

CONSTRUCTING KURDISH NATIONALIST IDENTITY THROUGH LYRICAL NARRATIVES IN POPULAR MUSIC*

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses how Kurdish ethno-nationalism and nationalist identity have been predominantly promoted through the lyrics of popular Kurdish music, with performance, sounds and rhythms as strong support for lyrical narratives depicting Kurdish nationalism. The analysis of the lyrics is to evaluate the subject from a political science perspective, which limited the author's methodological analysis of sounds, rhythms and performances which music anthropologists or cultural studies students often utilize.

In this study, the author argues that Kurdish popular music is both constitutive and represents social positioning, in the form of Kurdish nationalism. Music is thus perceived as a means and a representation of the imaginary Kurdish nation and Kurdish popular music is a form of cultural resistance for Kurds, against Turkish state policies.

This investigation firstly examines traditional and popular Kurdish music, evaluates such music in Turkey and the relationship between Kurds and the Turkish state. Secondly, musical structure in general and particularly lyrics of popular Kurdish songs, are analysed, to determine the boundaries of the Kurdish nationalist identity.

Keywords: Kurdish Nationalism, Political Violence, Popular Culture, Kurdish Music and modernization.

KÜRT MİLLİYETÇİ KİMLİĞİNİN KÜRT POPÜLER MÜZİĞİ SÖZLERİ ÜZERİNDEN KURULUMU

ÖZET

Bu çalışma, Kürt etno-milliyetçiliği ve Kürt kimliğinin Kürt popüler müziği aracılığıyla - özellikle sözleri aracılığıyla- popüler kültür üzerinden nasıl yeniden ürettiğini ve şekillendirdiğini analiz edecektir. Bu bağlamda çalışma, Kürt popüler müziğinin nasıl bir Kürt kimliği çizdiğini tartışmaya çalışacaktır. Çalışma siyaset bilimini baz aldığından dolayı müzikteki performans ve

ezgi kısımları analize dahil edilmeyecektir. Bu anlamda çalışma, Kürt popüler müziğinin Kürtler açısından bir direniş işlevi görerek nasıl “hayali bir ulus” kurduğunu anlamaya çalışacaktır. Çalışmanın ilk bölümünde Kürt popüler müziğinin gelişimi anlatılacak, ikinci bölümünde ise popüler müziğin sözleri analiz edilerek Kürt kimliğinin sınırlarının nasıl çizildiği analiz edilecektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kürt milliyetçiliği, siyasal şiddet, popüler kültür, Kürt müziği ve modernleşme.

Introduction

Popular music and national identity have a strong relationship. In popular culture literature, there is a strong tendency to see national music ‘*as the imposition of a nation building elite and to see other groups as trying to redefine that music and/or contesting the terrain with other music*’ (Wade, 1998: 4). Another tendency is to see music as both constitutive and representing social positioning. Music is thus perceived as a means and representative of imagining communities (Wade, 1998: 4,16). In this sense, popular music is used by the ruling elite to maintain certain ideologies, intending to realize political socialization and then progress a sense of national identity. It infuses a civil religion which ‘*directs favour and fervour*’ (Kong 1995:448) towards the nation. Popular music can also be a form of cultural resistance for some, particularly the stateless, both against state policies and certain socio-cultural forms (Leyhson, 1995: 448).

Lyrics, rhythms, sounds and performance are elements which can make music political (Martiniello and Lafleur, 2008: 1196). Artist and band names can sometimes express social and political concerns, as in certain Kurdish musical groups, such as Koma Azadi (Group Freedom) and Koma Amed (Group Diyarbakir). Lyrics often explicitly reflect political meanings and artists can take a position on specific political situations, for example, u2’s song ‘Silver and Gold’ protesting South African apartheid. Rhythm and performance may also have political meaning, as in Cajun music, where a sobbing voice is used to evoke the suffering people have faced. During a performance, clothes and symbols used can also mobilize social movements (Martiniello and Lafleur, 2008: 1195-98).

Kurdish popular songs have a similar function in creating an imagined Kurdish nation, strongly initiated since the late 1970s with the rising power of Kurdish Marxist organizations, particularly the *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan* (PKK), a pro-nationalist separatist organization in Turkey. Kurdish grass-root ethno-nationalism in Turkey vividly hardened in the 1980s in parallel with the actions and power of this organization. The PKK gained much influence over Kurds, particularly in eastern Turkey, which is heavily populated with Kurdish citizens, and in Kurdish diasporas in Europe, and infused Kurdish nationalism into those Kurds who lacked a Kurdish consciousness (Donmez, 2007: 53); authority over socio-cultural, political and economic structures among Kurds became paramount. The organization became a catalyst in disseminating Kurdish popular culture to Kurds in Turkey and Europe, thereby creating the Kurdish public sphere and building of a nation.

The politicization of Kurdish popular culture, particularly political songs in the context of nationalism, emerged in the 1960s in Marxist circles and developed independently in Kurdish nationalist circles in the 1980s. The political content is generally patterned on ethno-nationalism and represented resistance to the Turkish state's dominant hegemonic framework. A terrain of political and social conflict emerged from, and contributed to, the complex relationship between Kurds and the Turkish state. Various singers and groups released albums, mostly in Kurdish.^[1] Sales hit record highs, despite the banning of the Kurdish language in the mid-1990s. As these musicians became increasingly visible on Kurdish channels, their songs, disseminating Kurdish nationalism and language, reinforced the Kurdish ethno-nationalist identity.

