



SEPTEMBER 2023

Music as weapon: Heroic lyrical epics as tools in the PKK's struggle

Long-form narrative songs of the genre 'heroic lyrical epics' have helped preserve Kurdish history and culture. They also represent a repertoire of ideals, values and inspiration to resist injustice and exclusion. The PKK has tapped into this rich musical history from its early days and used heroic lyrical epics to spread the party's ideology, broadcast its struggle with Turkey, facilitate recruitment and create an archive to preserve the names of its foremost fighters. Moreover, the PKK has both popularized and professionalized heroic lyrical epics. By acting as a new patron for such music – in addition to the customary notables and village 'diwanxane' (meeting places) – the PKK helped make heroic lyrical epics more accessible to Kurdish publics. By creating its own modern music industry (e.g. artists, studios, re-introducing past folklore elements, publishing houses), the PKK also aligned heroic lyrical epics with the spirit of modern times and the tastes of today's youth. Professionalization especially took flight in northeastern Syria after 2011. Logically, the PKK's motivations are less socio-cultural in nature than that they are centered on maintaining public support in its fight against Turkey.

Introduction

Since the founding of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) by Abdullah Öcalan in 1978, the party has used Kurdish heroic lyrical epics – longform poems about valiant deeds that can be sung – to build popular support, facilitate recruitment and create a positive image of its violent actions. Building on Kurdish traditional cultural heritage, and using classic metrics and musical styles, the PKK also innovated on the genre and introduced new methods of creation that included novel forms of party-political control over production and dissemination as well. In order to silence PKK messaging, countries fighting the PKK have sought to repress Kurdish heroic lyrical epics.

This brief examines the origins of Kurdish lyrical epic traditions and explores how the PKK has adapted Kurdish lyrical traditions as a form of artistic expression for its own use.¹ It also explores the use of heroic lyrical epics in Rojava (the part of northeast Syria under the control of the People's Defense Units – YPG) and during the battle for Kobane. The brief concludes with a few reflections on the effectiveness of the use

¹ The author gratefully acknowledges the feedback of Kamal Chomani (independent researcher), Peter Haasbroek and Erwin van Veen (both Clingendael). The content of the brief remains his own responsibility.

of heroic lyrical epics in respect of the PKK and YPG's standing among Kurdish communities. In other words, how does the Kurdish public take to the party's use of its traditional heritage?²

Note that the brief includes hyperlinks to heroic lyrical epics, including of PKK-origin, to illustrate visuals, rhythms, musical style and narrative patterns. The brief does not, however, engage in content analysis nor does it take a view on the activities of the PKK in Turkey or those of the YPG in Syria.³ Instead, it examines the effects of the PKK's use in its violent struggle of a particular art form that is anchored in the Kurdish heritage of narrative songs.

The Kurds and the tradition of heroic lyrical epics

For generations, music and stories have played an important role in Kurdish culture. They have been passed down orally, preserving Kurdish words and expressions, and serving as a living repository of political, social and economic aspects of Kurdish history.⁴ As Kurdish novelist Muhammad Uzun put it, 'The songs are the richest and most accurate source of authentic Kurdish vocabulary.'⁵ The lyrical epic is considered the highest form of expression as it narrates events and people that reflect

the values and knowledge of a particular period. There are two types of lyrical epic, those about love and parting, and those about strength and courage, daring and honour. Examples of traditional epics are 'Kela Dimdimê' (Dimdim Castle) and 'Dewrêşê Ebdî' (The name of the hero).

In heroic lyrical epics, the audience is moved by stories of sacrifice and battles. They serve as a vehicle to share the injustice, persecution and exclusion that the Kurdish people have faced throughout history, inspiring revolutionary values in their listeners. Songs also helped to develop a shared intercommunal consciousness. Famous Kurdish singers not only perform songs from existing Kurdish folklore, but also use traditional musical forms and images to develop their own compositions, such as Şivan Perwer in his song 'Hawar' (Cry for help), which tells the story of the chemical bombing of Halabja/Helebçe (Iraq). For those who grew up in villages, the images evoked in the songs are imbued with complex meanings due to their direct links with folklore. But they also acquire new layers of meaning in modern political discourse and resonate with Kurdish youth in cities and the diaspora.⁶



Exhibit 1: 'Hawar' (Cry for help) on YouTube: <https://youtu.be/3Wcce4Y6YRA>

This is a heroic lyrical epic that commemorates the Halabja genocide (Iraq) at the hands of Saddam Hussein's forces.

