present and future by selecting stories, motives, and characters with the potential to influence contemporary listeners. According to Uzun, Apê Qado's skill was rooted in his ability to recall storylines from the past and treat them as commentary on present events. Due to the universality of human experiences, these stories could be meaningful in other contexts relevant to future generations.<sup>109</sup> The *dengbêjs*' ability to link the local and universal, as they were part of the immortal process of storytelling, became a leitmotif of Uzun's essays.<sup>110</sup>

Alihan, whom Uzun met in Diyarbakir prison, was a peasant sentenced to 35 years of hard imprisonment; a sentence disproportionate to the crime committed. Sitting in a cell and drinking never-ending amounts of tea, Alihan was constantly singing the well-known Kurdish song *Siyabend and Xecê*. The story, which reminded Alihan of his home,<sup>111</sup> seemed

<sup>105</sup> Dicle, interview with the writer, October 2019.

<sup>106</sup> Dicle, interview with the writer, Istanbul, July 2017.

<sup>107</sup> Dicle, interview, October 2019.

<sup>108</sup> Uzun, *Dengbêjlerim*, 123.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 25, 43.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

to provide solace. In talking about Alihan, Uzun highlighted the therapeutic power of words and stories for both storytellers and listeners.<sup>112</sup> Uzun even presented the *dengbêjs*' desire to share emotions and experiences indirectly, with the help of stories and metaphors hidden in sayings and proverbs, as the main incentive for *dengbêj* art, which linked all the various traditional performers. When speaking of his parents and grandparents' generations in Hezro, Dicle expresses the same view when pointing to their use of figurative language to pass messages to the young, rather than say things directly.<sup>113</sup> Thus, the *dengbêjs*, their singing and storytelling became a kind of living dictionary for the writers. Uzun emphasized this, especially with regard to Rifatê Darê, whom he visited in Syria to learn the vocabulary for describing past events.<sup>114</sup>

These remarks shed light on the role and reception of traditional storytelling in Kurdish society amid the changing realities of the 20<sup>th</sup> and the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. In the case of Uzun, Dicle, and many other young intellectuals, critical reception has been mediated and enriched by reading and studying. For example, Sadiq Ūskan, who studied philosophy at a Turkish university, stressed the role of Martin Hedegger's biography in raising his interest in his home village's oral tradition. Obviously, oral tradition is no longer interpreted by the Kurds as falling only within the context of Kurdish cultural, social, and political circumstances; they certainly seek parallels and dialogue with the outside world.

As mentioned, Uzun made *dengbêjs* the protagonists of his two novels: *Rojek ji Rojên Evdalê Zeynikê* and *Hawara Dicleyê*. Both works were written over a span of 10 years, but differ in their approach to using *dengbêjs* as literary figures and narrators. *Rojek ji Rojên Evdalê Zeynikê* presents two legendary *dengbêj* figures: Evdalê Zeynikê, the novel's protagonist, and Ehmedê Fermanê Kîkî, the narrator. Uzun never met the *dengbêjs*, thus the biography comprises a collection of stories from Zeynikê's repertoire that Uzun had known since childhood. These stories had been broadcasted by Radio Yerevan on its famous Kurdish programs,<sup>115</sup> and verified by Uzun through research in the 1980s.<sup>116</sup>

Evdalê Zeynikê was born, lived, and sang in the area of Serhad in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. According to Ahmet Aras, Zeynikê was born around 1800 and died around 1913.<sup>117</sup> In Uzun's novel, Zeynikê's story is narrated by Ehmedê Fermanê Kîkî, who collaborated with Celadet Alî Bedirxan,<sup>118</sup> editor of the Kurdish journals *Hawar* and *Ronahî*, and his brother Kamuran Alî Bedirxan, editor of the *Roja Nû* journal.<sup>119</sup> Kîkî provided the Bedirxans with

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 53–74. Uzun's observations can be compared to Yüksel's "collective catharsis," *Dengbêj, Mullah, Intelligentsia*, 128.

<sup>113</sup> Dicle, interview with the writer, February 2020.

<sup>114</sup> Uzun, *Dengbêjlerim*, 77–93.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 37. Radio Yerevan's Kurdish program is one of the most significant achievements in the history of Kurdish radio broadcasting. It was established in 1955 thanks to the efforts of Casimê Celîl, who was the head of the program from 1955 to 1958. Initially, the station broadcast in Kurdish for 15 minutes three times a week, but Celîl gradually succeeded in extending this to an hour and a half. The programs reached Turkey, broadcasting *dengbêj* performances in a country where Kurdish was forbidden. Thanks to the efforts of the Celîl family, a huge collection of Kurdish songs was stored in the Radio Armenia archive, which is named after Casimê Celîl (Yüksel, *Dengbêj, Mullah, Intelligentsia*, 343–345).

<sup>116</sup> Uzun, *Dengbêjlerim*, 47. Zeynikê's biographical details presented by Uzun differ from the study by Ahmet Aras, who, throughout his life, connected with Zeynikê's family members and others who knew him. Aras noted that he aimed to verify as much legendary information as possible (Aras, *Evdalê Zeynikê*). The differences between the two biographies may be justified if they are considered multiple versions of oral performances known to both Uzun and Aras. Yet, it is also likely that Uzun adjusted some facts, treating them as inspiration in order to present his vision of the *dengbêj* and his art.

<sup>117</sup> Aras, *Evdalê Zeynikê*, 19.

<sup>118</sup> Celadet Alî Bedirxan (1893–1951)—Kurdish intellectual, author of Kurdish Kurmanji grammar and the Latin version of the Kurdish Kurmanji alphabet (1932), and editor-in-chief of the Kurdish journals *Hawar* (1932–1941) and *Ronahî* (1942–1945), published in Damascus. Known also as Mîr Bedirxan (Prince Bedirxan), he became a symbol of Kurdish modern literacy and culture; for example, in Hesenê Metê's short story "Êş" (The Pain).