This paper analyses how Kurdish ethno-nationalism and nationalist identity have been predominantly promoted through the lyrics of popular Kurdish music, with performance, sounds and rhythms as strong support for lyrical narratives depicting Kurdish nationalism. The analysis of the lyrics is to evaluate the subject from a political science perspective, which limited the author's methodological analysis of sounds, rhythms and performances which music anthropologists or cultural studies students often utilize.

The songs chosen by the author are based on their popularity among Kurds in Turkey. For this paper 100 randomly selected popular Kurdish songs with political themes and from different genres, such as Kurdish rock and rap, were chosen. The songs are categorized according to the themes of the lyrics. The number of songs is decreased to 30 songs on the basis of the degree of underscoring these themes. Then the investigation predominantly evaluates these 30 songs. A

literal translation follows those excerpts quoted in this paper. The analysis is confined to Kurdish nationalism in Turkey and the struggle against the Turkish state; it does not address diaspora politics, although it is difficult to limit this struggle to taking place within Turkey.

In this study, the author argues that Kurdish popular music is both constitutive and represents social positioning, in the form of Kurdish nationalism. Music is thus perceived as a means and a representation of the imaginary Kurdish nation and Kurdish popular music is a form of cultural resistance for Kurds, against Turkish state policies.

This investigation firstly examines traditional and popular Kurdish music, evaluates such music in Turkey and the relationship between Kurds and the Turkish state. Secondly, musical structure in general and particularly lyrics of popular Kurdish songs, are analysed, to determine the boundaries of the Kurdish nationalist identity.

Kurdish Traditional Music

Kurds have not, in the past, developed a strong written culture due to their migratory nature, inability to unite and their division into different states. Suppression of the Kurdish culture forced the development of a strong oral culture. Consequently, music is of paramount importance in the Kurdish culture, transmitting significant information to later generations (Gündoğar, 2005: 9).

Kurdish traditional music is a type of folk music that is monophthong, anonymous, generally melancholic and performed solely by vocals; it does not consist of harmony or polyphony in itself (Mutlu, 1996: 57; Nezan, 2002: 52; Minorsky, Bois and MacKenzie, 2004: 159). For Christensen (2007: 2) a great variety of music exists in Kurdistan, and it is not easy to determine what makes it sound Kurdish. However, some kinds of music show obvious similarities across the entire Kurdish area, with sung narratives spread by bards (dengbejs), which can be seen as traditional.

For urban and rural Kurds, listening to historic events is a deeply moving experience. Such narratives are performed live and require highly developed skills, such as '*a vast memory for names, episodes, and historical contexts; the capability to shape a story into a compelling musical and spoken-prose rendering*' (Christensen, 2007 :2); and the ability to maintain a highly controlled vocal style while underlining the dramatic content with auditive, mimetic and bodily gestures. Lyrics are paramount in telling the story, while the melody creates an ambience to reinforce the story to audiences; requiring the ability to sense the audience's mood and

comprehend the specific needs of an occasion. Kurdish music is based on improvisation, with bards recomposing the music using alternative instruments while remaining loyal to the lyrics. Bards are important in forming the Kurdish national identity by disseminating local information to all Kurdish regions (Nezan, 1996: 15; Nezan, 2002: 53; Christensen, 2007: 2).^[3]

There are three kinds of sung narratives:

❖ Heroic songs known as *şer* or *mêrxweş* deal with battles among men and predominantly narrate historical events, glorifying the courage, bravery and honesty of men in general situations, often with fatal outcomes. These narratives explore what many Kurds believe to be Kurdish values for men, and singing them can strengthen group identity.

❖ Tragic stories, always involving love for a woman as a cardinal element (Al-Salihi, 2002: 143-202; Nezan, 2002: 55; Christensen, 2007: 3). These narratives rely on the recitation and melodic/rhythmic rendering of prose, with delivery traditionally a solo performance, unaccompanied by any instruments.

❖ The third kind – generally called *qesîde* – is usually presented in rhyme, with religious and fabulous content including narrative poems, or the sung poetry of Kurdish Alevi or Yezidi (Christensen, 2007: 3).

Kurdish popular songs in the mid 1980s were formed by merging Kurdish folk structures to modern Western music forms, such as rock, hip hop and Turkish music. For commercial reasons, some Kurdish popular music lost its structure, leaving only the Kurdish language. Similarities in Kurdish popular songs generally relied on traditional topics, verbal formulas, rhythms and melody types, combined with the Kurdish way of life. Most words can be easily understood, regardless of which syllables receive longer durations or coincide with strong beats. *‘Many two syllable words are most often sung so that the initial accented syllable falls on a beat and has a higher pitch than the second syllable’* (Blum and Hassanapour, 1996: 335).

Similarities in Kurdish popular songs generally relied on traditional topics, verbal formulas, rhythms, and melody types combined with the Kurdish way of life. Blum and Hassanapour (1996: 335), find that Kurdish singers use conventional rhythmic patterns to join three or four syllables in lines: 4+4, 3+4, 3+4+4, 4+3+4. Most words can be easily understood, regardless of which syllables receive longer durations or coincide with strong beats.