Warning: *The video contains disturbing scenes.*

Historically, oral art was highly regarded in Kurdistan. Lyrical epics were performed in the castles and palaces of Kurdish princes, who prospered until the mid-nineteenth century and acted as patrons of the arts.⁷ Beyond princes,

- 2 For a broader and more in-depth study of the issue: Cengiz Gunes (2012) 'Explaining the PKK's Mobilization of the Kurds in Turkey: Hegemony, Myth and Violence', *Ethnopolitics*, 2(3) DOI:10.1080/17449057.
- 3 See, for example: Michael Gunter (2013) 'The Kurdish Spring', *Third World Quarterly*, 34:3: 441–457; Cengiz Gunes (2019) *The Kurds in a New Middle East: The Changing Geopolitics of a Regional Conflict*, London: Palgrave MacMillan; Rena Netjes and Erwin van Veen (2021) *Henchman, Rebel, Democrat, Terrorist: The YPG/PYD during the Syrian conflict*, The Hague: Clingendael. For the purpose of this brief, the PKK and YPG are considered ideologically and culturally linked. Both share the common Kurdish heritage of narrative singing.
- 4 Nidal Youssef, 'Al'aghani almalhamia... Tawthiq Bial'adhan Litarikh Al'akrad' [Epic songs: Documenting the history of the Kurds with melodies], *Syria*, 24 October 2013, <https://tinyurl.com/kdevdp4k> (accessed 3 July 2023).
- 5 'Alghina' Almalhamiu, Eînd Alkurd' [Epic Singing of the Kurds], *Ciyaye Kurmenc*, 16 December 2018, <https://ciyaye-kurmenc.com/estranin-filiklori/> (accessed 3 July 2023).

- 6 Philip Kreyenbroek and Ulrich Marzolph (2010) 'Oral Literature of Iranian Languages: Kurdish, Pashto, Baluchi, Ossetic; Persian, Tajik: History of Persian Literature A, Vol XVIII, in: *A history of Persian Literature*, Ehsan Yarshater, London: Bloomsbury.
- 7 Robins, 'In Oral Literature', 132.

traditional Kurdish music tended to be performed in rural houses under the protection of clan leaders and sheikhs in the presence of dignitaries and senior men,⁸ although neither its themes nor its attraction was confined to a specific social class.⁹ Most villages also had a ‘dîwanxane’ where performances could take place and where local men gathered in the evening, entertaining passing guests, exchanging news and stories and singing or listening to songs. Lyrical epics were also performed in urban areas, in coffee-houses and other public spaces. From its early beginnings, the PKK tapped into this longstanding musical tradition, not so much by copying existing heroic lyrical epics and adjusting their texts, but by using the same rhythms, musical style and narrative patterns. Comparing the classic lyrical epic ‘Dewrêşê Ebdî’ (unrelated to the PKK) with the PKK’s heroic lyrical epic ‘Destana PKK’ illustrates the point.



Exhibit 2: ‘Dewrêşê Ebdî’ on YouTube: <https://youtu.be/ciHiY4jT6eY>

This is a traditional Kurdish lyrical epic. Its first singer is Baqî Xidir, a folk artist from Deşta Sirûcê (Siruc plain, in Turkey). Abdullah Ocalan has spoken at length of the influence the legend ‘Dewrêşê Ebdî’ had on forming his personality in video interviews and books.



Exhibit 3: ‘Destana PKK’ (PKK manuals) on YouTube: <https://youtu.be/rd9oRKfsmDI>

This song tells the story of the PKK from its founding in traditional epic lyrical style.¹⁰

Banning Kurdish music in order to repress Kurdish identity

Kurds inhabit five geographical areas: Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria and Armenia. At various points in time, these countries adopted policies against the Kurdish language that ranged from seeking to eradicate it – such as in Iran from 1925–1941, Iraq from 1918–1970, Syria since the mid-1960s and Turkey since 1925¹¹ – to milder forms of (partial) prohibition. Of these five countries, Turkey went furthest by banning the Kurdish language and culture in both the public and private sphere (see Article 2932 of the Turkish constitution), including Kurdish music.¹² In Syria, Kurdish was banned in the public sphere, but not at home or on the street. Turkish governments also sought to Turkify Kurdish music, as they did with other minorities’ cultures, in seeking to ensure that the newly established Turkish republic had one identity, one culture and ‘one people, one government, one language’. For example, Turkish Radio and Television Corporation archives did not include songs from large sections Eastern Black Sea, Greek and Kurdish music.¹³ Yet, despite such efforts, Kurdish music has remained an important tool in mobilising the masses and protesting against injustice and tyranny. In fact, repressive measures directed against Kurdish culture have rather strengthened it because they turned folk music into a form of cultural resistance against state policies and socio-cultural imposition.¹⁴