<sup>119</sup> Kamuran Alî Bedirxan (1895–1978)—Kurdish lawyer, politician, writer, co-founder of the Kurdish Institute in Paris, and editor-in-chief of *Roja Nû* weekly journal, which was published in Beirut in 1943–1944 and 1945–1946 in

many of the oral performances written and published in the journals. For many years, Celadet Alî Bedirxan and Kîkî were friends and shared a commitment to serve the Kurdish language and culture.<sup>120</sup>

In his novel, Uzun invented a new relationship between Kîkî and the well-known Kurdish intellectuals. The *dengbêj* is asked not only to provide the Bedirxans with oral stories of Evdalê, but also to write them down. Through this, Uzun drew attention to important issues that should, today, be evaluated through the lens of his literary development and overall output. He created a symbolic representation of Kîkî's transformation from *dengbêj* to writer and, at the same time, showed his readers a moment of transition from oral performance to literary text. Additionally, in the novel's initial chapter, Uzun directly expressed Kîkî's doubts and feelings of clumsiness as a beginning author; feelings which—as we may suspect—might have also applied to Uzun. These reflections are strengthened by the motto of Ehmedê Xanî's famous poem *Mem û Zîn*, where the 17<sup>th</sup>-century poet expressed his strong beliefs about writing in the Kurdish language, even if the results were not evaluated as highly as those written in Persian or Arabic. Finally, by selecting such a narrator, Uzun justified his novel's legendary and “naïve” content and form,<sup>121</sup> which can be associated with conservation rather than heritage as it contained well-known oral stories and was allegedly written by a *dengbêj*, not a professional writer. Importantly, the moment of transition is proposed, interpreted, and presented by Uzun in a literary form equipped with self-reflection.

As described by Ehmedê Fermanê Kîkî, Evdalê Zeynikê is very much embedded in the traditional world. Additionally, Zeynikê's representation of the *dengbêj* is very much idealized by the writer. If we look at Uzun-Kîkî's portrait of Evdalê Zeynikê, we easily recognize a figure with a status nearing sainthood; a status reminiscent of the myths of another legendary poet, Feqê Teyran:<sup>122</sup>

He was a *dengbêj* of the country. His voice moved the mountains, it was like thunder, and it made the stagnant smelly waters of the lakes flow and the leaves of almond and pomegranate trees leaf out. He was a man of gatherings, love songs, and dancing. With his voice, he cured wounds, warmed the hearts of the lonely, widows, and orphans, embellished the dreams of fiancées and of those girls for whom the bride price had already been paid. He was not only the *dengbêj* of people, but also of birds, animals, and wild beasts. His voice directed the flocks of sheep to the pastures, the ghazals to the waters of Murad and Firat, and the small and big birds to the highlands. No *dengbêj* in Kurdistan could compare to him. He sang the songs tirelessly day and night for months and years. His voice resembled the opulence of the spring rivers, the subtlety of the Firat and Dicle waters, which flowed incessantly, reaching the mountains and heavens.<sup>123</sup>

Kurdish and French. The journal informed Kurds of current world events, as well as promoted education and devoted considerable space to Kurdish culture. For more on the role of the journal in promoting knowledge of Kurdish folklore, see Keskin, *Roja Nû û Edebiyata Kurdî ya Gelerî*.

<sup>120</sup> Uzun, *Dengbêjlerim*, 100–118.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 46–47.

<sup>122</sup> Feqê Teyran (1590–1660)—Kurdish classical poet, many of his poems survived for centuries because the *dengbêjs* passed them on orally.

<sup>123</sup> “Ew dengbêjê welêt bû. Di dengê wî çiya dihejî, birûsk digurî, ava golên girtî û genî diherikî û pelên darên behîf û hinaran hêşîn dibû. Ew merivê civat, dîlan û govendan bû. Wî bi dengê xwe birînen birîndaran dicebirand, dilê bêkes, bî û sêwiyen germ dikir, xewn û xeyalên keçên destgirtî û qelindayîyan dineqîşand. Ew ne bi tenê dengbêjê merivan, herweha dengbêjê teyr û tûr û heywan û rawiran bû. Bi dengê wî keriyên pêz diçûn çêrê, keriyên xezalan berê xwe didan ava Mirad û Firadê, refên teyr, bet û qulingan xwe di zozanan digirtin. Di ser wî re, tu dengbêjê hê nehatibû welatê Kurdistanê. Bêwestan, wî bi ro û bi şev, bi meh û bi salan stran digotin. Çawan rûbara nîsanê bi xêr û bereket dibarî, çemên Firat û Dîclê bi nazî û bi delalî diherikîn, herwekî wan, dengê Evdalê jî nedihate birîn û xwe digîhand serê çîyan û esmanan.” Uzun, *Rojek ji Rojên Evdalê Zeynikê*, 27.

Obviously, from the point of view of Ehmedê Fermanê Kîkî, Evdalê Zeynikê's potential in singing and telling stories exceeded the power of the average human. He had more than just a talent; rather, it was a blessing originating from beyond this world, incomparable to anything else. Like Feqê Teyran, who could allegedly understand the speech of animals, Zeynikê could also communicate with the wild world. While the poetics of the description can, of course, be ascribed to the narrator and his worldview, what draws our attention is the writer's desire to present the *dengbêjs'* skills and art as the source of unquestionable good and beauty. This can, firstly, be understood as resistance to Turkish state policy that often presented Kurdish culture as backward and barbaric. Furthermore, this description challenged the self-ascribed Orientalism of the PKK and its supporters. In the 1990s, the PKK often attacked *dengbêj* art as the source of the notorious feudalism they wanted to eradicate.<sup>124</sup> Here, Uzun offered another reading, demanding instead that attention be paid to the *dengbêjs'* performance. Finally, Uzun's elevation of Zeynikê's skills can be linked to the wider process of acknowledging *dengbêj* art as a part of Kurdish national culture, which Clémence Scalbert-Yücel described as "inventing the *dengbêjs'* tradition."<sup>125</sup>

