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## “Acting” under Turkey’s State of Emergency: A Conversation with Kurdish Artists about Theatre, the Dengbêj Tradition, and the First Kurdish *Hamlet*

Pieter Verstraete

Although the recent coup attempt of July 15, 2016, resulted in a declared “state of emergency” in Turkey, Kurdish citizens, especially those living in the South East, have experienced what emergency legislation can do to their daily lives and cultural institutions long before (Demiröz 1990, 67) as this region was declared a permanent OHAL<sup>1</sup> region in 1987. For example, it is quite common that special security checks or occasional curfews stifle Kurdish theatre performances, thereby limiting audience attendance. It is also standard practice that theatre practitioners across Turkey perform self-censorship in order not to be targeted by verbal attacks in the media or by closure (*Siyah Bant* 2012).

In this essay,<sup>2</sup> we explore what is at stake for Kurdish theatre artists who develop their theatre praxis in this difficult socio-political setting, and why it matters to *act*, both in the general sense and in the theatrical one, in a language that is neither the accepted one of the nation nor of the majority culture. This essay discusses interviews with five prominent Kurdish theatre artists, some based in Turkey and others currently in exile in Europe. The respondents included costume designer Ismail Oyur Tezcanlı (based in Turkey), playwright Yusuf Unay (in Turkey), actor and director Mîrza Metin (in Germany), instructor and director Rezan Aksoy (in Germany), and director Celil Toksöz (in the Netherlands, though not in exile).<sup>3</sup>

The following is explicitly not a set of interviews but a contextualized “staging” of a debate between voices in the Kurdish artist community. We say *staging* since we do not go entirely unmarked in the ways we try to establish a narrative on the basis of, in essence, fragmentary and translated responses<sup>4</sup> by our “informant-interlocutors.” The latter are scattered in different locations and even language contexts and are part of a diverse art scene that is under constant pressures, which include hostility on social media and in the press, the constant threat of dismissal by decree, police investigations, closure, arrest and false indictments.<sup>5</sup> So despite any coherence our essay seeks to resemble, the reality is quite incoherent. We observed throughout our research several ambivalences and even conflicts between aesthetics and ideological or political standpoints. The outcome, however, of our critical stance is that we are focused on offering a framework that allows for these contradictions to play out while documenting this overlooked area of research regarding contemporary dramaturgies of Kurdish theatre artists at risk. This, we sincerely hope, would allow the reader to get a critically nuanced reading of the topic.

By providing context that is fully attuned to situated knowledge production, we aim to dialogically untangle some of the intricacies between current aesthetic practices and politics in Turkey’s Kurdish theatre scene. In part, the essay offers documentation, description, and insight into the history of

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theatre practices in the Kurdish language in Turkey from a Kurdish identity perspective, which is currently a difficult subject position to maintain due to Turkey's nationalist agenda. Due to the special political circumstances and history, we limited ourselves to discussing Kurdish theatre in *Turkey* and thereby omitted theatre practices in other Kurdish speaking areas, such as Syria, Iraq and Kurdistan, or by the diaspora in Europe (with the exception of the first Kurdish *Hamlet* which was produced by Kurdish-Dutch director Celil Toksöz in Turkey's Diyarbakır).

The notion of "Kurdistan" in some of our interviews introduces the complexity of a contentious political matter regarding territory. The area where Kurds live today covers parts of present-day Turkey (about half of the population), Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Armenia. When our interviewees refer to "Kurdistan," they mostly mean the regions of Turkey's eastern and southeastern Anatolia where Kurds form the predominant ethnic and cultural group, sometimes also referred to as a "Kurdistan of the North." It is often believed that one of the Kurdish (micro)nationalist ambitions is to form a Greater Kurdistan that would include northern Iraq (Southern Kurdistan), northwestern Iran (Eastern Kurdistan), and northern Syria (Rojava or Western Kurdistan). Most Turkish Kurds, on the contrary, do not see independence as a necessity, and many Kurdish grassroots movements are today inspired by the idea of a "democratic confederalism," rejecting the nation-state as *sine qua non* for their autonomy. In our essay, we will critically address the influence and problems that arise from nationalist agendas within Kurdish cultural production, which affects (the perception of) Kurdish theatre in Turkey as well. Since this is a very sensitive issue, particularly in Turkey's current domestic and war politics, we feel the need to stress that we do not intend to support any ideological agenda and that responsibility for the phrasings in the statements and quotes remains solely with the respective interviewee. The final goal is to document the complex relations that define the contested space of Kurdish theatre practices in Turkey in order to develop a broader understanding of the entwined operations of theatre and politics in this context.

Due to our interviewees' specific focus and understanding of Kurdish theatre as primarily "drama," we also restricted ourselves to a dramatic tradition (henceforth referred to as "Kurdish drama"), which requires the presence of a dramatic theatre text in the Kurdish language. With that, we actually actively resist a common view on Kurdish theatre by the state and other researchers as merely a traditional form of folklore by an "ethnic" or "traditional folk" community that exists besides other ethnic identity-marked theatres in Turkey, such as Laz and Circassian theatre (in contrast to, for instance, Ezici 2017, 66). We do acknowledge more traditional performance forms that are specific to Turkey's Kurdish cultures and that are not necessarily dramatic, such as *dengbêj*: the Kurdish "sung-speech" tradition that is transmitted by Kurdish "bards" who are also called *Dengbêj*. Other forms that we briefly touch upon include storytelling practices by *çirokbêj* (storytellers) and *stranbêj* (minstrels), always performed with music and songs. We, however, excluded Kurdish dance traditions, such as handholding dances (*helperkê*), since they are not strictly seen as theatre.

We do aim to facilitate recognition of the complexity surrounding the transcultural positioning of "Kurdish theatre"—while challenging what that category really is—and of its contributions with regard to nationalism and identity politics. In order not to fall into partisanship and to be critical of the ideological underpinnings of our interviewees' statements, our methodology is informed by concerns of postcolonial theory (transculturalism), Jacques Rancière's "politics of aesthetics," and cultural materialism, which help us to uphold a "rigorous attention . . . to the realms of the historical and the social" (Knowles 2004, 13). As such, we aspire to be sensitive to historical processes and power dynamics that are still at work. Within this interdisciplinary research outlook, we argue that

performance studies could be troubling some of the tensions around identity, territory, and nationality, which have been underrepresented in studies of the Kurdish question so far.

Given the tension between the openness and fluidity of what “Kurdish” represents today despite our concrete sense of and attention towards the topic, we organized our discussions along three foundational questions that we posed to our interviewees and allow us to map the complex terrain of this study:

1. What is Kurdish theatre, according to Kurdish theatre practitioners, and what makes it “Kurdish”?
2. What is their relation to the “political”?
3. What is the influence from Turkish contemporary theatre and other “Western” (political) theatre forms as opposed to assumed “Kurdish” performance traditions?

The use of the Kurdish language and the necessity of “reimagined” cultural forms like *dengbêj* were a significant concern. We hope that our contribution sparks more interest in Kurdish drama (studies) in particular, since it is largely underdeveloped and unknown to Turks, even Kurds, and the international research community. However, we do wish to present the current case as a particular example that allows us to consider questions of theatre, representation, and politics in ways that extend the field more broadly.

### **Towards a Definition: What is “Kurdish Theatre”?**

The context in which we identify our research is plagued by a history of oppression and ongoing violence. In Turkey, theatre in the Kurdish language (Kurmanji<sup>6</sup>) was long banned from the public arena, and it still knows the stigma of prejudice. There seemed some cautious improvement during the Kurdish-Turkish Peace or “Solution” Process starting with the March 2013 truce. However, the country has recently again been plagued by internal war in the South East ever since the pro-Kurdish, leftist HDP (Peoples’ Democratic Party) had unprecedented electoral success in the general elections of 2015, causing the ruling AKP (Justice and Development Party), the party of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, to lose its majority. This war has wiped out Kurdish cities and has been particularly damaging to the perception and “rebirth” of the Kurdish cultural movement in the public domain.

