

LORANE PRÉVOST

ORCID: 0000-0002-5908-0856  
King's College of London

## *Identity Representations: How Did the 1979 Iranian Revolution Affect Kurdish Folk Music?*

**ABSTRACT:** The following paper constitutes a part of my master thesis on the consequences of the 1979 Iranian Revolution on Kurdish folk music. The strong identity claimed by the Islamic Republic of Iran and particularly by Ruhollah Khomeini led to an obscuration of the Iranian cultural plurality, dominated by the Persian culture. Iranian music is often understood as Persian music while regional genres were confined to small areas. The domination of folk and regional identities by institutional, more-erudite identities is not limited to Iran but can be observed worldwide; however, the restricted access to music and research in the years following the Iranian Revolution enhanced this tendency in the country. In other words, vernacular genres including Kurdish folk music were denied a global presence and are still overshadowed by the dominance of classical music. Academic works made shortly after the revolution by important figures such as Jean During highlights a confusion between what was intended as folk music by the Kurdish population and what was perceived as such by foreign researchers. For this reason, the distinction between vernacular and classical music is still enforced nowadays, leading to an increasing gap between Persian culture and that of Iranian minorities. Furthermore, with Kurdish folk music being a regional genre and as political conflicts arouse between Iranian Kurds the Islamic Republic of Iran after 1979, Kurdish music is often perceived through a political lens only, denying the variety of reasons a genre may become popular and reducing music to a mean towards an objective. Through the perception of Kurdish folk music, this paper interrogates how political conflicts and cultural hegemony in music affects the representation of vernacular identities and seeks to explore how this participates in the discrimination of minorities.

**KEYWORDS:** Kurdish music, Iranian Revolution, cultural identity, Kurdistan, Iran, folk music

### **Iran in 1979: Intertwined Culture and Politics**

In musicology, academics have looked at the intersection of politics, religion and culture through musical manifestations. It provides any researcher studying music within power issues with a frame, particularly in Iran (DeBano, 2005) where the diversity of languages, cultures and populations highlights how some cultures are overshadowed by other dominant traditions. Because the Kurdish people constitute ten percent of the Iranian population, their culture was amongst the first affected by the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979. By analysing the con-

sequences of the 1979 Revolution in Iran on Kurdish folk music, my goal is to understand what the folk music meant for the population in the matter of identity and how the sounding changes that happened contributed to the assertion of their identity. On a broader scale, I would like to theorise the perception of the relationship between folk music and politics, especially within an ethnic group that struggles to assert their sense of identity, and how this topic can be used to understand the cultural dynamics in times of conflict. To undertake my research, I focused on the decade following the Revolution as its consequences were still lingering and as Ayatollah Khomeini, leader of the Revolution, was at the head of the country. As well as studying recordings and collections of folk songs from before and after 1979, I gathered secondary sources, including texts from sociologists and anthropologists working on the question of identity, as well as from historians focusing on the politics of Kurdistan. Finally, I conducted interviews with historians and musicians from, or with knowledge of, Iranian Kurdistan, trying to picture the situation for musicians at the time of the revolution and to understand more about the regional music. Although most of the people I interviewed may not represent the general population, as most of them live outside of Iran,<sup>1</sup> our conversations allowed me to understand how life was for musicians and how folk music was performed and transmitted.

The variety of ethnicities existing in Iran, despite participating in the cultural constitution of the country, was dismissed by the government after the Revolution and since then the minorities' voices have widely been ignored (Cabi, 2020). Although many Kurds had long been trying to reclaim their independence by the time the Islamic Revolution started, the revolution provided more tools to Iranian Kurds to enhance their rebellion, which had its beginning around April 1979. Indeed, following the new government's direction, aimed at asserting the Shia branch as the official Muslim one, the Kurdish Muslim population, mostly constituted of Sunni Muslims, wanted to establish their identity alongside the national one. However, as much as the leaders of this rebellion wanted political independence, it is claimed that they were not originally seeking national independence: according to Marouf Cabi (2020), the autonomy reclaimed by Kurdish political parties was a direct outcome of the exclusion of Iranian minorities, as some territories came to be seen as 'lost' to the hands of the Iranian government.

## Why Representation Matters

This exclusion was reflected in music. Regional music is subject to many influences, such as the primary purpose of its performance, the classical music around the region, and the language. In the case of Kurd music, a cor-

---

<sup>1</sup>In Iran, musicians who make a living of their art receive an allowance from the government. Musicians who do not want to receive any allowance usually have a main job besides their musical career or come from a privileged background. Moreover, folk music that is not performed by famous musicians is described as "anonymous": Kendal, "Kurdish Music and Dance", 20. For this reason, musicians living and having a musical career outside of Iran hold a different status as non-professional musicians who perform folk music.

relation can be observed between vernacular music and the different dialects, both through the lyrics and the musical rhythms and melodies used (Ali Merati, 2015, pp. 27–30). For instance, the Gurani language, spoken by a large portion of Iranian Kurds, has traced its way through folk music and is mostly sustained by the transmission of music and poetry (Lee, 2003). Regarding Kurdish music, it is therefore important to analyse it within the Iranian environment and to consider social changes of the time: Dieter Christensen explains that “cultural identity is not always a given for a person, it is often contextually determined and may change with the context, especially in situations of conflict” (Christensen D., 2007, p. 1). Such a definition becomes clear when compared with the notion of musical identity developed by Nikki S. Rickard and Tanchyuan Chin (2017): Rickard and Chin contrasted a musical identity given to a group by analysing it from an individual point of view. According to the authors, a musical identity is not only determined by a social context but is also self-given by a person and thereby, fluctuates.

Although music identity as defined above is mostly personal, David J. Hargreaves, Raymond Macdonald and Dorothy Miell (2017) counterbalance this idea by explaining that identity relies on performance. In this sense, music becomes a way to construct identity and performers and listeners decide of their own cultural identity rather than being subjected to it. Cultural identity, as described by Christensen, therefore appears as both a statement and something liminal, untouchable. In the context of Kurdish music, it means that Kurdish identity both relies on memory of the population growing up and what the musicians choose to perform after 1979. The study of music is therefore interesting from the point of view of understanding the concept of cultural identity and how it relates to politics.

