

The Kurdish Voice of Radio Yerevan

by

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Abstract

Radio Yerevan served as a bridge between Kurds and their culture throughout the second half of the 20th century when Kurdish language and cultural expression were banned by the Turkish government. This capstone project looks back at the establishment of Radio Yerevan's Kurdish broadcasts. Based on a qualitative methodological approach close to oral history, it traces the history of the Celil family, who set the foundation for a Kurdish musical archive in the Radio, as well as sheds light on the impact Radio Yerevan had beyond the Armenian-Turkish border.

Dear reader,

As you start this little journey, I am kindly asking you to listen to [Delalê](#), a folk song that brought me closer to Kurdish music as well as this beautiful interpretation of [Ehmedo Ronî](#), a song that was first performed on Radio Yerevan by Mehmedê Mûsa, a song that has touched all of my senses and will always hold a special place in my heart.

With peace, gratitude and solidarity,

Gayane

Introduction

Radio Yerevan, or as Kurdish people refer to it, *Radyoya Rewanê*, served as a bridge between Kurds and their culture throughout the second half of the 20th century when Kurdish language and cultural expression were banned by the Turkish government. My interest in Radio Yerevan’s Kurdish broadcasts and Kurdish struggle began quite unexpectedly. Everything started with a song. It was back in November 2017, when one of my close friends from Turkey, Haydar, was doing a Hrant Dink Fellowship in Yerevan. One evening, as we were walking around the Republic Square, he stopped all of a sudden, took out his phone and said enthusiastically, “Gayane, you should listen to this song. A friend sent it to me. It’s from Radio Yerevan.”

“*Leylo, Leylo, Leylo xanê* [khanê], *Leylo, Leylo, Leylo canê* [janê],” went the chorus of the [song](#)¹, a Kurdish folk piece performed by Hovhannes Badalyan and the Armenian SSR State

¹ Hovhannes Badalyan’s version: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Aa1ju-Qk4bM> ; Îskoyê Lezgî’s version: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bNqpVhq0VZc>

TV & Radio Ensemble of Folk Instruments. It sounded familiar and new all at once. Perhaps, the familiarity of it came from the fact that the arrangement of that particular interpretation of the song was based on Armenian traditional music. Enchanted by the melodic beauty of “Leylo Xanê,” we kept listening to it non-stop, for weeks. Back then I didn’t quite realize the role Radio Yerevan had in Kurdish people’s lives, but the idea of having Kurdish songs recorded in the Public Radio of Armenia simply surprised and brought joy to me. It was probably one of the first stories related to Armenian-Kurdish relations that wasn’t about “Sunni Kurds killing Armenians during the 1915 genocide.” To me, this song was a window through which I would later discover and build my own story of friendship and solidarity.

About a week after that evening, Haydar and I were on our way to Gyumri on one of the old trains that are like a living postcard from the Soviet days. We were taking photos of mount Ararat, when all of a sudden a skinny elderly man with a neat moustache approached us. He kindly smiled, sat next to Haydar and started to tell something in Kurdish. We were taken aback, especially Haydar. Haydar’s face looked excited and confused. He patiently listened to the man, trying his best to reply to him in Kurdish. “Ah, I forgot all the Kurdish words,” he said to me, clasping his head with his hands, with an expression on his face I had never seen before. He seemed touched that far away from home, someone spoke his people’s language to him, yet there was a sense of bitterness because he had “forgotten all the words.”

Haydar never studied Kurdish at school. He learned the language from his parents, who moved to Istanbul from Dersim. Many young Kurds like Haydar, who grew up in Turkey’s metropolitan cities, didn't have a chance to learn their native tongue properly. This incident

raised many questions in my head. How did his parents keep their language if it was banned? Why do so many Kurds know about our Public Radio? Why did Hüseyin Kaytan² mention it in one of his poems? Did the Radio have any significance in their lives?

My capstone takes a look at the history of Radio Yerevan's Kurdish broadcasts as well as how it contributed to the preservation of Kurdish language and musical heritage across Kurdish communities in Turkey. Since memory is at the core of my research, I have chosen an approach close to oral history and based my research on the narratives of those who helped sustain the broadcasts and those who grew up listening to them. My research also sheds light on the cultural and social changes that Kurdish people experienced as a result of these broadcasts.

Key terms and definitions

Dengbêj: Kurdish singer-poet

Kilam: Recital song in Kurdish

Navenda Çanda Mesopotamia: Mesopotamia Cultural Center, a chain of Kurdish cultural centers in Turkey existing since the 1990s. The centers organize a range of cultural activities.

Radio Yerevan: the Public Radio of Armenia (Kurdish: Radyoya Erîvanê or Radyoya Rewanê)

Stran: Rhythmic song in Kurdish.

² Kaytan was a Kurdish poet and guerilla fighter.

Note: All the Kurdish words in this capstone are spelled in Kurdish. Below is a short pronunciation guide.