We are committed to finding out how Kurdish theatre artists define their own praxis in this complicated social and political setting. During our research, we noticed a lack of literature on this very issue. If we are to understand the “source culture” in which this theatre operates, beyond authority figures<sup>7</sup> that may have shaped a “heritage” in its short existence, it is a pertinent question to look at artists’ current definitions. In a second step, if we want to engage with it as a form of transcultural theatre, namely as a form that both includes and exceeds Kurdish and Turkish cultural practices, we need to find out how Kurdish culture defines (and continuously redefines) itself through its theatre praxis, particularly in relation to existing theatre traditions as well as national cultural policies in Turkey that affect its current development.

When asked to define “Kurdish theatre,” one of Turkey’s innovative Kurdish theatre artists, Mîrza Metin, starts off by laying out the historical contours that define Kurdish theatre today:

Kurdish drama has started to become institutionalized in between the late 80s and early 90s. This correlates to the years when the Kurdish freedom movement, which began functioning before the 1980s coup, started to develop in the political, social, and cultural sense. Kurdish (Kumanji) is among the languages that are banned with the Orient Reformation Report [“Şark Islahat Raporu,” sometimes referred to as the Plan] which was enacted in 1925. Law No. 2932,<sup>8</sup> which banned conversing and singing in Kurdish, was abolished only in 1991. And all prohibitions were lifted during the Ecevit government. However, the ban still continues in the minds of the people.

The ban on spoken Kurdish was not lifted directly by Bülent Ecevit<sup>9</sup> but by President Turgut Özal and Prime Minister Yıldırım Akbulut in January 1991. It is generally believed that this was part of Turkey’s strategy to get closer to integration in the European Union in the 1990s. Yet most of our interviewees testify that it was not until the 2000s, under Ecevit as prime minister, when Kurdish drama started to flourish. More traditional cultural forms had already survived—by way of an expedient cultural tactic—in the private sphere, despite the censorship.<sup>10</sup>

Notice how Mîrza Metin sets out to talk immediately about “drama” instead of “theatre.” Kurdish theatre in Turkey did not start until very late in the twentieth century, after the 1980s, really flourishing from the 1990s. By that time, it was completely defined by the production of written play texts because of the earlier extensive language policy repressing the Kurdish dialects and hampering playwriting. Therefore, due to the sudden softening of the prohibition to speak Kurdish in public, and because of a previous lack of modern play texts under the long, extensive ban, the artists of the 1990s focused on rapidly producing new texts, many of them highly political in content. The ban was never entirely/officially lifted, though.

There seemed to be an initial momentum for Kurdish literature before the ban in 1925, including early theatre plays, costume designer İsmail Oyur Tezcanlı tells us. But they were not play texts—“drama”—in their own right and complicate what is really Kurdish:

First of all, there is no Kurdish drama, but drama in Kurdish. It would be wrong to indicate a certain idea or characteristic about a play or performance that belongs to Kurdish theatre; however, when we look into the historical texts, we see that the first Kurdish plays were titled *Memê Alan* and . . . *Mem û Zîn*. . . We cannot regard these pieces as stage plays or performances in Kurdish drama since they were adapted for the stage later on.

Most of the early Kurdish plays were written as literary prose and poetry, and Kurdish drama is a rather recent development.<sup>11</sup> The main reason is that, historically, Turkey’s nationalist language policy meant to “Turkify” large numbers of Kurds, repress their culture, and consequentially ban their languages (Zeydanlioğlu 2012; Arslan 2015; Hassanpour 2018). This “linguicide” was significant in diminishing the potential for a Kurdish culture to develop and an ethnic identity to be expressed publicly. So it comes as no surprise that theatre as drama plays an indispensable part in the social and political lives of educated Kurds in the urban middle classes of Turkey today.

In their work on intercultural theatre, Gilbert and Lo (2002) have stressed the importance of the choice of language on the stage and in the rehearsal room, since the “wide-scale imposition of

imperial languages” brings forth an “insidious form of epistemic violence” (46). Kurdish-Dutch director Celil Toksöz, based in the Netherlands since 1986, explains the impact of epistemic violence on the theatre as a result of the imposition of the Turkish language and the prohibition of Kurmanji:

Until 1990 there wasn't that much theatre because Kurdish activities were literally forbidden. The Kurdish language was forbidden in those days. There were Kurdish-language theatre activities in the then-former Soviet Union, Iran and Iraq. There was relative freedom over there. . . . Only from the 1990s things started to change [in Turkey]. It was very difficult because the censorship was enormous, especially in Diyarbakir. It began with the Mesopotamia Cultural Centre in İstanbul. They made their first theatre production, which later came to the Ankara Festival. This festival exists now twenty-two years.

Established on September 28, 1991, the Mesopotamia Cultural Centre<sup>12</sup> (MKM) played a significant role in educating new Kurdish theatre artists in the Kurdish language. As an independent institution, its primary motivation was to enhance Kurdish cultural and artistic production. It has led to a partial recognition of Kurdish theatre productions in Turkey's theatre festivals.<sup>13</sup> The Ankara Theatre Festival was progressive in programming *Teatra Jîyana Nû* or “New Life Theatre,” a work produced by their own theatre company since 1992, despite threats from municipalities<sup>14</sup> like Çankaya in the centre of Ankara. The reference to “Mesopotamia” in its name does, however, point to a Kurdish nationalist agenda (more in the next section) since, as Çağlayan (2012, 6) writes in a study about ideological and political discourses of the Kurdish movement through “myth,” it may “emphasize the historical continuity from the pre-historic peoples of Mesopotamia . . . and thereby allow the construction of a continuous identity of Kurdishness” (Smets and Akkaya 2016, 86).

Mîrza Metin, who got his theatre training from the MKM (beginning at age thirteen), explains how the stigma of the Kurdish language created an impediment to the development of Kurdish drama:

As for Kurdish drama, as a result of it being forbidden and a lack of a government (for its own nation's sake<sup>15</sup>), it is a type of drama that couldn't familiarize itself with Western drama, and sometimes didn't want to do so. . . . Its relations with the West started later on. While Kurdish drama was flourishing in the 1920s, the birth of Turkish drama dated back to pre-Republican Turkey. While Kurdish drama could find no financial support, Turkish theatre groups can find government and municipality funds, as well as sponsorships by various institutions.

Metin places the birth of Kurdish drama in the wake of the early Republican period before its repressive language policies. He (re)imagines a past for Kurdish culture that was initially not influenced by Western and/or Turkish traditions. This is an interesting question for Kurdish drama studies and even more so for the history of Kurdish nationalism, starting only after the Great War, that claims a genuine Kurdish culture unspoiled from Western (drama) traditions when the Turkish state was not yet formed after the collapse of the Ottoman state. Later, of course, Kurdish theatre had to negotiate with Western cultural practices, to which Metin's work also contributed.

The role of cultural institutions and structural funding is crucial here too. Metin's private theatre in İstanbul, Şermola Performans (since 2010, originally founded as DestAr Tiyatro in 2008 by Mîrza Metin and Berfin Zenderlioğlu) did partially gain legitimacy from the Turkish state by obtaining

government funds, though it was a long struggle.<sup>16</sup> It is generally seen as “the first producer of Kurdish theater in the history of the Turkish Republic to receive a grant from the Ministry of Culture and Tourism” (Kaya 2012, n.p.).<sup>17</sup> Private theatre groups in Turkey (the so-called independent scene) had already been developing since the 1950s. They have been taking the role of performing more progressive plays in Turkey’s cultural landscape (Council of Europe Steering Committee for Culture, Heritage and Landscape 2013, 56). However, it took half a century before Kurdish private theatres like DestAr Tiyatro and Şermola Performans in cities followed.

At the Ministry, where Numan Kurtulmuş presided from 2017 until recently, policies have been changing, but not always for the better. Under his ministry, we have seen the systematic closure of Kurdish institutions under emergency law and the latest “harmonizing” move which, as of July 15, 2018, puts all state and municipal theatres directly under control of the presidency rather than the Ministry.<sup>18</sup> In fact, except for a few laws, there is no written policy for the theatre arts, and funding opportunities for private theatres, separate from the heavily subsidized State and Municipal Theatres that perform in Turkish, have always been dependent on an ad hoc approach. By default, Kurdish theatre groups cannot count on the same financial support as Turkish theatres, since the state does not officially provide structural help in promoting Kurdish culture or any other ethnic minority for that matter. In an otherwise weakly articulated national cultural policy, there is no equivalent to positive discrimination in Europe or affirmative action in the United States.