Because the 1979 Revolution brought important changes in Iran, for the general population and especially for minorities, it is interesting to observe how folk music circulated, as well as its possible modifications due to the political influences of the time.

As mentioned earlier, the new regime of Khomeini wished to establish national unity. The Iraq-Iran war that started the year after reinforced this, as Khomeini aimed to sustain an impression of Iranian identity in the face of its enemy, disregarding the diversity existing in the country (Ehsani, 2017, pp. 6–9). Regional music, in this context, became a political challenge for the government as its perpetuation sustained ideas disapproved by the government. Although the government wished to display Persian culture, regional expressions could only be repressed to a certain extent. Despite the continuous existence of vernacular music, the lack of representation led to a misconception of Iranian music, considering cultural minorities as marginal, or not including them at all. The political tensions existing between Iranian Kurdish parties and the Iranian government were therefore enhanced by the Islamic repression, leading to folk music sometimes being perceived as a rebellious claim, ignoring the fact that folk music does not inherently present a purpose. In this essay, I wish to demonstrate how the nationalism promoted by the government closely influenced the question of the identity of minorities, by examining the consequences of the revolution for Kurdish folk music, highlighting through folk music the dynamics between national and regional identities.

## I. What Makes a Musical Identity?

### Music and the Sharia

For the common understanding, the Sharia law is antagonistic towards any type of music. Amnon Shiloah, who studied music in relation with Islam, puts forward another point of view. According to the late musicologist, the status of music in Islam is ambiguous because the rise of the Islamic era has brought many changes and novelties to music, yet the discipline itself is restricted to certain conditions and contexts (Shiloah, 2001, pp. 59). In Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini's discourse, that "music is like a drug" and that the population "must eliminate music because it means betraying [their] country and [their] youth" (Youssefzadeh, 2000, p. 38), suggests that music diverts one from devotion to duty, implying that if the music serves this devotion, it might be allowed. Music is indeed interpreted by many Shia adherents as having distracting effects on the mind via its rhythm and harmonies. According to Shiloah (2001, p. 59), this is precisely how it differs from vernacular genres, which, being based on poetry, serves more as a support for storytelling than as entertainment. The difficulty in analysing vernacular music through this lens comes from the fact that scholarly collections would often focus on one aspect of the piece, such as its narrative, religious or melodic character, a bias affecting the plural aspect or purpose of a song. For instance, while, as interviewee B., a traditional *tombak* player from Iranian Kurdistan (interviewee B., 2020) explained, songs performed in small communities were little affected, but their representation nonetheless changed after 1979. The Shi'ite and Persian identity advanced by Khomeini endangered the representation of Kurdish folk music by drawing the focus to the religious divisions of Kurds and the music's presence within Islam. Moreover, because of this strain put on music in the Iranian society, one tends to analyse Kurdish folk music in relation to religion, yet their status may differ. The perception of folk music to an external eye (which I will discuss in the next section) is therefore biased because of the way we commonly tend to observe music in relation to religion as well as academic inclinations towards the definition the genre itself.

### What is Folk Music? A Definitional Attempt

Generally speaking, folk music encompasses regional music as well as music based on traditional tunes, that, unlike classical music, are not subject to institutional authority. In Iran, according to During, music found in Iranian Kurdistan is classified as folk music as it uses old Kurdish poetry and elements from Iranian classical music without attempting to modernise the genre or to maintain a certain cultural status (During, Mirabdolbahi and Safvat, 1991). Moreover, folk music is a general category which has to be narrowed in order to fully understand how its existence or representation is directly related to Kurdish identity. Likewise, inter-

viewee B. (2020) explained that two sub-genres exist within folk music, what he calls serious folk music and light (or popular) folk music. The latter encompasses mostly music played during weddings or gatherings, while the serious folk music is more exported across and outside the country by professional musicians. 'Serious' Kurdish folk music is mostly vocal as it is based on poetry with topics on nature, love and melancholic themes (Kendal, 1979, p. 24). Given the long history of Kurdish people with independence struggle and repression, many songs also approach war, epic stories and revolution. On the contrary, according to Kendal, popular songs that are made to be danced to usually have an upbeat character. They have the facility to be played in a great variety of rhythms, and, given the presence of the *maqām*, offer versatility and space for improvisation (Ali Merati, 2015).

The perception of folk music by researchers, especially Western researchers, differs from its perception by the population. As an example, according to Jean During (1991: Prologue) the music performed by dervishes in Kurdistan is closely related to the folk music of the region. Dervishes (in Islam, Sufis who dedicate their lives to religious values while accepting material poverty) constitute an important part of musical and ritualistic performances in Iranian Kurdistan, where they are attached to a mystical religious practice with music and poetry aiding the collective practice of religion. Given the status of folk music and the importance of dervishes amongst religious populations, I was surprised to find that folk and dervish music were associated by Jean During. I therefore asked the interviewees their opinion on this association. Interviewee B. explained that serious folk music shares some musical similarities with music played by the dervishes, hence the common error of mistaking one for another:

I think it is different. [...] If we talk about serious folk music, it is closer to dervishes' music. They cross paths. [...] In other folk musics they're using an instrument called *hivan*, which is the same as the Turkish *saz*, they use the clarinet, they use the *sornā* that my father plays. Dervishes don't play that. In the *khamgah* music they only have *tembûr*, *daf* and vocals, chanting. One thing that also makes the biggest influence is the poetry. Poetry used in the common folk music is different from the poetry used in the serious folk music and the music played in the *khamgah*. (Personal Communication, 2020).

The *khamgah* refers to a ceremony performed by dervishes in which ritualistic music is played. Interviewee A. (2020), a traditional musician from Iranian Kurdistan whose father is a *tembûr* (instrument considered sacred in Kurdistan) player, added that referring to the dervishes' music as Kurdish folk music would be objectionable:

if you tell them that their music is Kurdish folk music, they would be offended. [...] They think it is very special music, it is only played for rituals and preserved by communities for generations.

