

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/325828602>

'Kurdish music can no longer be erased from our ears.' Musical memories of Armenians from Sason.

Chapter · January 2014

CITATIONS

0

READS

12

2 authors, including:



Wendelmoet Hamelink

University of Oslo

7 PUBLICATIONS 13 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:



IMEX: Images in Exile. Gender and representation among Syrian Kurdish women in Norway [View project](#)

‘Kurdish music can no longer be erased from our ears.’ Musical memories of Armenians from Sason.

Wendy Hamelink and Hanifi Barış

Introduction

“Kurdish music can no longer be erased from our ears.”¹ This is how mister Ömer,² an Armenian from Sason,³ spoke about Kurdish music. He told about the weddings they celebrate, he and the Armenian community he is part of. They are migrants from eastern Turkey, and have lived in Istanbul since the 1980s or 1990s. In Istanbul they have more opportunities to be connected to their Armenian identity, for example by going to church or sending their children to Armenian schools. But they still invite Kurdish wedding bands to play at their weddings, and mister Ömer said they generally listen to Kurdish music. This paper⁴ investigates how Armenians from Sason relate to their Armenian heritage, and to other identities they feel connected to, through music. Music is a powerful tool to express feelings of belonging, nostalgia and desire. However, in the case of Armenians living in Turkey, musical expressions and memories were disrupted, exterminated, and suppressed by the 1915 genocide⁵ and its consequences. How do the descendants of survivors experience the lack of Armenian musical practices, and the replacement of it with other music and cultural expression?

Some notes on Sason

Currently, Sason is a small provincial town close to Batman in eastern Turkey, mainly inhabited by Kurds and Arabs. The people we interviewed originate from the surrounding villages. But until the late 19th century ‘Sasun’ was a much larger region, part of the Ottoman *vilayet* of Bitlis, and an Armenian stronghold with a high level of independence.⁶ They became known internationally because of an earlier massacre in 1894, as a consequence of their resistance against tax exploitation by

¹ “Kürt müziği artık kulağımızdan silinmiyor.” Mister Ömer (pseudonym), interview by authors in Turkish, tape recording, Istanbul, 11 November 2008.

² All people are anonymized.

³ Historically called Sasun. The name refers to the House of Sasun, an Armenian clan appearing in the epic tale ‘Daredevils of Sasun,’ also called ‘Sasuntsi David.’ The epic takes place in the region around lake Van, and probably stems from Armenian resistance against Abbasid rule in the 9th century.

⁴ This paper results from research conducted by the authors in cooperation, as part of Hamelink’s PhD project on Kurdish dengbêjs for Leiden University. Barış originates from the Sason region himself. We felt that the cooperation between an outsider and an insider was very useful in building trust with the interviewees, and in analyzing and understanding the data. The data consists of interviews in Turkish and Kurdish with six people from Sason currently living in Istanbul, some of whom became long-term research contacts and friendships. Hamelink has planned a follow-up research project for Spring 2014, funded by the Max Weber Stiftung.

⁵ About the differences with earlier massacres of the Armenians, Suny notes: “Though there was a continuity between the brutal policies of massacre and deportation that earlier regimes used to keep order, the very scale of the Armenian Genocide and its intended effects – to rid eastern Anatolia of a whole people – make it a far more radical, indeed revolutionary, transformation of the imperial setup” (Ronald Suny, “the Holocaust before the Holocaust”, in: Kieser, *The Armenian genocide and the Shoah* (Zürich: Chronos Verlag, 2002), p.98.

⁶ The *dhimmi* status in the Ottoman Empire provided the Armenians with a limited form of self governance, but it also deprived them of fundamental rights such as access to the Islamic court system. Taxation carried out by local lords was a source of exploitation. Tax exploitation increased in the late 19th century (Peter Balakian, *The burnt Tigris, a history of the Armenian genocide* (London: Pimlico, 2005), p.10).

local Kurdish chieftains.⁷ This led to a first wave of out-migration. Then, during the 1915 genocide the majority of the Armenians were killed,⁸ and most of the survivors escaped abroad.⁹

For the survivors who remained living in Turkey the genocide meant an almost total erasure of Armenian identity, culture, religion, and language. The six people we spoke with came from different areas in the region. Three came from villages where the language of communication was Arabic. They also knew Kurdish. For the other three, the main language was Kurdish, and they did not speak Arabic. Most survivors converted to Islam, and did not teach Armenian to their children.