Given the absence of state support, the existence of private theatres<sup>19</sup>—a structure outside of the institutional framework of subsidized state theatres that is copied from the Turkish independent theatres—is noteworthy. Director and playwright Yusuf Unay, however, is critical of the idea of imitation when it comes to Kurdish theatre’s topics, aesthetic, and tradition:

I think it would not be wrong to say that Kurdish theatre is an imitation of Turkish theatre. Though it was feeding off the pain the Kurdish cities had to bear in terms of atmosphere and subject, it is similar to the conventional Turkish theatre in an aesthetic sense. And this is inevitable for two ethnicities that live together for so many years; however, Kurdish theatre is also dragged into a big mistake, as Turkish theatre could not go further than imitating the Western theatre canon. The rejection of the idea of a “national” theatre, the removal of boundaries, and the increasing pace of interaction that we see in today’s world also show us the spread of alternative theatres and the transgressing of mainstream traditions of drama in both cultures. I found this change very positive but I think that we should not ignore the fact that we still have a long way to go in order to create our own traditions.

The last point is highly significant: Unay talks about an effort, which is on the one hand politically motivated but on the other is a necessary cultural development. Politically, the birth of a Kurdish theatre is relatively new, so to expand it Kurdish artists would need institutions, universities, and conservatories that would situate and accommodate Kurdish drama. However, under the current emergency state, this is impossible. For Kurdish theatre culture to shape itself in Turkey, it would first need stability, which in the current political situation is merely an aspiration.<sup>20</sup>

Here we also encounter a first significant ambivalence in the amount of influence Kurdish artists want to ascribe to Turkish (and by implication, Western) theatre in their art praxis, given the context of enduring epistemic violence. Whereas Metin strongly believes in a pre-Turkish history of Kurdish drama, though embedded in non-Western oral storytelling traditions and a corpus of poetic texts

that are not dramatic in the literal sense, Unay directly links Kurdish theatre to the Turkish model for independent theatre but highlights the significance of its own topics and traditions. Metin's position could be seen, in essence, as a quasi-nationalistic<sup>21</sup> one, whereas Unay holds on to what some would describe as a position to assimilate to Turkish culture.<sup>22</sup>

By way of finding a middle ground, director Rezan Aksoy explains how contemporary Kurdish drama has difficulties coming to terms with its traditions precisely because of Turkey's adoption of Western culture:

If we talk about the traditional Kurdish visual arts such as dengbêjlik, çirokvanlık [similar to "çîrokbêj" or folk tales, *PV*], laments, folk dances etc., while each and every one of them is a vast category in its own right, we can say that it is not only different from Turkish drama but also other visual art traditions in the Middle East. However, the essential differences between Kurdish and Turkish drama are nomadism and sedentarism. Turkish communities, with their ability to establish governments, absorbed the customs and values of the lands they migrated to, excluding their partly nomadic traditions. While they were sovereign in authority, they never had one dominant culture. The culture that is left after the establishment of the Republic is only the crumbs of "genocide" cultures. Mustafa Kemal [Atatürk] and his brothers in arms only created a cultural Frankenstein by accepting the Western culture as the dominant one with their Occidental tendencies. This artificial culture mostly affected those who are exploited such as Kurdish, Armenian, Rum (i.e., Greek-Turkish), Alevi, Laz, etc. cultures. That is why there couldn't be a Kurdish drama with certain aesthetic rules although we have produced a few Kurdish plays on the soil of the Turkish Republic so far.

Aksoy explains precisely the epistemic violence of the Turkish nation-building and modernization processes under and after founding father Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, but he locates it in an imagined Western culture, with all its Occidentalism putting Europe in the centre. His argument reinforces Unay's idea that Turkish theatre is a copy of that imagined culture, and that contemporary Kurdish drama is then a copy of that copy. His argument of "nomadism" as the defining feature of an early Republican Kurdish culture, however, also agrees with Metin's point of view and explains why Kurdish as a minority culture within the newly established nation from very early on defied the more "sedentary" forms of culture that were in the process of establishing what was the new "Turkish" culture, and by implication, the state.

Unay adds yet another sociological reason for Kurdish theatre artists following Turkish theatre trends:

The Kurdish territories are culturally ransacked places. After the attempts to alienate the culture, from that point on there had been no funds or sources offered for any improvement. This picture that is created shows that the newer generations who live in the metropolitan cities to which their families were forced to migrate due to several reasons, get to know theatre and try to be involved. That is why Kurdish theatre was more active in metropolitan Western cities, although for many years now, we see Kurdish theatre in Eastern Turkey as well, which is exciting.

Thus the development of a Kurdish theatre in Turkey is shaped in accordance with forced migration routes—again, nomadism—of Kurds who moved to the cities, which were part and parcel of the urban transformations of the 1990s (Gambetti and Jongerden 2015, 16; Stefanovic, Loizides, and Parson 2015). They are dependent on the “superstructure” that Turkey’s social transformation has established. But due to the relative peace of recent years, paradoxically under the permanent state of emergency in the South East, Kurdish intellectuals<sup>23</sup> and artists in the cities are also increasingly aware of their history as a dispersed community with distinct traditions.

Here we see a historical and cultural materialist process at work, which has planted the seeds for a contradiction in which Kurdish artists are living today. On the one hand, for decades they were forcefully absorbed into the Western project of the Turkish Republic and strained to employ its remnant structures and institutions copying European models. On the other, they felt forced to define their art practices as different from the Turkish and Western models as a way to escape the cultural policies that tried to repress their earlier traditions of oral/musical storytelling and visual art aesthetics. Within that tension of imitation and authenticity, any definition of Kurdish theatre as genuinely separate from Turkish theatre is contentious and may suggest a political or ideological positioning within the Kurdish struggle. Given the complexity of the matter, we suggest entangling these *political* implications of making theatre in the Kurdish language before delving deeper into the question of authenticity and an imagined past of Kurdish theatre.

### **Is Kurdish Theatre “Political”?**

In the previous section, we hinted at a micro-nationalist positioning in some of our respondents’ statements. This nationalist tendency can be explained by sentience among Kurds of a differentiation between notions of society and community in the social sciences. Anthropologist Maurice Godelier (2010) unpacks this distinction, which brings him to refer to the territorial question of the Kurds:

We see from this that it is only the “tribe” that is a “society” . . . , while the ethnic group constitutes a “community” of culture and memory, but not a “society.” This sheds light on the fact that, in order to become a society, an ethnic group today must sometimes manage to form a state that will ensure sovereignty over a territory. This is one of the demands of the Kurdish groups that are dispersed over several states. . . . Furthermore, in some cases, an ethnic group seeking to appropriate a state and a territory for itself alone decides to carry out ethnic cleansing. (Godelier 2010, 7)

In this somewhat simplified dichotomy, Turkey is a society that has claimed existence through political (and also religious) relations after the establishment of the Republic in 1923, thus enabling them to establish sovereignty over territory, whereas the Kurds are a community seeking to become a society by forming a state of their own. The claim of “ethnic cleansing” also haunts the Kurds in Syria today who are beleaguered by the Turkish army’s Operation Olive Branch, though the term is highly controversial in this context and disputed by both sides.

Within today’s nationalist context of a “New” Turkey (a phrase used by the governing AKP-government), “Kurd” is often used as a negative identifier by (ultra-)nationalists, even a “threat” because the utterer may believe Kurds are “backstabbing the nation” (Leyla Neyzi, qtd. in Krajewski 2013). So it is not hard to imagine ethnic allusions resurfacing on the side of the opposition when

arguing against the closure of Kurdish cultural institutions<sup>24</sup> as part of the state of emergency. Mehmet Emin comments in this regard:

There was a censorship system that worked according to the content of the plays before. Now it revolves around the ethnic beliefs and mindsets of all those that oppose the head of the state and denying them the right to exist. They try to extinguish certain communities by taking their tools and places away from them. There is only one exit from this and that is solidarity and resistance. Unfortunately, Kurdish artists cannot find a theatre to put their plays on stage anymore, nor do they get invitations for the festivals where they were invited before. In this struggle, we will go through this process with few of the artists *of Turkey* [he actually refers to these artists as *Türkiyeli*,<sup>25</sup> *PV and GLA*].