According to interviewee A.'s explanation, this confusion often happened when music of Iranian Kurdistan was studied by researchers without specialist knowledge of the culture. We can assume that this confusion relates to the fact researchers would only focus on the musical aspect without considering the population in its entirety and the various meanings of performances, which, according to Waterman (1990), were not considered until the late twentieth century, the time

when much renowned research on Kurdish music was produced. Interviewee A. (2020) moreover added that *maqāmat* have a strong narrative character and had to be adapted depending on the context, meaning that some *maqāmat* are connected to ritual settings and cannot be played outside of it. In addition, Ali Akbar Moradi (2020) explains that dervish and folk music have influenced each other, although he does not perceive them as similar genres.

### The Myth of Authenticity

Another important point is that the conception of folk music is often associated with vernacular identities, whether it is a self-given identity or one given by external observers. While Kurds living in Iran are Iranian per definition, they are often perceived through their Kurdish identity. Iranian Kurdish music performances, as will be explored later in this essay, do not present a clear separation between musical elements from Iranian music and Kurdish musical elements; yet these performances are perceived as ‘Kurdish folk music’ as opposed to ‘Iranian music’. According to William G. Roy (2002, p. 459), “folk music is always the culture of some ‘other’”, explaining by this statement that the notion of folk music transcribes the appropriation of music by a dominant group, thereby enforcing social boundaries between different groups. Although many musicians describe their music or the traditions they grew up in as folk, Roy’s theory highlights the issues encountered when studying folk music: because of its close relation to identity, it is a somewhat superficial approach to study the genre solely through a sonic scope as it would only give indications, at best, of the geographical area of the music, and is often studied through its differences from more dominant genres such as classical music. Martin Stokes (1997 and 2004) supports this idea as he describes the appropriation and fetishisation of local sound by external populations, meaning that people who have no connection to the folk identity may find themselves attracted by the music as it sounds ‘traditional’. Such a definition is often found in dominant classes, as they seek an ‘authentic’ sound by exploring vernacular music from other populations without understanding the full aspect of it. The notion of identity can therefore be as important in the approach to vernacular music as much as it can be harmful: the notion of authenticity, that can only translate a given performance at a given time, is often magnified and becomes the main purpose of a research without encompassing the fluctuation of identity described by Christensen D. (2007). As well as the sound itself, it is therefore crucial to consider the social aspect of performances and the status of musicians to understand the genre.

### Music Beyond the Sound

Ultimately, the music analysis carried out by Shiloah (2001), coupled with reflections on the authenticity of local sound, illustrates the problem of studying music as a sonic object solely, instead of considering that music is in it-



self a ‘patterned context’ (Watterman, 1990, as cited in Stokes, 1997). Moreover, During’s confusion highlights the difficulties encountered by academics in Iran at the time of the Revolution. Although folk music studies became prominent between the 1950s-1970s, the Iranian Revolution abruptly marked a change in musicology as researchers did not have access to funding, and recordings which existed prior to the Revolution became inaccessible to researchers. The lack of available resources has therefore led researchers like During to build their works on what they assume to be regional music, without differentiating the contexts and circumstances in which certain kinds of music have existed. Although music played by dervishes is not considered folk music, it is interesting to understand in what contexts the two genres exist. This provides insights about the musicians themselves, about the way populations build their identity and about the purpose of music: the fact that the regime of Iran is religious often leads to the assumption that the population is exclusively religious, hence the confusion in taking religious music for folk music. While both genres can overlap, as interviewee C. (2020), a traditional Iranian musician and specialist in Iranian music theory, explains: “when you come to religious minorities in Iran, some of them are also ethnic minorities, like Armenian. So the religious music they have is also ethnic music”. However, folk music does not solely exist for the construction of identity and its purpose can equally be entertainment. Yet it is true that folk music, given its vernacular character, is commonly considered as representative of a population, a region or a political opinion, regardless of its performers’ opinions. The status of folk music in Iran after 1979 therefore reflects governmental ideologies (just as in any other political system; vernacular music, usually being performed by minorities rather than an elite, says much about the position and rights of dominated groups). The musical dynamics between vernacular and dominant populations relates to the difficulties encountered by minorities in times of conflicts but also illustrates the difficulties of trying to enforce one sonic definition of folk music. It is understood that the status of folk music in relation to Islam is ambiguous, which might explain why religious music is sometimes mistaken for folk music. However, a more theoretical view of folk music and identity shows the difficulty in approaching the topic, while the cultural unification in Iran at the time reveals how the culture of the Kurdish population was obscured by the display of Persian culture.

## II. Music and Popular Meaning

### Music Within the Population

In terms of music accessibility, a dichotomy was observed between the cultural unity espoused by the government and often assumed by foreigners and the memories of people living through the post-revolution era. An expansion in popularity of Kurdish folk music (which I will come back to later) as well as an access to tapes sold through black markets (personal communication, 2020)

highlight a wish to keep accessing music. Interviewee A. (2020) also explained that, as a child growing up around 1984, his father made him a small *tembûr* so he could participate in informal folk music sessions and that the government did not strictly follow these restrictions itself. As interviewee A. explained, although musicians who were famous before the revolution were now targeted by the government and many of them fled the country, the government was prepared to use musical performances when it served its purposes—such as asking traditional musicians to play revolutionary songs. Moreover, the changes on the musician scene left room for new musicians to emerge, especially for those who had been active during the 1979 revolution.