In Uzun's *Hawara Dicleyê*, we encounter a *dengbêj* who, this time, becomes the narrator of a historical novel set in the early 19<sup>th</sup>-century emirate of Cazira Botan, which was ruled by Prince Bedirxan. Biro is an orphan from a Yezidi family<sup>126</sup> killed in a Muslim-orchestrated massacre. Biro lost an eye during the carnage and was raised by the shepherd Apê Xelef afterward. On Bedirxan's order, Biro was admitted to religious school as a small boy, where he learned to read and write. However, despite all the skills acquired at school, Biro wants to be a *dengbêj*. He remains attached to the sonic dimension of words and many different voices, becoming a performer in the emir's house. Despite his close attachment to the prince, however, Biro often expresses criticism of the ruler. Biro's dream is for all suppressed and unheard voices to tell their stories, presenting the history of Cazira Botan from the view of those defeated, rather than the victorious. We encounter Biro at the end of his life, when, after the collapse of Bedirxan's uprising<sup>127</sup> and his subsequent exile, he returns to his homeland. He is a broken person who has lost all that he loved, but he still believes in telling the story of the Cazira emirate to invisible listeners and future generations.

The novel consists of seven chapters, identified as *şevbûhêrk*, referring to the long winter nights during which storytellers would narrate their stories to listeners. In this way, it is not only the *dengbêjs'*, their voice, content and style of their stories that inspire, but also the image of social gatherings becomes important to the novel's structure. The image of *şevbûhêrk* also encourages interactivity within the novel, as the implied readers are given a well-defined place and thus invited to comment on and discuss the events presented in Uzun's work. *Hawara Dicleyê*'s introduction and ending are called *qendil*, which means candle. The candle accompanies Biro every night as he tells his stories, but its blurred light symbolizes a story that can elucidate the history of "forgotten people" and make their voice more

<sup>124</sup> Hamelink and Barış, "Dengbêjs on Borderlands."

<sup>125</sup> See: Scalbert-Yücel, "The Invention of the Tradition."

<sup>126</sup> The Yezidis are a religious and ethnic minority who, today, live predominantly in Iraq, Syria, Turkey, the Caucasus, and Europe. They speak the Kurmanji dialect of Kurdish, but not all consider themselves to be Kurds. In the past, Yezidis were treated as heretics and "devil worshipers" by Muslims, and often persecuted. This is why, starting from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, they began to migrate, first to the Caucasus under Russian protection, and then to Europe. Their main sanctuary is Lalish (Iraq). In 2014, thousands of Yezidis became victims of a genocide planned and executed by the Islamic State.

<sup>127</sup> The Botan emirate, ruled by Prince Bedirxan (1803–1868), was the last Kurdish duchy to enjoy independence in the Ottoman Empire. The centralizing reforms introduced in the empire in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as well as the involvement of Western missionaries who supported local Christians against the Muslim population, led to military conflict between the Ottoman army and the Bedirxan forces supported by a few other Kurdish emirs. The conclusive clash took place in 1847. As a result, Bedirxan and his large family were exiled, and Kurdish rule in Kurdistan was replaced by a governor appointed by the central authorities (Eppel, *People Without A State*, 56–60).

audible. The *şevbûhêrks* consist of smaller sections named after different people's voices, the Tigris River, or even silence. Hence, Biro is not a typical *dengbêj* narrating well-known love and war stories to a society. Rather, similar to Evdalê Zeynikê in Uzun's previous novel, Biro is able to hear more than others in the surrounding world. This time, however, his skills are not presented as a heavenly blessing, but instead down to his sensitivity, which is of a moral kind and enables him to see all who suffer or are silenced. At first, this gift leads him to finding his roots in the Yezidi sanctuary of Lalish, but later, he narrates the suffering of Christians at the hands of Muslims, the Kurdish defeat to the Ottoman army, and the following demise of the quasi-independent principalities of Kurdistan. In this way, Biro's story becomes a reinvented *dengbêj* voice directed against the oppression of religious and ethnic minorities. The novel is written in the same simple style as Uzun's other novels, and Biro often draws attention to the sonic dimension of the represented world, enumerating the different sounds he can hear. Notably, we are told about the sounds, but do not encounter onomatopoeias.

In addition to the above, Uzun intertwined prosaic language with lyrics. Through the former, he presented the historical developments in Cazira, whereas the latter he used to offer a kind of mystical commentary on the events and universalize them as a part of an extended human history. This combination of prose and lyrics provides historical information along with mystical commentary, which equips events with a deeper sense and resembles the corpus of Yezidi oral texts collected and published in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is likely that Uzun was familiar with these texts when working on his novel. As a result, the lyrics not only "embellish the prosaic texture," but also "extend the semantic reach" of the work. Accordingly, Biro is elevated as a literary symbol of Kurdish storytelling who gives voice to the history of suppressed and forgotten people.

Biro's narrative equips the process of telling stories with a modern "postcolonial" reading, which can be interpreted with respect to heritage practice. Uzun's aim in *Hawara Dicleyê* was not to retell oral stories in a literary way; instead, Biro narrates a historical fiction as opposed to a traditional legend. In comparing both of Uzun's novels, we see the development in his application of the *dengbêj* tradition. He departed from the form of biography, comprised of the songs and stories ascribed to Evdalê Zeynikê. In the end, Uzun crowned his literary career by writing a historical novel, the characters and structure of which were inspired by different elements of the oral tradition and then woven into the fabric of modern work. As shown in the following section, Uzun's experience was further deepened, developed and questioned by Mehmet Dicle.