Kurdish theatre's cultural history of repression has come full circle with today's perception that the Turkish state has reverted to its previous stance of "rejection and denial" regarding Kurds and Turkey's historical assimilation project (Bozarslan 2017). Emin refers to theatre as a "tool" and a "place" for the Kurdish communities. The suggestion here is that of a postcolonial power dynamic between "oppressor" state and "oppressed" community, in which theatre has a symbolic function. We concentrate more closely on the issue of theatre as a political tool in this subsection.

There are actually two issues here. First, in Turkey in recent years, AKP supporters (instigated by President Erdoğan) fostered a general contempt for theatre artists, as they are historically related to the Kemalist project and therefore stand for Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's educational policies. The Kemalists are today often associated with intellectualism and condescending elitism, particularly during election campaigns that use anti-intellectualism as a conservative form of populism. Second, Turkey has a long-term account of intolerance, division, polarization, and repression of cultural and ethnic minorities, which is deeply rooted in Turkey's history of nationalism,<sup>26</sup> even at times advocated by that same Kemalist political culture. Both issues have only become worse under recent nationalist political agendas, affecting public perceptions of everything Kurdish.

In this polarized climate, Kurdish theatre is always somehow seen as having political meaning. Actor, author and TV personality Aydın Orak<sup>27</sup> summarizes this perception in the left-wing newspaper *Evrensel*:

I think Kurdish theatre is political, every play has a political message with no doubt and even if you don't try to convey any political message, you'd be seen as someone intervening with politics if you made theatre in Kurdish like us. Because Kurdish is banned and under oppression since the day it started existing. As you know, today is very much the same. (Orak, July 19, 2016)

Orak's claim is at first similar to, for instance, Chantal Mouffe's emphasis that every artwork has a political dimension. But the point here is that Kurdish theatre's political perception complicates its distribution and reception. Historically, this may date back to the first plays performed in the 1900s, which, according to Orak, were always expressing political struggle in some way or another. Orak mentions the Kurdish "oda" (room) plays, which were privately shown in houses before the 1990s: "These plays were political in nature. Besides this, there were village 'seyercik' plays performed in urban and metropolitan areas. They were often about social and political problems of those days" (Orak, July 19, 2016). These historical practices have continued until the 2000s. These historical

plays indicate a rich cultural background for Kurdish drama today. Yet it is a tricky exercise for Kurdish artists to balance the social issues they often want to address through their plays and a wish not to be seen simply as a tool for politics because of the preconceptions that exist regarding Kurdish cultural production and identity politics.

We asked our interviewees how they keep a balance between aesthetic preoccupations and the inevitable struggle against preconceptions about their art, given nationalist frames on either side of the Turks and Kurds. Mîrza Metin starts by unpacking the complicated relation to nationalism and territory in his artistic development:

I started contributing to Kurdish drama in order to support the struggle for the freedom of Kurdistan. However, during the process, it became more than a tool. It turned into a profession. It became a job and a field of expression that foregrounds humane values and took the narratives of the society that I live in upon the stage. I believe that the more I perform my job well, precisely and with an aesthetic sense, the more my humanistic sensibilities will live in this profession. I don't deal with drama to contribute to something or someone anymore. It would only make me happy if it is beneficial. What everybody needs in this country is a pluralist democracy.

Metin's statement demonstrates very well the duality in Kurdish theatre's relationship to politics, which poses challenges to young theatre artists in cities like Istanbul. Metin voices a concern for instrumentalization of his theatre praxis, though his primary aim to contribute through theatre to a political struggle that is much determined by territorial contestation has moved into the background. For Metin, a way out of this confining dichotomy lies in a wider political vision of humanism, pluralism, and democracy for all rather than a single-issue political agenda for Kurds in and outside of Turkey. Moreover, Metin questions the ability of theatre to be "beneficial" to one or the other in a goal-oriented way. As he continues, his main concern is an aesthetic one rather than serving any political agenda:

I really like the idea of Rancière. He suggests that art is political as much as it is cleansed from the interferences of politics. Art should create its connection with life by creating its own agenda, not by being influenced by the politics. Kurdish drama will increase its own value so long as we make it about our own agenda.

Metin's reference to Jacques Rancière is not surprising since Kurdish intellectual circles, as much as the Turkish Left, have in recent years engaged with *The Distribution of the Sensible* (2004) and *The Politics of Aesthetics* (2006), particularly in the wake of the Gezi movement. For Rancière, aesthetics and politics are inseparable, but the political power of art lies rather in perceptibility and the "sensible" than in its contents per se.

This is true for Metin's own productions, which are highly aesthetic and full of social commentary but in most general or "sensible" ways. For instance, although his "Disko 5 Nolu" was a direct reference to the Diyarbakir Prison (with "Disko" standing for *Disiplin Koğuşu*, i.e., disciplinary ward), which after the 1980 military coup d'état turned into a military prison systematically torturing prisoners until 1984, the theatre play is a strong denunciation of cruelty through multiple perspectives of a spider, a mouse, a dog, a prisoner and a guard, all personified on stage in a monologue by Metin.<sup>28</sup> The political commentary operates rather between the perceptible and the

imperceptible, the “sayable” and the unsaid, the imaginable and the unimaginable. Indeed, the performance “interrupts the distribution of the sensible” with those voices that have normally “no part in the perceptual coordinates of the community” (Rockhill in Rancière 2004, 3), which lies at the heart of Rancière’s notion of *the political*.



Mirza Metin in *Disko 5 Nolu*. Used with permission.

What Metin alludes to with art’s own “agenda” may be understood in a double sense: On the one hand, he seems to confirm Rancière’s modernist understanding of a political dimension of art that answers only to its own logic, although there is no autonomous art as much as there is no “pure” politics. So, in Rancière’s terms, Kurdish theatre should aim to connect with life and strive for a communal distribution of the sensible in the Kurdish experience without wanting to imitate any of its political discourses. On the other, he does seem to suggest that Kurdish theatre’s agenda is only meaningful if it is tied to the Kurdish struggle.

To do so, most of our interviewees adopt an apolitical stance by separating current political discourses from their theatre praxis, as Kurpiewska-Korbut observes, “to achieve independent status resulting in, among others, an effort to free themselves from the tutelage of a political trademark of PKK” (2016, 97). This is certainly the idea in which most private urban theatres like Metin’s DestAr Tiyatro and Şermola Performans operate. The flight from over-politicized tutelage of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) is very similar to what Rancière names the “aesthetic regime” of the arts as developed through a—for Rancière questionable— notion of modernity that makes art an “autonomous form of life,” thereby identifying it “with a moment in life’s process of self-formation” (Rancière 2004, 26). In the case of Kurdish theatre, one might similarly think of the Kurds’ wish for self-formation as a community within Turkey, a reality where life and politics coalesce on a daily basis.

This double stance towards politics may be seen as somewhat ambivalent. Indeed, Mehmet Emin also agrees with the argument of theatre having its own logic, but the emancipatory—and therefore, political—agenda of the Kurdish movement is never far away:

Drama always has an agenda of its own. During new meetings and while solving execution problems, this is always one of the topics that are discussed. However, sometimes the political agendas suppress the connection that it has with the society. I do not think that there are any plays that do not try to convey a political message. There is always some truth hidden under a sub-plot in a play. That is why I think actors and artists should be braver. Even the plays that avoid meddling with the current politics can be threatening by means of numbing people under the rule of an oppressive government. In this regard, I think HDP's ideology of voicing the oppressed ties with the ideals in our drama.

Emin's comment actually holds for all artists in Turkey, as any play contains political meanings, and they may be more apparent in an environment like Turkey's. But his reference to HDP's political program is telling. HDP had recuperated Gezi's call for all those who do not feel represented by the present regime, not only the Kurdish people, but in name, HDP was clearly tied to the Kurdish political tradition of the HEDEP<sup>29</sup> in the Kurdish region. Celil Toksöz explains this theatre's ambivalent connection to party politics in the southeastern provinces, particularly in Diyarbakir, more clearly:

Artists and politicians know each other already from outside the party. In any case, such a party [like the HDP] stands by the Kurdish people, so they want to address all aspects of their people, including music, art, culture and also theatre. What is interesting is that during the better times, the HEDEP did not intervene in the repertoire of the Diyarbakir Metropolitan Municipal City Theatre or in any other city. They were autonomous, also from the mayor; he didn't interfere in the choices of the repertoire. . . . The repertoire was set in intimate circles. So I think that even before the HDP wrote their party program, the Kurds knew what to do. . . . And it works the other way around too: the HDP observed that Kurdish theatre is doing well since the '90s while they were showing aspects of their program; so they naturally want to stimulate it.