Often the survivors were adopted in Kurdish tribes, and Kurdish men frequently married with Armenian women. It seems that Armenian men had more difficulty finding a marriage partner. From the interviews we understood that they made use of the network they had with other Armenians, and married with (half-)Armenian women. Even though they were now Muslims in name, many Armenians continued to follow Christian customs. Once a year, or once in two years, a priest came from Diyarbakır or another place, and performed Christian rituals. He baptized the children who were born, and married couples who had already celebrated their wedding, but were not yet officially married for the church. During the genocide many churches had been destroyed or were left behind in ruin. Mosques were only built much later, in the 1950s and 1960s. Although some Christian rituals were still carried out secretly, the people we spoke with indicated that they had very limited knowledge of Christianity.

Before the genocide, Armenian, Arabic and Kurdish were all spoken in Sason. Mister Ilhan (born 1935) mentioned that many Kurds knew Armenian, and many Armenians knew Kurdish. He still remembered Kurds who spoke Armenian fluently. But they were all elderly people who had lived the times when the Armenians had been the region's majority. After 1915, there was one Armenian singer left in the Sason region who was known by many people. His name was Amo, the son of Xaco, *dengbêj Amo* they called him. After he became a Muslim his name was turned into Amer. He sang in Kurdish, but before the genocide he also sang in Armenian. He was one of the few people left who reminded them of their Armenian past. In short, within one generation Armenian language and culture was almost completely erased from a region that before 1915 had numerous schools, churches, monasteries and its own local rule.

Notwithstanding this violent history, the people we spoke with generally spoke positively about the contacts with their Kurdish and Arabic neighbors. They celebrated weddings together, there were intermarriages, and also after they came to Istanbul they still kept in touch with them. Kurdish became the main language for wedding songs, also in Arab villages where people did not understand it very well. Although the people we spoke with emphasized positive encounters, their stories also show

⁷ “In 1894, Armenians in Sassun refused to continue paying an extortionary protection tax to Kurdish chieftains. In response, Turkish soldiers were sent to the region and, together with Kurdish cavalry units, they ravaged Sassun. Estimates of the number of dead range between nine hundred and sixteen thousand, and some twenty-six to forty villages were destroyed” (Donald E. Miller and Lorna Touryan Miller, *Survivors: an oral history of the Armenian genocide*, (University of California Press), p.37).

⁸ About the differences with earlier massacres of the Armenians, Suny notes: “Though there was a continuity between the brutal policies of massacre and deportation that earlier regimes used to keep order, the very scale of the Armenian Genocide and its intended effects – to rid eastern Anatolia of a whole people – make it a far more radical, indeed revolutionary, transformation of the imperial setup” (Ronald Suny, “the Holocaust before the Holocaust”, in: Kieser, *The Armenian genocide and the Shoah* (Zürich: Chronos Verlag, 2002), p.98).

⁹ The website sasun.org refers to Vardan Petoyan, *Sasuni yev Taroni Azgagrutyun* (the ethnography of Sasun and Taron), which supposedly mentions that in 1914 there were 156 villages, 127 churches, 6 monasteries, 15 school, 24.233 people, and 2812 houses in the Sason region. I could not trace this book nor the year of publication. I could only find Petoyan (2005) *Sasunn antsialum yev Sasuni asatagrakan sharzhumnere* (Sasun in the past and the liberation movements of Sasun), but have not been able to consult this source either.

that there had been deep problems with some of their neighbors, because of them being Armenian. It seems that the emphasis on positive experiences has been a necessary survival strategy.¹⁰

Five of the six people we spoke with became more connected to their Armenian identity after they moved to Istanbul. They established contacts with the Armenian community, and live in migrant neighborhoods where many Armenians live. At the time of the research (2008), the topic was still very sensitive and people had difficulty trusting us and talking to us about their Armenian background. But in recent years Turkey saw increasing openness on this topic, with one of the clear signs, and arguably also causes, the activities of the Hrant Dink foundation. As part of this development, also Armenians from Sason began organizing themselves; they founded websites, internet newspapers, and organizations.¹¹ These are recent developments that were not yet present at the time of our research.