In the mid-1980s, Kurdish music diversified into two streams. In the first, the popular Kurdish musical structure was fused with rock, jazz and avant-garde rhythms while using

traditional Kurdish instruments, such as the *erbane*, *duduk*, *blur* or *tenbûr*, fused with other modern instruments, but preserving the vocal techniques of Kurdish folk music. The second stream did not take any essentials or structures from Kurdish folk music. Many Kurdish singers write Kurdish lyrics to Turkish folk music or Arabesque songs, which are particularly oppositional to the political ideology of the Turkish state. Only the Kurdish language, certain Kurdish instruments and particular performance methods, (e.g. *Beytocan*), are used. However, in both cases, the structure of music and lyrical narratives plays a strong role in strengthening Kurdish identity and providing opposition to the Turkish state.

Turkish Republic and Kurdish Music

During the Ottoman Empire, Kurds gained autonomy in the state's multi-national societal structure called the *millet system* (Inalcık, 1998: 79-80). Kurdish men were recruited for the military during wars, but Istanbul left political administration of the Kurdish-populated regions to the tribes. Ottomanism in general, and Islam^[4] in particular, were the sole components binding Kurds to the Ottoman Empire (McDowall 2004: 69-104). In this administrative and sociological environment, traditional Kurdish music was performed under the protection of princes, large clan leaders or sheiks.^[5]

Three developments negatively impacted Kurdish music. Firstly, the Ottoman Empire failed in international relationships as well as the management of its own millet system. Istanbul became anxious and pressurised the millets, including the Kurds. Attempts to centralize during the nineteenth century politicized peripheral ethnic and religious identities. Most Kurdish tribal revolts against the central government resulted from tribal reaction to the invasive and centralizing policies of the modernization policy of the Ottoman state and the Republic of Turkey, which appropriated violence and education, thereby threatening tribal autonomy and the interests of the *aga* or *seyyid*. Such erosion of tribal ties improved Sufi networks and politicized Islamic identity, with Kurdish ethnic awareness evolving within the framework of Islamic consciousness. In the anti-centralization movements, Nakşibendi networks not only replaced more aristocratic Kadiri orders, but also played a pivotal role. The first proto-religio-ethnic rebellion occurred in 1880 under Seyh Ubeydullah (d. 1883), a local religious leader, in reaction to the centralizing policies of Sultan Abdulhamid II (reign 1878-1909), ultimately ending the Kurdish principalities in the nineteenth century and eroding the *dengbej* tradition in which music

was institutionalized within the larger tribal structure (Yavuz, 2001: 5; Heper, 2008: 75). Thus, Kurdish music began to develop within Islamic sects.

The second impact stemmed from the intensification of Kurdish nationalism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Several prominent Kurdish elites exiled to Istanbul discovered 'French' enlightenment, leading Istanbul to become the centre of the Kurds' cultural and political development. During this period, many Kurdish associations were established in Istanbul. The Ottoman government prevented the further establishment of such facilities in Istanbul, thereby forcing Kurds to move these cultural and political facilities to Damascus, Aleppo and Qamişlo, initiating the migration of Kurdish musicians to these centres (Yıldırım, 2007).

The final impact on Kurdish traditional music was the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923. The republican elite created a new Turkish identity that entailed the homogenization of ethnicities and cultural differences under Turkish citizenship and state ideology, through education and state security measurements (Sarigil, 2005: 4-6; Aktar, 2006).

Turkey's centralization resulted in the abolishment of Caliphates while removing autonomy from Kurdish regions, and alienating Kurds from the republic. Two uprisings, the Sheik Said Rebellion (1925) and the Dersim uprising (1937), early in the republic, were harshly suppressed by the state's security forces, forcing Kurds to resettle in the western part of Turkey. Many Kurds fled to Syria, then under France's control. These rebellions politicized and militarized the Kurdish identity, generating a coherent identity based on a Kurdish-Islamic synthesis.

Baghdad's radio broadcasts of Kurdish music attracted many Kurdish musicians from Turkey and Iran, who migrated to Baghdad to work without state sanctions. Unlike traditional Kurdish music, based on vocals and prioritized melody, Baghdad's music featured large orchestras comprised of the lute (*lavta*), classical lute (*tambur*), kaval (*bilûr*), and frame drum (*arben*). This new form of Kurdish music became popular (Yıldırım, 2007).

Many *stranbej* and *dengbej* outside Iraq followed these broadcasts and became involved in incorporating this new synthesis into their repertoires. Kurdish music became the catalyst for forming a Kurdish nationalist consciousness in Iraq as well as in Turkey, Iran and Syria. Different nation states' political borders were eroded through mass culture and music. For example, in the late 1950s and 1960s, Kurds living in Turkish cities and provinces close to Iraq

were more familiar with Molla Mustafa Barzani's nationalistic movement than with Ankara's political actions (Yıldırım, 2007).

From 1925 to 1960, the Turkish elite tried to establish a nation state homogenized of all ethnic differences, including the restriction of the Kurdish culture and language. However, Turkey's 1960 constitution was based on liberal principles in terms of political representation in the public sphere, which had two important consequences for Kurdish music. It created an opportunity for Kurdish music to become a part of popular culture. Various musicians released Kurdish albums through the Turkish music industry, and many books and journals on Kurds' socio-political and economic conditions were disseminated throughout Turkey. Secondly, the musical structure of Iraqi Kurds influenced musicians like Perwer, resulting in political content being incorporated into lyrics (Çelebi, 2008). However, in 1967 the Turkish state banned these products.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Kurdish political music emerged in parallel with Turkey's Marxist movement. The 1960s to early 1970s was defined by young middle-class Kurds' acquaintance with the Marxist movement, internalizing universal principles like equality, solidarity and proletariat dictatorship. From the mid-1970s to 1980s, the Kurdish movement began to distinguish itself from Turkish Marxists and Kurdish nationalism according to Marxism's patterns (Gündoğar, 2005: 28-32).