The emergence of the PKK

The Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) realised early on that music could help to spread its revolutionary discourse. By adopting the musical

8 ‘Alghina’ Almalhamiu’ [Epic singing].

9 Rasim Özgür Dönmez (2012) ‘Constructing Kurdish Nationalist Identity through Lyrical Narratives in Popular Music’, *Alternatif Politika* 4 (3), 318.

10 For context, see: ‘The Epic of the PKK – Pioneering work of revolutionary art’, ANF, 4 December 2022, <https://anfenglishmobile.com/culture/the-epic-of-the-pkk-pioneering-work-of-revolutionary-art-64101> (accessed 3 July 2023).

11 Amir Hassanpour, Jaffer Sheyholislami and Tove Skutnabb-Kangas (2012) Introduction Kurdish: Linguicide, resistance and hope. *De Gruyter Mouton, International Journal of the Sociology of Language: 2*.

12 Dönmez, ‘Constructing’, 327.

13 B. Siyem Ezgi Saritaş, *Articulation of Kurdish identity through politicized music of koms* (February 2010), Middle East Technical University.19–20.

14 Lily Kong (1995) ‘Music and Cultural Politics: Ideology and Resistance in Singapore’, *Institute of British Geographers, Vol.20, No.4*. 448.

style, rhythms and narrative patterns of the traditional Kurdish lyrical epics, songs quickly became the party's favourite medium of communication. In part this was because levels of illiteracy were high when the PKK started operating and songs had the potential to spread rapidly throughout society.¹⁵ Via its songs, the party broadcast the importance and meaning of courage and sacrifice, which its fighters embraced. For example, the legend of Kawa the Blacksmith (Kawa Hesinkar) – also rendered in a traditional heroic lyrical epic – was often used as an analogy for how the party's fighters resisted injustice and fought tyranny. PKK fighters often prepare for battle by listening to revolutionary songs and dancing to their rhythms in the hour before they go into battle.



Exhibit 4: 'The legend of Kawa the blacksmith' on YouTube:
https://youtu.be/YP65xYT_vNw

This heroic lyrical epic narrates the emergence of a new beginning after resistance has triumphed over evil tyranny.

In order to mobilise the masses, the PKK did not just instrumentalise the form of traditional songs. In the 1980s and 1990s, it also revitalised the story of 'Newroz' (the arrival of spring on 21 March) to build a contemporary myth of resistance modelled on the PKK. With time, the Newroz festival became the most important day of Kurdish political activism in Turkey and attracted large crowds to celebrate and protest.¹⁶ In addition to songs celebrating courage and resistance, the PKK also crafted songs to document the party's history, struggles, battles and revolutionary ideology. Songs also document the lives of key personalities who sacrificed themselves for the party and the struggle for freedom, in prisons as well as in battles. Many songs follow the classic format of the heroic lyrical epic. PKK-affiliated committees

have systematically produced such songs, whose overarching aim has been to 'raise awareness among Kurdish communities and to mobilize it to support the PKK's political and military goals'.¹⁷ The party used the style and tradition of historical lyrical narratives about ancient Kurdish heroes and legends to showcase what it views as its fighters' more contemporary acts of heroism.



Exhibit 5: 'Koma Berxwedan' on YouTube:
<https://youtu.be/aD90vK-iUB4>

This is one of the first revolutionary PKK songs calling for Kurdish youngsters to join the party. It is rendered in the style of the heroic lyrical epic.