The story of a Kurdish dengbêj: I am a Kurd and a Muslim, not a *fileh*

The above described developments in the Sason community were not followed by everyone. Many people from Sason continue to identify predominantly as Kurdish and Muslim subjects. An example is mister Cihan, the son of a genocide survivor, who is a *dengbêj*, a Kurdish folk poet. His life story is telling for how Armenian identity on the one hand disappeared almost entirely, but on the other hand could not be forgotten. Even though he is well aware of his Armenian background, and openly relates the stories of his father's escape, he does not regard himself as a *Fileh*, a Kurdish word that has the double meaning of being Armenian, and of being Christian.¹² Early in his life he reconciled himself to his identity of *Misilmîn*, of a Muslim with a Christian background, and took pride in it. We suggest that by singing songs he performs and reconfirms his Kurdish identity. Being a Kurdish dengbêj made him more part of where he wanted to belong. Still, in his story Armenian memories continuously emerge.

Born in 1925, he was the eldest of the people we spoke with. He could understand some Turkish, but did not speak it. Most of his adult life he lived in a village close to Kozluk. He was married and got nine children. He made a living from farming, with tobacco as the main subsistence crop. Since 2004 he lives in Istanbul with one of his children, although he still regularly returns to his home region.

His father Aram came from the Armenian village Parmis. Mister Cihan told how, when Parmis was attacked, the men were gathered and sent to a prison in the town Pasûr (Kulp), about 70 km from Parmis. Aram managed to escape. Later on all these men were killed by Ottoman soldiers. In the meantime, the soldiers who had attacked their village had also collected all old people, women and children, and driven them into the church. They set fire to the church, and to all people who had taken refuge there. Of the 1050 registered inhabitants, only 50 survived.

Aram fled to his aunt who had married a Kurd and lived in a nearby village. There he converted to Islam, and married an Arab woman from the same region. Together they got one child. When Cihan was eight years old his mother left his father and married someone else. Soon thereafter

¹⁰ Mister Ilhan for example, often said that he saw Turks and Kurds as friends. Until the mid 1980s he and his family lived in their village, the only Armenian village in the region that had been saved in its entirety from the genocide. Over the decades, they had permitted some Kurdish families to move into the village. The reason for them to leave their village and move to Istanbul was that eventually these Kurdish families began pressurizing them to give up their lands and leave. (Mister Ilhan (pseudonym), interview by authors in Kurdish, tape recording, Istanbul, 31 August 2008).

¹¹ For example the SasMut HayDER (Association of Armenians from Sason and Mutki), that organizes activities for Armenians from the Sason and Bitlis regions now living in Istanbul, and establishes contacts with people living in Armenia whose forefathers originate from Sason. In November 2013 they had invited the *Maratug* folklore group from Armenia to give a concert in Istanbul's Bakirköy neighborhood.

¹² The word *fileh* is also used for other Christian groups who live(d) in the Kurdish region, and is therefore not solely referring to Armenians. However, when talking in the specific context of a village or a region where one of these groups lived, people refer both to the ethnic and religious identity.

his father passed away. Cihan remained on his own. Until he was an adult he moved from place to place and did not have much stability. He lived mostly with his aunt, but also for some time with his mother and her new husband.

In the following, we focus on the musical activities of mister Cihan, and on how he talked about these memories. The analysis we made of his life story is based on four interviews conducted between 2007 and 2011, all in Kurdish.