### Songs and Variations: A Traditional Sounding

Amongst these emerging musicians were The Kamkars, a band composed of seven siblings from Iranian Kurdistan. Although they largely performed Kurdish folk songs, interviewee C. (2020) explained that these had been adapted in a way that sounded similar to Iranian classical music. The song *Lay Lay*, existing in the folk repertoire under different forms, illustrates this. Amongst the different recorded versions, the singer Muhammad Mamlê, an Iranian Kurdish folk singer, released two long versions in 1950 and in 1979 under the title *Laye Laye*. The intervals follow the pattern described by Ayako Tatsumura (1980): according to the researcher, songs found in Kurdish villages usually consist of a melodic line moving from the tonic to a minor or major third, repeated several times before moving to the fourth. The song *Laye Laye* recorded in 1979 follows this pattern, with Mamlê's voice containing a typical sound of Kurdish folk music, both "bright" and "melancholic" (Tatsumura, 1980, pp. 86–9). Much later, in 2007, the vocalist Bijen Kamkar released a version of this song, with the addition of much orchestral instrumentation reminiscent of Iranian classical music. Regarding the music itself, although the melody differs from one version to another, the vocal line follows the tendency to stress triad intervals, although not necessarily in movements from the tonic. Kendal (1979, p. 22), however, explains that melodies have lesser importance in Kurdish music, musicians being more attached to the meaning of the lyrics. In this instance, the variations in both recordings give little information on the social or political influences that the revolution may have had on music. It is of importance therefore to consider the sound within its whole context. The tempo of Bijen Kamkar's version is faster, which, along with the orchestration of the music, provides a more classical sound to the song, reminiscent of Iranian music. The instrumentation, featuring violin and *tembûr*, is moreover closer to what has been analysed as that of "professional musicians" by Tatsumura and Kendal, as songs from non-professional musicians are usually sung unaccompanied (Kendal, 1979, p. 22) while musical instruments specific to Kurdish music became integrated with the orchestration of Iranian music.

Although the comparison of professionally recorded songs gives an insight into the different sounds that were popular at the time, they unfortunately can



only reflect the sound that was shaped to be broadcast and does not necessarily represent the music circulating traditionally. As Pierre Bourdieu (1977) evokes hierarchies' transformation in social performances, the professional recordings studied here provide indications on the cultural dynamics in Iran in the 1980s, as well as on a dominance that may exist within minority groups themselves. The addition of Persian elements reflects a wish from the Kamkars to not choose between their Iranian and and their Kurdish identities but nonetheless gives an insight on how Kurdish traditional music was considered at the time: as Iranian popular culture was in the process of being unified, the addition of Iranian traditional elements would have enhanced the status of Kurdish folk music in the country. Moreover, the songs studied here are the ones that remained after forty years and exclude the unreleased recordings or unofficial performances, which raises an ethical issue regarding the past and artistic erasure: although on a local scale, many traditions are transmitted orally, they do not appear as constitutive of the culture on a bigger scale, thereby masking a whole part of the popular identity.

The fact that most recordings of folk songs are from famous musicians and have a Persian-like sound is in fact linked to the idea of a power that exists both culturally and politically. Youssefzadeh (2000, pp. 38–40) and Maria Koomen (2014) explain that after the revolution, the government used Persian music as a tool of propaganda. According to them, the power of music is such that a constant repetition of one particular sound can be analysed as propaganda. For this reason, the government broadcast a traditional song, “O Iran, O House of Hope” recorded by Mohammad-Reza Shajarian. The repetition of this song was enough for the population to associate it with the atmosphere of the Revolution, while the recognisable sound of the *tasnif* became identified with the new regime. The incorporation of Persian musical elements in the Kurdish folk songs aforementioned relates, in this instance, to a control on their sound directed by the government, without explicitly ordering this control. Although some musical events (as I explained earlier with the presence of tapes found in black markets) were directly in contradiction of the government's restrictions, the post-revolution atmosphere was, in the eyes of the population, associated with the fall of the Shah. Indeed, interviewee C. (2020) explained that the 1979 Revolution belonged to the Iranian population before becoming an Islamic Revolution. Although the song “O Iran, O House of Hope” was broadcasted by the Islamic Republic of Iran to incite to nationalism, the Iranian musical elements were not necessarily interpreted as such.

## Vernacularity and Nationalism

This sonic unification can therefore be explained by the government control on sound, but also relates to the general idea that classical culture is of higher standard than folk one. Kurdish traditional songs therefore only gain value when performed according to classical criteria. This relates to a bigger issue: in general, vernacular music is contained and performed in limited areas unless it serves the purpose of the dominant classes. This again can be attached to the

search for authenticity which provides a false sense of value to a song: as Stokes's theory (1997) explains, folk music is often fetishised by and for the purpose of dominant classes, and we can see through the use of vernacular music by the Iranian government how the genre has to reflect the idea of folk music the dominant classes have, carefully choosing what is represented and excluding other aspects.

Indeed, the government used regional music as part of the identity display, by integrating it into the common musical repertoire. Youssefzadeh (2000, p. 433) explains that classical and regional music in general were used by the government to assert a sense of nationalism. As an example, the researcher provides the Festival of Hymns and Anthems, later named the Fajr Music Festival, which began in 1986. Taking place for the first time at the seventh anniversary of the revolution, the festival reunited performances of revolutionary songs as well as Iranian classical musicians and folk regional musicians. The association of regional music (which was originally ignored) with genres of a national character could easily be understood as a tool for the government to control their image. According to Youssefzadeh, this festival is associated with the musical propaganda used by the Khomeini's government: indeed, the representation of regional music only related to that chosen by the government, turning the representation of cultural diversity in the country into one that was carefully manufactured. Regarding the festival itself, there is little available archive from the first few years. Different sources (Youssefzadeh, 2000, p. 433; interviewee A., 2020) explain that professional folk performers were invited. As it could not possibly represent the whole musical diversity of Iranian regions, it relates to the selective choice of musical preservation by the government: while the government did not have the power to forever ban regional music, it could select which parts would be widely available and representative of the genre, thereby shaping the overall corpus (and indirectly threatening other parts with erasure.) Interviewee A. (2020), whose father is a traditional and folk musician, explained that his father was invited to perform with his band. He moreover explained that at the time, his father and his band were hired by the government "to the front line of the war to play for the soldiers." These elements support the earlier point that the government's position towards music was only strict to the extent that it did not find a use in it. Selective regional performances as well as the use of music for the morale of soldiers illustrate the national unity praised and displayed by the government, which, by this token, could enhance its control on cultural plurality.