In city theatres where the Kurdish party until recently was in power, it seems that the sought-for autonomy of theatre does not only apply to content but also any influence by the political establishment.

Nevertheless, as Toksöz alludes to, political culture and ideology are bound to drip into the repertoire choices since a select circle, namely a board appointed by the state, selects all staged plays a year in advance. This is standard practice in all state and municipal theatres in Turkey. Although this may be seen as a form of self-censorship induced by the state but organized by the cultural sector itself, this may play out beneficially to those theatres in areas where the BDP<sup>30</sup> is at its strongest. Moreover, Toksöz seems to suggest that the HDP (BDP's fraternal party in the rest of Turkey) supports those theatres that have contributed to the recognition of the Kurdish language and culture since it fits their political agenda. So in the BDP-controlled municipalities, the political influence exists instead in the similar mindset, and in the informal politics of appointments and connections between artists and politicians, than in enforced boundaries on what one can say and what not. However, during the state of emergency, many of the state cultural institutions were shut down in 2017 (see note 19), even when the government-appointed trustees are from the BDP. In this sense, creating theatre in Kurdish in the southeast of Turkey, despite its predominantly cultural and artistic aims, often reveals a complex relationship to who is in charge.

Because of that complicated relation, depending on one's political stance, there is also dissatisfaction among Kurdish artists with the current politics as influenced by the BDP and HDP, voiced by Tezcanli for instance:

Kurdish theatre got its share from the current political process in Turkey. In this time, in this oppressive environment that we are going through while HDP is supposed to be the voice of the oppressed, Kurdish theatre is brought to the point of extinction instead of staying active like it is supposed to.

Such an unforgiving statement needs contextualization, however, as it may reflect a Turkish assimilative standpoint that puts more blame on Kurdish party politics for voicing the oppressed than on the oppressor regime. Such a reversed postcolonialist viewpoint seems to correspond with mainstream explanations of the current political crisis in Turkish media that refer in one breath to the PKK and HDP as the agitators. What it also shows, beyond its ideological ambivalence, is a point of desperation due to the targeting of the institutional structures that were helpful to Kurdish culture. And it certainly demonstrates that there is much more incoherence and ambivalence regarding the predicament of theatre and politics among Kurdish artists than we can discuss within the scope of this essay.

Related to our question, “is Kurdish theatre political,” one could also pose the question how much Kurdish theatre *can* contribute to the politics of the Kurdish struggle when its political and social message, however obscured that may be, poses threats to its existence in Turkey. Yusuf Unay proposes an initial answer:

Theatre allows you to connect with the audience by looking into their eyes, making you feel their breath drawn. That's why, when you try to convey social messages through theatre, you put the aesthetic obligations in danger. . . . However, when you look into someone's eyes in the audience and say, “Look, there is someone sitting next to you. His village was burnt down too, and he had to migrate to somewhere else like you,” it means more to me emotionally than any political message. . . . In the past, the Kurdish dramatists made the mistake of becoming the spokesman of a political party. . . . Theatre may be weak regarding the mass influence, but it has a great power to change things.

Unay takes further Metin's earlier point that politics should not influence theatre in a somewhat reductive understanding of the theatre-politics dichotomy. He states clearly that theatre should not aim to be a mouthpiece for politics but that the emotions (Rancière's distribution of the sensible) theatre can evoke are political when they are communal. It is in this shared aesthetic space of the theatre touching the *demos* (the people, the citizens, in Rancière's thinking) through the senses where most independent Kurdish theatre artists, like Unay and Metin, find political expression without intending to make political theatre.<sup>31</sup> Yaşam Kaya gives the example of Tiyatro Avesta's staging of Gogol's *Diary of a Madman* as an exploration beyond immediate political significance for the Kurdish question: “Being able to engage with the non-political universal topics of theater is a great achievement on the part of urbanized middle-class Kurds” (2012, qtd. in Baş 2015, 333). DestAr's staging of the Kurdish play *Bûka Lekî* is yet another example of how Kurdish theatre can narrate and reflect on psychosexual notions of love, loss and desire, within a context of the Kurdish urban middle class and without any overt political references. Kaya suggests that these notions “distinctly

describe humanity” (2012, n.p.). In order to underscore the play’s interweaving of Kurdish and Western narratives, it blended traditional Kurdish with modern Western music.

Following Unay’s positivist stance towards theatre’s ability to “change things,” Metin believes it must be the theatre practitioner’s foremost attitude to aspire artistic independence through which progress and recovery can be achieved:

We should be independent, equalist, capable of resisting against all kinds of censorship, not engaged in any kind of ideology as artists who never cease to study, analyze and deepen the understanding of the equation between art, politics, life and aesthetics. If we can be this way and continue this attitude as a tradition—and we have artists like that—we can talk about positive progress. I think there are some developments in this sense. And yes, I think drama helps the social healing process.

Social healing, as through reconciliation and recovery, is undoubtedly also a political goal within the Kurdish movement. But whether or not theatre can achieve this for the “masses,” whether or not Kurdish artists seek to convey social messages through a play to address this, Kurdish theatre does “act” within a political space that influences people’s lives. It is in this context that we should understand Metin and others’ plea to equate art (the aesthetic regime), politics and life while avoiding interference by a political agenda and instrumentalization of the theatre for that agenda, which may be felt as oppressive, reductive, restrictive, and counterproductive to their message. It does of course not rule out a nationalist frame of perception that is looking inwardly within the Kurdish community as this theatre is still seeking legitimacy in a very politically volatile environment.

Finally, as was touched upon by the end of the first section, although it is highly relevant to the question of how theatre produces and troubles Kurdish identity and community, we propose a closer look at the discussion of authenticity in how Kurdish theatre artists position their theatre praxis against “Turkish” and “Western” aesthetic practices. Language and the reinvention of the *dengbêj* performance tradition are central to this debate. Before we dig into this last issue, one remark on the political nature of the authenticity debate is, however, in order:

Debates about hybridity in postcolonial theory tend to go hand in hand with discussions of authenticity. Griffiths reminds us that “authenticity” is a politically charged concept rather than a “natural” or preexisting attribute. While it may be politically exigent for non-Western peoples to deploy discourses of authenticity in order to bolster their cultural authority, in the hands of Western critics and commentators, the sign of the “authentic” can easily become a fetishized commodity that grounds the legitimacy of other cultures “not in their practice but in our desire” (Griffiths 1994, 82). (Gilbert and Lo 2002, 46)

Likewise, it could be said that Kurdish theatre’s insistence on either a claim of hybridity or authenticity is politically charged. We will have to question if the claim of authenticity of Kurdish theatre culture is genuine or fetishized as a common desire on the part of Kurdish artists, or of Turkish or Western commentators. We will see in the following subsection a small case-study of how Kurdish theatre artists, in their search for cultural representation and acknowledgment in Turkey by claiming authenticity through *dengbêj* aesthetic practices, may fall into the trap of fetishization and perhaps even (self-)orientalization in the eye of the Turkish and/or “Western” critic.

## Reimagining Performance Traditions, (Re)-Imagining the Future?

So far, we have focused on the role of state and private theatres in the production of Kurdish theatre in Turkey. Yet, if we want to address the Kurdish “theatre” performance traditions fully, one important institution has not been mentioned: the *Mala dengbêjan* (House of Dengbêj), which opened in Diyarbakir in May 2007 as a forerunner to the brief reform period called the “Kurdish Opening” or “Kurdish Initiative” in 2013 (Council of Europe 2016, 12). This EU-supported organization<sup>32</sup> is significant to mention within the discussion of authenticity and Kurdish theatre’s relation to an “imagined” past.