C, c - j in judge

Î î - ee in meet

Ç ç - ch in church

J j- like the s in casual or z in seizure

E, e - e in egg, pen

S, s - s in sad

Ê ê - a in lake

Ş ş - sh in shake

G, g - g in girl

U, u - oo in foot

I, i - like the io in motion

Û û - oo in cool

X, x - pronounced as kh, like the ch in Loch ness

Literature Review

For my capstone project I have been looking at what cultural and political restrictions Kurdish people in Turkey faced throughout the second half of the 20th century and how they managed to preserve their cultural identity. I've chosen to explore particularly the role Radio Yerevan had in this process of cultural preservation mostly because of my interest in Kurdish music and the overall struggle for cultural expression. Before discussing Radio Yerevan's impact on Kurdish people, it's important to consider political repressions against Kurds in Turkey and the role of oral tradition in Kurdish culture.

The Repression of Kurdish Language in Turkey

Despite the fact that Kurdish is the largest minority language in Turkey, since the establishment of the Turkish Republic, governments have systematically issued policies to eliminate Kurdish and deny the existence of a distinct Kurdish culture. Geoffrey Haig (2014) argues that even though state policies regarding the use of Kurdish language have always been

“characterised precisely by a lack of overt policy formulation, by indirect or masked reference, or systematic lack of reference to Kurdish, rather than positive assertions, officially formulated agendas, or public debate” (p. 2), however, an official policy did exist. This policy, which Haig refers to as **invisibilization**, is a strategy widely used by nation-states to silence minority groups. To illustrate the issue more clearly in the Turkish context, Haig provides a broader definition of invisibilization.

Invisibilization is the deliberate removal, or concealment, of the overt signs of the existence of particular culture, with the aim of rendering that culture invisible. It is part of the logic of invisibilization that the policy and its implementation remain covert, because overt formulation would mean increased visibility. (2014, p. 3)

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, prior to the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1922, Kurdish language had public presence within the Ottoman Empire. Kurdish intellectuals from Istanbul had founded social and cultural circles, publishing journals in Kurdish. What brought an abrupt change to this public presence is, according to Haig, the emergence of Turkish nationalism. He argues that one of the determining factors that would shape the State’s future policies toward the Kurds was Mustafa Kemal Atatürk’s nation-building project. The notion of Turkishness was at the core of that project, and therefore, the existence of a distinct non-Turkish culture within the Turkish Republic was an obstacle for Atatürk’s mass turkification agenda. Haig argues that because it would take decades to completely assimilate the Kurds to Turks, authorities turned to an alternative “solution,” namely, invisibilisation. “If it proves impossible to completely assimilate the carriers of a minority culture, an alternative solution is to remove, or conceal, the visible symbols of that culture” (Haig, 2014, p. 7).

Among the various cultural differences between Kurds and Turks, language, undoubtedly, has always been the most remarkable one. As Haig (2014) states, “In the context of Turkey, the Kurdish language is the most salient emblem of Kurdish culture and identity” (p. 7). It is because of its very quality of otherness that Kurdish language has always been a key target for invisibilization. As Zeydanlioglu (2012) points out, throughout the rest of the 20th century, “Kemalism continued to form the official basis of the state’s ideology and the Kurdish ethnic identity continued to be systematically denied and persecuted” (p. 107).

Dengbêjs as Preservers of Kurdish Culture and History

Dengbêjs, the Kurdish bards, have always had a prominent role in the preservation of Kurdish oral tradition within the Turkish territory. The word *dengbêj*, which consists of *deng* (voice) and *bêj* (to tell), can be translated as “a master of the voice” (Yücel, 2009, p. 4). Traditionally sung acapella, dengbêjs perform songs known as *kilams*, written by themselves or other master dengbêjs. The themes of these *kilams* range from stories of battles, local conflicts to friendship and love.

As Hamelink notes in his *The Sung Home: Narrative, Morality, and the Kurdish Nation*, “The Dengbêjs and their songs create a tangible past, a Kurdish geography, a place of belonging and nostalgia, set within the landscape of the Turkish and surrounding (nation-)states” (2014, p. 20). It was due to the immense role Dengbêj art played in the preservation of the Kurdish identity that for decades, it fell victim to the silencing policies of the Turkish Republic.

...Turkish nationalist projects, which regarded the Dengbêjs, like any other expression of Kurdishness, for much of the twentieth century as a threat to national unity. Consequently, they either tried to silence them, or to assimilate them to Turkish ‘folk’ traditions. (Hamelink, 2014, p. 21)

As we learn from Hamelink's interviews done with dengbêjs from Van and Diyarbakir, one of the most widespread ways of suppressing Dengbêjs and their art was torture. One of Hamelink's interviewees, Osmanê Farqînî, a popular Kurdish singer whose music was based on the dengbêj tradition, mentioned that he had been tortured at least nine times between 1980 and 1992 because of his music (Hamelink, 2014). Depending on the region they lived in, dengbêjs experienced police brutality differently. However, as Hamelink notes, because of the mass imprisonment and tortures, the 1980s saw a dramatic decline in the number of dengbêjs performing both publicly and privately (Hamelink, 2014).

There's a common perception that Dengbêj art is solely a male one. According to Hamelink's observations in the Dengbêj houses of Van and Diyarbakir, female members of the house weren't regarded as "real dengbêjs" and they were hardly ever invited to perform during gatherings. Hamelink (2014) notes, "It seems that the Dengbêjs were afraid of losing their position to female Dengbêjs who received more attention" (p. 30).