#### *Mehmet Dicle: Seeking a literary dimension in the dengbêj experience*

We encounter the *dengbêj* figure in only one of Mehmet Dicle's short stories, which is entitled "Nara" and dedicated to the memory of Şakiro, one of the famous traditional Kurdish performers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>128</sup> Dicle's works originate in the many stories and legends he heard in the Hezro region as a child, by both famous performers and average people. Through his approach, Dicle draws attention to the more popular dimension of storytelling practiced by many society members. This runs parallel to the interests of the many young folklore collectors searching for and discovering little-known storytellers among their relatives and network of friends.<sup>129</sup> Dicle's work gives birth to the new, more democratic representation of who a traditional performer actually was and strengthens the already-existing picture of storytelling and singing Kurdish society. At the same time, *dengbêjs* are no longer viewed only as relicts of the past, but as vibrant elements of contemporary reality.

<sup>128</sup> Şakiro (?–1996), known also as Şakirê Qereyazîyê, was a famous 20<sup>th</sup>-century Kurdish *dengbêj*. He was born in the village of Navik in the Ağrı region and lived in Adana, Muş and Qereyazî (the region of Erzurum). Thanks to his extraordinary voice and performance of well-known songs, he was called *şahê dengbêjan*—the king of the *dengbêjs*.

<sup>129</sup> Bêrivan Matyar, personal communication October–November 2019, online interview July 2020.



“Nara” is narrated in the third person, immediately creating distance between the narrator and characters. Nara, a protagonist of the story, is a woman of Armenian origin who marries the Kurdish *dengbêj* Arif. She marries for love and so does the *dengbêj*, who sings many love songs about his young wife that are quoted in the text. He often performs at the house of a prince and, like Biro, accompanies the prince in his travels. Arif is believed to be one of the most talented singers. However, the portrait Dicle paints of the *dengbêj* and his art differs from that presented by Mehmet Uzun in *Rojek ji Rojên Evdalê Zeynikê*:

When he was 24, his name had already become widely known in the country. His *kilams* were guests at important meetings and, under the big family tents, on nights in the dead of winter, they warmed up among the dogs of the beggars, their sweat dried out in the shadow of mosques, they caught the ears of reapers bent during the harvests in the August heat, they inspired self-confidence among the cowards, infatuated people, and took revenge.

(...) Arif (...) who collected the *maqams* from the nightingales, was also able to give voice to the rain. To the Eastern and Western winds. When he spoke about the wars, his voice became the February wind freezing the wolves on Diyar-topan. It cut the roads of the smugglers. When, in his *kilams*, the killers and throat-slitters hidden in the ambushes and holding their breath put on their arms the long rifle barrels, for three days and three nights, Arif's voice became whistling bullets. His words became the kernels roasted on the hearth popping one after another. The whiz of the bullets, clash of swords, horse snorting, groans of brave men coming from choked breasts were heard in the house of the emir. The crime was boiling in the veins of the audience.<sup>130</sup>

Like Evdalê Zeynikê, Arif is described as a very talented *dengbêj*, but his skills are not presented as supranatural. Their origin is earth, not heaven, and they cannot “move mountains” or “cure wounds.” If we read the description carefully, we also realize that it is devoid of the exultation present in Uzun's style. The comparisons happen to be amusing. However, the crucial difference between Zeynikê and Arif is that the latter's songs can inspire evil, not only to good, causing crime to boil in the veins of the audience. Here, we receive a totally different picture of not only the *dengbêj*, but also his community, where beauty is not idealized to serve only the good.

This idea is also developed in the storyline. Arif's extraordinary love songs about his wife amplify the attention and passion of Kejo, one of the robbers and killers who finds favor with the prince. When Kejo appears in the prince's house, Arif sings a song about him, which immediately catches the ear of Nara. Kejo keeps visiting the prince's house and, on one occasion, encounters Nara personally. Overwhelmed by her beauty and his own passion, he kidnaps her, and she does not resist. Realizing that his songs ignited an infatuation between Kejo and Nara, bringing disaster on himself, Arif cuts off his tongue so he will never sing again. Thus, Dicle's short story, although inspired by the traditional *dengbêj* art and told in the style of a legend, provides critical commentary on the social reality it presents.

<sup>130</sup> “Di bîst û çarsaliya wî de navê wî li hemû bajarên welêt belav bû. Kilamên wî bûn mêvanên civatên giran, bin konên eşîran, xwe li ber kuçikên xizanan germ kirin di şevên kerr ên zivîstanê de, li ber siyên mizgeftan xwêdana wan ziwa bû, li ser benderan ketin guhên paleyên bin tava teboxê û ji mêrên herî bizdonek re jî bûn ciret, kelê ew girtin bûn kezebpola, heyf stendin.

(...) Arif (...) çawa ku ji bilbilan miqam hil dikirin, her wiha deng dida baranê jî. Bayê şerqê, ê xerbê. Dengê wî di qala şeran de dibû bayê sibatê, yê ku ji Diyar-topanê guran diqefiland. Rê dibirî li karwanên qaçaxçîyan. Gava ku di kilamên wî de mêrkûj û qesasen gelek seriyan didan ser milan qondaxên mîratên modelî û eyneliyan, bêhn li hev diçikandin di kozikan de, bi sê roj û sê şevan wî bi miqamê çapiliyan digot. Gotin dibûn dendikên li ser selê, yek bi yek diteqîyan. Di eywana mîr de dibû vîngîna guleyan, şîngîna şûran, kehîne hespan, nalenala mêrxasên di pêşîrtengiyê de. Mêrkujî dikeliya di damarên guhdaran de.” Dicle, “Nara,” in *Nara*, 20.



This criticism is not introduced as a protagonist's direct statement, as characterized in Biro's first-person narrative in *Hawara Dicleyê*. Considering Alan's critical remarks, we can say that the criticism does not become anachronistic to the depicted reality;<sup>131</sup> rather, it is expressed figuratively, with the help of description and comparison, offering a more morally complicated worldview.

