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The Invention of a Tradition: Diyarbakır's Dengbêj Project

Clémence Scalbert-Yücel

- 1 This paper analyses the formation of a 'Kurdish tradition' at the cross-roads of various initiatives by Kurdish national(ist) and government actors, focusing mainly on the contemporary dengbêj [Kurdish singer] project, which was carried out within the auspices of the Diyarbakır municipality, one of the biggest cities in southeast Turkey.¹ This project involved a number of different state offices and openly pro-Kurdish non-state actors, working –at least on paper–in cooperation with each other.
- 2 Led by the pro-Kurdish Diyarbakır Municipality and the Diyarbakır-based cultural centre Dicle-Fırat Kültür Merkezi, the *Dengbêj ve Dengbêjlik Geleneği* [Dengbêj and Dengbêjî Tradition] project was funded by the European Union's Grant scheme for the promotion of cultural rights in Turkey. The scheme aimed to 'support and enrich the daily usage of languages and dialects other than Turkish.' It helped develop various projects around Turkey that dealt with cultures associated with 'non-Turkish languages.'² The scheme's institutional framework involved the Office of the Prime Minister Directorate General of Press and Information, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, and the Central Finance and Contracts Unit of the Republic of Turkey. Financed by this scheme, the *Dengbêj ve Dengbêjlik Geleneği* project aimed to create an anthology (a book and a CD), and to hold two concerts, which ultimately took place in September 2007 in Diyarbakır and Istanbul.
- 3 The project was noteworthy for several reasons. First, it was the first time a Turkish ministry had been involved in a project that openly aimed at supporting Kurdish culture and Kurdish language, which have long been highly circumscribed.
- 4 Second, the project stands out as an important step in a process initiated decades ago by the Kurdish national movement, namely, the recognition and construction of a specifically Kurdish 'tradition.' It marks the passage from a loose, unofficial and contentious effort to the institutionalisation of a Kurdish heritage in Turkey. This specific project must be considered as part of a much wider interest in the dengbêj on the part of both the municipality and the Kurdish movement, an interest that culminated with the opening of the *Mala dengbêjan* [House of Dengbêj] in the heart of Diyarbakır's old city in

May 2007. Institutionalisation on such a scale would probably not have been possible without the involvement of the EU, the ministry and the municipality.

- 5 Third, the project highlights the complex position of a nominally 'state' office such as the Diyarbakır Metropolitan Municipality when such an office is governed by pro-Kurdish challengers. On the one hand, the municipality can be seen as a 'Turkish' governmental office staffed by 'state' actors. On the other hand, because the municipality is controlled by the pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party (DTP, Demokratik Toplum Partisi), it is inscribed within a nebula of actors belonging to the trend of the Kurdish movement more or less loosely organised around the DTP - PKK (TV channels, cultural centres, journals, political parties) that functions as a network and shapes ideologies and actions (the actors in this Kurdish network, also, however, act sometimes in contradictory ways)³. It is thus possible to speak of 'activists in office' (Watts 2006) who sometimes have rather tense relationships with other local and sometimes national state representatives. This fact necessitates, as recommended by Nicole Watts (forthcoming), that we look at the role of the political party (among others) as a third dimension of the state-society relationship: through the party, the Kurdish contention enters the state's offices. The municipality is thus situated in an in-between space.
- 6 Looking at these aspects in relation to one another, I pose the following questions: How have the dengbêjs (themselves, their practices and their songs) been constructed as a Kurdish 'tradition' and heritage? What have been the effects of both the state's policies (from those of the repressive institutions on the ground to those of the contentious municipality) and of the Kurdish movement (including the municipality) on the process and outcome of building such a 'tradition'? The 'invention of tradition' refers not merely to an invention, but also to a revitalization and adaptation of old practices left in abeyance (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983). In this case it results not from strong interventionism, but rather from a smoother and loose process involving the selection of 'a tradition,' the attribution of symbolic meaning, and the definition of the forms of this so-called tradition. Because a specific 'object' is distinguished, constructed as protected, and transmitted as one of the main carriers of the Kurdish culture, we can also characterise this 'invention of a tradition' as a *patrimonialisation* process.
- 7 The paper argues, most generally, that the dengbêj 'tradition' as it exists today is the result of a several-decades-long process of negotiation between individual and collective actors within Kurdish society as well as between these Kurdish actors and representatives of the state. In fact, both the state and the Kurdish national movement have demonstrated contradictory attitudes toward Kurdish folklore and the dengbêj, ranging from protection to disinterest and repression. The dengbêj themselves have similarly produced contradictory narratives about who they are and what they do, or what they should be and should do. In addition, I suggest that the contemporary involvement of the state in the Dengbêj project through the Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism has not substantially modified negotiations between the actors, although it does mark an important symbolic change in state policy. Even though there is no longer a ban, auto-censorship is still in force and the dengbêjs are represented as 'innocent relics' who portray the Kurdish part of the 'Anatolian mosaic' promoted by official narratives in the 2000s.
- 8 Scholars in many disciplines have produced a number of works on the building of Kurdish national identity and the different 'symbolic and tangible elements' (Thiesse 1999: 14) that shape it, including history (Bozarslan 2003; Hirshler 2001), geography and landscape

(O' Shea 2004), and language (Scalbert-Yücel 2005; Tejel 2007), to mention only a few. In the vein of these works, the building of a Kurdish 'tradition' can be studied as part of the process of building a distinct national culture.

- 9 Building the dengbêj 'tradition' is today part of this process, but it must also be considered in a wider context. Interest in memory is rapidly spreading in contemporary Turkey and is helping people explore personal and collective histories. These memories are also –within certain limits– fostered by official narratives that 'rediscover,' for instance, an Ottoman and multicultural past. With the opening of the 'Pandora's Box of history' since the 1990s, 'a nostalgia industry has emerged, ostensibly offering up titbits from a 'lost' past' (Neyzi 2002: 142). The interest of the state as well as associative or private sectors in such memorial narratives, policies and products, is observable today in Turkey as in many other parts of the world. EU-funded projects that openly aim at developing a 'cultural dialogue' promote an image of Turkey as a peaceful 'cultural mosaic.' But these cultures and this diversity, in the way they are exhibited and displayed, may also be frozen and innocent representations of a lost but also imagined past (De Certeau 1993). The way memories are remembered, traditions reinvented (as in the dengbêj's case) often confirms this.
- 10 Research for this study involved interviews with municipality employees, folklorists, music professionals of the private sector (tape sellers and producers, TV employees, singers), and 12 dengbêjs from the House of Dengbêj in Diyarbakır. Interviews with the dengbêjs were conducted within the House over two weeks. The dengbêjs interviewed were all male, mainly residing in Diyarbakır, and from the villages of the province. They were between 50 and 75 years old. Some work outside the house, some own land, and some are retired. Some claim to have nothing. A short interview was also conducted with Mehmûd Kizil, who was not a member of the House but visited it when I was there.
- 11 The paper follows a time frame that is roughly divided, maybe a bit artificially, into a period of contention and ban (from the 1960s –the earliest time the dengbêjs I met mentioned when speaking about contention– to the early 1990s), followed by a period of 'opening' (starting progressively in the late 1990s). The first part of the paper examines the survival of a certain way of dengbêjî in spite of repression by state institutions, wider social changes, and a rather disinterested Kurdish movement. The second section looks at the revival of the dengbêj practice and at a renewed interest among some Kurdish activists, looking specifically at the municipality-led project.

I. Defining the dengbêj and dengbêjî

- 12 It is necessary to start with a definition of the term dengbêj. This is a working definition only, since the invention of a dengbêj tradition necessarily examines the making of the dengbêj's contemporary definitions. The term dengbêj is a Kurdish term composed of the words *deng* [voice] and *bêj* (present tense of *gotin*, to tell). According to Yaşar Kemal, the dengbêj is a man who recites epics in a professional way⁴. The terms bard or troubadour are sometimes used alluding to the long epic songs that dengbêjs recite, generally without musical accompaniment. Christine Allison also distinguishes between the *stranbêj* and the *dengbêj*, the latter singing without musical accompaniment (2001: 68). Besides the geographically or historically limited terms 'bard' or 'minstrel,' Michael Chyet (2003) gives a clear and straightforward definition: 'reciter of romances and epics.' The dengbêj must also be defined by his social position: he used to work for and praise a

master who took care of him in exchange.⁵ Roger Lescot, one of the first authors who worked on Kurdish oral literature, thus gives the following definition of the dengbêjs:

These professional poets, who over the course of years furnished their memories as apprentices of certain old masters, assumed the task of conserving the traditions of the past and, if some new event were to occur, the celebration of the heroic deeds of the present. ... They sometimes faced each other in competitions which were held regularly until quite recently. Every emir or chief of an important tribe maintained one or more of these bards, whose songs, because of the contemporary allusions they might contain, sometimes also had political connotations. Thanks to their unlimited repertoire and matchless gift of improvisation, these men transmitted, from the remotest centuries until today, poems with thousands of verses (Lescot 1977: 798).

- 13 Even though this definition is quite romantic, it contains the main elements of the dengbêj and its practices. This definition must be kept in mind, but does not reflect the reality of those who today define themselves and are defined as dengbêj, or indeed the reality of the previous generation from whom they learned. The evolution of the practice will be examined in the last part of the article.
- 14 Dengbêjî is defined by Chyet (2003) as 'minstrelsy,' 'singing,' or 'the art of being a dengbêj.' I shall refer to the last one in this text. The term dengbêjî (and dengbêjlik in its Turkish version), even though it sounds a bit artificial, is also used by the leaders of the Dengbêj Project and by the dengbêjs. However, even the dengbêj themselves have contradictory ideas of what it means to be a dengbêj, as I explore further within the paper.