The 1960s and 1970s witnessed the rapid urbanization of Turkey, leading to the emergence of middle-class urban Kurdish intellectuals who revived Kurdish consciousness. Kurdish students from eastern Turkey joined the left-wing movements. Both Kurdish and Turkish Marxists opposed the Turkish state and feudalism; movements were not separated by ethnic identity (Kirişçi and Winrow, 2002: 114-6).

During this period, many Marxist musicians of Turkish and Kurdish descent modernized Turkish folk music using Western instruments, such as the electric guitar and piano, changing the lyrics to use lyrics based on Marxist ideology that spoke of the '*suppressed village man*' and '*subordinated proletariat*' who faced a '*struggle with injustice*' (Gündoğar, 2005: 28-35). Kurdish music was not popular among Kurds for two reasons (Gündoğar, 2005: 33): the *dengbej* tradition of prioritizing lyrics over melody did not fit with modern forms of popular music^[6] and poverty in eastern Turkey meant Kurds had little chance to easily listen to Kurdish music.

Around 1971 Kurds began to separate themselves from Turkish Marxists, and pattern their Marxism on Kurdish nationalism, culminating in the establishment of The Eastern

Revolutionary Cultural Association (*Doğu Devrimci Kültür Ocakları*; DDKO) in 1969 by Kurdish Marxists. DDKO sought to emancipate Kurds from feudalism and the Turkish state. Educated Kurds began to discuss socialism as well as their Kurdish identity (Kirişçi and Winrow, 2002: 114-7), which helped inculcate urban and rural Kurds with Marxism and socialism, merging these with Kurdish nationalism. DDKO organized many activities to this end, including plays performed in Kurdish, and cultural concerts and balls where Kurdish music found its place.

During this period, Perwer, considered the founder of this musical genre, began to write lyrics, based on socialist ideology and Kurdish identity, to classical Kurdish melodies.^[7] He also used anthems as a form in his music, stressing liberation struggles in places like Africa and Vietnam, and related the work of Kurdish poets, such as Mehmet Bozarslan and Cigerxwîn, to Kurds' emancipation. The Kurdish Marxist movement divided into organizational factions, which encouraged members to establish their own musical groups. *Koma Azadî* (Group Freedom), *Koma Dengê Kawa* (Group, the Voice of Kawa),^[8] and *Koma Berxwedan* (Group Resistance) followed in the musical footsteps of Perwer (Gündoğar, 2005: 24-36).

In the late 1970s, the state suppressed the Marxist movement, forcing Kurdish singers to flee Turkey and continue their musical adventure in Kurdish diasporas in Europe. The 1980 *coup d'état* was a milestone for the Kurdish movement, as the state had tried to impose Turkish-Islamic^[9] synthesis on political and cultural life. This situation impacted Kurdish music in two important ways:

❖ Kurdish singers experienced the beginning of diaspora life, which was reflected in their music and lyrics (Çelebi, 2008). Lyrics were predominantly based on difficulties related to living the diaspora life.

❖ Kurdish singers were forced to express their emotions and ideas through Turkish music or non-Kurdish languages. Some sang in Turkish, such as Ahmey Kaya, and others, such as Rojin, performed in Arabic. Kurdish singers, such as Mahsun Kırmızıgül and İbrahim Tatlıses, wrote love lyrics in Turkish set to Kurdish political music; making it legal and popular in Turkey's public sphere (Korkmaz, 2002: 39-48). This situation corresponded with the state's assimilation policy and establishing hegemony on Kurds by suppressing their symbols, rituals and representation strategies in popular culture.

The mid-1980s witnessed the emergence of the PKK's claim to represent Kurds. The PKK became an important player in eastern Turkey by dismantling all armed leftist Kurdish

organizations and eliminating Kurds who refused to cooperate (Dönmez, 2007: 53). It fought the Turkish state to establish a Kurdish state in eastern Turkey and lift all prohibitions on Kurdish culture. The low-intensity conflict decided the state to impose stricter limits on Kurdish culture. For example, Article 2932 of the Turkish constitution prohibited Kurdish, even in the private sphere, thereby banning Kurdish music in the public sphere. However, albums produced in the diaspora were copied and distributed. Although Kurdish singers encountered Western forms of music, for example rock and avant-garde, in the diaspora, which led to a new fusion, this situation also prevented the Kurdish music industry from developing in Turkey.

This ban continued until the mid-1990s. However, pressure to Europeanize Turkey in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries forced Turkey to reduce its demands on politics and culture. Meanwhile Kurdish music continued to develop in Turkish metropolitans, particularly Istanbul, and in Europe, encountering modern music forms. At this time, the Kurdish CD industry developed, and companies like *Kom* emerged to reinforce Kurdish popular music. PKK in society and through its television channels (MED, ROJ TV) enabled Kurdish music to become more visible in public spheres, culminating in further development (Yavuz, 1996). The PKK was a catalyst in forming Kurdish culture and enlarging opportunities for Kurds in popular culture.