When still a teenager, Cihan once went to Syria on foot to visit a sheikh he knew, and he stayed there for two months. He had met the sheikh in a nearby village, and he had joined in his religious gatherings. The sheikh was a runaway, he was sought after by the government and therefore escaped to Syria. In Syria Cihan assisted the sheikh with household tasks and sang for him. It must have been around the year 1939, when he was fourteen years old. He told how he learned about the heroic deeds of this Kurdish sheikh, who had revolted against the government, and how he sang about these events as entertainment for the sheikh. These were his first singing activities.

I used to sing for him, the *kilams* (recital songs) of his battle with a regiment of soldiers and militias from the Badika and Xiya tribes. There were only nine armed men with rifles, including the sheikh. Sheikh Mihemedê Zilî's daughter was also with them. She was having a child with her, and she could not carry her child [anymore]. Hence, [next to fighting] two men carried the woman and the child. There were only seven men [in total]; for about two hours they fought with their rifles with all the regiment and militias, in a place without any chance to hide themselves. But they managed to escape to the mountains during that battle, and that is how he escaped to Syria.¹³

This episode demonstrates that Cihan was totally immersed in Kurdish culture, even though his father and aunt with whom he grew up were Armenian. He learned to sing about his heroic deeds, in the manner of the Kurdish dengbêjs, and it was his choice to join the religious activities of the sheikh and to become his adherent.¹⁴ Still, he felt also connected to his Armenian background as becomes clear from what he said immediately after the above quote:

At that time there were French in Syria, no Arabs. Their soldiers were also Kurmancî, they were *Fileh*. Like us they spoke Kurmancî, they were all *Fileh* who came from Turkey. Like dengbêj Karapetê Xaço, he was from a village of Batman, from Bilhêder. He said that he had been a soldier for the French for fifteen years.

From the sentence about the sheikh escaping to Syria, dengbêj Cihan seemed to remember some things about Syria that had interested him. Syria had become a French mandate during WWI. Some of the Armenians who crossed the Turkish border and entered Syria were employed by the French as soldiers. Cihan remembers how they spoke his language, Kurmancî Kurdish, and that they were 'all *Fileh* who came from Turkey.' This reminded him of dengbêj Karapetê Xaço who also enrolled as a soldier for the French. Karapetê Xaço was like himself a dengbêj with Armenian roots, who became assimilated to Kurdish culture to such a level that he became a famous dengbêj. The soldiers who he met in Syria obviously also caught his attention because they spoke Kurmancî, like himself, but were also *Fileh*. It seems, in spite of not seeing himself as an Armenian, he recognized something of himself in these people. Another reason for his interest may have been that he suspected there could be relatives among those who had escaped from the atrocities (see below).

¹³ Mister Cihan (pseudonym), interview by authors in Kurdish, tape recording, Istanbul, 18 November 2008.

¹⁴ He said: I was his adherent (*murid*), and took part in the prayer ceremony (*zîkr*).

When Cihan was around twenty years old he got acquainted with an agha of a nearby village, Agha Hamo, or Haji Hamo. The agha (chief) turned out to be a distant relative, he was the son of Cihan's cousin (father's brother's daughter) who had been kidnapped by a Kurd. The agha thus had an Armenian mother and a Kurdish father. The agha invited Cihan to stay at his house and work for him, and also promised him one of his daughters. It was approximately in 1946 when he moved to the agha's village. He worked for him as a farm laborer and as a shepherd. His wife to be was only seven years old, so he agreed on waiting until she would have grown up. In the house of Hamo, Cihan learned to be a dengbêj. The agha invited dengbêjs from many places to come to his house, and Cihan heard many performances. After the troubled childhood Cihan had had, his contact with the agha must have meant a lot to him. He was adopted in his household, he married his daughter, and he would live in this village for the next sixty years. The following story shows that dengbêj Cihan enjoyed the life he had obtained through the contact with the agha:

The uncle of my father, his name was Romo, some men asked for him in Yerevan but they could not find any information about him. Fifty years ago a letter came with the name of my father. It said: 'come,' but I did not go. Yeah, I didn't go. I [lived] with my father in law, I didn't care of it. There were some people who said: 'come let's go', but I said I could not go. I myself didn't see that letter. But someone said to me that the letter had come to a man in the village Beksê, he was also an Armenian-Muslim (*Misilmîn*), it came to his house and it was on the name of my father. I myself didn't see the letter, nor the address.¹⁵