II. The survival of the dengbêj practice

The hidden dengbêjs: repression and stigmatization of a 'Kurdish' and 'feudal' practice

- 15 Because it is obviously linked to the use of the Kurdish language, the practice of dengbêjî has been obstructed by the state. Since the 1960s (the earliest dates mentioned by the dengbêjs interviewed in Diyarbakır), there have often been tensions between dengbêjs and the authorities. However, according to the interviewees, such tensions did not result in imprisonment or torture until the 1980s.⁶ One interviewee spoke about fines given for each Kurdish word pronounced. These fines, which date back to the 1930s, were set at a local level by municipality workers or Turkish Hearth members of different southeastern localities in the 1930s (see for instance Aydın et al. 2001: 378). Repression, however, varied depending on where one was located. Outside towns, for instance, authorities showed more tolerance for the use of the Kurdish language. One of the most senior dengbêj described a warning he received from the authorities in the 1960s, when he had been brought to the governor's office and warned by the governor himself. He reported the governor saying as follows: 'In the internal part, within the walls, it is forbidden. Outside the wall it is free. In the gardens it is free; in the countryside it is free. In town, it is forbidden.'⁷ As pressure was always greater in town, the village played an essential part in preserving the *şevbihêrk* [evening gatherings] where dengbêjs used to sing, and the apprenticing of the *kilam* [song] (see note 54 for an extensive definition). Later, villages were the best places in which to collect the *kilam*. Even though speaking Kurdish had been strongly discouraged at the local level since the 1920s, it was not officially forbidden at

the national level until the 1980s (see *e.g.* Scalbert Yücel 2005: 56-82). The official ban on language occurred with the 1982 Constitution and Law 2932 of 1983 after the military coup of September 12, 1980 led by Kenan Evren. The first softening of the legislation occurred in 1991 under Turgut Özal when Law 2932 was amended, enabling the use of Kurdish language in recording and publishing. As suggested by the governor's attitude (or, more accurately, the way this attitude was remembered and told) in the event related above, but also in the very way the use of spoken Kurdish was circumscribed during these years, there was no single official attitude toward Kurdish language use: speaking Kurdish could be banned and fined, but could also be tolerated depending on the place one was in and according to whom one was facing; some state employees were, simply put, more tolerant than others. The situation has become tougher in the 1980s.

- 16 Most of the dengbêjs who lived in town when the coup occurred ceased to sing afterwards. For instance, B. was assumed to be dead by the people who collected oral literature and who tried to gather some dengbêjs around newly established cultural centres in the early 2000s. Like many of interviewees, however, this dengbêj had simply stopped singing after 1980. Collecting and recording were also much more difficult after 1980: as the researcher Hilmî Akyol notes, people were frightened and refused to sing. Those who later settled in town also stopped singing when they abandoned the rural settlement for the urban one. This is how one interviewee who left his village 15 years ago put it: 'In Diyarbakır, no. Songs were over, they disappeared. Turko [colloquial Kurdish term for 'the Turk'] didn't allow it. They tore up our tapes. They didn't allow.' Other interviewees recounted similar experiences. Even within the four walls of the house, people were discouraged from singing by their own family. People either stopped singing or sang in secret; the state's repression was internalised. Some interviewees stressed the fact that songs fell into oblivion because the dengbêj practice stopped for several decades. One mentioned that his repertoire was reduced to a third. Visiting the House today enables them to remember and renew their repertoire.
- 17 Because of this repression, dengbêjî has tended to be represented as something 'hidden' [*tiştêkî veşartî*], or as a 'buried treasure,' as one of the dengbêj said: 'The *dengbêj*, it is a treasure buried in the ground. The dengbêj is like gold.'⁸ As such dengbêjî needs to be discovered, cherished and protected.
- 18 But dengbêjî was not only repressed by the state. It was also impeded by a Kurdish population that was both worried about persecution and had to some degree lost interest due to wider social changes (*i.e.*, urbanisation, the arrival of television, and the development of new, 'modern,' musical forms), and because of the attitudes of some within the Kurdish movement. Even though dengbêjî is today considered a highly important Kurdish tradition that needs to be preserved, and although the songs and the *şevbihêrk* used to be widely and highly appreciated, dengbêjs were also associated with poverty and dependency. The dengbêj often learned to sing while herding sheep; and being a shepherd –though perceived as quite romantic today– ranks low in the social scale. The dengbêj worked for a *beğ* or an *ağa*, who looked after him and whom he praised in exchange. People could be forced into dengbêjî by poverty and received protection, food and shelter in exchange (what some of the interviewees called *karşılık*). Schematically sketched, they were beggars [*parsek*], a slave in the house [*xulam*] and miserable [*perîşan*].⁹ People could be pushed into dengbêjî by need [*îhtiyaç*]. Thus one of the dengbêj mentioned having been discouraged by his father from singing because of this negative image.

- 19 The poverty of the dengbêj seems to be still very much relevant today, but it is also cultivated as an image that can be used for specific aims *i.e.*, when the dengbêjthemselves are asking for an exchange of goods or services. A few dengbêjs I met presented themselves in this vein. One for instance, presented himself like this: 'I started singing when I was seven, and I still sing. I was an orphan; I grew up with my uncles. My parents were dead. I was naked, poor, and not respected.'¹⁰ He followed with a long presentation of his hard childhood and his later work as a shoe-shiner. Another presented himself as follows: 'I was thrown in the street. Home went, house went, properties went. I am now in the street. I have no home. [...] What kept Kurds on their feet, until today, that's the dengbêjs. These dengbêjs, they need people to take care of them, to take care of them. Each dengbêj, he goes barefoot, naked, he has no house. The economy is at zero. Ah! Thank God! The municipality took care of us, it opened this place.'¹¹ Some of the House's dengbêjs own businesses and are relatively wealthy; some are retired and earn a small wage. But most of them clearly have few resources. However, not all of them spoke about their economic situation. It seems that those who did are the most involved in trying to use their impoverished status to obtain a *karşılık* from their dengbêjî. The stigma can be inverted and used in order to secure resources –not only economic resources but also symbolic ones, because poverty also secures the 'traditional' image of the dengbêj. The stigma is thus inverted by the process of institutionalization of the 'tradition,' and poverty becomes part of the definition of the dengbêj and constructs his social reality too.
- 20 The Kurdish movement, which had an ambiguous attitude toward folklore, also had a share in marginalizing dengbêjî. This ambiguity has been perceptible since the early 1990s, when the movement developed cultural policies and activities, in particular around the Centre for the Culture of Mesopotamia, *Navenda Çanda Mezopotamya* (NÇM). The NÇM opened in 1991 in Istanbul (branches were later opened in other towns). According to its website, Dicle-Fırat Kültür Merkezi, which opened in 2003, can be considered a new branch of the NÇM in Diyarbakır. Since 1991 the NÇM has been a leading organization in promoting the cultural aspects of the Kurdish movement. Its first aim was to 'protect the culture, art, history and language of the colonised peoples of Mesopotamia,' meaning, the Kurdish people. It also aims at 'recreating the national culture' which, it asserted, had been 'destroyed' and 'assimilated.'¹² But what culture? The journal *Rewşen* [Enlightened] published by the Centre between 1992 and 1996 paid attention to folklore, popular culture and popular literature [*çirokên geleri, edebiyata gel*]. In the first issue, an article entitled 'Folklor' underlined the importance of folklore in building a national identity and called for the rediscovery of Kurdish folklore which, the article argued, had been made meaningless by the occupier.¹³ Subsequent issues did not ignore oral literature, proverbs or songs, but they were not the journal's main focus. In January 1993, the NÇM opened a branch in Diyarbakır (it was shortly after shut down). Its manager, Îbrahîm Xort, declared: 'The NÇM branch in Diyarbakır will mainly focus on research, collection of oral literature, music, traditional dances and theatre lessons [...] NÇM calls on all the Kurds, saying: collect proverbs, stories, jokes, songs, poems, books, etc.; collect everything that is in your hands or in your region and send it to us in order for us to be able to gather together our culture.'¹⁴
- 21 The interest in folklore and its collection has been evident since the beginning of NÇM. However, the NÇM's activity branches are divided into music, theatre, folkloric dance, art and language; no specific section is devoted to oral literature. While oral literature was one of the areas of activity of the Kurdish Institute in Istanbul, funded in 1992 as a

research institute in order to complement the NÇM, the Institute did not publish any books related to it before 1998. In *Rewşen* no specific mention is made of the dengbêj –the term is present in some of the articles but no specific attention is given until the publication of the journal *Jiyana Rewşen* [The Enlightened Life], which replaced *Rewşen* in 1996. *Jiyana Rewşen* advertised the monthly activities of the NÇM's Istanbul and Izmir branches; since 1997, concerts given by dengbêjs have been occasionally (although rarely compared to the numerous other concerts) advertised.¹⁵ The *Diwana Dengbêj* (literarily 'court of dengbêj,' an expression which refers to the public gathering of dengbêj on a stage or on TV) slowly developed in the second half of the 1990s, and is today a traditional part of all gatherings and festivals. Despite organising these gatherings, however, it seems that, in practice, the Kurdish movement organisations showed very little interest in the collection, recording, and transcription work conducted by a few individuals in the Kurdistan region. One sees a divergence of views within the movement itself on the role to be attributed to oral literature and folklore, as well as different opportunities between people residing in Istanbul and those residing in the southeast, where collection mostly took place. With fewer resources and opportunities (due in particular to the state of exception in place until the early 2000s), the southeast has been a place for less visible and less prestigious activities such as folkloric collection; Istanbul or Izmir have been places for creative work like theatre or cinema, works that give room for another conception of the 'Kurdish culture.' The fact that the collection of folklore also took place in prison nurtures the hypothesis that this type of work was done by those in the movement with few resources.