Contrary to the common belief, Schäfers (2016) argues that in fact, Dengbêj art has originally been a female one. According to her, the reason for this shift was the transition from a matriarchal society to a patriarchal one. She argues that the reason why female dengbêjs have gone unnoticed is the fact that in these transformed Kurdish communities it was no longer appropriate for women to sing in public. "They do so [make their voices heard], however, mainly in domestic, private and all-female spheres to which outsider and/or male ears are rarely admitted" (Schäfers, 2016, p. 1).

Schäfers notes that in recent years women dengbêjs strive to return to the public space. Moreover, not only do they perform traditional *kilams*, but compose their own ones that reflect

upon their own experiences and struggles both as women and as minorities in Turkey. Schäfers cites one of the *kilams* by Dengbêj Gazîn from Van. As Schäfers notes, Gazîn, whose name literally means “cry” or “shout,” in her *kilam* sings about her own sufferings instead of telling the fates of others (Schäfers, 2016).

Here is an excerpt from a song by Gazîn, translated by Marlene Schäfers (Schäfers, 2016):

<i>Ez Gazîn im, ez dengbêj im</i>	I am Gazîn, I am a dengbêj,
<i>Ez ne ker im, ez ne gêj im</i>	I am neither deaf, nor am I mad
<i>Hestîrên çavên min dirijin</i>	My eyes are shedding tears
<i>Derdê dilê xwe dibêjim</i>	I tell the sorrows of my heart
<i>Kesek dengê min nabihîze</i>	Nobody hears my voice
<i>Derdê dilê xwe dibêjim</i>	I tell the sorrows of my heart
<i>Kesek dengê min nabihîze.</i>	Nobody hears my voice.

Broadcasting in Kurdish

As Metin Yüksel (2012) notes, neighboring Kurdish communities have contributed greatly toward the preservation and development of Kurdish culture in Turkey. According to him, Radio Yerevan’s Kurdish programs particularly came as a result of the Soviet Union’s broader campaign aimed at reducing illiteracy. Yüksel also makes an important note on the backgrounds of the Kurdish families who managed different publications and radio stations outside of Turkey.

...while those in Syria and Lebanon were led by such Ottoman-Kurdish notable families as Bedirkhanis and Cemilpaşazades, the cadres in the Soviet Union were the “generation of orphans” of Yezidi Kurds who fled from the province of Kars during the 1918-1920 period for Yerevan. (Yüksel, p. 27)

As Sardar Saadi (2019) notes in the first episode of his *Kurdish Edition* podcast, besides Radio Yerevan's Kurdish programs, throughout the 20th century there have been a number of Kurdish radio stations in Iraq, Iran as well as Cairo. We also learn from Hassanpour (1996) that in Iraq, broadcasting in Kurdish started in 1939 and there were also two stations from Jaffa and Beirut. However, he notes that these stations were not accessible to a large public, as only the wealthy could afford having radios at the time. Hassanpour also notes that even though the Iraqi government installed radio sets in public areas throughout the Kurdish-speaking towns and villages, radio remained an unpopular medium until the 1960s.

According to Hassanpour, although all the states which had Kurdish radio programs had their own political agendas behind them, there were a number of differences that set Radio Yerevan's programs apart from the other ones, making it also more accessible and relatable to the Kurds living in Turkey. Firstly, unlike Radio Baghdad or Radio Cairo, Radio Yerevan's broadcasts were in Kurmanji dialect, while the others were in Sorani. Another major difference was the number of female singers. As Hassanpour notes, "Radio Yerevan, broadcasting in Kurmanji, had more female singers than Radio Baghdad" (1996, p. 330). This might have been a determining factor for the re-emergence of female dengbêjs as Hassanpour also states that "the proportion of female singers is higher in Kurmanji-speaking areas than elsewhere" (1996, p. 328).

Both Hassanpour (1996) and Saadi (2019) mention that not only was it prohibited to speak Kurdish in Turkey, but it was also unacceptable to listen to the Kurdish programs aired by the neighboring countries. Hassanpour writes, "...listening to Kurdish broadcasts was considered an act against the Turkish state" (1996, p. 330). However, despite the attempts by the Turkish

government to suppress Kurdish language and music, “the airways from Yerevan, Baghdad and Kirmanshah carried music into private homes” (Hassanpour, 1996, p. 330).

While there’s a fair amount of research done on Kurdish oral traditions as well as the cultural/ political restrictions imposed by the Turkish State, there isn’t much literature, especially in English, on the history of Kurdish broadcasts and Radio Yerevan in particular. In this sense, my research not only will explore the history of Radio Yerevan’s Kurdish broadcasts from their very foundation, but also bring new voices that will tell about the role Radio Yerevan has in the individual and collective memories of Kurdish people.

Research Questions

The main goal of the capstone is to understand how Radio Yerevan’s Kurdish broadcasts started and developed and the extent to which they contributed to the preservation of Kurdish language and culture in Turkey. Radio, being a major source of information at the time, perhaps not only played a role in the preservation of Kurdish cultural heritage. Therefore, at the core of this capstone are the following primary and secondary questions:

1. How was Radio Yerevan’s Kurdish department established?
2. To what extent did Radio Yerevan contribute to the preservation of Kurdish language and musical heritage in Turkey?
3. What social and/or cultural changes did the Kurdish community in Turkey experience as a result of Radio Yerevan’s broadcasts?