Dengbêj Cihan distanced himself from the relatives he appeared to have in Yerevan. It is clear from his account that he did not feel the slightest interest in going there. He seems to have been too much occupied with the life he lived, and apparently also satisfied with it. Still, he shows that he identified with the man who had received the letter, someone in a nearby village who was, as he said, "also a *Misilmîn*", like himself. It seems that dengbêj Cihan reconciled himself to this identity and decided to live with it, rather than to leave and go to Yerevan when he had the option.

There are also other indications in the interviews that point to a continuing contact and network that (former) Armenians seem to have maintained until long after the genocide. For example, when talking about the many dengbêjs he had got to know in the household of his father-in-law, we asked dengbêj Cihan if he also remembered any female dengbêjs from that time. He replied:

There was a female dengbêj (*dengbêja jin*) from Herend, she was a Christian. There was a Muslim, the brother of İsa, he was her lover, she was kidnapped by him. He was the son of Mihemedê Alî Keleş. And when she came back from him she became a Christian again. She came to our house and stayed for a month with us, at the house of my wife's father. Her name was Xemê, she had a wonderful voice. They said Xemixiştî to her, she was an amazing dengbêj. (...) Her Christian name (*navê wê filetî*) was Xemê, and her Muslim name was Henîfe. She was from the village Herend, they were all Christians. When she escaped she came to the house of Hamo because he protected people when they were kidnapped. She stayed for one month and in this time she sang songs.¹⁶

Like many other Armenian women, Xemê fell victim to being kidnapped by a Kurd. However, she managed to escape from him and turn back to her old village, to become a Christian again and to marry with a Christian man. She must have been an independent woman to manage to change her fate. This might be related to the fact that she came from Herend, a village still inhabited by only Christians, which meant she had more support than other Armenian women who were left without social contacts to protect them. Another interesting fact is that Xemê had learned her songs from

¹⁵ Mister Cihan (pseudonym), interview by authors in Kurdish, tape recording, Istanbul, 15 April 2007.

¹⁶ Same interview, see note 15.

dengbêj Amo, an Armenian himself, who sang in Kurdish and Armenian.¹⁷ He had also converted to Islam. This example demonstrates how Armenian knowledge stopped suddenly: Amo had still sung in Kurdish and Armenian, but Xemê, who learned kilams from him, sang only in Kurdish.

But first, before returning to Herend, she was hosted for a month by Hamo agha who most probably arranged her return to the village. Trustable aghas were the right people to go to in such situations, as they would offer protection, and they would mediate between the disagreeing parties. This event also demonstrates that the remembrance of Armenian identity was still there, as mister Cihan knew which people in the surrounding villages had an Armenian background. It seems that for better or worse, (former) Armenians supported each other and made use of each other's networks.

That dengbêj Cihan predominantly regards himself as a Muslim and a Kurd, also became a topic during the interviews because of one of the songs he sings. It is the famous song *Metran Isa*, about the love between the Armenian woman Meyrem and the Kurdish man Êlî, who escape to the Akdamar church in Lake Van, and seek protection from the Bishop. When Êlî asks the Bishop if he can marry them, preferably according to Islamic customs, the Bishop gives his full consent. The song ends in disaster for the Christians and their church, and is a celebration of Kurdish interests. The Bishop renounces his faith by throwing his cap on the floor and blowing the roof of the church. When we asked mister Cihan if the ending of the song, in which the bishop converted to Islam, was indeed the correct version, he confidently agreed on this. To him, the bishop's conversion to Islam was not problematic. It was a course of events he felt connected with, as it supported his father's conversion to Islam, and his own choices and life story.

