



GIS

DENGBÊJ – A KURDISH RESISTANCE YELL

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At a large outdoor patio, a group sitting in the corner smokes cigarettes while they drink tea and talk. A voice echoes. There is a room full of men: they are Kurdish singers and their audience. A gentleman with white hair and a mustache, wearing a Kurdish scarf around his neck resonates the verses of his song. One hand muffles the sound in one of his ears, while the other holds the tasbih¹. Without the accompaniment of instruments, using only his voice, he sings in Kurdish. At each verse, a pause, a cough, a throat clear... The end of his song, which ends with a long “eee eyh!”, is followed by the voice of another singer. And so, one after another, four men sing the Kurdish legends to an audience composed mainly of men. These performances are daily, start at 13:00 and end at sunset.

This is the Dengbêj Evi (Dengbêj House), in the old district of Sur, in Diyarbakir, the main city of Turkish Kurdistan², which is located in the north of Turkey and is today considered the main center of *dengbêj*. What brought me to this place were the words of Ciwan, a Kurdish-Syrian refugee: “If you want to know about a people, you must to listen their music”. Without speaking the language and with the camera in hand, I wandered the city of Diyarbakir in search of the so-called “mountain nightingales”.

¹ Tasbih, also known as Masbaha, is an object similar to the rosary, with beads (which can be 33 or 99 and representing the 99 names of God) used by Muslims in their prayers.

² Kurdistan is a region in the Middle East that was divided between Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey after World War I. The Kurds are not Turkish, Arab or Persian, they form their own ethnicity, whose origins are uncertain (Cf. Pessuto 2017).

Dengbêj means singer in Kurdish, it is a term composed of the words *deng* (voice) and *bêj* (present tense of the verb to say) (Scalbert-Yücel 2009, 4). These singers are professional poets, who sing tales, legends and stories of their people. Their songs have no instrumental accompaniment, they use only their own voice, thus transmitting the traditions. The term is used to define both these singers and the musical genre. *Dengbêj* is one of the biggest cultural manifestations of the Kurdish people, responsible for transmitting the Kurdish language and stories.

The idea of a Kurdish nation is directly linked to the issue of the Kurdish language. Sovereign governments, knowing the importance of the Kurd as a mobilizer of identities, try to suppress its use. The assimilation process perpetrated by the “host nations” (native category) – Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey – already begins with the language, since by undermining the culture of a people, their collective memory is weakened. The Kurdish language is responsible for maintaining the cohesion and preserving the national identity of 25 million Kurds.

Since the practice of *dengbêj* is linked to the use of the Kurdish language, it has suffered several crises³ since the creation of the Turkish state. Since the 1960s, the period of Turkey’s first military coup (a time marked by strong nationalism), there have often been tensions between *dengbêjs* and the authorities. In 1980, after the military coup in Turkey, the *dengbêjs* were silenced. The Kurdish Language was officially banned, there was imprisonment and even torture, which spared neither singers nor listeners. Singers and people who had recordings at home were arrested, at a time when speaking Kurdish in the streets generated even arrests.

As of the end of the 1990s, *dengbêj* was institutionalized and in 2007, in the city of Diyarbakır, was created the *Dengbêj Evi*, (*Dengbêj House*) a place that brings together these singers, who can only sing love songs and never address political themes in their songs.

In this way, *dengbêj* is the main means of transmitting the Kurdish language and culture. And this photographic series, shot in the city of Diyarbakır, portrays these singers and the surroundings of *Dengbêj Evi*.

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³ The Kurdish music in Turkey has gone through seven different periods, ranging from total prohibition to the institutionalization of *dengbêj* (Cf. Reigle 2013).