In this period two cardinal points arose for Kurdish musical groups. Kurdish music groups (*kom*) strengthened their place in Kurdish music, merging Kurdish folkloric culture with Western musical structures while using lyrics patterned on Kurdish nationalism (Kurdish Magazine, 2007). Certain militant singers emerged, who used their melancholic voices to make Kurds feel they were in a state of war, thereby encouraging audiences to participate in the national struggle. The music's background was simple and was generally played using only a simple Turkish lute, illustrating that even a simple Kurdish man could fight the colonizer.

Given Turkey's Europeanization process and the state's curbing of PKK, obstacles to Kurdish music were to a great extent lifted. However, the Turkish state continued to reassert hegemony over Kurdish music by controlling lyrics while the free market structure fostered this hegemony. Turkey's sanctions provided little space for Kurdish music to develop on its own, thereby preventing professional musicians from expanding the genre independently. Kurdish people in Turkey used to listening to copies of albums, due to historical sanctions on Kurdish culture, but did not buy original albums, preventing the Kurdish music industry's development. Most Kurdish performers could not financially survive in the entertainment sector (Epözdemir,

2009). The Turkish state's hegemonic nature and the free market obstructed the development of a strong Kurdish music industry.

Constructing Nationalism in Kurdish Music

Popular Kurdish political music generates a strong Kurdish nationalistic habitus, which functions as an inclusion/exclusion mechanism generating emancipatory discourses. The PKK strongly impacted on Kurdish nationalism. Its financial and military power made it a prominent player in diffusing nationalism.

Cardinal themes in Kurdish ethno-nationalism are paramount for understanding this nationalism. The lyrics of 100 randomly selected popular songs analysed, identified the following themes:

- ❖ Feelings of injustice, nostalgia, homeland and nationalism,
- ❖ A call for independence and the mobilization of nationalism,
- ❖ Women's role in the independence struggle, and
- ❖ Kurdish socialism.

These themes were expressed in lyrics, rhythms and performances. Many Kurdish singers wear traditional Kurdish costumes; indeed, in Koma Berwedan Roja Me's music video, the group wears black clothes and hold cloths to show the nation's sorrow. Performers can also use the traditional Kurdish flag (yellow, red and green), which PKK now uses. Rhythm and musical instruments are also used to express these themes. Although many western instruments are used, the clarion and erbane are most common for changing the beat. For example, Aynur uses both instruments in 'Keçe Kurdan' to create a high tune with singers' emphatic accents at the end of long phrases to express the need to mobilize Kurdish women in the struggle. Supplementary instruments include the bass guitar, violin and saz (a long-necked stringed instrument). ^[10]

The saz is commonly used to express nostalgia, sorrow and the beauty of the homeland. PKK militant singers often use a sad female or male voice while playing the saz. While lyrics are paramount in telling the story, the background instrument creates ambience with the accompanists in the reprise. Another way to express nationalism is through the choir, which gives ambience to the nation's solidarity. These expressions all resist the hegemonic culture and form a popular platform for Kurds, but the most explicit and strongest means for inculcating nationalism is lyrical expression. This study further focuses on lyrical analysis.

Analysis of Lyrics***Feelings***

Members of nationalist movements, particularly ethnic nationalists struggling for independence, feel they are in unjust positions and are exploited by other nationalists. An important component of Kurdish nationalism is the feeling of subordination (Sancar, 2001: 25-9). One pattern is the disappointment of being a nation without a state, whose lands were invaded by colonizers, which leads to discourse on the antagonism between ‘coloniser – Turkey, Iran, Syria, Iraq and imperial powers – and colonised’ (Bozarslan, 2007 :1169). Kurdish nationalists in Turkey see their homeland in four areas, with North Kurdistan located within Turkish borders captured by the Turkish state, which suppressed Kurds and ignored Kurdish identity. This subordination is based on society/state antagonism. Turkish, Iran, Syrian, and Iraqi states – not societies – are projected as ‘others’ (Bozarslan, 2007: 1170), as reflected in ‘Kes Nema’:

*Kes nema li dinyayê
Tevahî bûne serbest
Bindestî ne para me*

*There is no one not gaining independence in this world
We would not be the ones who are under oppression of the other
It is a shame. Come on, stand up!*

The injustice theme is also evident in ‘Welatê min’:

*Dîsa li welatê min bombe barandin
Zarok û dayikan bi hev re qelandin
Birano rabin brîna me kûr e
Hevalno rabin, êdi li me şerm e*

*They spread bombs to my homeland again
They exterminate children and mothers
Brothers/sisters arise, our wound is deep
Fellows wake up, it is a disgrace*

For emancipation from subordination, Kurdish nationalism envisions a return to the ‘imaginary golden age’ – ancient Mesopotamia, which is conceived as the birthplace of the first civilization – a promised land for Kurds that would bring eternal happiness and prosperity. Kurds are then united rather than feeling dominated by other states (Açık, 2002, 2007). This ‘golden age’ mythology reflects back to Kurdish nationalism in two ways. The first is the stress to the Median Empire, which was the first state and the ancestors of Kurds established in the seventeenth century and the prominent Kurdish leaders who were leading the Seljuk Empire,

including Giyaseddin Keyhusrev and Selahaddin Eyubi. The second is the myth that tells the story of the emancipation of a village by the heroic action of Ironsmith Kawa who beat brutal King Dehaq and emancipated all Kurds from his rule. These are considered the founding myths for Kurds.