Songs provided at least part of the encouragement that pushed many young men to join the PKK in its armed resistance against Turkey, even though many were initially reluctant.¹⁸ Via its growing portfolio of contemporary lyrical epics, the PKK also broadcast two more subliminal messages. First, it reinforced the conception of the Kurds as a people in need of its own state. Second, it stressed the need to resist all forms of exploitation and oppression, including within Kurdish society against the ruling class of aghas and sheikhs.¹⁹ By establishing local musical groups in every Kurdish town, linking these directly to the party and separating them from the houses of the aghas, the PKK made sure that its messages were heard. Starting in the 1980s, the PKK also built a strong presence in Europe, especially in Germany, via a network of community organisations. In March 1985, the National Liberation Front of Kurdistan (ERNK) was established to carry out political advocacy and mobilise support abroad.²⁰ The ERNK organised many events in European cities such

15 Bahzad Hammo, 'PKK music: engineering a social revolution', *Open Democracy*, 30 June 2017, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/pkk-music-engineering-social-revolution/>.

16 Gunes, 'Explaining', 259.

17 Hammo, 'PKK music'.

18 Hammo, 'PKK music'.

19 Alev Kuruoğlu and Wendelmoet Hamelink (2017) 'Sounds of resistance: Performing the political in the Kurdish music scene' in *The Politics of Culture in Turkey, Greece and Cyprus*, Oxfordshire: Routledge, 103–121.

20 Gunes, 'Explaining', 258.

as rallies, demonstrations, meetings, protests, hunger strikes, music festivals, cultural activities, Newroz celebrations and commemoration events. Such activities drew large crowds and further developed the PKK's support base.²¹

Moving from radio to TV, the first Kurdish TV channel (Med TV) started broadcasting from Belgium in May 1994 due to the efforts of PKK cadres and members of the band, Berxwedan, who had moved to Europe to work. Med TV became a platform for the PKK and its ideology, while its songs and images of its fighters reached most Kurdish homes. In 2017, there were more than five TV channels and over 20 radio stations associated with the PKK, including Ronahi TV, Sterk TV, Cira TV, MMC Music Channel and Gerilla TV. They all broadcast the same speeches, political messages and revolutionary songs.²² In brief, the PKK used, revived and repurposed the Kurdish heroic lyrical narrative heritage to advance its own agenda, recruit support, prepare the Kurdish masses for revolution and resist the repressive policies of countries with Kurdish minorities. At the same time, it also used heroic lyrical epics to undermine traditional forms of Kurdish authority by creating its own production and broadcasting avenues, which broke the quasi-monopoly of the aghas and sheikhs.

Kurdish heroic lyrical epics in Rojava

Early on during the Syrian civil war, the Kurdish People's Defense Units (YPG) established an autonomous area of their own that came to include much of northeast Syria. Although a large part of the area is Arabic, the YPG and Democratic Union Party (PYD) have built their own educational system, mainstreamed their own language and created their own cultural organisations in the areas they dominate. These institutions have been generally well received by Kurdish inhabitants, but much

less so by other population groups.²³ Today, for example, it is possible for an illiterate elderly Kurdish woman to attend a theatrical or musical show wearing her Kurdish folkloric dress because the show will be in her mother tongue.²⁴ Such cultural transformations in Rojava must be viewed in a context of decades of injustice, tyranny and policies banning Kurdish culture under both Assad regimes. The Kurdish region in northeastern Syria was economically marginalised and remained poor, despite the area's oil wealth.

The 'Hunergeha Welat' (Country Art) foundation in Rojava, created by the YPG, has produced dozens of Kurdish songs in the heroic lyrical tradition to further the party's agenda. Its use of 'pure' Kurdish words and production of high-quality video clips under professional direction ensures that within hours of release, each new song generates a large number of views, including among younger generations. On 23 April 2023, Hunergeha Welat released a new song, 'li herî jorê' (At the top).²⁵ It narrates the familiar story of three PKK fighters who died during a guerrilla operation against Turkey, but it does so in a modern, slick format that is substantially more sophisticated than the party's productions of the 1980s and 1990s. For example, it creatively adds traditional Kurdish folkloric clothes and decorative items, which had gone out of vogue due to the spread of Western styles and repressive anti-Kurdish policies. Since this song is typical of much of the foundation's output, it gives a good idea of the type and nature of Kurdish songs in Rojava.

23 Nuadim Takushar, 'Thawrat Althaqafat Walfani Tazdahir fi Ruj Afa' [The Culture and Art Revolution is Flourishing in Rojava], ANF News, 10 September 2022, <https://anfarabic.com/%D8%AB%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%A9-%D9%88%D9%85%D8%AC%D8%AA%D9%85%D8%B9/thwrt-althqaft-walfn-tzdhr-fy-rwj-afa-82786> (accessed 3 July 2023); also Salwa Al-Ahmad (2023) *Education – an Arena of Political Contestation: The Case of Qamishli City in North-Eastern Syria*, Florence: European University Institute.