## Resistance and Apolitical Identity

Although Kurdish folk music became more popular in the Iranian society, there are still misconceptions about the Kurdish identity. Indeed, Mehdi Semati (2017, pp. 155–162) explains that due to the repressive character of the government, there is a romanticisation of resistance by the West, particularly when studying the Middle-East, creating a specious dichotomy between severe authority and resistant community. When researching Iran Kurdish songs produced after 1979, most resources I came across mentioned the highly political

and revolutionary character of the music, claiming a Kurdish identity separate from the Iranian one. Many Iranian Kurds, however, were not necessarily for the national independence of Kurdistan: interviewees A. and B. (2020), both of Iranian and Kurdish ethnicities, explained that they do not wish to engage with one identity more than with the other. The repression applied on Kurdistan by the Iranian government certainly highlighted the political parties as the most visible representatives of Kurdish identity; this notion is however counterbalanced by many historians, who explain that while the Islamic revolution provided a ground for the Kurdish parties to move forward, many Kurds would define themselves as apolitical.

Cabi (2021) explained that the perceptions of Kurdish politics and culture were amplified by the ongoing conflict. The historian, however, contradicts the predominant perception of Iranian Kurdish political parties: the two main Iranian Kurdish parties, the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (KDPI) and Komala, are often presented as 'separatist'. Cabi, whom I contacted to discuss his previous works on the history of Kurdish parties in Iran (2019; 2020), explained that the qualifier 'separatist' is usually used as a way to delegitimise Kurdish politics (personal communication, Cabi, 2021). According to him, most Kurdish parties, while seeking an independence, did not want to be separated from Iran and wanted to keep a geographical and administrative unity. A parallel can be drawn between Kurdish politics and folk music. Even today, while resources on Kurdish music are more and more accessible, the perception of it is often limited to songs calling for a revolution and therefore giving a biased perception of the Kurdish population, depicting them as very political and engaged. This raises two issues: it illustrates the idea of fetishisation explained by both Stokes (1997) and Semati (2017) while also reducing Kurdish folk songs to its political character. It therefore implies that the songs exist solely for a non-musical purpose, even though many interviewees explained that the music in itself was very rich.

### III. Music and Political Meanings

#### A Need for Music: Songs Availability

More than political ideologies, the presence of Kurdish revolutionary songs in the society relates to their availability at the time. Due to the close government surveillance of the music broadcast, most of the music available was either relating to the Islamic Republic or to dissident parties. Explaining that Kurdish folk music suddenly became very popular, interviewee D., an historian in politics and culture of Iranian Kurds (2020), and interviewee C. (2020) referred both to the integration of Kurdish folk musical instruments and elements in Iranian classical music and to the songs broadcast by political parties. Komala and the KDPI were, in Iran, performing or broadcasting music from what interviewee C. (2020) referred to as a "free zone", that is to say an area where they

were not pursued or repressed by the government. The KDPI musicians would perform songs calling for rebellion (especially *Ay Raqib*, usually considered the Kurdish national anthem) while Komala set up a radio station between 1982 and 1983 (interviewee C., 2020) broadcasting their political impulses with and alongside music. The anthem *Ay Raqib*, often performed during events, expresses the political ideologies of both political parties, endorsing Kurdish unity and dissent with lines such as “We are the Kurds” and “Our flag will never fall” (Youtube and Hemin Neima, 2013). References to warriors and weapons seem to invite defiance and revolt. This song therefore became popular amongst the part of the Kurdish population that shared a similar ideology, but also amongst people who listened simply for the music. Moreover, the song stresses the importance of the Kurdish ethnicity and while the line “Both our faith and our religion are our homeland” refers to religion, the sense of identity in the song goes beyond that of a shared religion. This characteristic is emphasised by the KDPI: indeed, although many Kurdish people are Sunni Muslims, the KDPI praises a tolerance towards religious minorities, separating their religious views from the Iranian government as well as making their views more tolerable to a wide audience (Koochi-Kamali, 1991, pp. 178–9; interviewee C., 2020). The identity praised by *Ay Raqib* therefore describes the importance of the Kurdish ethnicity rather than any other cultural trait such as religion. The importance and popularity of Kurdish revolutionary songs immediately following the Islamic revolution is explained by interviewee D. as psychological need for music, and can also be perceived as an alternative to the Shi’ite-led unity enforced by Khomeini on the population.

### Revolutionary songs

It is clear that Kurdish identity may have been amplified as a result of the Islamic Republic’s oppression. Iranian Kurds who did not recognise themselves in the Shi’ite ideology and the glorified Persian identity could find in the Kurdish identity an important counterweight. The plurality existing in opposition to the unity praised by Khomeini may have benefited Komala and KDPI, and their ideologies were translated into songs. The emergence of revolutionary songs indeed led to changes in the instrumentation as well as in the rhythm of folk songs popular at the time, giving them a march-like sound in order to represent military anthems. The melodies were moreover simplified: while most Kurdish folk songs have the versatility to be sung in both major and minor modes, the melodies of revolutionary songs were composed in a way that would be easy to harmonise. In comparison with folk songs recorded long before the revolution, or genres such as the *lawke* (a narrative genre of love songs), revolutionary songs were very upbeat. Such songs are characterised by the important rhythmic presence, which, unlike Kurdish folk songs performed in small gatherings that use asymmetric time signatures, use rhythms such as 2/4, 4/4 or 3/4 (interviewee C., 2020) and, according to interviewee C., “besides its ideological aspect, in terms of music and in terms of the content, it’s a very rich music.” The

musician and historian moreover explained that these changes occurred because of musicians who had become more political, therefore integrating the major population more than before. Indeed, before the revolution, music was particularly listened to and performed by the upper class; the populist aspect of the revolution coupled with the sudden influx of Kurdish musicians in revolutionary music, who integrated elements relating to popular music in order to make it easier to remember and sing, accelerated the diffusion of the song.