The myth of a golden age is a mobilizing element in Kurdish nationalism. For Smith (1986: 177), this myth is central to ethnicity and the nation, legitimizing the ethnic group's current actions and providing targets to preserve the group. Smith notes:

Nostalgia is so often linked with utopia; our blueprints for the future are invariably derived from our experiences of our pasts, and as we travel forward, we do so looking backwards to a past that alone seems knowledgeable and intelligible and which alone can 'make sense' of a future that is forever neither.

Smith (ibid) argues that nostalgia emerges during periods of intense social change as a cognitive instrument for resistance. Ethnic nationalism uses the golden age as a symbolic instrument for the preservation of nationalistic identity, as reflected in popular political songs; the ideological apparatus to serve these myths to audiences. The songs depict and define imaginary Kurdish lands, tracing back to the age when Kurdish lands were united. The narrative is based on Kurdish mythology for political targets and the aesthetics of territory. The song 'Ey Raqip' (Hey Enemy) written by Yunus Dildar expresses this:

*Em xortên Midya û Keyhusrew in
Dîn îman û ayîn man, her niştiman
Dîn îman û ayîn man Kurd û Kurdistan*

*We are the heroes of Meds and Keyhüsrev
Our faith and our religion is our homeland
Our religion and our faith is Kurds and Kurdistan*

Kurdish nationalism's political targets are patterned on mythologies associated with Kurds. Although Kurdistan is divided into four areas, the myths bind Kurds together. Ironsmith Kawa's rebellion against King Dehaq and the Kurds' salvation under his leadership is fundamental mythology. Kawa's story can be reinterpreted according to the current Kurdish nationalist movement's political aims (Bozarlsan, 2002: 863; Çağlayan, 2007: 114). Kurds, emancipated by Kawa's leadership, withdrew and settled in the mountains. However, this did not protect their freedom; rather, it alienated them from their civilization (Çağlayan, 2007: 114). Such nostalgia is reflected in songs such as 'Newroz':^[11]

*Bêhna te gelek xweş e Newrozê Newrozê
Por sorê çavê reş e Newrozê cejna me*

*Bi çiya ve hildikişe Newrozê Newrozê
Govenda te şoreş e Newrozê cejna me*

*Your smell is beautiful
Ginger hair, black eyes, Newroz is our feast
Newroz goes down towards mountains
Your halay^[12] is revolution, Newroz is our feast*

On the aestheticization of territory, Smith (1986: 183) considers ethnic groups as inseparable from their habitat. A group's origins can be traced back to mysterious and primordial times, bolstered by imaginary ancestral terrain that is inaccessible and whose zone is inexplicable. This paves the way for identifying the community with a specific terrain by redefining historical and natural sites. Although a terrain's natural features have become historicized, the past is reconstructed through this action (1986: 183). Kurdish nationalism aestheticizes its ancient lands, sometimes reaching imaginary and inaccessible lands in the mythologization. Thus, Kurdish nationalists identify political targets to mobilize Kurds, as evident in 'Gula Cîhanê':

*Jor çiya û zozan, jêr bax û bistan
Tevde qir û bir petrol û madan
Tevde zîv û zêr, sera û eywan
Çemên pir hêja ji dilê Kurdistan*

*There are mountains and plateaus on top,
There are vineyards and vegetable gardens below
Everywhere is moorlands, oil wells and mines
Everywhere silver, gold, palace and arbor
Glorious rivers flow from the heart of Kurdistan*

In this context, the 'other', the homeland and nostalgia appear as alternatives to popular territory for hegemonic players while establishing a Kurdish habitus; signifying the purification of the Kurdish nation (Smith, 1995). However, these elements are insufficient for mobilizing Kurds to free themselves from this situation.

Mobilized Nationalism

Kurdish nationalism requires mobilization and political violence to gain independence. Altınay and Bora (2002: 140-1) suggest the nation-state led to the emergence of modern military and educational systems. To create a homogeneous nation, these two systems function as

ideological tools, mobilizing all segments of society and transforming individuals into citizens of the nation.

Unlike counterparts in Europe and Turkey, Kurdish nationalism did not have a chance to inculcate Kurdishness into Kurds *via* militarism and education until the PKK emerged, which led to the militarization of Kurdish nationalism. Nationalism was reinvented to evoke dying for a nation and eliminating enemies (Yüksel, 2006). Popular music undertook Kurdish nationalism's educational function, motivating Kurds to be citizens and militants of the nation; to fight for their imaginary homeland; demonstrating popular music's counter-hegemonic nature, which functioned as Kurdish nationalism's socialization apparatus while enlarging its political terrain.

Militarization and education through Kurdish popular songs was necessary to emancipate individuals from their unjust position, which led to the repression of the 'other'. Kurdish nationalism blames Kurds for not actively claiming their emancipation (Bozarslan, 2002: 863-4; Volkan, 2004), as outlined in 'Agire Azadi':

*De rabin ala xwe em ji erdê rakin
Deynin serê Birca Amedê
Em tev bibin yek
Ë bi pê nûs û ê bi çek
Rizgariya me yekbûna me ye*

*C'mon get up and take up our flag
Erect to Diyarbakir Castle
We should unify with some holding pen and some loading weapons
Our salvation will be our unification*

The struggle for emancipation and Kurdistan's rescue should be realized not only in the battle arena, but also intellectually (Bozarslan, 2002: 864-5).