Dicle's style and vocabulary, which are far from simple, also deserve attention. Even a brief look at the above quotation shows how he uses longer sentences filled with sophisticated vocabulary collected from oral performances, the Hezro region, and literature. In translating these sentences, I required close cooperation with the writer to grasp their meaning, as many words were absent from existing Kurmanji dictionaries. The best example may be the word *Asûs*, which is an invented name of both a small town and an area where Dicle set most of his short stories. The word is used in the Hezro region and, according to the writer, means "something tough, hard, and difficult to break."<sup>132</sup>

Interestingly, Dicle's long sentences contain descriptions, comparisons, metaphors, and are aggregative in nature, which could also be seen as a feature of oral performance.<sup>133</sup> Dicle does not simply enumerate these qualities; compared to Uzun, he employs more elaborate sentences. Yet, Dicle's complex descriptions do not rely solely on longer linguistic structure, as they provide a new literary quality—the sequence of interpenetrating images. For example: "the crickets, which every day expressed their complaints, forcing the world to look at them, as if inhaled the autumn air and losing touch with reality, hid in the leaves of the grove";<sup>134</sup> and,

With time, the face of my father was becoming darker; when he looked through the window at the houses of the area, he was reminded of chicks wishing to break the egg-shell as soon as possible in order to get out to the daylight.<sup>135</sup>

In the short story "Kuçâ filan" (The Street of Christians), Dicle intermingles many such images and topics. In this story, we can recognize biographical motives and the writer's wish to delve into childhood fears, of which his *mullah* father and forced education in a mosque were a part. What is more, we are exposed to the cruelty of a small boy who derives pleasure from brutal games. Together with his companions, he tortures and kills animals and gradually becomes crueler and crueler. Furthermore, we get access to the repressed memory of the *Asûs* inhabitants who escape remembering what happened to the Armenians,<sup>136</sup> the bones of whom emerge every spring during the overflow of water. Kurdish children play with the bones, and those leaving the mosque lower their eyes not to see. One day, the dwellers of *Asûs* are transformed into swallows, and the boy becomes overwhelmed by his desire to kill all the swallows' chicks. At the end of the story, we are

<sup>131</sup> Alan, *Folklor û Roman*, 118–128.

<sup>132</sup> Dicle, *Dicle, Nûserekî Qewîn: Mehmet Dicle*, interview by Çetoyê Zêdo.

<sup>133</sup> Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 38.

<sup>134</sup> "çîrcîrokên ku her roj di vê wextê de ji rojê lomeyan dikirin û dinyayê dianîn temaşaya xwe jî wekî ku bêhna payizê hîlanîbîn û pê ji xwe ve çûbin xwe di pişt pelên dehlan de telandibûn." Dicle, "Heyfa Mêran," in: *Asûs*, 22.

<sup>135</sup> "Her ku diçû bavê min çîrnexweş dibû, gava ku di şîbakê re li malên navçeyê yên ku dişîbiyan çûkên bixwazin gavekî zûtir qalîkê xwe bişkînin û derkevin dinya ronî dinêrî." Dicle, "Gulên Sala," in: *Asûs*, 18.

<sup>136</sup> In a few of his stories ("Nara," "Kuçâ Filan," "Baran û Nepen," "Maria"), Dicle refers to the Armenian genocide of 1915. Planned by the Young Turk government, who feared Armenian support for the Russians during the First World War, the extermination of the Armenian population was conducted by the Turkish army and Kurdish tribal squads, adding to the famine and illness that met the Armenian convoys pushed toward the Syrian desert. Contrary to Turkish state policy that still denies that genocide occurred in 1915, many Kurdish politicians and intellectuals have recognized the events as genocide and expressed regret for Kurdish participation. In recent years, in contemporary Kurdish literature written in both Kurmanji and Zazaki, the Armenian genocide and question of Kurdish responsibility is a recurring subject. See more on this topic: Çelik and Öpengin, "Armenian Genocide in Kurdish novels," and Galip, "The Politics of Remembering."

confronted with a scene that brings new moral awareness to the story. On his way to the mosque, upset by the fact that his friend was bitten by a snake, the boy kills a white kitten:

I threw my stone toward the place where I heard the voice, with the blindness of a hunter. While my stone was still in the air, I glanced at the spot from where I had heard the voice and I regretted what I had done. The small kitten. White. The ball of snow. I wanted my stone to become cold, to fall to the ground or return and hit my head. But my aim is never wide of the mark. I am famous among my friends for it. And this time it was precise too. I was weak in the knees as if my legs had been beaten with a stick. The baby cat. The snow-white ball looked as if it had fallen into a bowl of dims.<sup>137</sup> It became red. Trembling. My heart shattered.<sup>138</sup>

The moment of killing the kitten is narrated through various seemingly disconnected images that intertwine, giving birth to new meanings and resembling the poetics of Kurdish songs.<sup>139</sup> We see the boy picking up the stone, the stone in the air, the kitten, the ball of snow, the bowl with the grape syrup, the red color, the white color, the stick hitting the boy's knees, and the trembling of the kitten's body. After killing the kitten, the boy's repentance and illness bring changes to his and his family's lives. He realizes that he misses his father's warmth, and his father, "for the first time," does not lambast him. The boy abandons his lessons in the mosque, and his father does not stop him.<sup>140</sup> However, the episode also alludes to the Armenian genocide: the killing of the kitten took place on the Christian street where the boy wanted to play with bones, but did not find any, and his Quran fell into a puddle. Hence, in a broader sense, the scene must be interpreted as bringing together all the images and plot lines of the story, and thus raising the hope that recalling the beauty of the Armenians and their culture can be helpful to realizing guilt and evoking repentance.<sup>141</sup>

There are also images in Dicle's short stories that appear borrowed from another place. When, in "Nara," the narrator informs us of the prince's anxiety regarding Kejo, we are shown the foxes in his head—they become angry and start to bite each other. This is not a simple comparison to the foxes; rather, they are offered a special role to play:

That night, the 40 foxes left their foxholes and started conferring in the emir's head. The emir circulated around Kejo, but he did not get anything out of him.  
(...)