- 22 Within the Kurdish movement, and certainly within the NÇM itself, Kurdish activists cultivated a somewhat different definition of culture, grounded not in folklore and 'ancient tradition' but in the party and the guerrilla struggle.¹⁶ The NÇM held a 5-days Kurdish conference on culture [*Konferansa Çandê ya Kurdî*], for instance, in November 1992. The report published in *Rewşen*¹⁷ after the meeting seems to include two competing views on culture. On the one hand, Abdurrahman Durre and Feqi Hüseyin Sağnıç (two of the oldest representatives of the movement, who came from the medrese and pre-PKK political trends) stressed the importance of language and oral literature (*Rewşen* 8, 1992: 23-24). On the other hand, even though amateur folklorists participated in the conference, the main abstracts discussed a new culture to be built on the ground of the guerrilla struggle. İbrahîm Gürbüz, director of the NÇM, stated:

Our art, our culture and our literature must rise from this revolution. Our music, literature, painting must talk about this revolution. Today in our country each act of resistance is a heroic example. This heroism must be written down. In order to break the influence of the colonialist and occupier, culture and art, alternative art and culture must be created. In order to do this a body politic must be discovered. The characteristics and particularities of this polity are the following: national, democratic, scientific, universal, egalitarian, social. That is to say that the form and the shell of our culture and art must be national, and its content must be democratic and socialist.¹⁸

- 23 The few people I met who had started to collect and record oral literature said that they were discouraged by the political milieu which, during the 1990s, gave priority to contemporary music, theatre and folkloric dances. In the 1990s, people interested in folkloric and oral literature were considered 'reactionary' [*gerici*]. At that time, the dengbêjs did not appear at all a priority for the PKK, which was a socialist party that

fought against feudalism, of which dengbêj were considered to be fully part. Thus, dengbêjs fell into oblivion for a while.¹⁹

The role of key people and places in the survival of dengbêjs

- 24 For these reasons,²⁰ the dengbêj never had high visibility among the cultural activities of the Kurdish movement until recently. However, certain individuals and places played an important role in keeping them active and practising.
- 25 Discussions with some of Diyarbakır's *kasetçi* [tape maker and seller] clearly show that the dengbêj always maintained an audience, despite their low visibility. While political artists like Koma Berxwedan, Aram, Şivan Perwer and Xelîl Xemgîn –political bands and singers with musical accompaniment– were illicitly but widely circulated in the 1980s (sometimes in more than 100,000 copies), the more austere dengbêj recordings were circulating illicitly as well, although in a smaller circle of amateurs. The amateurs were mainly old men who had enjoyed the actual *şevbihêrk* and fully appreciated the subtleties of the Kurdish language at a time when, especially in towns, Turkish was quickly superseding Kurdish. The recordings circulating at the time were mostly from well-known dengbêjs like şakiro, Hûseynê Farê, Ayşe şan, Meryem Xan and Îsa Perwarî. However, more local dengbêjs were also recorded, appreciated, and listened to. These recordings were made illegally on simple tape-recorders: people would place tape-recorders in front of the dengbêj during the *şevbihêrk*, and record for one or two hours. Then they would go see a *kasetçi*, who was able to issue tapes that accessed the illegal market. The *kasetçi* could also make a copy for himself and keep it as a precious archive²¹. Among the amateurs were wealthy people who gathered the dengbêj (either local or visiting) at their place and could ask his guests to fill tapes for them.
- 26 In Diyarbakır, dengbêj also used to gather in cafés until 1980. A café frequently mentioned was the Café of Mehemedê Hezroyê, or the Café of Dengbêj, which already existed in the 1960s. It was situated within the city walls of the old town of Diyarbakır, in the market *Çarçiya şewitî*, far from the main streets. It was a small two-storey café. The ground floor was for ordinary customers, but dengbêj gathered on the first floor where they could sing. Both local and visiting dengbêjs used to gather there. The gendarmerie and police had a relatively tolerant attitude toward the place until 1980:
- The police or military didn't come to the café. There was no problem. Trustworthy people used to go. Those who were curious about Kurdish, they came. No one came from outside. Nobody came to this café. [...] Here [in the House of Dengbêj] everybody comes; there nobody came. The café was in the middle of the market, it was small, on the first floor, a hundred meters from the main road. I mean, nobody came! And if people came, when police or military came, they didn't sing, they stopped. They said the Turks have come, *zaptiye* have come. We didn't sing. In the village as well, when *zaptiye* came, we didn't sing. *Zaptiye* or military. This is their name in kurmanci. For them we say *zaptiye* [...] when they came we didn't sing; we didn't dare. *Zaptiye* used to beat people.²²
- 27 Although everybody knew about the place, it was not shut down until the 1980 coup. Until then, dengbêj was kept alive by this milieu of men, particularly elderly men. They also composed an important part of the audience of Radio Erivan, which broadcasted in Kurdish from the 1950s; the dengbêjs the radio broadcast contributed to keeping alive a strong interest in these singers and their songs within the Turkish territory.²³

- 28 A more detached and organised interest arose from people one could define as amateur folklorists, who took up the mission of collecting oral literature. Hilmî Akyol is important in this domain, though he is far from the only one. Born in Hazro (a district of Diyarbakır province), Akyol grew up in Diyarbakır and started collecting popular songs and stories when he finished high school in 1979. He first collected songs and stories from two persons in Diyarbakır, then in Hazro's villages, and then in other districts of Diyarbakır. In the early 1990s, villagers fled the destroyed villages and settled in Diyarbakır; he therefore started his collection again within the city. He loved the tales he listened to every evening in his childhood, and was afraid that the elderly people would die. Thus, he started building a personal archive, without ever realizing that it would one day be transcribed and published. He said he had gathered around 700 tapes, some of which he recorded, others bought. In 2005 he sent more than 500 of them to Suleymaniye (Northern Iraq) where the Kelepor Institute established the Hilmî Akyol Archives in his name. His first book was published in 2000 by the Kurdish Institute in Istanbul, and by 2009 he had published more than 10 books of collected folklore. Akyol used to work as truck-driver, carrying oil from Iraq to Turkey, and at the same time collected stories, songs and proverbs. He collected this material alone from 1979 until 2000, when he started working within the 'collection and research' branch of the Kurdish Institute in Istanbul with a number of other people. When the Institute opened a branch in Diyarbakır in 2004 he worked there for two years. In 2006 he joined the municipality of Diyarbakır (the Araştırma İnceleme branch²⁴) and now works as one of the administrators of the House of Dengbêj. Before this he played an important role in gathering the dengbêj around the Dicle-Fırat Cultural Centre.²⁵ He is a key personality of the Municipality Dengbêj project. His trajectory from solitary to associative work illustrates the slow rise of the interest for folklore by Kurdish organizations.

III. Rediscovery and institutionalization of a 'tradition'

- 29 Folklore and oral literature have been focal points of Kurdish organizational attention since the emergence of the first Kurdish associations in the late Ottoman Empire. Oral literature acquired a core position in the construction of Kurdish national identity in the 1930s and 1940s thanks in large part to the efforts of the Bedirxan family, which became the focal point of the Kurdish national movement in exile in Syria, and which published the journal *Hawar* (1932-1935; 1941-1943). The French Orientalists were also central in the discovery of the rich Kurdish oral literature and in its use as a resource to build a national self, through what Jordi Tejel describes as the 'Kurdish-French connection' (Tejel 2006, 2007). Since then, many individuals have worked to collect and preserve Kurdish oral literature. Of particular note are Mehmed Emin Bozarslan and Zeynelabiddin Zinar. Both live in Sweden and have published collections through their publishing houses, respectively Deng and Pencînar. In Turkey, Ahmet Aras has also been important in this regard, publishing three Kurdish epics in 1993 and 1996. Later, many other writers have published collections of oral literature and epics.
- 30 However, while there has long been interest in Kurdish oral literature, dengbêjs do not seem to have garnered much attention. Although *Hawar* occasionally mentioned the dengbêjs, and while published epics were collected from dengbêjs themselves (in particular from Ehmedê Fermanê Kiki²⁶), no article underlined the specific role dengbêjs played in Kurdish national identity or Kurdish society. Interest mainly grew in the 1990s.

