

'It would disappear within a moment': Performing Tradition

Introduction

In everything [the dengbêjs] told was rhythm. The songs and epics were all on rhyme and music. And in addition to the rhythm in the words, they added a bodily rhythm. (...) The rhythm made it easier to remember the decorated words and the music that was connected to it. It was as if they knew that if they would not repeat their knowledge in a loud voice, it would disappear in a moment.

MUHSIN KIZILKAYAL, 2000: 23, *Translation from Turkish by Author*

Diyarbakır (Amed), October 2008.² I awoke at 7.30 in the house of a friend. She lives in a quarter of the city that is inhabited by migrants who recently arrived from the villages. I heard the Kurdish voices of women and children outside. Many children were playing, even that early in the morning. Women talked with each other through open windows. The houses were old, a grayish brown, three or four stores high, with little stairs outside climbing up each of them. On each floor there lived a family, two or three small rooms full of people. I left the house later in the morning, as I did on most days when I was there and took the minibus to Dağkapı. This is one of the large gates in the old city wall, built in antiquity and restored by Constantine in 349 CE. The beautiful city walls and the old restored houses and mosques give Diyarbakır the atmosphere of a distant past. From there I walked in the direction of the old crowded bazaar. The sun was burning hot, giving the streets and people a clear-cut sharpness. Small children followed me and tried to sell me packages of tissues or chewing gum. In front of the big mosque, built in the eleventh century by a Seljuk Sultan, old men sat on benches. Many of them wore small knitted caps with blue or red patterns.

I passed the mosque, the bazaar, turned right and walked until I saw the familiar brown sign saying 'Dengbêj House', in Kurdish, Turkish and English. To the left was the small shop of a music seller who played dengbêj music as if

1 Muhsin Kızılkaya is a Kurdish journalist and writer currently living in Istanbul. He wrote a book about the dengbêj art, inspired by his brother who was a dengbêj.

2 This section is based on my field notes and video recordings.

preparing the passersby for their visit to the House. When I approached the small entrance to the Dengbêj House I heard the voice of dengbêj Qadîr. His voice sounded old but was still amazingly loud. I could not stop being amazed by the volume, even after all that time. One man singing a cappella can be heard clearly from a distance of more than a hundred yards. I entered the courtyard of the old building with its typical grey basalt stones. The restoration of this old Armenian building took place the previous year and the opening of the Dengbêj House was in May 2007. Twenty to thirty people were sitting on wooden chairs, about ten of them dengbêjs. Most of them were over fifty years old, and all of them were men. They greeted me warmly and invited me to take a seat. Dengbêj Qadîr continued, his songs never ended, his voice never seemed to break down. In between the verses most people joined in humming a small tune, marking the end of the verse. When he finished the kilam another dengbêj continued, and so on. While the dengbêjs sang, people sitting nearby remained silent. I put my small camera on the table, only pointing it in the right direction when another dengbêj began to sing. They allowed me to film because they knew me and because I had obtained permission. Without permission it was forbidden to make recordings. In this way, the organization of the House aimed to protect the dengbêjs from possible copyright abuses.

At the first sounds of the call for prayer, emanating from the big mosque just next to the House, the dengbêj stopped in the middle of his kilam. Most men stood up to attend the prayers. It was a natural break in the performance, a small movement in a day otherwise passed by in a chair. Often new visitors would enter right before or after the prayers. These were dengbêjs or audience members who had a break from work, who had something to do in the city center and quickly dropped by, dengbêjs coming from the villages around Diyarbakır (Amed), or sometimes from other towns and cities. They joined in the concert of voices, in the artistic expression of language, in the colorful play of imagination and recollection.

Dengbêjs do not need much for their performance, and most of what they need is already present in their body: their voice, memory, sense of rhythm, imagination, and social skills. Apart from this they might need a glass of tea with a sugar cube, so that they can take the sugar between their teeth and slowly sip the tea through it. And of course, they need an attentive public, people sitting around them and watching, listening, encouraging their dengbêj by joining in the wordless chorus, singing *ahiaaaaaaa*. Often performing alone in the village setting as it existed until about 1980, and without any other instruments than what they carried in their own bodies and minds, they were expected to entertain a large public for many long hours.