Methodology

To answer my research questions, I have interviewed Cemîla Celîl, the daughter of Casimê Celîl³, and Tital Choloyan, the editor of Radio Yerevan's Kurdish broadcasts today. Initially I had also planned to travel to Istanbul and Van to conduct oral history interviews with people who grew up listening to Radio Yerevan. My flight which was scheduled on March 26th, 2020 never happened due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Luckily, I had two interviews from March 2019, conducted in Istanbul with Kurdish musicians from Erzurum; Dengbêj Gani and Ahmet Kaya, a doctor and musician who is one of the co-founders of the Kurdish folk-rock band *Koma Amed*.⁴

My first steps into this research process started in 2018 when I visited the Public Radio of Armenia. That is where I got to interview Tital Choloyan, the editor of the Kurdish broadcasts today. I am grateful to Artur Ispiryan, thanks to whom I got access to the official radio archives at the time, where hundreds of recordings are still waiting to be digitized. While my interview with Mr. Choloyan was more journalistic (it was for an article I wrote for EVN Report) and limited to specific questions about how the broadcasts were run, I took a different approach later on when interviewing Mrs. Cemîla, Ahmet Kaya, and Dengbêj Gani. It was a few months after meeting Mr. Choloyan that I got to learn about oral history methodology and even work on a project as part of my oral history course at AUA. This experience showed me that oral history as a methodological tool would be a better fit for my research. Besides direct questions regarding the role of Radio Yerevan, my interview guidelines included questions about my interviewees'

³ Kurdish poet and writer, the founder of the Kurdish radio archive of Radio Yerevan.

⁴ *Koma Amed* was founded in 1988 by Fikri Kutlay, Ahmet Kaya, and several Kurdish students in Ankara, Turkey.

childhood, families as well as career choices and backgrounds. Some of the questions I asked were: *What are your earliest childhood memories of Kurdish songs? What was the community like where you grew up? What is your family background? When and how did you start listening to Radio Yerevan? Did you ever find the broadcast content controversial or disagreeable? What other sources did you have to explore the Kurdish language and culture?* And while I had these questions ready, I also made sure to ask follow-up questions where it was needed and let my interviewees lead the conversation in the direction they felt was necessary.

A broader scope of questions helped me connect the interviewees' experiences and memories to one another and to the broader context. Moreover, as some of my interviewees had given me oral consent to video record the interviews, when interpreting their answers, I also took into account their non-verbal responses, e.g., facial expressions, gestures as well as changes in their voice. All these alternative responses are included in the final transcription of my interviews.

As I always wanted my interviewees to feel at ease, I took into consideration the location, time, and language in which the interview was conducted. With Mrs. Cemîla there were no issues. We conducted the interview at her apartment in Yerevan, in Armenian as it is one of her native tongues along with Kurdish (Kurmanjî). However, in March 2019, when I traveled to Istanbul to interview Ahmet Kaya and Dengbêj Gani, as much as I wanted the interviews to be in their mother tongue, Kurdish, there were time and resource limitations I had to face. As a result, the interview with Mr. Kaya was conducted in English without any translators, whereas the interview with Dengbêj Gani had to be conducted in Turkish as my friend, Haydar, who kindly volunteered to interpret our conversation, felt more confident doing it in Turkish. Although I

wasn't able to conduct the interviews in my interviewee's mother tongue, I made sure the location of the interview would make them feel at ease. That's why I agreed to meet them wherever they felt most comfortable. Eventually, I met Mr. Kaya at the clinic in Kumkapı district where he currently works as a doctor, and I interviewed Dengbêj Gani at Mesopotamia Cultural Center (*Navenda Çanda Mezopotamya*).

Since my approach was closer to oral history methodology, it allowed my interviewees to speak more expansively about their memories and experiences, creating an opportunity for me to explore and find the answers to my main research questions from a more personal, humane angle. As Portelli (2003) notes, the main thing that makes oral history different is “that it tells us less about *events* than about their *meaning*” (p. 67). Moreover, oral history “provides a more realistic and fair reconstruction of the past, a challenge to the established account” (Thompson, 2003, p. 25). I attempted to find meaning and reconstruct the past not only by exploring the narratives of my interviewees but also observing the many different stories and perspectives I have heard throughout my interactions with my Kurdish friends, acquaintances, and their families for the past two years.

As a result of these continuous interactions, I have grown attached to the history of Radio Yerevan's Kurdish broadcasts as well as to the Kurdish struggle for freedom of cultural expression. That is precisely why I hope this capstone and my future academic activities will become a medium for advocacy. At the beginning of my research I was concerned that my growing attachment and excitement would make my voice less reliable, however, as I explored Sherna Berger Gluck's “Advocacy Oral History: Palestinian Women in Resistance” (1991), I realized that just like in her and other scholars' experiences, my political beliefs and values have

played a significant role from the very first step of choosing to research this topic to the choice of interviewees and my methodology. I realized that there was no point in forcefully concealing my position and attitudes neither from my interviewees nor the reader. On the contrary, as Gluck put it, “Where previously my interviews [...] were guided primarily by a commitment to give them a voice– or rather, to make their voices heard– now I was going to be using those voices much more deliberately to advocate on their behalf” (1991, p. 206).