## Reclaiming an Identity Through Music

However, the political aspect of the songs was still important for the performers, often connected to the Kurdish parties' ideologies. Amongst the most famous musicians who had a role or had been affected by the revolution, we can mention Merziye Feriqi, an Iranian Kurdish singer who was very favourable to Kurdish independence and fought in Iranian Kurdistan as a *peshmerga*. Many of her songs were revolutionary and performed to espouse her support for Kurdish independence, a famous one being a call for the *peshmergas*, "*Slawi germî – hevalî peshmerga*" (Lyrics Translate and Muhammad Ya'aqub, 2020). Unlike songs released without political purpose, such as *Lay Lay*, revolutionary songs such as *Slawi germî – hevalî peshmerga* are intended to reclaim and construct identity. The identity aspect can be attributed to narrative songs performed during festivities or in family gatherings such as the ones recorded by Christensen. To explore the changes in sound in music from before and after the Revolution, I compared *Slawi germî – hevalî peshmerga* with the song *Beyt: Xanê Keyqa and Paşbend (Goranî)*, a song recorded in 1962 by professional story teller Hadji Hemedereş in the city of Mahabad, as they both rely heavily on poetry and are both used to express Kurdish identity. They moreover both put the performer to the fore, as Merziye Feriqi performed this song for the Kurdish people, and Hadji Hemedereş's role was to inform the population. *Beyt: Xanê Keyqa and Paşbend (Goranî)* is exclusively vocal and recalls the story of a Kurdish knight (Christensen D. And Christensen N., 1966, p. 5). Both songs refer to Kurdish landscape as well as to the population, which is a common feature of Kurdish folk songs: whether they regard a revolutionary character or not, the songs are attached to the Kurdish identity by referring to nature, mountains and landscapes of Kurdistan. Nezan Kendal (1979) indeed explains that references to mountains and the analogy of Kurdish people and tigers are often found in Kurdish songs because of the Tigris plain bordering Kurdistan, as well as the nomadic character of the people. In terms of sound, however, the song *Slawi germî – hevalî peshmerga* uses instrumentation close to *soruds*, providing a military rhythm and sound, while *Beyt: Xanê Keyqa and Paşbend (Goranî)* has a more melodic and narrative tone. The melody of *Slawi germî – hevalî peshmerga* differs from typical Kurdish melodies, not relying so heavily on intervals of thirds. On the contrary, the song *Beyt: Xanê Keyqa and Paşbend (Goranî)* stresses seconds and thirds, as seen earlier. While the technical changes in Iranian Kurdish folk can be explained by the increasing popularity of the genre, it is not the only factor. As

Christensen explains, one's identity fluctuates and only gives an indication of a specific time—the changes in Kurdish music can therefore relate to the musicians' determination to recuperate their identity but by no means is a representation of every aspect of the Kurdish identity.

While new instruments were added to previously recorded songs around 1982–1984, the biggest change brought about in Kurdish music was therefore its popularity outside of vernacular areas, with the instrumentation traditionally found in Kurdish music, such as the *tembûr* or the *daf*, suddenly becoming much more popular across the country (interviewee D., 2020; Simms and Koushkani, 2012, pp. 21–3). However, as mentioned earlier, this comparison only encompasses songs that have been made popular or whose recordings are available nowadays. The events happening in Iran and Kurdistan after 1979 certainly participated in bringing new sounds to folk music; the importance given to songs emerging from political situations, on the other hand, overshadowed how non-political folk songs adapted to the situation. Within the genre, the main changes occurred in their popularity. While I was told folk performances were less affected by the 1979 revolution than any other genre, it would be interesting to have a deeper understanding of the social aspect of informal performances in Kurdistan, which, I hope, will be provided by further research.

### Conclusion: An Approach to Cultural Plurality

In 2008, Amnesty International highlighted abuses against Kurdish minorities, from religious discrimination to economic deprivation and cultural repression, explaining the long-lasting character of the abuse, tracing back centuries. The NGO (Amnesty International, 2008, p. 1) reports stated that no human rights assessor had been allowed in Iran “since shortly after the Islamic Revolution in February 1979” while Cabi (2020, pp. 339–41) denounces the lack of studies on minorities during the Revolution. As such, the situation of Kurdish music exemplifies the complications encountered between cultural presence and its marginalisation. All in all, the consequences we could expect from the Islamic revolution relate to the interactions of dominants and minorities. As Kurdistan and its population have faced repressions and oppressions for decades, perhaps more than other ethnic minorities in Iran, it would be logical to assume that Kurdish music was the first vernacular genre affected. Moreover, the absence of official recordings or foreign research available on Kurdish folk music led to a marginalisation of the culture outside of the region. Despite its desire to make the Kurdish and non-Persian culture in general disappear, the Islamic Republic could not ignore the existence of the Kurdish minority as it constitutes ten percent of the Iranian population. Allowing some Kurdish musicians to take part in performances such as during the festival of 1986 enabled the government to keep a position where they would acknowledge the presence of Kurdish minority without actually acknowledging the cultural differences within this minority, especially at a time when human rights organisations were beginning to note the absence of Kurdish recognition: the integration of Kurdish musical elements



within Iranian classical music whilst simultaneously denying the plurality characteristic of Iranian culture illustrates this point. Outside of professional recordings, folk music was mostly constricted to small communities. For this reason, Kurdish folk music of the time is usually associated only with that of the most famous musicians such as the Kamkar family, or with songs developed by the *peşmêrga*. During my research, most of the resources I found that were specifically focusing on Kurdish folk music in Iran were produced afterwards by scholars of Iranian or Kurdish ethnicity, while the resources made at the time on the music and that are now available to scholars were produced by Western scholars. While it can be explained by the lack of fundings from Iran, it leads to misinterpretation of Kurdish music—such as the interpretation of dervishes' music as folk music by Jean During. The lack of representation of Kurdish music (and Kurdish culture in general) therefore illustrates the issues encountered by ethnic and cultural minorities in times of political instability: it leads to an obscuration of the Kurdish population and thereby, to a denial of diversity and the rejection incurred by the population. It moreover provides an illustration of the hierarchies that exist within a genre itself: although Kurdish songs, especially those performed by non-professionals, are considered by the population as apolitical, the stress is put on revolutionary songs. This of course is explained by the availability of recordings compared to songs that remain in enclosed areas; however, the gap between these two types of song causes non-professional songs to be widely ignored.