The foxes in the emir's head were still conferring, but they could not acquire Kejo's secret.

They bit each other out of sadness.<sup>142</sup>

<sup>137</sup> Dims – (Kurd., Tur) – a condensed grape juice made by boiling them for a long time. Its color is dark red.

<sup>138</sup> "Min kevir firand ciyê ku deng jê hat, bi çavtarîtiya nêçirvanekî. Awirên min beriya kevirê gihîştin ciyê ku deng jê hat û hîn kevirê min li hewa, ez poşmam bûm. Pişîkeke piçûk. Spî. Gulîftika berfê. Min xwest kevirê min sar bibe, bikevê erdê, an vegere, bişikîne serê min. Derba min qet li tewşê nedîçû. Min jî wiha nav dabû di nav hevalên xwe de. Dîsa li tewşê neçû. Çokên min di bin min ve bûn, wekî ku yek ji paş ve li çalîka her duyan bixe. Têjîka piçûk. Çilspî. Gilofîtika berfê, wekî ku bikeve nav tasa dimsê. Sor bû. Dîperpitî. Dilê min xeliya." Dicle, "Kuça filan," in: *Nara*, 82.

<sup>139</sup> See Kurdoyev and Musaelian, "Predisloviye," in: *Kurdskaya Narodnaya Lirika*, 17.

<sup>140</sup> Dicle, "Kuça filan," in: *Nara*, 83–84.

<sup>141</sup> See also the discussion of this short story in Bocheńska's "Power of Humanisation," which addresses Kurdish literature's role in "humanizing" the image of the Kurds.

<sup>142</sup> "Wê şevê çil rovî derketin qulên xwe, di serê Mîr de kirin şêwr û mişêwrê. Mîr geriya li dora Kejo, xeberek dernexist ji dev.  
(...)

Roviyên di serê Mîr de di şêwrê de bûn hîn, dipîvan, ro dikirin, di sira Kejo nedigihîştin. Ji kerban re hev gez dikirin." Dicle, "Nara," in: *Nara*, 27.

The foxes are not part of this story; they were invited into it, resembling the magic objects in Kurdish fairy tales that help the protagonist reach their goal. One such example is the golden tray on which lively animals chase one another in the fairy tale “*şarur bulbul*,” recorded by the Celîl family.<sup>143</sup> To better understand the poetics of this motive, we should recall the *dengbêj* technique of memorizing their oral performance, which was based on thematic and sonic formulas that could be moved like bricks from one story to another.<sup>144</sup> Dicle evokes this technique, not to indicate the power of magic, but to describe the feelings of a character and employ a style that fits the ambience of the story. At the same time, such a visualization of the character’s inner world may have its roots in the magic realism of Gabriel García Márquez, where “invisible meaning” is “inherent in the visible artifacts.”<sup>145</sup> Furthermore, what draws attention is the onomatopoeic dimension of Dicle’s language, as if he carefully follows Biro’s suggestions in *Hawara Dicleyê*, reminding his readers that sounds may be not less aesthetically interesting than letters and the meaning of words. Still, Dicle does not simply identify sounds, as Uzun did, instead accumulating certain onomatopoeic words, as exemplified in the above quotation describing Arif’s talent. This makes us hear the words when we read aloud and not only learn about the sounds the *dengbêj* could produce. The short paragraphs dividing the text in a rhythmic way are another specific aspect of Dicle’s style; this may be associated with sound and music, as the style resembles the stanzas of a song. As stressed by the writer, creating “melodic” expressions and language is one of his main aesthetic aims.<sup>146</sup>

Finally, we also encounter proverbs and idioms that “embellish the prosaic structure” and interact with images, strengthening their impact. For example, in the short story “*Jinek û Mêrek*” (A Woman and a Man), we encounter the idiomatic expression: “*diya min digot ezê şîrê xwe li te helal nekim*,” “my mother used to tell that she would not allow me her milk,”<sup>147</sup> which symbolically demonstrates strong parental disapproval. The image of milk is then extracted from the idiom and developed in a further sentence: “*şîrê diya min di pozê min re hat, dilop bi dilop*,” “my mother’s milk was dripping from my nose, drop by drop,”<sup>148</sup> expressing the protagonist’s helplessness when forced by his parents to marry a woman he did not love.

The intertwining images and onomatopoeic dimension of words are certainly inspired by the Kurdish oral tradition and share some similarities with the style of 20<sup>th</sup>-century Polish poets, such as Bolesław Leśmian,<sup>149</sup> who drew on Polish and Ukrainian folklore, applying the experiences of previous generations of poets and writers.<sup>150</sup> In his short stories, Mehmet Dicle shows consideration for the sonic dimension of words, enriching the aesthetics of his short stories. The stories can be read aloud and thus work well in the modern audiobook form. What follows is that Dicle does not show us “Kurdish orality” as a “simple” artistic experience that always impacted the audience in a positive way; instead, we are invited to discover a sophisticated, often very cruel, world. In this world, Dicle not only seeks his

<sup>143</sup> Ordixanê Celîl and Celîlê Celîl, *Çirokên kurdî*, the selected transcripts of Kurdish fairy tales collected by the Celîl family made available to me by Prof. Celîlê Celîl for the purpose of translation in Spring 2010; *Opowieści Dengbeżów. Baśnie i bajki kurdyjskie a archiwum rodziny Celîl*.

<sup>144</sup> Albert B. Lord, “Cechy oralności,” 40.