Research Findings and Analysis: In Search of The Celils

Exploring the history of Radio Yerevan’s Kurdish broadcasts means exploring the story of the Celil family. The first time I came across their family name was in mid-2018 when I was working on an article⁵ about Radio Yerevan’s Kurdish broadcasts. Back then, I knew that Casimê Celil had already passed away, but what about his children and grandchildren? I had no contact information to get in touch with someone from the family. Later I learned that most of them had moved to Vienna, except for Mr. Celil’s daughter, Cemîla Celil, the woman who, in my eyes, embodies the history of Radio Yerevan’s Kurdish broadcasts.

I finally got in touch with Mrs. Cemîla in January 2020, when she invited me to her place for a chat. I had been searching for this woman for months, and I was about to meet her in person. My heart was beating fast as I knocked on her door. Her daughter-in-law kindly welcomed me and accompanied me to the living room, where Mrs. Cemîla was waiting for me. She was very kind to have agreed to answer my questions, but I could feel she didn’t trust me yet. She asked me different questions such as why I was interested in Kurdish broadcasts, what I knew about them or if I had any Kurdish friends or acquaintances. She was quite cautious and

⁵ The [article](#) was for EVN Report’s *EVN Youth Report* project.

didn't feel comfortable being audio or video recorded. However, she told me she was ready to answer any questions I had and that I could take notes and stop her whenever I needed to double-check things.

Honestly, I felt a little discouraged and confused, thinking perhaps I had done or said something wrong. But 15 minutes into our conversation, the atmosphere of the room started to change. It felt warm, safe, and more welcoming. After learning more about me and my attitude toward Kurdish people and culture, Mrs. Cemîla seemed to be at peace and as she patiently and passionately walked me through the history of her family and Radio Yerevan, all of a sudden I felt that I was becoming part of its past and future.

My first meeting with Mrs. Cemîla seemed to set the foundation for a unique kind of friendship. I continued visiting her from time to time in the coming months and I realized that I learned much more from our conversations than I would have from a formal interview. Mrs. Cemîla kindly accepted me into her world, sharing the extensive work she has done for decades as well as encouraging me to continue my journey in the coming years.

***Yêrêvan xeber dide!*⁶**

These were the first Kurdish words aired from Radio Yerevan in 1955. While the decision to have Kurdish programs was made by the Central Administration of the Former Soviet Union, Yerevan kept on “speaking” and “singing” in Kurdish thanks to Casimê Celîl, his children and their collaboration with local Kurds and Armenians. Casimê, a poet, writer, translator and educator was born in 1908 in the village of Ghzl-Ghula⁷ (Kars region). Like many

⁶ From Kurdish: *Yerevan is speaking*.

⁷ Armenian: Ղզլ-Ղուլա; Turkish: Kızılkule.

of his peers at the time, he was a child of the “orphan generation⁸.” Casimê was about 10 years old, when he and his family decided to escape. By the time they arrived at the Armenian-Turkish border, his entire family had been killed, except for his paternal aunt, who helped him cross the river and find refuge in Gyumri’s orphanage, which was also home to hundreds of orphaned children who were survivors of the Armenian genocide of 1915. After spending his teenage years in the orphanage, like many of his peers, Casimê moved to Yerevan to work and study.

Casimê always showed interest in education and literature. He quickly learnt Armenian and prior to graduating from the Pedagogical University in 1940, he was already a member of the Writers’ Union. Casimê took the position as the head of Radio Yerevan’s Kurdish department in 1954, shortly before the first official broadcast on January 1, 1955.

Initially, the programs were scheduled three times a week, for only 15 minutes and were solely a propaganda of the Communist Party. However, Casimê wanted to take the given opportunity and revive Kurdish music and make it accessible to a broader audience. Not only was his idea controversial at the time, but it also required additional resources the Radio administration couldn’t afford. “In Soviet times, in the 1930s, people would get prosecuted even for just a word. Back then, Stalin had already passed away, but the fear was still there,” noted Mrs. Cemîla. Nevertheless, after getting rejected once, Casimê tried again, eventually convincing the head of the Radio to play Kurdish songs at the end of each program from 2 to maximum 2,5 minutes. “All my father needed was that permission, some tape and the sound engineer. He promised them to take care of everything else” (C. Celîl, personal communication, January 28, 2020). Once Casimê got the permission, he headed to the town of Talin to ask Şamilê Bako, a

⁸ Thousands of Ezidi Kurds had to flee the persecutions in Kars after the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk was signed between Russia and the Ottomans in March 1918, enabling the Ottoman troops to take over Kars province.

native of Kars, to come to Yerevan with him to record the first piece. Bako, delighted by Casimê's offer, not only agreed to play a Kurdish tune on Duduk, but also named it *Casko*, the affectionate diminutive for Casimê (C. Celîl, personal communication, January 28, 2020).

Home: A Living Memory of The Past

Finding Kurdish musicians and dengbêjs to perform wasn't too difficult as Casimê who had grown up with many of them in the orphanage, was always in touch with the Kurdish community across Armenia and was well-respected among them. The difficult task was their accomodation, which, with no support from the radio administration, was left entirely on Casimê's and his family's shoulders.