Outside of Iran, the country is often seen as mostly Persian and while this is the most widespread ethnicity of the country, it does not fully represent the cultural diversity of the country. The purpose of this research was therefore to show what the actual identity of a population—in comparison to that of the dominants—says about the dominants in regards to minorities. Nowadays, resources about Kurdish populations are becoming more important but should a time of conflict come, dominant populations may be expected again to be the only ones documented: besides cultural erasure, the lack of resources about a minority enhances the chances of abuse of the community. With this paper, I wish to stress the importance of documenting cultural elements in times of political instability, especially within marginalised groups. Exploring the consequences of such events on folk music expands the studies existing between folk arts and political struggle, while illustrating the dynamics caused by institutional silencing of minorities.

## Bibliography

- 4parcheyKurdistan (2014). "Kine Em? – Translated" [Video]. Accessed December 28, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DQUpKobBn-Q>.
- Abrahamian, E. (2008). *A History of Modern Iran*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ahmadi, S., Hassani, H. & Abedi, K. (2020). "A Corpus of the Sorani Kurdish Folkloric Lyrics." *Language Resources and Evaluation Conference*.
- Akbarzadeh, S., Shahab Ahmed, Z., Laoutides, C. & Gourlay, W. (2019). "The Kurds in Iran: balancing national and ethnic identity in a securitised environment." *Third World Quarterly*, 40, 1145–1162.

- Ali Merati, M. (2015). *Les formes fondamentales de la musique kurde d'Iran et d'Irak: hore, siâw-çamane, danses, maqâm*. Dissertation: Université Paris-Ouest-Nanterre-La-Défense.
- Amnesty International (2008). *Iran: Human Rights, Abuses Against the Kurdish Minority*. London: Amnesty International Publications.
- Bourdieu, P. (1977). *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Breyley Gay, J. (2013). "The language of love': The legacy of Persian poetry and music in contemporary Iran." *The La Trobe Journal*, 91, 158–164.
- Cabi, M. (2021). "The duality of 'official' and 'local' in modern Iran: historical and intellectual foundations", *Middle Eastern Studies*, 57, 777–792.
- Cabi, M. (2020). "The roots and the consequences of the 1979 Iranian revolution: A Kurdish perspective." *Middle Eastern Studies*, 56, 339–358.
- Christensen, D., Christensen, N., Gillis, F. and Quazi, A. (1966). *Kurdish Folk Music from Western Iran*. Indiana University: Archives of Traditional Music Ethnomusicological Series; Folways Records & Service Corp.
- Christensen, D. (2007). "Music in Kurdish Identity Formations." *Conference on Music in the world of Islam*, Assilah.
- DeBano, W. S. (2005). "Music and Society in Iran, a Look at the Past and Present Century." *Iranian Studies: Music and Society in Iran*, 38, 367–372.
- Dr Grossman, A. and Dr O'Brien, Á. (2006). "Kurdish Lyrical Protest: The Terrain of Acoustic Migration." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 32, 271–289.
- During, J., Mirabdolbahi, Z. and Safvat, D. (1991). *The Art Of Persian Music*. Washington DC: Mage Publishers.
- Ehsani, K. (2017). "War and Resentment: Critical Reflections on the Legacies of the Iran-Iraq War." *Middle East Critique*, 26, 5–24.
- Fajr Music Festival. "Introduction." Accessed December 28, 2020. <https://fajrmusicfestival.com/about/>.
- Hassan Touma, H. (Jan. 1971). "The Maqam Phenomenon: An Improvisation Technique in the Music of the Middle East." *Ethnomusicology*, 15, 38–48.
- Hemmasi, F. (2013). "Intimating Dissent: Popular Song, Poetry, and Politics in Pre-Revolutionary Iran." *Ethnomusicology*, 57, 57–87.
- Hemin N. (2020). "Kurdistan National Anthem with English Subtitle \* Ai Raqib \*" [Video]. Accessed December 28, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gH6VRdg6uw8&feature=youtu.be>.
- Heviina (2014). "Merziyah Razazi – Havalî Peshmarga" [Video]. Accessed December 28, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-DSHsrXtGKI>.
- Houston, C. (Mar. 2009). "An Anti-History of a Non-People: Kurds, Colonialism, and Nationalism in the History of Anthropology." *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 15, 19–35.
- Institut Kurde de Paris. "Instruments." Accessed December 28, 2020. <https://www.institutkurde.org/en/kurdorama/music/instruments.php>.
- Înfowelat and Moradi, A. A. "Kermanshah is a center for Kurdish Music." Accessed December 28, 2020. <http://infowelat.com/kermanshah-is-a-center-for-kurdish-music.html>.
- Iran Chamber Society and Moradi, A. A. "Kurdish Music, Ancient Heritage of Iranian Music." Accessed December 28, 2020. [http://www.iranchamber.com/music/articles/kurdish\\_music\\_iranian\\_heritage.php#top](http://www.iranchamber.com/music/articles/kurdish_music_iranian_heritage.php#top).
- Irfan Aktan. "Lo sivano, 'kine em?'—Hey Sivan, Who Are We?" Accessed December 28, 2020. <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/29884>.
- Isgandarova, N. (2015). "Music in Islamic Spiritual Care: A Review of Classical Sources." *Religious Studies and Theology*, 34, 101–114.