Rezan Aksoy already mentioned the *dengbêjîk* as a performance tradition that is separate from Kurdish drama. It is nonetheless theatrical since it depended on highly trained musical storytellers or *dengbêj* (from “deng” voice, and “bej” say) who travelled from village to village, recounting stories and singing songs. As Toksöz explains, “they did something before an audience so they needed to get prepared, to rehearse. There are theatrical aspects to that.” It is historically understood that these travelling artists had an important social role as they performed in people’s houses, illuminating pre-eminent members of the community while rearranging their *kilam* (i.e., musical story) at each destination. Their stories often contained information about other villages they visited or important historical events that over time became ingrained in the Kurdish collective memory. As the *dengbêj* trade was passed on from master to apprentice over centuries, a rich tradition of oral literature (folktales, stories, and *çirok* or fairy tales) was established and preserved until the twentieth and now twenty-first century (Kaya 2012). Today, this oral tradition is reinvented and understood as a discursive sphere for freedom that makes up the “staple” of the Kurdish society and culture (Kurpiewska-Korbut 2016, 99–100). The *dengbêj* are also often regarded as “the first practitioners of Kurdish narrative theatre” (Baş 2015, 318). Related narrative forms like “çîrokbêj” and “vebêj” also represent a vast resource for Kurdish theatre (318).

The foundation of the *Mala dengbêjan* could be seen as an attempt to commemorate and rediscover the Kurds’ cultural memories, fostered by official narratives, of a multicultural past. But there is also something anachronistic or pastiche-like in reinventing traditions at a time when they seem out of practice. Scalbert-Yücel (2009) relates this to a “nostalgia industry” that started roughly in the 1990s, which one can also observe in other parts of the world:

EU-funded projects that openly aim at developing a “cultural dialogue” promote an image of Turkey as a peaceful “cultural mosaic.” But these cultures and this diversity, in the way they are exhibited and displayed, may also be frozen and innocent representations of a lost but also imagined past (De Certeau 1993). The way memories are remembered, traditions reinvented (as in the *dengbêj*’s case) often confirms this. (Scalbert-Yücel 2009, 3)

Indeed, in *The Writing of History* (1988; 1993), Michel de Certeau’s vision of history-writing is that history is always in the process of making and, therefore, *remaking* which is inevitably impinged by a level of “fiction,” “the repressed other of historical discourse” (White 2005, 147).<sup>33</sup> This idea also rings through Benedict Anderson’s notion of the “imagined community” (1983) that participates and finds legitimacy for its existence in a historical discourse that often claims national continuity where there is none. Scalbert-Yücel’s argument about the reinvention of *dengbêj* as part of a lost but imagined past seems to fit de Certeau’s notion of the “return to origins,” which paradoxically “states

the contrary of what it believes, at least in the sense that it presupposes a *distancing* in respect to a past . . . and a will to *recover* what in one fashion or another seems lost in a received language” (1988, 163). One can see a similar paradox in the seemingly “innocent” representation of Kurdish identities and their past through a return to the origins of dengbêj. As de Certeau suggests, this return is based on the fiction that the tradition—and its nostalgic belonging to a simpler, perhaps more multicultural and politically innocuous past—has already been lost.

The relationship between dengbêj and Kurdish theatre finds its apex in Celil Toksöz’s *Hamlet* adaptation in 2012, translated by Kawa Nemir and staged in Kurmanji, with the subtitle “Hebûn an nebun” (*to be or not to be*). Toksöz adapted Shakespeare’s revenge tragedy with elements of the dengbêj tradition. We want to briefly focus on this play to exemplify one way of reclamation and reinvention of the dengbêj tradition in a performative context, particularly because of the unique historical momentum in which it was conceived. However, we should not overemphasize its importance as a sole example of the so-called nostalgia industry surrounding dengbêj.



Left, Gülseven Medan (Ophelia); right, singer Rojda (Getrude); rear, Yavuz Akkuzu (Hamlet). Used with permission.

The play opens with a narrator and a conversation on how Shakespeare, due to its etymology, should be Kurdish. In the final scenes, Ophelia would also only sing dengbêjlik.<sup>34</sup> The production was a co-production between the Amsterdam-based RAST Theater and the Diyarbakir Metropolitan Municipal City Theater, which had already a history of repertoire building in the Kurdish language since 2003. Toksöz explains his choice for a Kurdish *Hamlet* as well as the political circumstances in which the production took place:

It was very relevant to us that a Turkish minister had once said, regarding the question if the Kurdish language could be accepted in schools and if a course in Kurdish should be implemented, that Kurdish is not a language because “you can’t even play Hamlet in the Kurdish language.” That really hurt me. That is why I thought: if we are going to go for it, it should be *Hamlet*. And then, crisis times started. There were the hunger strikers. Three days after we arrived in Diyarbakir, the hunger strike had stopped by Öcalan<sup>35</sup> and it looked like a gesture towards rebalance was coming from Ankara. We would play in Ankara later on and we heard that perhaps the then-President Abdullah Gül would come to see our opening night. How would he respond? Do we give him a hand? All the HEDEP people wanted to talk with him. So there was this constant doubt: yes no yes no. . . . Eventually the Minister of Culture, Ertuğ Günay came. And when he comes, all the highest ranked employees of the state theatre (*Devlet Tiyatrosu*) come and the whole shebang around

it. So many big names of the theatre world came. That was then a gesture of balance. And that is why we didn't get trouble.

Despite the rehearsal process being hampered by air and hunger strikes and not being sponsored by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism in Ankara, the play became the poster event for the Kurdish “opening” with subsequent broadcastings of the play on television. Shakespeare’s tragedy was chosen as an authoritative cultural mediator to raise international visibility and awareness for Kurdish theatre and culture and its historical circumstance, particularly concerning the recognition of the Kurdish language in Turkey, which was and still is an incomplete process. The quintessential question, *to be or not to be* (“hebun an nebun” and later in the play, as “Ya herrü ya merrü,” i.e., even if for the worst, let it be), is directly posed to the Kurdish community, as Toksöz suggests in an interview with *NRC Handelsblad*: “Do we need to forget our culture or to keep on struggling to keep it alive?” (Beekmans October 16, 2012; my trans. *PV*). But due to the performance’s hybridity and the choice of *Hamlet* as a marker of cultural standard, one could question here: which culture?

One could argue that the success of this first Kurdish *Hamlet* was precisely the reinvention of traditions in a double sense. First of all, it offers the Kurdish audiences, inside and outside Turkey, a confirmation that their language (and culture) can produce serious drama on the stage just as any other language. It could also be seen as a strong signal to policy-makers in Ankara that any cultural policy regarding the Kurds should evolve away from conflict management towards cultural diversity management. For this purpose, the Kurdish adaptation of *Hamlet* emphasized the commonalities between Kurdish culture, such as the Kurdish tradition of marrying a sister-in-law and a kinship-oriented revenge called *kan davası*, and common themes in Shakespeare’s tragedy. Second, the reimagining of the dengbêj culture through this *Hamlet* production could be seen as feeding the nostalgia for this storytelling tradition in a time when even some of the actors had to (re)learn how to pronounce certain words in Kurmanji. The dengbêj tradition was evoked by means of folkloric elements, such as Gertrude wrapped in a scarf and Claudius with a nargile (water pipe), accompanied by Kurdish songs in the dengbêj tradition. Near the end, Ophelia’s soliloquies are purely sung.

Despite this unique exchange of artistic *know-how* within the devising process, the play could, however, fall into the trap of “cultural promotion” or even worse, a “native-representative” aesthetic that would lower spectators’ viewing expectations. Indeed the production was presented and supported by the Dutch government in the context of its anniversary of four hundred years of diplomatic relations between Turkey and the Netherlands. Within that framework, it toured in 2012 in seven Dutch city theatres. Such support programs, however, do call for our caution against the prejudice that non-Western “others” would produce *culture* (where artistic expressions are often seen as collective ethnic markers) vs. the “West” *having* culture and producing *art* (Karaca 2010, 131). Toksöz comments fervently:

I have fought in the Netherlands to prove that I don't make culture but theatre. This is an important difference. I have worked thirty years for this. When you make something, they may say: this is your culture; we make space for your culture, but I say: no, you are just giving museum space for culture as you do for folkloric dances. I make theatre. This is art. I have fought to make these changes in the Netherlands.