When I stepped into Mrs. Cemîla's living-room, the first thing that caught my eye was the large image (figure 1) of a group of women dressed in traditional Kurdish garments, hung above Mrs. Cemîla's couch. It was so impressive and iconic that it almost shouted, "You're in the right place." That picture, the many little photographs peeping at me from Mrs. Cemîla's bookcase, the huge portrait of her parents along with the old-fashioned black cassette player next to her couch made me feel like I was in a museum, in an archival room rather than someone's living-room. And indeed, for decades, those walls have absorbed the voices and melodies of all the people who made Radio Yerevan's Kurdish programs possible.



Figure 1: The photo above Mrs. Cemîla's couch.

“Our apartment had turned into a villager’s home⁹,” Mrs. Cemîla said with a feeling of longing in her voice. Most musicians and dengbêjs were from villages and to make sure they didn’t have to worry about their accommodation while in Yerevan, Casimê always hosted them in his apartment. “They came to our home bringing the smell of the manure and *tondir*¹⁰ with them, the smell of the village” (C. Celîl, personal communication, January 28, 2020).

At the Radio studio, Casimê did everything to make the villagers feel comfortable. Most of them had never been to a studio before. The equipment and the recording process was new to them. Most of them could not speak a word of Armenian. To comfort them, Casimê would say, “Please, feel at home here. Imagine you’re in your house, playing. I’ll be on the other side of the

⁹ Armenian: Գյուղացու տուն – a shelter for people from different regions of Armenia, who didn’t have any relatives in Yerevan.

¹⁰ A type of hearth used in South-West Asia. It is made of clay or metal and has a cylindrical shape. There are also underground *tondirs*, like the ones commonly used in Armenia.

window if you need anything.” In their apartment, the roles were swapped. Now, it was Khanoum’s, Mrs. Cemîla’s mother’s turn to make sure their guests were comfortable and had everything they needed. Khanoum, who also grew up as an orphan, was always hospitable and compassionate toward others. She would make the villagers’ beds and cook for them. Mrs. Cemîla recalls many cases when they had so many people in the apartment, there was no room left, and when they didn’t have enough food, she’d tell her children, “That’s alright. We can eat bread and cheese today. They are guests. We should treat them kindly.” Looking back at those years, Mrs. Cemîla proudly said, “If my father taught us the value of national songs and music, my mother taught us how to treat people” (C. Celîl, personal communication, January 28, 2020).

The apartment and the memory of it meant so much to Mrs. Cemîla that even after getting married, she kept visiting it almost every day. After her husband passed away, she moved back to her family home and to this day she continues receiving her guests and writing her books in that very living-room.



Figure 2: Students of Yerevan State University listening to the Kurdish broadcast in Casimê Celîl’s living-room. On the left: Ordîxanê Celîl (Cemîla’s elder brother), Celîlê Celîl (Cemîla’s younger brother), Sîma Semend, Şerefê Eşir. On the right Êmma Êsîv, Mecûtê Bişo, Îlîçê Reşîd. 1955.

Cemîla Celîl Takes Over

Mrs. Cemîla grew up with Radio Yerevan’s Kurdish programs and it was only natural that she would continue her father’s work, bringing her own vision to the further development of the programs. Casimê, who worked as the head of the Kurdish broadcasts from 1954 until 1964, left a legacy of over 700 original recordings, setting the foundation for the Kurdish audio archive at the Radio. In Mrs. Cemîla’s words, “It was unheard of. No such thing had happened in any other Soviet Republics. Thanks to internal negotiations, a huge archive was established” (C. Celîl, personal communication, January 28, 2020). She officially joined the Radio in 1967 to take care of the archive as well as design the broadcasts, which had been extended from half an hour to an hour and a half.

As a musician and musicologist, Mrs. Cemîla came up with new arrangements of old songs as well as designed and coordinated her own programs. Երաժշտական փոստարկղ [yerazhtakan postarkgh]/ *The Music Mailbox* was the most popular one. “People would tell their grandchildren to write letters to us [many elderly were illiterate], asking to play their favorite songs” (C. Celîl, personal communication, January 28, 2020). *The Music Mailbox* wasn’t merely a medium for entertainment, but had educational purposes as well. “I’d speak about classical composers, Armenian composers, especially those who had some connection to Kurdish music, for example, Komitas, Aram Khachatryan, Spiridon Melikyan and Srбуhi Lisitsyan” (C. Celîl, personal communication, January 28, 2020). There seems to be a balance of entertainment and education in the programs. Together with her brothers, Mrs. Cemîla continued working on radio plays that were based on Kurdish folk tales accompanied with music. On the other hand, they

also had educational programs on Kurdish language and literature. Under the Soviet regime, it was still controversial to talk about certain historic events and Kurdish unity, however the programs covered different aspects of Kurdish culture and lifestyle. Besides her main work at the Radio House, Mrs. Cemîla conducted field work as well. Traveling to various regions of Armenia, she wrote down and recorded Kurdish folk songs on her portable recorder.



Figure 3: Mrs. Cemîla during fieldwork. Masis region, Armenia, mid-1970s.