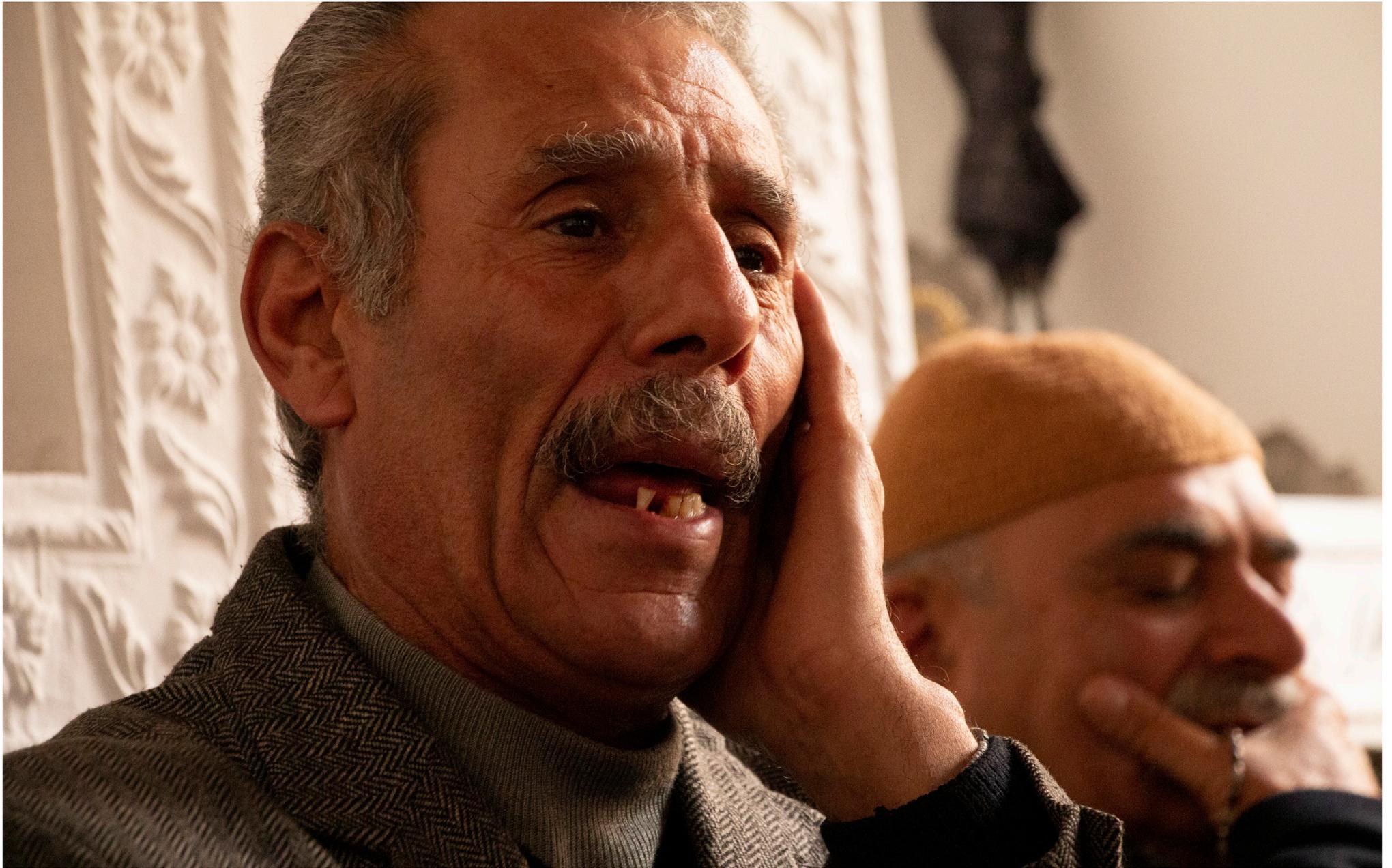


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ABSTRACT

This photo essay was accomplished in the Diyarbakir city, in the Turkish Kurdistan, and portrays the Dengbêj, the principal cultural practice of the Kurdish people, which aims to transmit their language, myths and histories through generations. In a country where the idiom is forbidden even at schools, the Dengbêj practice, even institutionalized (since 2007, when was founded the Dengbêj House), is an act of resistance of the Kurdish people, because through these songs the Kurdish language lives and resists.

KEYWORDS:

Dengbêj; Kurdish
song; Diyarbakir;
Kurdistan.

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