<sup>145</sup> Lois Parkinson Zamora, “Swords and Silver Rings: Objects and Expression in Magical Realism and the New World Baroque.”

<sup>146</sup> Dicle, interview with the writer by the author, February 2020.

<sup>147</sup> Dicle, “*Jinek û Mêrek*,” in: *Asûs*, 76.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>149</sup> Bolesław Leśmian (actually Lesman, 1878–1937) was a Polish poet of Jewish origin. Inspired by the Romantic tradition and Henri Bergson’s philosophy, he updated many folkloric genres and motives, offering a new, deeply psychological and existential meaning. Leśmian spent his school years in Kiev and his first language was Russian. As a poet, he experimented with Polish language, employing the Eastern Slavic word formation rules, which gave birth to the extraordinary neologisms that became the hallmarks of his poetry. Moreover, his poetic style is equipped with a strong sonic dimension based on rhythms, rhymes, and accumulation of onomatopoeic words.

<sup>150</sup> See more: Nalewajk, *Leśmian Międzynarodowy*.

own literary identity, but also tries to gain moral distance from the values acclaimed in traditional oral performances, such as bravery, chastity, or honor.<sup>151</sup> In addition, like Uzun, Dicle revises Kurdish history, addressing the accountability not yet taken for those who suffered at Turkish and Kurdish hands. Compared to Uzun, Dicle's literary language is more developed and richer, and the world we gain access to is psychologically and morally more complex. We are invited to contemplate interwoven images and sounds, showing us the characters from many different angles. Nevertheless, what links both authors is their attempt to universalize the Kurdish landscape.

### *Local, National, and Global—Heritagization of Oral Kurdish Geography*

A central topic of Kurdish literary research is the imagining of the territory of Kurdistan in Kurdish novelistic discourse; this is closely connected to the question of how to construct Kurdish national identity in contemporary literature.<sup>152</sup> While the aim of this short section is certainly not to explore the intricacies of Kurdish geography, it does show the literary landscape as an integral part of the heritagization of the Kurdish oral tradition in the works of Uzun and Dicle. This is important because Kurdish geographies still tend to be discussed separately with regards to the oral and the literary world.

Following Doreen Massey's concept of a progressive sense of place, I suggest that Kurdish literature should be analyzed within the context of a political geography that extends beyond merely nationalism. As stressed by Massey,

instead (...) of thinking of places as areas with boundaries around, they can be imagined as articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings. And this, in turn, allows a sense of place which is extra-verted, which includes a consciousness of its links with the wider world, which integrates positively the global and the local.<sup>153</sup>

Without undermining the “national” reading of Kurdish literary geography, I suggest that, in some Kurdish literary works, the sense of place is more “extra-verted” and “integrates in a positive way the global and the local,” the latter being deeply embedded in the oral tradition. Özlem Galip stresses that Uzun generally described Kurdistan as “the homeland of Kurds,”<sup>154</sup> yet, in his novel *Ronî Mina Evîne Tarî Mina Mirinê*, we only encounter the Big Country and Mountain Country, not Kurdistan. Similarly, in Dicle's short stories, there is no direct mention of Kurdistan; instead, it is the invented land of Asûs.

In this regard, it is first important to stress that fictitious lands, such as Muhurzemîn, are often found in Kurdish fairy tales and indicate very far and unknown places. Second, as emphasized by Hamelink and Bariş, the *dengbêj* songs spoke of individual and social experiences where the local geography was the central point of reference.<sup>155</sup> Hence, the geography expressed in oral performances did not represent the “great Kurdistan” project, but rather the cultural and social intimacy of locality. Interestingly, the authors also suggest that the failure of the Kurdish state idea in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century might be attributable to deliberate social choices aimed at avoiding the state and its administration, and which focused on the deeply entrenched cultural imaginary.<sup>156</sup> I argue that fictitious Kurdish lands and local geography are part of the heritage recreated in modern literary works in order to find links with the wider world.

<sup>151</sup> See more: Bocheńska, “Honour and Dignity.”

<sup>152</sup> Ahmedzadeh, *Nation and the Novel*; Galip, *Imagining Kurdistan*.

<sup>153</sup> Massey, “Power Geometry,” 66.

<sup>154</sup> Galip, *Imagining Kurdistan*, 109.

<sup>155</sup> Hamelink and Bariş, “Dengbêjs on Borderlands,” 35.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

Uzun's *Ronî Mina Evîne Tarî Mina Mirinê* tells the story of Kevok, a young student who joins the guerrilla fighters in the mountains, and general Baz who, along with his soldiers, fights the guerrillas. The guerrillas fight for the rights of the people of the Mountain Country, which is occupied by the Big Country ruled by general Serdar. While the Mountain Country and the Big Country are very general metaphors that can apply to many different realities, these are obvious allusions to Kurdistan and Turkey for some readers; allusions invented by the writer to avoid censorship. However, following Uzun's view of literature as part of "the immortal and universal storytelling," I suggest that he intended his novel to have a more universal interpretation. In his response to the Turkish public prosecutor, who accused him and his novel of supporting terrorist propaganda, Uzun stressed that his work was fiction, the story lines of which could relate to the political realities of various countries, including Iraq, Syria, or Chechnya.<sup>157</sup> This way, the story is both rooted in the Kurds' difficult 20<sup>th</sup>-century history in Turkey and, at the same time, loses its direct reference to that particular historical and geographical reality. Therefore, it is able to integrate the Kurdish context with the experiences of the outside world.