24 Takushar, 'Thawrat Althaqafat'.

25 'New video clip from Hunergeha Welat released in 6 languages', *MedyaNews*, 23 December 2021.

21 Gunes, 'Explaining', 259.

22 Saritaş, 'Articulation', 19–20.



Exhibit 6: 'At the top' on YouTube: <https://youtu.be/.VIHuQrM89Zs>

This is a story of three PKK fighters killed in action, produced by Hunergeha Welat – the Country Art foundation linked to the YPG.

The battle for Kobane: United lyrical resistance

In the symbolic sense, the battle of Kobani against Islamic State was a struggle for existence for the entire Kurdish people.²⁶ Ultimately, YPG, PKK and KRG Peshmerga fighters temporarily formed a united front, together with Free Syrian Army forces and US supplies, to prevent the town from falling into the hands of Islamic State.²⁷ An overlooked fact is how songs offered crucial support and contributed to the defence of the city. They were produced by the YPG and PKK, mostly through their Art and Music Foundation, which is able to produce songs within hours. The PKK took the view that the best way for the name of Kobane to be heard in all the villages, towns and cities of Kurdish-inhabited areas, and even in European capitals, was through the form of the heroic lyrical epic. This was unique in that Kurdish singers and artists from different Kurdish-inhabited areas collaborated in the production of patriotic songs that were broadcast simultaneously in Erbil, Qamishli, Sulaymaniyah and other places. It was also the first time since the establishment of the PKK that the courage and sacrifices of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Peshmerga and the YPG

26 Imad Talati, 'Salih Buzan: Almaeareik dd Al'iirhab Waldawlat Altrkyt Kashafat Haqiqat bed min Almthqqfyn Alkurd' [Salih Bozan: The Battles Against Terrorism and the Turkish State Revealed the Truth About Some Kurdish Intellectuals], ANF News, 4 March 2019.

27 Omer Berberoglu, 'Peshmerga, Syrian rebels battle Islamic State in besieged Kobani', Reuters, 3 November 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-idUSKBN0IK15M20141103>.

were celebrated in one song.²⁸ In other words, the battle for Kobane temporarily united different Kurdish artists and audiences across borders, drawing on their shared heritage of singing and oral narration in times of war and resistance.



Exhibit 7: 'Ez Kobanê me' (I am Kobanê) on YouTube: <https://youtu.be/S6gGeMRFoYI>

This is a story of resistance in the city of Kobani against Islamic State rendered in the style of the heroic lyrical epic.

Conclusion

The traditions of Kurdish oral narrative singing have helped preserve Kurdish history throughout recent history, in part through heroic lyrical epics that celebrate resistance, courage and valour. PKK revolutionary songs have used this type of song to promote the PKK's agenda and recruit young people to its ranks. But the PKK also extended access to traditional Kurdish songs beyond their traditional venues in the palaces and castles of the aghas and sheikhs, in a sense democratising them, even though it largely sought to exploit the tradition for its own purposes. Moreover, the PKK developed the genre by combining folklore with professional production and artistic styles that are popular with contemporary Kurdish youth. The culture and art institutions created in northeastern Syria under the Autonomous Administration further revived the Kurd's lyrical heritage, with the battle for Kobane providing a temporary unifying moment among artists and across audiences. In this manner, the YPG and PKK have strengthened the sense of Kurdishness through songs, despite the existence of disagreements among Kurdish elites and population groups about the PKK's ideology and its role in Syria.

28 See, for example: <https://youtu.be/cQJBgkw80BU> (accessed 3 July 2023).

About the Clingendael Institute

Clingendael – the Netherlands Institute of International Relations – is a leading think tank and academy on international affairs. Through our analyses, training and public debate we aim to inspire and equip governments, businesses, and civil society in order to contribute to a secure, sustainable and just world.

www.clingendael.org/cru
cru@clingendael.org
+31 70 324 53 84

 @clingendaelorg
 The Clingendael Institute
 The Clingendael Institute
 clingendael_institute
 Clingendael Institute
 Newsletter

About the author

Moustafa Mohammad is a Kurdish writer and analyst. His interests concern political Islam, the modern history of Syria and minorities. He studied Middle Eastern Studies at Leiden University.