- Kifner, J. (July 24th, 1979). "Khomeini Bans Broadcast Music, Saying It Corrupts Iranian Youth." *The New York Times*, Section A, 1.
- Koohi-Kamali, Fereshteh (1991). "The development of nationalism in Iranian Kurdistan." Routledge.
- Koomen, M. "Music and power in Iran: An Instrument of Propaganda and Control." Accessed December 28, 2020. <https://en.qantara.de/content/music-and-power-in-iran-an-instrument-of-propaganda-and-control>.
- Kremser, F. (1993). *Kurdistan d'Iran Après 1979* [Video]. Institut Kurde de Paris, Archives.
- Kreyenbroek, P. G. and Sperl, S. (2015). *The Kurds: A Contemporary Overview*. Routledge.
- Kendal, N. (1979). "Kurdish Music and Dance." *The World of Music*, 21, 19–32.
- Lee, W. (2003). "Reviewed Work: 'Kurdistan Iranien: Les Maqam Rituels des Yarsan / Iranian Kurdistan: The Ritual Maqam of the Yarsan by Ali Akbar Moradi, Reza Askarzadeh, Pierre Bois, Ahmad Djavaheri and Frank Kane.'" *Yearbook for Traditional Music*, 35, 231–232.
- Lucas, A. E. (2019). *Music of a Thousand Years: A New History of Persian Musical Traditions*. California: University of California Press.
- Lucas, A. E. (2006). "Understanding Iran Through Music: A New Approach." *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin*, 40, 79–89.
- Lyrics Translate and Estere. "من چ دانم (Man Che Danam) (English translation)." Accessed December 28, 2020. <https://lyricstranslate.com/en/%D9%85%D9%86-%DA%86%D9%87%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%85-man-che-danam-what-do-i-know.html>.
- Lyrics Translate and Muhammad Ya'aqub. "گرمش ئپ ئلفهه – ىمرهگ ىوالس (Slawi germî – hevalî peshmerga) (English translation)." Accessed December 28, 2020. <https://lyricstranslate.com/en/slawi-germ%C3%AE-heval%C3%AE-peshmerga-warm-greetings-fr.html>.
- MacDonald, R., Hargreaves, David J. and Miell, D. (2017). *Handbook of Musical Identities*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Miller, L. (1999). *Music and Song in Persia: The Art of Avaz*. Richmond: Curzon Press.
- Moaddel, M. (1993). *Class, Politics, and Ideology in the Iranian Revolution*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Movahed, A. (Autumn 2003 – Winter 2004). "Religious Supremacy, Anti-Imperialist Nationhood and Persian Musicology after the 1979 Revolution." *Asian Music*, 35, 85–113.
- Nomani, F. and Behdad, S. (2006). *Class and Labor in Iran: Did the Revolution matter?* Syracuse University Press.
- Nooshin, L. (2015). *Iranian Classical Music: The Discourses and Practice of Creativity*. Ashgate: Ashgate Press.
- Nooshin, L. (2005). "Subversion and Countersubversion: Power, Control, and Meaning in the New Iranian Pop Music." In *Music, Power, and Politics*, edited by Annie J. Randall. New-York: Routledge, 231–272.
- Nooshin, L. (2017). "Whose Liberation? Iranian Popular Music and the Fetishisation of Resistance." *Popular Communication*, 1, 163–191.
- Personal Communication (May 24th, 2020 and November 20th, 2020). Interviewee A.
- Personal Communication (May 23rd, 2020 and November 16th, 2020). Interviewee B.
- Personal Communication (September 10th, 2020 and November 21st, 2020). Interviewee C.
- Personal Communication (November 19th, 2020). Interviewee D.
- Personal Communication (July 23rd, 2020). Interviewee E.
- Personal Communication (March 15th, 2021). Marouf Cabi.
- Rawa Mufti (2013). "Bijen Kamkar Boni Helalan De" [Video]. Accessed December 28, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XWd-ip4HZn4&list=LLgpdgFyuEWVSiz26JbZ2fLg&index=771>.

- Reigle, R. F. (2013). "A brief history of Kurdish music recordings in Turkey." In *Hellenic Journal of Music Education and Culture*, 4.
- Roy, W. G. (2002). "Aesthetic Identity, Race, and American Folk Music". *Qualitative Sociology*, 25, 459–469.
- Rickard, Nikki S. and Tanchyuan Chin (2017). "Defining the Musical Identity of "Non-Musicians" in *Handbook of Musical Identities*. Oxford University Press, 288–303.
- Sarhang Rasheed (2020). "Mazhari Xalqi | La Prdi Sur | Boni Halalan De | یدرب هل یقلاخ یردهزم - موالمجب روس - نالالده ینزب" [Video]. Accessed December 28, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tpBxBpVzD3E>.
- Semati, M. (2017). "Sounds like Iran: On popular music of Iran." *Popular Communication*, 15, 155–162.
- Sheppard, J. and Moser, B. (1984). *Dervishes of Kurdistan* [Video]. Granada Television International.
- Shiloah, A. (2001). *Music in the World of Islam: A Socio-cultural Study*. Detroit, Mich.: Wayne State University Press.
- Simms, R. and Koushkani, A. (2012). *Mohammad Reza Shajarian's Avaz in Iran and Beyond, 1979–2010*. Lexington Books.
- Smithsonian Folways Recordings. "Various Artists: Kurdish Folk Music from Western Iran." Accessed December 28, 2020. <https://folkways.si.edu/kurdish-folk-music-from-western-iran/islamica-world/album/smithsonian>.
- Sterner, M. (1984). "The Iran-Iraq War." *Foreign Affairs*, 63, 128–143.
- Stokes, M. (1997). *Ethnicity, identity and music: The musical construction of place*. Oxford: Berg.
- Stokes, M. (1992). "Islam, the Turkish State and Arabesk." *Popular Music*, 11, 213–227.
- Stokes, M. (1989). "Music, Fate and State: Turkey's Arabesk Debate." *Middle East Report*, 160, 27–30.
- Tatsumura, A. (1980). "Music and Culture of the Kurds." *Senri Ethnological Studies*, 5, 75–93.
- Youssefzadeh, A. (2005). "Iran's Regional Musical Traditions in the Twentieth Century: A Historical Overview." *Iranian Studies: Music and Society in Iran*, 38, 417–439.
- Youssefzadeh, A. (2000). "The Situation of Music in Iran since the Revolution: The Role of Official Organizations." *British Journal of Ethnomusicology*, 9, 35–61.