In the 1990s, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, Armenia suffered immense economic hardships that were reflected in various aspects of the country's social/ cultural life. The increasing poverty, lack of transportation and resources nearly shut down the broadcasts. Almost the entire staff working for the Kurdish department, 13 people, left the country. Among those who stayed were Mrs. Cemîla and Keremi Seyyad, one of the hosts, who was also actively involved in the production of the programs. "There was no electricity, no transportation and it was terribly cold in the winter. But my father would walk 8 km from our home to the Public Radio with the hope that things would get better," Tital Choloyan recalled (Ghazaryan, 2019,

para. 8). Mrs. Cemîla didn't lose her hope either and came up with new alternatives to keep the programs going. "Those were challenging times. Villagers wanted to come to Yerevan to record their new songs, but we didn't even have a tape to record on. I didn't want to let them down and would either re-use some old ones or record them on my cassette player" (C. Celîl, personal communication, January 28, 2020).

Mrs. Cemîla worked at the Radio for thirty-five years, until 2002, enriching the archive with about 700 new recordings that are currently kept at the official archives of the Radio, waiting to be digitised soon. She also has hundreds of recordings in her personal archives which she regularly updates to this day. Many of the songs have been digitized and have been turned into CDs that are part of *Stran û Awazên Kurdî*¹¹ (Kurdish Songs and Melodies), a five-volume book by Mrs. Cemîla and her daughter, Naza Celîl.

Transcending Borders

"I have two mothers; one is my biological mother, and the second is Radio Yerevan."

- Osman Baydemir¹²

To explore the impact Radio Yerevan had in the lives of Kurds living in Turkey, I have based this section on my interviews with Ahmet Kaya and Dengbêj Gani. While these interviews are only a small piece of a greater puzzle, they offer insights and narratives that comprise the experiences and memories of many more.

¹¹ Currently, Mrs. Cemîla is working on the 6th volume of the book. The first three volumes were published between 2002-2006 in Yerevan, while the 4th and 5th ones were published in Vienna with the support of Celîlê Celîl.

¹² Baydemir is a Kurdish lawyer and human rights activist. He was the mayor of his home town of Diyarbakır from 2004 to 2014. He has been prosecuted and imprisoned several times, the latest one being in December 2018 for "violating the law of demonstrations and meetings" (Ahval, 2018).

It was in 1961 when Radio Yerevan's Kurdish programs went beyond the Armenian border, reaching to new audiences in Turkey, Iran, Iraq and other Soviet Republics. Ahmet Kaya, a medical doctor and one of the founders of *Koma Amed*, was among those who grew up listening to the broadcasts. Born in Erzurum in 1968, Kaya's earliest memories of Radio Yerevan go back to 1974, when he was 6-7 years old. Growing up, he always had a strong attachment to his Kurdish roots, especially music, as "In Serhat region, Kurdish music is very rich, especially the dengbêj" (A. Kaya, personal communication, March 7, 2019).

Back then there was no electricity in the village and people used radios that worked on batteries. Radios were still rare as not everyone could afford them. Kaya recalled how they would gather at someone's house, who had a radio at home and would listen to the programs as a community. "People were giving up whatever they were doing and were listening to the radio" (A. Kaya, personal communication, March 7, 2019). Dengbêj Gani, who grew up in the Salyamaç Village of Erzurum, shared similar memories.

I was fifteen or sixteen then, and we used to wait for the radio program to start, my mother, now deceased, when she would go to milk the cows, and told me to wait beside the radio, and there was a singer, Fatma İsa¹³, and her song Maho, and my mother would say, let me know when Maho plays. And my mom, she would put me beside the radio, and I was waiting there for her *kilam* to play. She would say if Maho from Fatma İsa plays on, call me out, as she would be busy at that time milking the cows. She was such a fan of that music. (Abdulgani, personal communication, March 8, 2019)

¹³ It's necessary to note that until recently, singing in public was considered inappropriate for women and therefore, forbidden for women in the Kurdish communities of Turkey. However, female voices were frequently heard on Radio Yerevan. Perhaps, listening to women like Fatma İsa, Meryem Xan and Sûsîka Simo contributed to the re-emergence of female dengbêjs, like Dengbêj Gazin, for instance. I hope to study the connection of Radio Yerevan and the dengbêj tradition from this perspective in my future research.

For many, Radio Yerevan was the only source of Kurdish media as Kurdish language publications were banned and people persecuted for speaking it in public. Later Kaya and his community learnt about Radio Baghdad, which also broadcast in Kurdish, but according to Kaya, Radio Yerevan had numerous advantages, the most significant one being the technical quality. As Kaya's village was close to the Armenian-Turkish border, it allowed the sound to have decent quality. Another important factor was the language, particularly, the dialect. The dialect of Kurmanji spoken on Radio Yerevan was very close to the dialect of Serhat region. Kaya noted that many of the dengbêjs who performed on the radio were originally from the Serhat region as well. (A. Kaya, personal communication, March 7, 2019)

It's interesting that while many of the songs were originally from Serhat, Radio Yerevan transformed the nature of their original source, making it more accessible. Kaya explained that most Kurdish songs, especially the *kilams* performed by dengbêjs didn't have any instrumental accompaniment. They were sung a cappella. However, Radio Yerevan introduced a number of instruments to the old songs: *def*, *zurna*, *mey*, *duduk* and *cümbüş*¹⁴.