The pioneering role of various Kurdish writers

- 31 In understanding the renewed attention given to the dengbêj, Mehmed Uzun (1953-2007), one of the most prominent Kurdish writers from Turkey, played a central role in building the current image and position of the dengbêjs. Mehmed Uzun's work is inscribed within several legacies: Kurdish notable history, the written production of the *medrese*, and oral literature. His work gives an important place to the dengbêjs. One of his first novels, *Rojek ji Rojên Evdalê Zeynikê* [One day in the life of Evdalê Zeynikê, 1991], tells the story of one famous dengbêj, Evdalê Zeynikê, who even became a mythological figure and subject of other dengbêjs' songs. Uzun's last novel, *Hawara Dicleyê* [The Cry of the Tigris, 2001-2003] is built on an oral narrative: the first volume is composed of four *şevbihêrk*, and the narrator, Biro, is a dengbêj. He presents himself as the voice of the peoples without voices, of the peoples without history, of the 'forgotten.' Uzun clearly underlines the role the dengbêj played in the transmission of history, and the memory of this people without a state. Uzun's essay *Dengbêjlerim* [My dengbêjs], published in Turkish in 1998, is directed to a large audience. It aims to introduce the dengbêjs to a Kurdish and Turkish audience; indeed, the work opens with the words 'I will tell you about my dengbêjs.' Mehmed Uzun compares them to Homer, pays tribute to them, and describes them as one of the main sources for his oeuvre. They were, he wrote, his masters [*usta*] and teachers [*öğretmen*] (Uzun 1998: 75). At the same time Uzun's work, and in particular *Dengbêjlerim*, participated in the re-construction and re-invention of the dengbêj in general, and of some particular dengbêjs as national figures. He pays tribute to some of the dengbêjs he knew personally, but also to the most acknowledged dengbêjs like Evdalê Zeynikê. Uzun not only presents his own dengbêjs, but also the people's dengbêjs. Later, underlining the role Mehmed Uzun played in the rediscovery and re-invention of the dengbêjs, Diyarbakır's dengbêjs paid him tribute: when he was sick in the city hospital, they sang for him in a concert organised by the municipality.²⁷
- 32 Following Mehmed Uzun, other writers have written books about the dengbêjs, among them Uzun's translator, Muhsin Kızılkaya (2001). Salihê Kevirbirî (2002 and 2003) also contributed to a better knowledge of the dengbêjs of Turkey and Armenia.
- 33 This rediscovery and reinvention of the dengbêjs lies behind contemporary Kurdish literature, and in particular behind Uzun's literary work and fame in contemporary Turkey. However, I would also like to stress the role the writer Yaşar Kemal seems to have played in the rediscovery of Kurdish oral literature and its uses in literary creation. Indeed, Yaşar Kemal's work is clearly fuelled by a deep knowledge of Turkey's oral traditions (Erhat 1978; Yücel 2008). He was one of the first writers in Turkey to discuss and to define the dengbêjs (see, for instance, Erhat 1978: 260-264). He was the first to mention Evdalê Zeynikê, who had been a guest in Kemal's family house in Van, and who became one of the characters of *Yer Demir Gök Bakır* published in 1963. The dengbêjs are found throughout Kemal's work, as shown in the importance of their characters in the second volume of *An Island Story* (2002). For Yaşar Kemal, the Russian novel, based on oral literary tradition, was a model that the Turkish novel could build from. Kemal spoke about these traditions to Kurdish writers, and in particular to Mehmed Uzun, whom he had met in Sweden in the early 1980s. In the foreword Kemal wrote for the Turkish translation of Uzun's *Siya Evînê*, he stressed that the language of Russian writers like Pushkin or Gogol and the Turkish author Nazim Hikmet had been fed by the rich oral

literature of their countries, just as Kurdish literature might build from its own oral tradition (Uzun 1995: 8). The rediscovery of this oral literature and dengbêjs among Kurdish writers may be located behind Kemal's advices.

The role of a loose political and cultural network

- 34 Even though the rediscovery of the dengbêj as a 'Kurdish tradition' came partly from activists and writers with no affiliation with the movement around the DTP and PKK, a constellation of political actors associated to varying degrees to this network have re-appropriated the dengbêj today.
- 35 The municipality is one central point in this constellation. The pro-Kurdish party HADEP (replaced by the DEHAP and later DTP) was first elected to head the municipality in 1999, and is still in office. As Zeynep Gambetti writes (2009: 98). 'This was the first time that a political party representing the Kurdish resistance movement took hold of a state institution wielding local power.' The election of this party brought 'activists into office' and brought the municipality into a space in between 'the state' and the 'Kurdish national (ist) movement.' I follow Gambetti when she writes that 'the sheer weight of the municipality as a state institution that forcefully opens up a space for Kurdish culture and identity largely surpasses the narrow limits of everyday subversion because it furnishes subversion with agency, vision and coordination' (Gambetti 2009: 100). Part of this coordinated subversion within the state came from the municipality's 'symbolic politics,' defined by Nicole Watts as 'the use of representation – narratives, symbols, and spectacle – to maintain or transform a power relationship' (Watts 2006: 136). The cultural policy of the municipality can be defined – at least partly – as symbolic politics in that it mobilizes Kurdish culture and language. To understand the 'rediscovery' of the dengbêj, the element of the municipality's cultural policy that interests me here is the artistic and cultural festivals that have been organised in southeastern pro-Kurdish municipalities since the early 2000s, when the Extraordinary Rule that had been in effect in the southeast since the 1980s ended. The first such festival was Diyarbakır's *Kültür ve Sanat Festivali* [Culture and Arts Festival] in 2001. Today most of the pro-Kurdish municipalities organize festivals on Diyarbakır's model. The declared aim of these festivals is to promote democracy and fraternity between people; art and culture are described as the main tools to develop mutual acquaintance and democratization.²⁸ These festivals appeared as a place of promotion of multiculturalism and of rediscovery of the ancestral multiculturalism of the region.²⁹ This rhetoric of multiculturalism, today legitimized by the EU and UNESCO, gives high visibility to local cultures, and mainly Kurdish culture. Today, there is no festival without the dengbêjs and the *Diwana dengbêjan*.
- 36 The municipality, however, is well embedded in the political network and does not work on its own. The dengbêj were also promoted by cultural centres, in Diyarbakır particularly by the Dicle-Fırat Kültür Merkezi, which opened in 2003. The cultural centre opened in April 2003 with a concert given by local dengbêjs. The dengbêj participating in the festival were those who performed in Dicle-Fırat. Television has also been central in promoting and publicising the dengbêj, who were first broadcast by Med TV from Europe. Local dengbêj have also been participating for five years in the program *Müzik Diyarı* [The country of music] broadcasted by the local channel Gün TV. A few weeks before my visit to Diyarbakır, a new program had been created: *Nalina dengbêjan* [The lament of the dengbêj] replacing *Müzik Diyarı* every fortnight when the dengbêjs would appear. It is

possible to argue that by 2009 these three components –municipality, TV channel and cultural centre– worked as a network with the same dengbêjs, promoting the same narratives.

- 37 Within this sphere, the dengbêjs are now depicted as important –if not the most important– representatives of oral literature and of Kurdish culture.³⁰ Cevahir Sadak Düzgün, in charge of culture at the Diyarbakır municipality, stated: ‘When you say Kurdish culture, you first think about *dengbêj*.’³¹ *Dengbêj* are considered carriers [*taşımak*] of Kurdish culture,³² like the mothers [*dayik*] and the *medrese*.³³ Osman Baydemir, mayor of Diyarbakır Metropolitan Municipality said in April 2008: ‘The dengbêjs, linking the past to the present of the Kurds, are the most important carriers of this rich cultural accumulation,’ and on the same occasion the parliamentary deputy Selahattin Demirtaş declared that the existence of the dengbêj had protected the Kurdish culture and language from being wiped out.³⁴ They are the memory of a Kurdish people deprived of written memory, of written history and of archives.³⁵ This narrative is very close to Uzun’s, according to whom the dengbêj Biro of *Hawara Dîcleyê* is the voice of the forgotten.
- 38 These narratives, developed by the municipalities and by the Kurdish cultural and political activists, are also found among some of the dengbêjs themselves, who are clearly appropriating the ‘dominant’ rhetoric: dengbêjî is portrayed as coming from ancient times, from ancestors. Dengbêj are also portrayed as a treasure [*xezîne*] or as something very profound [*kur*] and respectable [*bi rûmet*]³⁶. One even spoke about a kind of archive [*arşîv*]:
- Until today there was no Kurdish archive even though Kurds are numerous in the world. The Kurdish culture, through its own language, from tongue to tongue, from person to person... what kept the Kurdish culture on its feet, it was the *dengbêjs*, until now. If there was no *dengbêj*, who would have said what? We don’t know what happened. Because we have no archive.³⁷
- 39 We can refer to this rhetoric as dominant because it seems to be produced by the ‘knowledgeables’: the municipality, the folklorists, and the writers who are in daily contact with the House’s dengbêjs. This narrative seems to pass from them to the dengbêjs, since the same terms and the same ideas are sometimes found in the narratives of both. It can also sound like slogans, short phrases easily memorised: ‘Since Kurds first existed, there have been dengbêjs’; ‘Among the people dengbêj always existed,’ and so on.

The Dengbêj Project: the central state’s disinterest?