As Scalbert-Yücel (2009) suggested above, this commemorative act of the “nostalgia industry” around dengbêj plays an important part in the exhibition of culture. Kurds and Turks might even reproduce this bias and frame of looking when they regard modern drama as a predominantly

“Western” art form instead of an authentic art form within Turkey. The reinvention of *dengbêj* as an alternative performative form to drama, despite the cultural legitimacy it claims and receives, demonstrates yet another ambivalence Kurdish (theatre) artists will need to come to terms with.

## Concluding Remarks

Our interviews with Kurdish theatre practitioners in Turkey suggest that their art praxis is marked by much ambivalence regarding their relationship to current politics. They give us at least three key insights into the relationship between theatre, culture, identity politics, and reconciliation for Kurdish audiences and communities.

First, it is problematic to speak of a “Kurdish theatre” proper. Rather, in Turkey we should speak of theatre in the Kurdish language, which is predominantly dramatic and dependent on a play text. As a contemporary form, it is also a rather recent, urban phenomenon and should not be isolated from the Kurdish Opening with significant policy changes in 2002 and 2013. This policy climate was expected to safeguard certain fundamental rights, freedoms, and democracy for Kurds in the southeast region in the long run, where imaginings of political autonomy and sovereignty are gradually realized through art and cultural production. The partial recognition of the Kurdish language Kurmanji in artistic domains, such as literature, criticism, drama, and dramaturgy, is indispensable in this process. It is, therefore, inevitable that the Kurdish art scene shares “nationalist” political tendencies.

Second, despite this micro-nationalist context, politics is seen as a burden to the artist. On the one hand, the perception of Kurdish theatre is unavoidably political, whether it expresses aspects of the Kurdish struggle deliberately or not. On the other hand, there is a perceivable link with the political agenda of Kurdish political parties who have recuperated those feeling underrepresented and oppressed, such as the BDP and HDP, which have been increasingly successful in breaking AKP’s majority and influence in the Kurdish region and other urban areas in Turkey. Groups like DestAr Tiyatro / Şermola Performans are believed “to provide solutions to relieve the uneasiness of Kurdish social life” (Nurtsch 2014). And indeed, some of the artists believe in a Kurdistan as an unrealized territory and nation for Kurds. However, Kurdish theatre artists struggle to make theatre for its own sake, beyond a political agenda, in an attempt to find larger audiences. This “apolitical” stance fits in a reconciling and rebalancing gesture to reunite Kurdish communities in the southeast, and Kurds and Turks in cities like Istanbul. Yet it is also part of a broader identity politics, and hence, part of the same nationalist myths the artists struggle against since they might lead to further bans and censorship. This is a vicious circle that Kurdish artists share with other nationalist movements demanding cultural revivals of local communities in the world.

Third, in contradiction of the ensuing reimagining of traditions that help to separate Kurdish theatre aesthetically as an art form from its Turkish relative, intercultural theatre in Western Europe has taught us to be wary of treating ethnically “other” artists as native informants or representatives of a different culture that would either fatally end up confirming the cultural frames, aesthetic practices, and epistemes of theatre of “the West,” or fetishize otherness as a selling point and commodity. International artistic collaboration and exchange are necessary for Kurdish theatre to keep its momentum and existence, particularly in times of crisis like now, but Kurdish artists and international stakeholders should be aware of the possible asymmetries and power dynamics in the collaboration and perception of the work. By the same token, Kurdish artists are confronted with

the inescapable Western aspects of their artwork in their relation to Turkish theatre history and theatre education. Higher education and theatre training, informed performance studies, and mature art criticism in the Kurdish language are vital in this. Turkey's unresolved Kurdish conflict, a widespread fear for Kurdish separatism fed by mainstream media as well as mechanisms of institutionalized racism, however, limit such developments.

All of the above dilemmas show us that being a Kurdish theatre artist in today's Turkey is a difficult subject position to occupy and maintain. Despite all this, many do continue, and others make it abroad. It is in this currently conflictual space that Kurdish theatre moves in. We end this article with a final inspirational note by Mîrza Metin who, despite the current (self-)censorship and controlled repression, still has a hopeful message:

Kurdish drama was born into censorship. It knows how to deal with it and find new solutions about this problem. Censorships continue to live in different versions. Kurdish drama is not only about producing plays. It is about finding ways to defeat censorship, as well as strength and resistance. Resistance keeps going on.

Through theatre's resilience, we can perhaps start to imagine a brighter future for Kurds in Turkey.

### **Artist and Translator Biographies**

Rezan Aksoy studied scenic arts and worked as an instructor and director in Izmir while contributing to the organization "Halkların Köprüsü" (The Bridge between Peoples), which supports refugees. Discussions in this group with researchers from Berlin's Alice Solomon Hochschule led him to Berlin in November 2016 to give a lecture on "the relationship between immigration and art." At the same time, he was asked to give another speech at the Rosa Luxemburg Association on the political developments in Turkey. When Turkish police started to investigate him, he decided to stay in Germany. He sees himself as part of the Kurdish movement. He is now trying to establish his own theatre group in Germany.

Mîrza Metin started out as an actor in Mesopotamian Culture Centre where he got most of his training. He won several prizes for his successful play *Disco 5 No'lu* in 2012. He was also on the big screen in several movies. He played a role in a Kurdish short movie called *Pera Berbangê*. He established DestAR Theatre group in October 2008 with Berfin Zenderlioğlu after which they founded Şermola Performans in 2010. He is currently residing in Cologne (Germany) as part of an *artist at risk* program.

Ismail Oyur Tezcanlı comes from a family of artisans and tailors. Through his studies at 9 Eylül University in Izmir, he developed from a tailor at Diyarbakir State Theatre to a costume designer. He became a permanent staff member of the Diyarbakir Metropolitan Municipality City Theater. He also recently worked at Amed City Theatre in Şişli, Istanbul.

Celil Toksöz is a Turkish-Kurdish director, based and working in the Netherlands. As a leftist activist, he was in prison for four and a half years. He came to the Netherlands as a political refugee in 1986. While in prison, he read classical theatre plays, among which *Hamlet* left a great impression. In 1995, he founded the Turkish/Kurdish organization Tiyatro Kina in the Netherlands, with

collaborating Turkish actors and directors. In 2000, he was one of the founders and artistic directors of the intercultural Theatre RAST.

Yusuf Unay studied dramatic writing at 9 Eylül University in Izmir. He taught applied theatre, worked as a dramaturge and director, and wrote several plays (including for children) as well as scripts for radio and TV. He works for Tiyatro Kalemi and Theatre Deng û Bêj, of which he is one of the founding members.

Gülcan Irmak Aslanoğlu is a graduate of Hacettepe University in Ankara. Her preparatory research, communication with the interviewees, and translation of the interviews were indispensable to this project.

### List of Abbreviations and Key Terms

AKP: the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*), led by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. This party has been in power since 2002.

BDP: the Peace and Democracy Party (*Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi*, or in Kurdish, *Partiya Aştî û Demokrasiyê*), Kurdish political party, which existed from 2008 to 2014 when it changed its name to the Democratic Regions Party and its parliamentary caucus joined the HDP. BDP would then exclusively operate at the local or regional administrative level of government.

Çîrok: fairy tales, and related to that, *Çîrokbêj*: storytellers. In Kurdish cultural traditions, storytelling is performed through songs. Their (classical) music culture is thus intertwined with oral literary traditions. Besides the *Çîrokbêj*, two types of musical performers recite stories while singing: *Dengbêj* (bards) and *Stranbêj* (minstrels). The *Dengbêj* were travelling artists who, from generation to generation, have delivered the most significant historical events of the Kurdish people, as ingrained in their collective memory, through epic songs (*keilam*, musical stories). *Vebêj* is yet another word for narrators.

Dengbêj: the Kurdish advanced “sung-speech” tradition (oral literature) that is transmitted by Kurdish “bards” who are also called *Dengbêj* (from “*deng*,” voice and “*bej*,” say, so literally “to convey words verbally”).

Gezi (movement): the waves of insurgency—some call it a civil rights movement due to the input from civil societies—in the summer of 2013 that started as an environmentalist and anti-capitalist concern against the demolition of Gezi Park near Taksim Square in Istanbul.