Dengbêj Gani, who sings about love, heroism and Kurdish lifestyle and struggle, noted that most Kurdish music beyond the Turkish borders had instrumental accompaniment. "[...] considering the other parts of Kurdistan, for example, Arif Cizrawî, Hasan Cizrawî, etc., they actually used music" (Abdulgani, personal communication, March 8, 2019). However, the musical arrangements of Radio Yerevan were innovative and had a big impact on Gani's career as a dengbêj.

¹⁴ *Def* - a large frame drum widely used in Kurdish and Persian music; *zurna*, *mey*, *duduk* - wind instruments used across the Caucasus and the Middle East, *cümbüş* - Turkish stringed instrument that has a relatively modern origin.

Although dengbej music was quite special and unique, in Yerevan Radio, its style impacted on us a lot, they used to air the perfect music. And that had a great influence on us, a great influence. I mean, we already had dengbêjs, that sense of dengbej music, we were not that insufficient but the field of music there and the style had a great impact on us, I mean, that of Yerevan Radio. (Abdulgani, personal communication, March 8, 2019)

The instrumental accompaniment made the songs more accessible for the listeners.

Ahmet Kaya admitted that it's hard to listen to dengbêjs' *kilams* due to their complex structure. I personally got fascinated the first time I heard one of the *kilams* being digitized from the radio archives, trying to figure out its structure and the breathing technique. However, Mr. Kaya made an important point, saying that I was listening to the piece from a person's point of view who has a background in music or is interested in its technical aspects, yet most villagers wouldn't look at it from that angle. But having musical instruments along with the vocals made it more entertaining and exciting to listen to.

An important implication can be drawn from here. Storytelling is at the core of the *dengbêj* tradition or *Dengbêji*. With the absence of comprehensive written sources on Kurdish history and language at the time, *Dengbêji* was a means to preserve the culture and educate the coming generations by telling real stories from different periods of time and geographies. Making *kilams* more enjoyable to listen to meant they would reach wider audiences, serving their initial purpose more successfully. In this regard, Mr. Kaya believes that Radyo Yerevan was quite effective.

You will not be able to imagine how effective it [Radio Yerevan] was. I mean it was very very effective in our community for changing our mind or culture and to love our culture. It was so effective. And I think when they were publishing, they didn't know that it was so effective and it was listened by so many people and so effective, because you know, for villagers it's not easy to reach them with the ideas, you cannot reach them with ideology, but this way, radio, culture, and

simple culture, roots, it's very easy. You can catch everyone. (A. Kaya, personal communication, March 7, 2019)

Several conclusions can be drawn from my conversations with Ahmet Kaya and dengbêj Gani. It becomes clear that RadioYerevan holds a significant place in the individual and collective memories of many Kurds. Beside being a bridge between them and their culture in times when it was banned in Turkey, Radio Yerevan's broadcasts re-shaped Kurdish music, influencing the compositions of the new generation of musicians and dengbêjs. The broadcasts also made Kurdish music more accessible to the audience, helping the dengbêj tradition serve its purpose even more successfully.

Limitations and Avenues for Future Research

Due to the COVID-19 outbreak, my travels to Van got cancelled and the initial plan to focus on Radio Yerevan's impact in Turkey failed in a way. However, reflecting on my conversations with Mrs. Cemîla, I realized that they have opened up lots of new avenues for research. Her stories revealed a lot about Armenian-Kurdish relations in Soviet Armenia and today. That is why, in the near future, I intend to explore more deeply the Kurdish memory in Armenia and Armenian-Kurdish relations in the Republic of Armenia.

Besides, while exploring the history of Radio Yerevan's Kurdish broadcasts, I came across many themes and stories. I didn't have a chance to explore all of them because of time constraints and lack of resources. I hope to have the opportunity to go deeper and research the lives and stories of those whose voices are now on the tapes kept in the Radio archives – the hosts, musicians, singers, and dengbêjs like Karapêtê Xaço, Aramê Tigran, Meryem Xan, Memoê Silo, Sûsîka Simo and many more, both Armenians and Kurds.

Conclusion

Radio Yerevan left a mark in the individual and collective memories of Kurds in Armenia, Turkey and beyond. What started as an initiative by the Soviet government, turned into a powerful medium for the preservation and further development of Kurdish music thanks to the immense efforts of the Celil family and their cooperation with local Kurds and Armenians.

Connecting thousands of Kurds to their language and cultural roots in times when Kurdish cultural expression was subject to persecution in Turkey, Radio Yerevan served as a bridge between a nation and its culture. Not only did it contribute to the preservation of Kurdish language and folklore, it also created cultural dialogues between Armenians and Kurds as well as brought about cultural and social changes among Kurdish communities living in Armenia and Turkey. By introducing new forms of music, Radio Yerevan made Kurdish music more accessible to the public, strengthening the oral tradition and inspiring new generations of musicians and dengbêjs.

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Photographs used in the capstone:

Images 1 and 3 are from the Celil family archive. Image 2 by Gayane Ghazaryan.