Today, the nine children of Cihan and Helîme are all adults. Two daughters live still in the village near Kozluk, where they married and got children. Two other daughters and a son moved to towns not far from their home village, and have a family. Three sons live in Istanbul with their families, and one lives abroad. All siblings are fiercely supporting the Kurdish movement. They watch Kurdish satellite television, and often discuss politics at home. They are strict in speaking Kurdish instead of Turkish with their children. One of the sons in Istanbul is a singer of a wedding band. He performs in Kurdish, and much of his repertoire is politicized songs about the struggle for Kurdish freedom. Another son, the youngest of the family, married in 2008. His wedding looked more like a political meeting than a wedding, the wedding band expressing their overtly political message both in songs as in exclamations, all in Kurdish.

But Cihan's children do not only see themselves as Kurdish; the youngest began rediscovering their Armenian background. Aram, one of the younger sons, said that as a child he found this out through neighbor children. When they were fighting, they insulted him by calling him *bafîleh*, and since he did not know its meaning, he asked his parents. *Bafîleh* (from *bav*, father, and *Fileh*, Christian) means that one's ancestors are Christians, and it has a derogative meaning. Obviously, even though Cihan did not consider himself an Armenian, other people did not forget about his background. And they even regarded his children as *bafîleh*, who did not even know its meaning, and who spoke Kurdish, were Muslims, and had a Kurdish mother. Thus, almost a century after the genocide, the youngest children construct a subjectivity to which their father and grandfather could not, or did not want to, be connected. Aram, who officially carries a Muslim name, chose to be called from the Armenian name of his grandfather in his student years. He follows both the Kurdish and Armenian issue closely. He said that he also discussed these things with his father, and tried to explain to him that being Armenian not automatically means one is also Christian.

¹⁷ From the data Hamelink collected for her dissertation on Kurdish dengbêjs, it seems likely that Armenian women were more often known as dengbêjs than Kurdish women. It seems that it was easier for them to sing in front of a public and to be known by many people, while in Kurdish circles it would be understood as shameful.

His father insists that he is not a *Fileh*, but a Kurd and a Muslim (*ez ne Fileh me, ez Kurd im, ez Misilman im*). That does not mean that he denies the story of the genocide, of the escape of his father, and the previously Christian character of the region he comes from. Instead, he openly talked about these issues in detail and would refer to them whenever his mind brought him to such memories. To illustrate this point, we end this section with the way dengbêj Cihan spoke about the Christian heritage of the Sason region. By ending with his own voice, we underline that despite of the systematic erasure of Armenian identity in Turkey, the Armenian voice cannot be silenced, and continues to sound through the words of a now Kurdish dengbêj.

On top of the [Mountain] Mereto there is a church. In the time of the *Fileh* they brought a number of Shamaz (monastery students) to this church. They placed twenty Shamaz in the church and they stayed there all winter. When spring came, they found out that they were all dead. Before they died, they had written on a paper that they did not die because of the shortage of bread or water, but because of the wind and the fear of God. That is the hearsay about the church on the Mereto. I haven't seen it and I didn't go there, but that's how we heard it from our elders.¹⁸

Conclusion

The most extreme form of violence that a genocide, and the aftermath of suppression, entail, led indeed to an almost complete erasure of Armenian presence from Turkey. However, after one hundred years of that violence (which is not yet an anachronism, and indeed is an ongoing process) the children and grandchildren of survivors now openly voice and share stories about their ancestors and the lives they once lived, along with their own ambiguous experiences. During our search for these stories, music proved to be a valuable research tool. When talking with people about their musical memories, this topic turned their focus away from the conflict, and towards often positive memories. This made it easier for them to talk about a history that they had learned to conceal. It brought up unexpected memories and personal feelings of belonging and desire that were embedded in the songscape of lives otherwise dominated by Kurdish and Turkish language and culture. For Armenians from Sason, not only Kurdish, but also Armenian memories can no longer be erased. Although it may be a hasty conclusion to state that there is an Armenian come-back, for many of them, Armenianness obtained, and will continue to obtain, new meanings in today's Turkey. Turkey has moved towards an increasing degree of openness about its histories of oppression, and it is our strong hope it will continue to do so.

¹⁸ Mister Cihan (pseudonym), interview by authors in Kurdish, tape recording, Istanbul, 18 November 2008.