- 40 As the main carriers of Kurdish culture, dengbêj need ‘protection’ [*xwedî kirin*]. This term is recurrent among Kurdish cultural and political activists and associations, and some of the dengbêjs themselves. Kurdish culture faced assimilation policies and was on the verge of ‘disappearance’, therefore it needs ‘protection’ and sometimes ‘recording.’ The Dengbêj Project is directly aimed at preventing the disappearance of what is defined as a ‘tradition.’ The actors seem not to distinguish clearly between tradition and heritage. This is reinforced by the use of three languages (Kurdish, Turkish and French) and translation in the CD and the anthology produced within the frame of the project. The terms *çand* [culture] or *kevneşopî* [tradition] are found in Kurdish; with their equivalent of *kültür* [culture] or *gelenek* [tradition] in Turkish; in English the term tradition is only found in the title of the project and the term of patrimony is used everywhere else for the

Kurdish or Turkish 'tradition' (and in a lesser extent 'culture'). It seems that these different terms are interchangeable for the actors.³⁸ What is clear from the texts in both the CD and anthology is that dengbêjî (either defined as a tradition or patrimony) is considered as a part of the Kurdish culture, as an element having been transmitted from the old ages ('before the written word') to today, as an element to be conserved and recorded.³⁹

- 41 In order to prevent the disappearance of this 'tradition,' the passage toward a written object is deemed essential. As the objective of the project was to make something 'immortal' [*nemir*], 'some document, like a book' [*belge, weke pirtûk*]⁴⁰ was needed. Some dengbêjs expressed the same idea toward the recordings: 'The anthology, it is very good! The culture does not disappear. A book, it is not something small. It is something difficult to do. The names of the dengbêj that have been recorded do not disappear.'⁴¹ Others expressed: 'Something written or recorded, it stays,' or 'Everything dies but not the written word.'⁴² These phrases are quite similar to the words of Osman Baydemir introducing the anthology: 'We know, in the beginning was the word; but word passes, writing remains' (in Düzgün; Akyol; Gazi; Avci & Günel 2007: 8). This need to produce books and writing is recurrent among the Kurdish movement and can be linked to what I would define as a 'complex of orality,' developed when few written documents are available to use as a ground for a 'high national culture.' This 'complex' and the need to refer to a written culture is clearly visible in the narratives and projects of the municipality. The first words Cevahir Sadak Düzgün, in charge of culture at Diyarbakır Municipality, said to me in our interview when I asked her about the project's idea were: 'In reality the foundation of Kurdish oral culture is the dengbêjî. For the written culture, it is the *medrese* of Kurds.'⁴³ The municipality of Diyarbakır (but also the wider Kurdish movement) seems to be trying to resolve this imbalance between a huge oral tradition and a few written documents by developing two parallel projects, one dealing with written culture, symbolised by the *medrese*, and another dealing with oral culture, symbolised by the dengbêjs. The first is, however, rather limited and paradoxical (a single CD, but no book, was produced). The dengbêj project, in comparison, grew progressively bigger.
- 42 According to Düzgün, even before the European fund was advertised and became available, the municipality had already expressed its desire to develop a project on the dengbêj, and its research branch had already started collection work. The Dengbêj project indeed was divided in two parts. A part funded by the European Union was dedicated to developing a written dengbêj anthology and CD together with the organization of two concerts in Istanbul and Diyarbakır. Another part, funded only by the municipality, was dedicated to the opening of a House of Dengbêj. The two parts of the project were done concurrently. The House of Dengbêj was opened on the 30th May 2007 (the first day of the 7th Diyarbakır Kültür Sanat Festival); the anthology and CD were ready for the organization of the concerts in September 2007.
- 43 The Dengbêj Project was among the 10 projects selected within the frame of the European Union Promotion of Cultural Rights in Turkey Programme (PCRT),⁴⁴ the aim of which was to:

... contribute to the implementation of the legislative changes related to cultural rights. The project will contribute to increasing mutual understanding, knowledge and wider appreciation of the cultural variety of Turkey. It will also promote economic development by means of support to local and regional initiatives and

entities, and will provide valuable experience for local and national public institutions, directly involved in promoting cultural rights implementation.

- 44 The rhetoric of cultural diversity and inter-cultural dialogue is dominant: 'The specific objective of the Cultural Initiatives Support Grant Scheme (CISGS) is to support fostering mutual understanding, knowledge and wider appreciation of the various cultures in Turkey.'⁴⁵ The Dengbêj project was conducted along with other projects, dealing with Romani, Circassian, Bosnian, or Georgian culture and language, within the same framework. Some projects did not focus on a particular culture or language, but on the idea of the 'cultural mosaic' itself, by investigating local ethnic diversity and cultural exchange in cities such as Istanbul or Kahramanmaraş. This focus on cultural diversity and dialogue explains the fact that the first idea of the Diyarbakır project was to join the dengbêjs to the Laz singers from the Black Sea. However, this dimension of the project, which would have been a continuation of a first encounter between the dengbêj and their Laz counterparts during the 2006 Kültür Sanat Festival, was eventually dropped; the final project focused on the dengbêj only.
- 45 The Dengbêj Project that received funding was designed by the municipality together with the Dicle-Fırat Cultural Centre. The implementation of the Scheme necessitated the collaboration of the Office of Prime Minister Directorate General of Press and Information, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, and the Central Finance and Contracts Unit of the Republic of Turkey, all based in Ankara. As the beneficiary of the Programme the Ministry of Culture and Tourism was responsible for its technical implementation. Because of the involvement of the Turkish state in the project, it acquired a high symbolic value. Indeed one of the results of the project was the first-ever publication of a book in Kurdish with state participation. Düzgün noted that although financially it was a very small project compared to other EU-funded projects of the municipality, it was a big project in terms of its ideas. It is symbolically important for the municipality: When elected officials use the Kurdish language they have typically been put on trial, which also underscores the inconsistency of the state and its different institutions concerning its language policies.⁴⁶ For Hilmî Akyol, the fact that the book was published by the Ministry of Tourism and Culture symbolized state recognition of the Kurdish language. For the dengbêjs, the involvement of the state signifies that singing is now free again.
- 46 How exactly was the state involved?⁴⁷ According to the interviews I conducted, the Dengbêj Project was designed and written by the municipality (its branch of research and projects), in collaboration with people from Dicle-Fırat Cultural Centre. It was selected by European representatives. I understood that the state involvement in the project was quite minimal. Meetings between representatives of the Turkish Ministry of Tourism and Culture and of the municipality were organized twice. The first time the project's members travelled from Diyarbakır to Ankara was for training regarding the Fund. Another time, representatives from the Ministry in Ankara came to inspect that the money had been spent properly. At the beginning, municipal employees sent copies of all written materials to the Ministry of Tourism and Culture, which eventually informed them that this was not necessary. From the perspective of those involved with the project in Diyarbakır, the Ministry seemed to withdraw from the content of the project. As Düzgün pointed out, this is also stressed on the cover of the anthology: 'The whole responsibility of this publication belongs to Diyarbakır Metropolitan Municipality.' However, according to Düzgün, the Ministry asked that the Kurdish texts be published together with a Turkish translation. This constituted the only Ministry interference on

the content: the biographies of the dengbêjs were translated; the Turkish toponyms were used together with the Kurdish ones, and short Turkish summaries of the songs were inserted.

- 47 Is this apparent minimal involvement really that minimal? I would suggest that this project (like the other projects selected within the grant framework) is located within a larger process of institutionalizing an innocent and static multiculturalism in Turkey. As we will see below, the way the 'tradition' is practised and passed down today seems to confirm this idea. In addition, an important 'auto-censorship' enables the 'tradition' to develop only within limits given by the rhetoric of cultural diversity and dialogue.

'The tradition is not what is used to be'

- 48 The Dicle-Fırat Cultural Centre and its extension, the Dengbêj House, are perceived as being places where dengbêjî has come to life again. Since 2003, they gave visibility to the dengbêj, but also institutionalised them and their songs. As one dengbêj said:

In Diyarbakır, no. Songs were over, they disappeared. Turko didn't allow it. They tore up our tapes. They didn't allow ... When we came, Dicle Fırat opened. Diyarbakır's dengbêjî started too. [Again?] Yes again. In Dicle Fırat we became dengbêj. Now... When I was 10 years old I started singing. Now I am 60. I had not sung for 20 years. For 20 years it was forbidden. When Dicle Fırat opened, when I came, at the beginning, I was scared. Now it is free.⁴⁸

- 49 The House of Dengbêj was opened as a dedicated place for the dengbêjs who, since 2003, would gather in a room in Dicle-Fırat Cultural Centre, a few meters from where the House of Dengbêj is located today. Because Dicle-Fırat is a place for teaching (music, theatre), the dengbêjs and classes disturbed one another. To prevent this, the house of dengbêjs was opened by the municipality in one of Diyarbakır's traditional old black stone houses in the old town, which was refurbished by the Chamber of Architects. Organized around a courtyard, several rooms downstairs are dedicated to the dengbêjs, who sit, chat, drink tea and sing. Upstairs are the offices. One is the office of the research branch of the municipality, the other is the tourism office. This is no coincidence: the Dengbêj House is now included in the municipality's touristic circuit of the town, the dengbêj are shown to the tourists and the dengbêj anthology is available and distributed in the main tourism office in Dağ Kapı⁴⁹.

- 50 The dengbêjs who frequent the House mostly live in Diyarbakır, and are *kayıtlı*, which in this case means both 'registered' and 'recorded.' The system of registration started with Dicle-Fırat. Twenty-four dengbêjs are currently on file: their names and contact details are registered, and their voices are recorded and stored 'in the computer.' The registration does not oblige them to come everyday, but ensures the place will never be empty, for when a visitor comes, dengbêjs should be present and available to perform. Thus registered, the dengbêjs are also tied [*bağlı*] to the House: 'We are tied to this place. When dengbêj are needed, they call us.'⁵⁰ What are dengbêjs needed for? 'For the festivals. When a festival or a meeting is organized, they send us.' Dengbêj from Dicle Fırat and Mala Dengbêjan are also sent to the local TV station, Gün TV, where they receive a little money in exchange of their performance. Being registered also means they cannot record or participate in any public activities without the authorization of the House. Hence the main symbolic role given to the dengbêj by this complex is 'to protect the Kurdish culture'; their main practical role is to animate the house and to participate in festivals

and TV programs (see a performance of some dengbêjs of Diyarbakır's dengbêj house at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j6pYhN2WKuo&feature=related>).