The theme of political violence holds an important, albeit implicit, place in Kurdish popular songs. Lyrics necessitate and normalize political violence for emancipation. Political violence is a compulsory action for decolonization (Fanon, 1994), as expressed in 'Ax Kurdistan Kurdistan':

*Ji bo serxwebûna te
Mezin bûye serê me
Emê dujmin derxînin
Ji ser çiya û erdê te*

*For your independence
We become stronger*

*We will expel enemies
From your mountains and lands*

The nationhood becomes sacred in the mindset of this ideology that legitimizes and glorifies dying as much as political violence. Such martyrdom corresponds with Kurdish ethno-nationalism disseminated by the PKK in the 1980s. Militants' death in clashes with Turkish security forces needed to be legitimized and Kurdish songwriters romanticized PKK's struggles with the state for the salvation of Kurdistan, encouraging Kurds to seek martyrdom in the name of moral integrity.

Dying for the nation leads the individual, and the nation, to salvation (Beit-Hallahmi, 2003: 22-5). Kurdish nationalistic discourses promise symbolic immortality if individuals participate in the struggle for independence (Cağlayan, 2007: 161), as evident in 'Beritan':

*Eniya şer de ya li pêş bû Bêrîtana min
Şehîdbünê de her li pêş bû Bêrîtana min
Wek şefeqê ron û geş bû Bêrîtana min*

*She, my Beritan^[13], was on the front line of the war
My Beritan! Always in the front line as a martyr
She was shining and exhilarating like the dawn*

Women's Role in the Struggle

In modern Kurdish nationalistic discourse, the suppression of women parallels the invasion of Kurdistan. When Kurds lost their identity, Kurdish women lost their self-confidence. Both men and women were deprived of the ability to resist and both understood they had been exploited and enslaved; therefore they decided to pursue a common resistance against the 'other' (Açık, 2002: 284).

Women's salvation is perceived as an *a priori* condition for Kurds' salvation (Heckman and Gelder, 2000: 312-5). The Kurdish nationalist discourse identifies the concepts of nation and women, one with the other; suggesting women are agents of the nation while ignoring their female identity. 'Kece Kurdan' states:

*Keçê em dixwazın bî mera warin şêvvrê
Dilo em dixwazın bî mera werin cengê
Hayê hayê em keçikê kurdanin
Şêrin em şengin em hêviya merdanin*

*Girls, we want you to come to war with us
Girls, we want you to come to light with us*

*Yes, we are Kurdish girls
We are lions, vivacious and the hopes of men*

The militarization of Kurdish nationalism and women's participation in the PKK in the 1990s changed the Kurdish nationalism perspective, culminating in many songs about female heroism. This process separated Kurdish women from men and led them to be independent players in the discourse of Kurdish nationalism, equalizing women in social relationships.

For HandanÇağlayan (2007: 115), women's participation created another mythological hero for Sumerians; the Goddess Sterk (Star), who became popular in Kurdish nationalistic discourse and embodies Kurds' ties with the Neolithic era. The Goddess signifying women's power, is linked with the essence of Kurdishness and embodied in the figure of Zilan.^[14] Kurdish nationalistic discourse connects Sterk with Zilan, completing the female as the supplementary figure to men, making women independent and strong provided they devote themselves to their nation (Çağlayan, 2007: 115), as reflected in 'Keçe Delal (Zilan)':

*Zilan birûska havîne
Zilan welatê dîlkîne
Volgan e-keça Medî ye
Zilan Zilan*

*Zilan is the streak of summer months
Zilan wanders her motherland
She is the volcano of Med girls^[15]
Zilan Zilan*

Kurdish popular culture functions as an inclusion mechanism binding women's role to the national struggle discourse.

Marxist-Leninism: Kurdish Socialism

Kurdish ethno-nationalism was shaped by the late 1960s leftist movement in eastern Turkey, when Marxist and nationalistic terminologies entered into popular music. Singers composed music along Marxist-Leninism lines while leftist organizations (particularly the PKK) and their policies reinforced Marxist-Leninism and its terminology among Kurds until the mid-1990s. Yet the fight against Kurdistan's exploitation and suppression found support among Kurds long before this Marxist-Leninism wave (Bozarslan, 2007: 1172-1175).

Marxist-Leninism allowed Kurds to identify themselves with feelings of subordination which universalized the issue. Marxist-Leninism promotes a feeling of solidarity among the

world's societies, viewing Kurds as friends and states as enemies, which supplies a paramount tool of Third Worldism for the Kurds (Bozarslan, 2007: 1170).

In 1978, PKK's foundation program included Marxist-Leninism and Third Worldism philosophy. The political target was to realize 'the national democratic revolution' led by the proletariat in cooperation with peasants. Colonization and the semi-feudal structure were perceived as obstacles; the revolution had to be nationalistic in nature to eradicate tribalism, sectarianism and patriarchy. The program was patterned on the discourse of injustice among Kurds merged with the state's denial of Kurdish identity, and proposed establishing a Kurdish state based on Marxist-Leninism to diffuse and reinforce nationalism to all Kurds (İmset, 1993: 55-6). The principles were reflected in popular music, as in 'Serfirazkin':

*Bi hurandin, bi gri fêde naki
Hatin wê bibe sosyalist
Wê sibe ji îro xweştir çêbe
Ewê diiroka min nû vebe*

*There is no benefit in complaining and bewailing
The future belongs to Socialism
Tomorrow will be better than today
History will be written again...*

Although Marxist-Leninism reinforced a counter-hegemonic terrain against the capitalistic and colonial state, Third World ideology brought opportunities to bind Kurds physiologically to suppressed nations of other states, as in 'Her biji Kurdistan':

*Kurdistan welatê me
Her biji Kurdistan
Lenîn e seroke me
Her biji Kurdistan*

*Kurdistan is our motherland
God Bless you Kurdistan
Our leader is Lenin
God Bless you Kurdistan*

Changing conditions transformed the bipolar world into a semi-polar world. The USSR could no longer anchor Marxist-Leninist organizations like the PKK. In 1995 the PKK abandoned the idea of establishing an independent Kurdish state but retained orthodox Marxist terminology (Çağlayan, 2007: 115), which led to an ideological transformation to pure ethno-nationalism, which diminished the effects of Marxist-Leninism in popular lyrics.