In the three short-story cycles by Mehmet Dicle, we can identify diverse strategies of geographical naming:

1. The imagined land of Asûs, which, as explained above, is derived from the Kurdish word used in the Hezro region. Asûs is the name of both a small town and an area. Its borders are blurred and rooted in both Kurdish oral tradition and inspirations taken from foreign writers, such as Márquez's *Macondo* or Faulkner's *Yoknapatawpha* and *Jefferson*.<sup>158</sup> Dicle, who is a high school geography teacher, highlighted that he wanted to create a land that was not a direct representation of any Kurdistan location.<sup>159</sup> At the same time, he recreated the life of the Kurdish province with its many details and using very rich Kurmanji vocabulary. Notably, for readers of my Polish translation of Dicle's short stories, the name was immediately associated with the well-known computer brand. In this way, the land of Asûs was imbued with new meaning from the global world, bringing to mind a writer's modern tool.
2. Moreover, in most of Dicle's short stories, an enigmatic image of a state resembling a faraway Muhurzemîn from Kurdish fairy tales appears, a land that no one has ever seen. The state sends its bureaucrats, teachers, soldiers, and dignitaries to Asûs, who, though perceived as strangers, interact with Asûs' inhabitants in many different ways.
3. Furthermore, in a few of Dicle's short stories – i.e. "Jinek û Mêrek," "Hêvî" (Hope), "Simîtfiroş" (The Seller of Pretzels) – a big, anonymous city on a seashore appears, the identity of which is blurred. All characters feel alien here, and the city's space is hostile to them. However, it is not easy to infer whether the author intended to tell us about Istanbul, Izmir, or any other location.
4. Only in one short story, "Havîna Evînê" (The Summer of Love), do we encounter the realistic context of the city of Izmir on the Turkish Aegean coast and the Kurdish town of Mardin, as linked by the figure of the Kurdish teenager Nefel. Raised in Izmir and assimilated into Turkish culture, Nefel visits her grandparents in Mardin and, unexpectedly, experiences her first passionate love.

These different approaches to geography invite us to discover the various aspects of Kurdish reality. For the writer, Asûs serves as a location of memories and motives hidden in the collective subconscious. At the same time, Dicle also criticizes inner Kurdish relations and their uneasy, unsettled history with the Armenians. The blurred reality of the

<sup>157</sup> Uzun, "İddianameye," 343.

<sup>158</sup> Dicle, "Jibîrkirin Mirin Bi Xwe Ye," interview with the writer by Mihemed Şarman and Fexriya Adsay, 109.

<sup>159</sup> Dicle, interview with the writer, by the author, February 2020.

anonymous metropolis exposes the poverty and helplessness of Kurdish migrants in the Turkish metropolis, while the realistically portrayed picturesque town of Mardin, as discovered through the eyes of a teenager, inspires us to reflect on adolescence and the process of becoming mature, as well as the life of the Kurdish middle class and their entrapment between Turkish and Kurdish cultures. Dicle's literary geography is extra-verted in many ways. It presents different locations as "articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings," rather than any fixed map of Kurdistan with strict boundaries. Asûs is a fictitious land rooted both in the local geography of Kurdish oral performance and inspirations from world literature. Hence, like the Big Country and the Mountain Country from Uzun's novel, Asûs becomes universalized and enters the wider network of literary landscapes. However, it would be incorrect to see the Mountain Country or Asûs as areas disconnected from the Kurdish national idea. Despite the fact that such a vision of Kurdistan and Kurdishness is not based on the "detailed mapping of the boundaries" or "dividing Kurdistan from other non-Kurdish places,"<sup>160</sup> both images are locally rooted and created in the Kurdish language with the aim of being globally recognized as full members of the modern world, including ethnically and politically. Still, to quote Dicle, "Asûs offers a policy different from the political parties."<sup>161</sup> To sum up, Dicle's geography is based on the idea of *belonging to*, not only the desire to *separate from*. Although Asûs is separated from the state, it still belongs to the global literary world.

### Conclusions

In this paper, I explored the heritagization of oral tradition as it transpires in modern Kurdish prose. As shown above, the development of modern literature by Kurdish authors from Turkey has been strictly related to the revitalization of the Kurdish culture and language condemned by the Turkish state's assimilation policy. Hence, these Kurdish writers' aim was not only to create literature, but also to encourage people to think of the Kurdish language as a modern tool of communication. Mehmet Uzun's view of oral tradition and literature can be described as "beauty in simplicity," and he perceived Kurdish writers as the direct continuation of the *dengbêjs*. He indicated that proverbs and condensed language originating in the social and cultural context – tools listeners of traditional performances might easily decode – were important elements borrowed from the oral tradition to serve literature. At the same time, the figures of the *dengbêjs*, their songs and stories, alongside the sounds of the surrounding world and the social reality accompanying oral performances, were presented as elements of the oral tradition from which writers should learn. Uzun's work became more of a textbook of ideas and suggestions, rather than a direct application of all the proposed inspirations.

Mehmet Dicle represents the younger generation of writers, taking advantage of Uzun's experiences and hints. What is more, Dicle's approach to oral tradition and literature demonstrates more knowledge of and care for the rules governing oral performance and literary text. Furthermore, what he praises and searches for is not simplicity, but perfection. Dicle perceives oral performance and literary text as equals that can interact with each other, but for this union to bear fruit in literature, inspiration from oral tradition must follow the lead of modern literature. Dicle intertwines motives from the Kurdish oral tradition with those originating in world literature, as his imagined land of Asûs exemplifies. Dicle's literary geography presents different locations as moments in networks of social relations. Accordingly, many young writers and folklore collectors have discovered their tradition not only from the perspective of local residents, but also a perspective that draws on global intellectual inspirations. Therefore, we can see the Kurdish oral tradition as able to interact with the outside world. As Sadiq Ūskan mentioned to me, "Kurdish folklore should

<sup>160</sup> Galip, *Imagining Kurdistan*, 137.

<sup>161</sup> Dicle, interview with the writer, February 2020.



be recognized by the United Nations and UNESCO as the world's cultural heritage," and thus taken care of by the world, not only Kurds. Hence, Kurds no longer perceive their orality and modern literature only in relation to the nation-building process, but also as important intermediaries inviting modern interactions with the global world.

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