- 51 As many of the dengbêj emphasised, being registered is a form of recognition in a time when people do not give value [*değer, qîmet*] to or show sufficient interest in them. The institution, and being a member of it, is perceived as something that can enable the dengbêj to be known and appreciated like they were before.

No. There was nothing. Now we exist here. Whether or not we were practising dengbêjî, we started with Dicle Fırat. We entered the market with Dicle Fırat. Arif! How many tapes has he sold?! He used to stay behind his herd. Before Dicle Fırat, nobody knew him. With Dicle Fırat we became dengbêj. We became known and people became aware of us and we became aware of the people.⁵¹

- 52 Poor, registered, and tied to the municipality, dengbêj can ask for compensation [*karşılık*]; they thus organised a strike in 2008 to secure a salary. 'Dengbêjî, it is not something little; dengbêjî, it is the Kurdish culture. I mean it is the foundation of the Kurds. If there is no foundation, on what do you build? No! I mean it is necessary that people take care of it, of this culture.'⁵² Indeed, such arguments can lead to the claim that the dengbêjs, as the foundation of the Kurdish culture, must be supported and even paid. The idea of organising a strike emerged from some of the dengbêjs. Even though some dengbêjs seemed to have disagreed with the idea or even with the dengbêj leader of the strike, no open conflict was mentioned. The strike consisted mainly in not coming to the House for nearly two months; the once regular Diwan that used to take place in the house had to be organized with non-registered dengbêjs. The registered dengbêj then met with Cevahir Sadak Düzgün and mayor Osman Baydemir, asking the municipality for a salary. The mayor promised to do what he could. Today they do not have a salary, but free lunch is provided every day, as well as a bus pass to travel in the city. One of the dengbêj also mentioned an '*eidî*' (understood to be a kind of pocket money given for the religious feasts).

- 53 The strike highlights the institutionalization and professionalisation of the dengbêjs, who feel themselves to be a kind of municipal workers, keeping alive and displaying the Kurdish culture to visitors, and holding rights as such. For some, however, the simple opening of the House is already a mark of kindness [*qencî*]. From the encounters I had with various dengbêjs of the House, it is possible to affirm that their conceptions of their own practices and images are two-fold: Some of them seem to simply be doing what they like to do, and have clear ideas of what their art is or should be; others seem to have well understood the narrative of the Kurdish movement –i.e., the loose political and cultural network described above– which enables them to be more instrumentalist, as demonstrated in the organisation of the strike, an imported form of protest that the movement is familiar with.

- 54 Nowadays, the dengbêjs rarely sing in private houses, in the village guesthouses [*köy odaları*], or during weddings. The dengbêjs sing in the House, during festivals, and on TV; three places and times which are characterized by staging and constitute a deviation from common previous practices.⁵³ The same images and symbolism are used in staging in these three different places and times. The House is an old building with rooms filled with wooden sofas, cushions and carpets. Small coffee tables and old copper trays are covered with old copper or tin objects like coffee pots and samovars. On the walls are pictures of past *dengbêjs* which remind both the visitors and the dengbêjs themselves that dengbêjî is an ancient practice. Gün TV programs staging the dengbêj are also shot in

what is called the *şark köşesi* (literally 'oriental corner'): little couches covered with carpets, and pictures of dengbêjs who have passed away. During the festivals, the stage is also generally organized as a small *şark köşesi* and the dengbêj sometimes wear the *şal û şapik* (traditional Kurdish trousers and jacket) as well as the *keffiyeh*. The *şark köşesi* and the collective 'mnemonic objects' (Fliche 2007: 196-200) that compose it inscribe the dengbêjs in the past and reinforce the process of *patrimonialisation* granting them a heritage status.

- 55 In such contexts, all songs [*kilam*]⁵⁴ cannot be sung, and the old songs are not performed in the old way. First, the songs performed today are shorter. This is due to two reasons. Firstly, lack of practice, sometimes for a couple of decades, led to a loss of memory and shortening of the songs. The second reason is directly linked to the issue of the performance and the audience. The contemporary audience does not necessarily appreciate long epic stories, nor do they always understand them. This is reflected in the way in which people visit the House: they come for a little while, sit in the room with the dengbêj, and listen for them for a few minutes. They also often record the songs with their mobile phones, like they would shoot a photo souvenir. For the festivals and the television, the long epic songs are also largely shortened and cut.
- 56 Cutting the song –or creating short songs– is, however, not only a recent development, but is also tied to constraints on recording and radio broadcasting that developed in the 1950s. This point is emphasized by Mehmûd Kizil, who learned dengbêj alongside his father. He first shortened the long songs for the purpose of recording (his first record came out in 1965 in Istanbul): songs couldn't fit on an LP record, and a record's audience is different of a *şevbihêrk*'s one. Mehmûd Kizil also said that he did not go much to the café of Mehmedê Hêzro, where the dengbêj used to sing long songs. Because he recorded, and because people liked short songs and became bored by long songs, he became used to sing shorter songs⁵⁵. Recording also brought musical accompaniment more in sync with young people's tastes; dengbêj often compared themselves in the interviews to the *sazî*. This is a recent neologism that derives from the musical instrument *saz*. I understood that it was used in order to qualify the 'modern' singers who used musical instruments. Most of the dengbêjs stressed the fact that they are not given enough value and interest compared to the *sazî*, whose popularity has increased through radio and TV broadcasting, particularly among youth. Economic and symbolic stakes also pushed people toward the use of instrumentation: adding instruments makes the dengbêj easier to listen to, more attractive, and potentially more famous. This changed the form of the music.
- 57 For an unfamiliar and novice audience, the dengbêjs of the House choose their own songs, but on TV or during a stage performance, they sometimes sing what they are requested to sing. Political and guerrilla songs are also censored by the associations or TV channels. This means that an important part of the repertoire remains 'in the chest' of the dengbêj and may eventually be forgotten. This can also halt the creative process and lead to a fixation of the dengbêj in the past, or give new directions to the creative process. Also, 'old' songs seem to be given more value than the new ones as representing the 'tradition,' the real 'culture.' They are often referred to as the 'classic songs.' Here we see at work the selection by the actors of what they want to (and/or can) accept as a legacy in the contemporary context. As Lenclud (1987: § 31) argues, the tradition 'is not a product of the past, a work from another age that contemporaries would passively receive [...] but an interpretation of the past carried out according to rigorously contemporary criteria.'
- 58 Some of the dengbêjs insisted that the transmission process that was a central element of the dengbêj has changed or disappeared. They say that in their time, there was an

'education' and that they learned as pupils [*şagirt*] or servants [*berdest*] beside a master [*usta*], who might sometimes be someone from the family. They would sit in the main room while the master and the old people [*mezin*] sang; they would then practice on their own, and return to the master for corrections. The master would critique passages where omissions or errors were made and ask the pupil to correct the song. The pupil would not start singing in front of an audience until the master gave him permission. Thus, a chain of transmission was built. This chain of transmission is already broken, since some of the dengbêj of the House have learned from tapes. Some even advise the young to learn, at least partially, from tapes. Some of the dengbêjs who learned beside a master are well aware of the fact that this method of learning has stopped and say that they will not be replaced. Their own children, and youth in general, they said, have no wish to learn; they do not take pleasure in listening to the songs of the dengbêjs, and prefer the *sazî*. The issue of repertoire and transmission thus underlines the fact that dengbêjs carry different ideas of what dengbêjî is. It also stresses the actual reformulation of dengbêjî, like every 'tradition.'

- 59 Some dengbêjs are happy with the more commercial turn that dengbêjî has taken, oriented toward recording and festivals that might eventually give them recognition and a small economic profit. However, because of this, some people argue that dengbêjî is not what is used to be. Dengbêjs really feel that dengbêjî will fade after they are gone. The collectors, folklorists and other people interested in the dengbêjs are not completely credulous either; according to them, 'real dengbêjî' is already gone. The conditions that defined the dengbêjs' practices and art, such as the context of the enunciation and the transmission from a master, have disappeared. Dengbêjs have become symbolic; they have become a heritage [*mîras*], as said one of the music professionals interviewed, who compared them to swords in a museum: before they were used daily by everyone; now they stand on a shelf.

Conclusion

- 60 The 'dengbêj tradition' as it stands today has been built progressively over several decades through the input, interaction and negotiation between a large number of actors. These actors cannot be classified clearly into two categories of 'state' or 'society,' because they often overlap. On the one hand, the Kurdish national movement enters 'the state' via the municipal office. On the other hand, the state enters society when, for instance, individuals or associations censor themselves. Furthermore, 'state' and 'society' are themselves very much plural, divided and contradictory. This is seen in the state's ban on the Kurdish language, for instance, which is carried out in flexible and sometimes arbitrary ways. It is also evident in the Kurdish movement, whose different groupings have had different attitudes to the dengbêj, as well as in the permeability and interaction of the different social actors, far beyond the PKK-driven Kurdish movement, in the re-discovery of the dengbêj. Today, the dengbêj have become the symbol of Kurdish culture and are mobilized as such not only by the Kurdish movement described here but by a much wider sphere. The AKP, for instance, has also organised dengbêj concerts in Diyarbakır,⁵⁶ and different cultural organisations have built their own dengbêj projects with various foreign funds.⁵⁷
- 61 The overlap is not only noticeable in term of actors, but also in terms of politics. Dengbêj practice has not simply been circumscribed by a repressive state; rather, the Kurdish

national movement, together with broader social changes, has fuelled the 'disappearance' of the dengbêj. Moreover, the renewal in interest in dengbêj and the dengbêj practice can be attributed to a set of actors who, while typically thought of as in competition with each other, in this case displayed the common objective of publicizing and protecting dengbêj. It might be hazarded, however, that their aims were different: for some, the aim was to create and rescue a 'Kurdish culture' or 'Kurdish heritage'; for others, it was to show a liberal attitude, and build a 'diverse' or 'multicultural' Turkey. Whatever the motivations of the actors involved in the project may be, it seems that the policies implemented led to a similar result: a deep transformation of the practice, making the dengbêj a more 'frozen' than 'living' heritage.