Conclusion

Popular music and national identity has a strong relationship. Popular music functions as the catalyst for the imposition of an 'elite' for nation building. It is also both constitutive and represents social positioning. Thus, music is perceived as a catalyser and a representative of imagining communities. In this sense, popular music is used by the ruling elite to maintain certain ideologies; intending to realize political socialization and progress a sense of national identity. It infuses a civil religion which '*directs favour and fervour*' towards the nation. Popular music can be a form of cultural resistance for some nations, particularly the stateless, both against state policies and certain socio-cultural forms.

Kurdish traditional music's unique structure transformed Kurdish popular music, leading to a Kurdish nationalistic consciousness. Popular music used Kurdish lyrics and nationalistic symbols to expand the Kurdish nationalistic terrain against the dominant order. Although performance, sound and rhythm provide resistance, lyrics are the strongest and most explicit instrument for evaluating Kurdish nationalism; particularly in three themes: a sense of injustice, a call for independence and the role of women. The lyrics aim to create a nationalistic habitus based on the politicization of the Kurdish culture; thereby purifying the culture by giving new meaning to certain symbols, or creating the 'other' through words such as *brutal* and *colonialists*. The Kurdish nationalist habitus creates an alternative area to purify the community by fighting against the 'other'.

There are four themes that emerge from the lyrics:

1. The feeling of injustice, and the need to unite in a Kurdish homeland. Kurdish nationalism defining itself by the image of the 'other', the Turkish state, but also Iran, Iraq and Syria governments, reflects in popular Kurdish songs. The songs express the unjust and subordinate position of Kurds from pressure by the Turkish state and others. The songs long to unite Kurdistan, as it was in historic times, but presently spread over four states.

2. A call for independence and the mobilization of nationalism. This reflects in songs as an urgent need to mobilize and fight against the 'other'; for emancipation from the 'colonizer'. The songs urge Kurds to die for their homeland and glorify martyrdom.

3. Women's role in the independence struggle. In modern Kurdish nationalistic discourse reflecting in songs, the suppression of women parallels the invasion of Kurdistan.

Women's salvation is seen as an *a priori* condition for Kurds salvation. Popular songs function as an inclusion mechanism binding women's role to the national struggle discourse.

4. Kurdish socialism reflects in the songs. Kurdish ethno-nationalism was shaped by the late 1960s leftist movements which led to Marxist Leninism penetrating popular music. Singers composed music along Marxist Leninism lines, allowing Kurds to identify with feelings of subordination which universalizes the issue and promotes feeling of solidarity among world societies, particularly subordinated societies.

All these elements – lyrics, rhythms, sounds and performance – create opportunities for Kurds and Kurdish nationalism by reminding listeners of symbols, folkloric sounds and mythologies providing the means to oppose the hegemonic Turkish state. Although rhythm and sound are catalysts for creating group ties among Kurds, this music has been banned since the establishment of the Turkish Republic; but performances and the explicit meaning of lyrics have inculcated Kurds into realization of their identity.

END NOTES

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[1] Kurmanji is predominantly used by Kurds in Turkey.

[2] Accumulation strategy is used to articulate the contingent unity between the economic and the political.

[3] Music based on real stories was performed in gatherings organized by the prince (mir) or strong tribal leaders. Such people had several functions: as bards (dengbej), they improvised music for a story (çirok); as minstrels (stranbêj), they sang songs and narrated epic tales.

[4] Sunni Islam is the dominant religion in the societal and political system.

[5] Every Kurdish lord (mir) and tribal leader has their own dengbejs, who cannot perform without entering into the protection of tribal leaders (Interview with Vedat Yıldırım, soloist of Kardeş Türküler and composer of ethnic music, March 2008).

[6] Although one form of Kurdish music (mitirb) prioritized the melody over the lyrics, Kurds despised it.

[7] Although he used classical Kurdish unmetered folk song structure in his songs, he also used dance and entertainment songs (Gündoğar, 2005).

[8] Kawa was an ironsmith who resisted a brutal king

[9] According to this ideology, Islam has a superior place in the Turkish identity; Turkish-Islam synthesis is a nationalist movement that defines Turkish identity based on Islam, indicating religious ethics and identity.

[10] A stringed instrument with a long neck.

[11] Kawa's emancipation of the Kurds is celebrated as the Newroz feast which marks the day Kawa defeated King Dehaq.

[12] A folk dance.

[13] Beritan was the nickname of Gülnaz Karataş, a member of the PKK military section.

[14] Zilan was the first female PKK member to carry out a suicide attack in 1995.

[15] Meds were Kurds' ancestors living in Mesopotamia in BCE 4-6.

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