- 62 One should therefore consider bringing into the analysis a third and ostensibly 'external' actor, namely, the European Union, and examine more deeply its role in the possible homogenization of the policies of both the state's and society's actors toward a Kurdish culture that is defined sometimes as a 'national culture,' sometimes as a 'local culture,' and sometimes as a 'minority culture,' but that is today part of the so-called 'cultural mosaic' of Turkey.

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NOTES

1. I am very grateful to Muriel Girard and Ioannis Kanakis for their insightful comments, and to the French Agence Nationale de la Recherche (ANR) which sponsored this work as part of the program 'From Cultural Friction to Armed Conflict: A Comparison of Turkey, Iran, and Pakistan.' I also wish to thank special issue editor Nicole Watts and the two anonymous referees for their very stimulating comments.
2. www.cultural-rights.org/default.aspx, consulted on 4 February 2008. The phrase 'languages and dialects other than Turkish' is the actual formulation of the different legal documents. The main documents concerning the language uses are the Regulation on the teaching of different languages and dialects used traditionally by Turkish citizens in their daily life (*Resmi Gazete*, 20 September 2002) and the Regulation regarding the languages of TV and radio broadcasting (*Resmi Gazete*, 18 December 2002).
3. This paper particularly focuses on the role of this political trend, because of the inscription of the Dengbêj Project in a DTP led municipality. In this paper, when I speak of the Kurdish movement I will refer to this particular trend. However, in general, the Kurdish movement(s) can not be limited to this trend and is composed of many different political trends and views.
4. 'Kürtçe 'dengbêj' sözcüğü de öyle genel anlamda: deng: ses demek, bej ise söyleyen, dengbej tipik olarak profesyonel destan söyleyen adam demek.' Interview with Yaşar Kemal by Azra Erhat (Erhat 1978: 264).
5. Djeladet Ali Bedirxan mentioned that *mir*, *ağa* or *beg* always had a little suite of dengbêjs who had privileges: they were given houses and the masters took care of their living. See *Hawar* 4, 1932: 88 (republished by Nûdem, Stockholm, 1998, vol. 1).
6. The fact that dengbêj had been arrested or jailed because of their dengbêjî activity is however documented for the early decades of the Republic: for instance, according to Bedirxan dengbêjs were arrested for relating Sheikh Said's revolt (1997: 37).
7. 'Îç kismî, nava bedenê yasaq e. Derva bedenê, serbest e. Nava baxçê serbest e, nava çolê serbest e. Hundirê bajêr yasaq e.' Interview with B., 23 November 2008, Diyarbakır.
8. 'Dengbêj, xezîne di bin erdê ye. Zêr çawa ye, dengbêj ew e'. Interviews, Diyarbakır, November 2008.
9. Interview with H. Akyol, 22 November 2008, Diyarbakır.
10. 'Di heft saliyên xwe da, min dest pê kir û heta niha ez dibêjim. Ez sêwî bûm, dest apê-amo da mezin bûm. Dê û bavê min mirîbûn, ez tazî bûm, faqîr, bê kes, bê hurmet.' Interview with B., 23 November 2008, Diyarbakır.
11. 'Ez ketim kuçê. Mal nema, xanî nema, avahî nema. Ez niha li kuçê me. Mal tune. [...] Ê ku Kurd li ser linga girtiye, heta niha, dengbêj e. Ji wan dengbêjan re, lazim e ku gel xwedî dere, xwedî dere. Her

dengbejêkî di ling wî da sol tune, cil lê tune, xanî tune. Aborî, ekonomî, sifirê da ye. Ax! Welleh! şaredariya mezin li me xwedî derket, li wira vekirîye. Interview with D., 26 November 2008, Diyarbakır.

12. NÇM Tanıtım Broşürü, İstanbul : NÇM, n. d.: 58.

13. *Rewşen* 1, February 1992: 46.

14. İbrahim Xort, 'MKM (Navenda Çanda Mezopotamya) li Amedê', *Rewşen* 9, February 1993: 16.

15. *Jiyana Rewşen* advertised the following 'concerts': Dengbêj Seyda (04.01.1997 and 08.02.1997, İstanbul), Dengbêj Salihê Qubînê (concert in İstanbul on the 11.05 1997 and 10.08.1997), Dengbêj Mehmûd Kizil (İstanbul, 2.11.1997), Concert by Diwana dengbêjan (09.11.1997, İstanbul; 10.05.1998), Dengbêj Zahro (16.02. 1998, İzmir). Dengbêj Reşîr (13.01.1998, İstanbul), Dengbêj Salihê şîrnexî (08.08.1998). It also advertised different talks given by Ahmed Aras about Evdalê Zeynikê and about Kurdish folklore in 1997.

16. See Scalbert Yücel 2005: 331-333.

17. 'Konferansa Çanda ya Kurdî,' *Rewşen* 8, 1992: 21-24.

18. 'Konferansa Çanda ya Kurdî,' *Rewşen* 8, 1992: 22.

19. Discussions with music professionals, November and December 2008, Diyarbakır. Interview with a folklorist, February 2004, İstanbul. In this way, the case of the dengbêj seems quite similar to the Corsican traditional songs. Rejected by urban Corsicans in the 1940s, they were reclaimed decades later as main element of Corsican identity (Pizzorni-Itié 2004, 1997).

20. The wider social change in Turkey is also invoked to explain the disappearance of dengbêjî. This social change includes the modernisation of the countryside (the arrival of electricity, radio and television) as well as education and changes in norms and values, urbanisation, and the end of feudalism. These are certainly elements that should be integrated into the discussion, but they go beyond the scope of this article.

21. Discussion with a group of *kasetçi*, 2 December 2008, Diyarbakır.

22. 'Polis, asker, nedihatin qahwê. Problem tunebû. İnsanên merd diçûn. Ê ku meraqiyê kurdî bûn, wana diçûn. Ewe dervê nedihatin. Kes nedihatin wê qahwê. [...] Li vir her kes tê. Li wir her kes nedihat. Qahwê li orta çarşî bû, piçûk bû, kata jor bû, ji cadê 100 metre bû. Yanî kes nedihatin. Ku bihata, gava ku asker û polis bihata, nedigot, disekiniya. Digot Turka hatin, zaptiya hatin. Me nedigot. Li gund jî, dema ku zaptî dihat me nedigot. Zaptî, asker yanî. Navê wan bi kirmancî. Em ji wan ra dibêjin zaptî. Gava ku bihata me nedigot ... gava dihatin em disekiniyan, newerîbûn. Zaptiya mirov dixistin' Interview with N., 25 November 2008, Diyarbakır. *Zaptiye* is the Ottoman word for police. It is not used nowadays except in some villages to refer to gendarmes. Here the interviewee refers most probably to the gendarmes, present in the villages. Thanks to Noémi Lévy for this information.

23. Radio Erivan was the radio the most listened by the Alikan tribe İsmail Beşikçi studied in the 1960s (Beşikçi 1969: 203). On Radio Erivan see also Kevirbirî 2002.

24. The objective of the branch is to shed some light on the local cultures, to record and develop them, as well as to study them. The Dengbêj project is one of the main projects of the branch.

25. Interviews with Hilmî Akyol, 22 November and 2 December 2008, Diyarbakır.

26. According to Mehmed Uzun, Ehmedê Fermanê Kiki had successively been the dengbêj of Reşid Bey from the Kikan tribe, of İbrahim Paşa from the Milan tribe and of the Cemilpaşazade in Diyarbakır. He left the city in 1925 after Sheikh Said's revolt and settled in a small village next to the Syrian border. At that time Celadet Bedirxan was collecting epics and tales from dengbêjs, and heard about Ehmedê Fermanê Kiki from the Cemilpaşazade. He convinced Kiki to come to Syria where he stayed until his death in 1951 (Uzun 1998: 108-133).

27. 'Dengbêjler Uzun için soyledi,' *Evrensel*, 26 September 2006.

28. Interview with the Director of culture of Diyarbakır Metropolitan Municipality, şerif Baltaş, *Tîroj* 2, May-June 2003: 55.

29. 'Îcar dora Mîhrîcana Sertê ye,' *Azadiya Welat*, 13-19 September 2003; 'Neden ve Nasıl bir festival,' *Batman Sesi* 8, August-September 2004: 3.
30. 'Sözlü edebiyatın güçlü temsilcisi olan dengbejlik geleneğinin' (on <http://www.diyarbakir-bld.gov.tr/NewsDetails.aspx?ID=1132>, consulted on 01 February 2008.
31. Interview, 24 November 2008, Diyarbakır.
32. The vocabulary used in the following news articles is related to the transmission of an oral culture, without written tradition. 'İki belediyeden dengbej divanı,' www.heryerdenhaber.com/V1/.../İki-belediyeden-dengbej-divani, consulted in 2008; 'Dengbejler söylemeye devam edecek,' 31 mayıs 2007, <http://diyarbakir-bld.gov.tr/newsDetail.aspx?id=999>, consulted on 27 August 2008; also available at or <http://www.rojaciwan.com/haber-25123.html>, consulted on 22 June 2009.
33. It is as such that the dengbêj were presented during the concert they gave on the 8 November 2003 for the Literature Days organized in Diyarbakır.
34. 'Dengbêj Evi'nde klam sesleri,' 12 April 2008. <http://www.diyarbakir-bld.gov.tr/newsDetails.aspx?id=1432>, consulted on 27 August 2008.
35. 'Kürtlerin hafızası Dengbejler divanı kurdu,' <http://turkish.rizgari.com/modules.php?name=News&file=print&sid=9859>, consulted on 22 June 2009.
36. Interviews with dengbêjs, Diyarbakır, November and December 2008.
37. 'Ku çiqas Kurda li dunya heye, heta niha arşîva kurda tunebû, kultura kurda, bi zimanê xwe, dilden dile, yani şexsa ji şexsê, li ser linga girtiye, heya niha dengbêj bûye. Çûnkü dengbêj tuneba, kê çê bigota? Merîv nizane çi bûye. Çûnkü arşîva me tune ye.' Interview with D., 26 November 2008, Diyarbakır.
38. The term of heritage [*miras*] is barely used in the context of the Dengbêj Project except in a few documents as if the term *gelenek*, tradition, was more meaningful. According to Muriel Girard, in the documents regarding maintenance of heritage, the term of *miras* is not exclusive, but is used alongside the terms *değer* [value], *varlık* [wealth], or *eser* [work] and *tarihi çevre* [historical environment] for material heritage.
39. See Düzgün, Akyol; Gazi; Avci, Günel(2007: 8-11) and the CD 'Dengbêjen Diyarbakirê,' *Kom Müzik*, 2007.
40. Interview with Cevahir Sadak Düzgün, 24 November 2008, Diyarbakır.
41. 'Antoloji pir baş e! Kültür winda nabe. Pirtûk tişteki hindik nîne. Tişteki zor e. Navê dengbêjan ku qeyîtlî bûn winda nabin.' Interview with S., 25 November 2008, Diyarbakır.
42. Interviews with dengbêjs, November 2008, Diyarbakır.
43. 'Bi rastî bingeha çanda kurdî ya devkî, dengbêjî; bi nivîsî jî, medresê kurdan e.' (interview with Cevahir Sadak Düzgün, 24 November 2008, Diyarbakır).
44. The Promotion of Cultural Rights in Turkey Programme (PCRT) is divided in two schemes: 'Broadcasting Support Grant Scheme' (BSGS) (15 projects elected) and 'Cultural Initiatives Support Grant Scheme' (CISGS).
45. <http://www.cultural-rights.org/program1.aspx?pgid=31>, consulted on 22 June 2008.
46. Trials for using Kurdish in official documents by DTP MPs or mayors are numerous. One can mention the trial of Osman Baydemir and of Yurdusev Özsökmenler, mayor of Bağlar, for printing a brochure in Turkish, Kurdish and Zaza about the cleaning campaigns of the municipality in June 2007. Another example is the Council of State's dismissal of the mayor and the 17 city council members of the Sur city council of Diyarbakır Metropolitan Municipality after it had decided in October 2006 to enforce multilingualism and had passed a resolution on 'Multilingual Municipality Service.'
47. I did not conduct any interviews with T. C. Ministry of Tourism and Culture personnel, although I had planned to do so before going to Diyarbakır. However, my previous fieldwork experiences focussing on the Kurdish movement, the reluctance the researchers can express to face and meet state officials in order to discuss quite contentious issues (Watts, forthcoming), together with the narratives that the interviewees produced of a monolithic and absent state,

unfortunately led me to change my plans. Thus the (dis-)involvement of the central state I describe here is mainly drawn from indirect sources.

48. 'Li Diyarbakır, na. Kilam qediya. Kilam hatin helandin. Tirko nedihîşt. Bandê me dişêkinand. Nedihiştin. Wexta ku em hatin, Dicle Firat vebû, dengbejiya Diyarbakır jî baslamîş kir.

Dîsa?

E, dîsa. Dicle Firat te, em bûne dengbêj. A niha, emrê min 10 sal bû min kilam gotiye, niha jî emrê min 60 salî ye. 20 sal min kilam negot. 20 sal, yasak bû. Wexta Dicle Firat vebû, ewil ez hatim, ez dîsa ditirsîyam. A niha serbest bûye.' Interview with P., 25 November 2008, Diyarbakır.

49. See also 'Return to Diyarbakır', *Zaman*, 6 December 2009. The Dengbêj House is inscribed among the touristic highlights of the town.

50. 'Em bağlî vê derê ne. Dema ku dengbêj lazim in, bangê me dikin.' Interview with B., 23 November 2008, Diyarbakır.

51. 'Na! Tîstek tunebû! Em a niha dengbejê mevcud li vê derê, ku dengbejiya me hebe tunebe, ji Dicle Firatê da me dest pe kiriyê. Em bi Dicle Firat ketin piyasa. Arif çiqas bandê wî hatin firotin, ji xwe ber diwara digot, heta Dicle Firat, kesi nas nekir. Bi Dicle Firatê, em bûn dengbêj, em hatin nas kirin, û xelkê me nas kir, me xelk nas kir.' Interview with D., 26 November 2008, Diyarbakır. Arif is a dengbêj whose recording was advertised in all music shops during my stay in Diyarbakır.

52. 'U yanlîz, dengbêjî ne tişkî hindik e, dengbêjî kultura kurda ye. Yani temela kurda, temel, Temel tunebe, avahî li ser çi çêdibe? Na! Yani ji vî kulturê re, lazim e ku însan xwedî dere.' Interview with D., 26 November 2008, Diyarbakır.

53. Of course one must keep in mind, as underlined by Lenclud (1987 §16) that the tradition, in the sense of 'customs,' is capable of variation and that 'changing traditions' must be considered (Finnegan 1991: 112).

54. Christine Allison, after fieldwork in Iraqi Kurdistan, distinguishes the *stran* from the *beyt* or *destan*. *Stran* is the generic term for 'song' with musical accompaniment. She also mentions that there is a wide range of *stran*: historical, love, dances, etc, songs. *Beyt* or *destan* 'are heroic and long narrative songs, often with some prose sections, performed without musical accompaniment' (2001: 64-66). In my fieldwork in Diyarbakır, the term *kilam* was used to refer to the generic 'song' more than the term *stran*. Some of the dengbêj then distinguished between three types of *kilam*: The song for dancing [*kilamê govendê*]; the song of gathering, about the wars, the combats and the tribes [*kilamê cemaatan, a ser şeran, ser aşîret*]; and the love song [*kilamê li ser dila*]. The songs of the dengbêjs were the *kilamê cemaatan*. For the dengbêjs I met, however, the term *kilam* mainly referred to the dengbêj songs, whereas the term *stran* mainly referred to other songs (for weddings, for instance, and with musical accompaniment). However, it is impossible to generalize because the term *stran* is also used by some of them. The terms *destan* or *beyt* are not used to refer to the dengbêj's songs. *Beyt*, however, is used in order to refer to a coherent part in an epic. The expression '*strana dengbêj*' has become widespread. Celadet Ali Bedirxan does not distinguish the *stranbêj* from the dengbêj, who according to him both tell tales and epics. *Stran* is according to him an exclusively musical; epics and tales being both sung and narrated (alternating verses and rhythm prose). *Hawar* 3, June 1932: 72 (reedited by Nûdem, Stockholm, 1998, vol. 1). But the situation today is different from the 1930s, music creation having evolved at lot and the 'invention of the tradition' brings a redefinition of all these genres.

55. Interview, 26 November 2008, Diyarbakır.

56. http://www.akparti.org.tr/gnsayfa/haber.asp?haber_id=19003&kategori=8, consulted on 10 September 2009.

57. See, for instance, the Project of the Bingöl Social, Cultural and Economic Development Association. <http://www.bingolonline.com/modules.php?name=News&file=print&sid=8109>, consulted on 10 November 2009.

RÉSUMÉS

Turkish authorities have obstructed the expression of Kurdish culture and forms of Kurdish cultural expression for nearly a century. Beginning in the late 1990s, however, non-Turkish forms of cultural expressions gained visibility in the Turkish public sphere. This paper examines one aspect of this new Kurdish cultural production through an analysis of reconstruction of the tradition of the dengbêj (Kurdish singer) in the city of Diyarbakır. This process has developed through the participation and initiative of various Kurdish national(ist)s and the state actors. In contrast to typical depictions of opposition between an oppressive Turkish state and an oppressed Kurdish people, the paper argues that the dengbêj 'tradition' as it exists today is the result of a several-decades-long process of negotiation between different Kurdish individual and collective actors, between different part of the Kurdish society, and between these Kurdish actors and representatives of the state. It shows that both the state and the Kurdist movement(s) have demonstrated contradictory attitudes toward dengbêj, ranging from protection to disinterest and repression, and that the practice of the dengbêj as well as the definition of the 'tradition' have been profoundly shaped by this process.

INDEX

Mots-clés : dengbêj, Diyarbakır, Kurde, municipalité, patrimoine, politique culturelle

Keywords : cultural policies, dengbêj, Diyarbakır, heritage, Kurds, municipality

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