HDP: the pro-Kurdish, leftist Peoples’ Democratic Party. Due to the ten percent threshold in Turkey’s electoral system, which in the past forced pro-Kurdish parties to run candidates as independents, the AKP was able for a steady period to gain the majority of parliamentary seats from the Kurdish southeastern region. The HDP challenged that in the general elections of June 2015 by running as a party list. To the surprise of many, the HDP won with thirteen percent of the national vote and blocked AKP’s parliamentary majority.

Halperkê: (also known as “halparke” or the Kurdish “halay”): a collection of handholding round or circle dances in traditional Kurdish culture. Its present-day, modernized performance is known to be deeply symbolical of solidarity and resistance.

Kurmanji: a main group of dialects spoken in the southeastern region of Turkey. Other main Kurdish dialects are Zazaki (Kirmanckî or Kirdki, from Iran, spoken by the Zaza community in Turkey’s eastern Anatolia), Gorani (spoken by Kurds in Iraqi Kurdistan and the Hewraman mountains between Iran and Iraq), and Sorani (mainly spoken in Iranian Kurdistan, but also in Iraqi Kurdistan).

Mesopotamia: the reference to a mythologized “Mesopotamia” of ancient times—as in MKM’s name—often serves a political argument to claim back a part of Turkey’s territory. According to Casier (2011), it plays a role in a larger reimagination by the Kurdish Movement (and Abdullah Öcalan) to move focus from Kurdistan towards “Mesopotamia” as the lands once populated by the Kurds, now a political space to be (re-)appropriated and transformed. The reference fits in a larger, micro-nationalist narrative (and myth-making) that emphasizes the Kurdish relation to an ancient, wider Mesopotamian region and culture against what is imagined today as “Anatolian” within Turkey’s national(ist) literary history. It thereby supposedly locates today’s Kurdish movement in an overlooked Kurdish golden age in ancient Mesopotamia in 2000 BC, which contributed to the West and Anatolian civilization long before “Turks” arrived in the region (Schäfers 2017, 9).

MKM: the Mesopotamia Cultural Centre (*Mezopotamya Kültür Merkezi* in Turkish, or *Navenda Çanda Mezopotamya/MÇM* in Kurdish). Its first office was established in Istanbul in 1991 just after the ban on the Kurdish language was lifted, both for print and recording (law 2932) (Stansfield and Shareef 2017, 263). The influence of its founder, the Kurdish author and journalist Musa Anter, who wrote his first play in the Kurdish language in the 1990s, is not to be underestimated. The Tigris and Euphrates Cultural Centre was the Diyarbakır branch of the Mesopotamia Cultural Centre, but it is closed today due to the state of emergency.

OHAL: literally, “Governorship of Region in State of Emergency” (*Olağanüstü Hal Bölge Valiliği*), which originally referred to the permanent state of emergency in Turkey’s southeastern Kurdish region, created in 1987 to curb the developing Kurdish-Turkish conflict. This OHAL was officially discontinued on November 30, 2002, but special Turkish security forces kept monitoring the region. After the failed coup attempt of July 15, 2016, a nationwide OHAL was declared on July 20, 2016, with renewals every three months until midnight on July 18, 2018.

PKK: the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*), which is a militant organization in Turkey and Iraq that started as a radical leftist political organization to liberate the oppressed Kurdish people from national and class oppression. It was founded in 1978 by Abdullah Öcalan, who was hunted down and captured in Kenya in 1999 and is now serving a lifelong prison sentence in solitary confinement on Imrali Island in the Turkish Sea of Marmara. From 1984 onwards, the PKK has been involved in ongoing armed conflict with Turkish security forces. It is listed internationally as a terrorist organization by NATO, the US, and the EU, among other allies of Turkey.

## Notes

1. OHAL stands for *Olağanüstü Hal Bölge Valiliği*, meaning “Governorship of Region in State of Emergency.”
2. We would like to thank Dr. Görkem Akgöz for her support throughout the research and writing process.
3. Gülcan Irmak Aslanoğlu provided all communications with the interviewees and translations. Our interviewees all consented to the use of their names. Biographical notes and information on their exilic situation can be found at the end of this article.
4. We conducted the interviews in Turkish, except for one interview in Dutch, by e-mail and Skype between September and December 2017, on the basis of ethical consent and objective translation, and with prior assurance of confidentiality and privacy when needed or desired. The choice of language was conscious in order to avoid uncertainty about meanings when the interviews were translated into English.
5. In this context, it is also significant that neither the author nor the translator received financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this essay. They are aware of the risks of publishing, which makes them politically vulnerable given the sensitivity of the topic. They had no other reasons than academic ones to compile the data and process it according to academic standards and methodology.
6. When we refer to the Kurdish language spoken in Turkey, we actually mean Kurmanji as a main group of dialects spoken in the southeastern region in addition to Zazaki, Gorani, and Sorani.
7. In contrast to Kurdish cinema, where for instance Yılmaz Güney is always referred to as an authority figure, Kurdish theatre in Turkey does not seem to yield such a historical figure as a role model or “heritage,” which makes our choice to focus on “source culture” even more pertinent.
8. Law No. 2932 was enacted in 1983 after the military coup of 1980 as part of the junta prohibiting a separate Kurdish identity, including the use of Kurdish languages.
9. Bülent Ecevit was prime minister of Turkey in 1974, 1977, 1978–79, and 1999–2002. He claimed that his paternal grandfather was of Kurdish descent, but for most of his career, he opposed any proposal to legalize education and television broadcasting in the Kurdish language (Kinzer 2006).
10. Despite a general lack of linguistic knowledge and grasp of Kurmanci in the last decades, Kurdish folk music and stories have been traditionally passed down from one generation to the next (Kinzer 2010). Music traditions survived the bans, particularly after the 1980 military coup, up until the 1990s by means of underground recordings, pirate radio and illegally copied tapes sold on the black market (Kimmelman 2011). Theatre traditions such as Kurdish “village plays” (similar to Turkish “Köy Sehirlik Oyunları”), particularly those associated with the yearly Newroz festival (the Kurdish new year), weddings and other rituals, survived in the private sphere through performances inside homes. We should, however, remain vigilant of any particular frame which risks Orientalizing and/or romanticizing these forms as a kind of lesser, non-professional, peasant drama based on folk rituals.
11. Author of the classic—and nationalist—love poem *Mam and Zin* (originally “Mem û Zîn” or “Memî Alan û Zînî Buhtan,” written in 1694), Ahmad Khani (1651–1707) is perhaps the best-known Kurdish poet and most popular until this day. Some see the publication of *Mam and Zin* in the Kurdish literary journal *Jine* (Life), published in Istanbul in 1919, as the beginning of modern Kurdish drama.
12. The Mesopotamia Cultural Centre (*Mezopotamya Kültür Merkezi*/MKM in Turkish, or *Navenda Çanda Mezopotamya*/MÇM in Kurdish) constitutes a vast network of regional offices and cultural centres in urban areas in Turkey, such as Diyarbakir, Van, Sanlıurfa, Mersin, Adana, Izmir, Mardin, and Siirt.
13. In fact, most Kurdish plays of this early period were performed first in non-professional contexts, such as at union meetings, in makeshift theatres in basements, and at protests or strikes (Bas 2015, 315). As they were often political (mostly agitprop) and underground, it was still difficult to stage plays in Kurdish in the 1990s.

14. The government did forbid one of their plays, so the actors took it to the European Court of Human Rights. In *Ulusoy and Others v. Turkey*, the Court decided on May 3, 2007 that the ban on Kurdish theatre production in municipal buildings was a breach of the freedom of expression (ECHR Report, January 17 2017).
15. Note that Mîrza Metin refers here to the inability of the Kurds to create their own nation, often referred to as “Kurdistan” due to historical circumstances and repressed rebellions like those between 1925 and 1938 in Turkey, when the Ottoman sultanate and caliphate were abolished (in 1922 and 1924, respectively) (Özkırımlı 2018, n.p.).
16. In Turkey, the theatre infrastructure consists of three segments: First, there are the state theatres, operas, and dance institutions based in the big cities. They are funded through the General Directorate of Turkish State Theatres by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism but now fall under the jurisdiction of the presidency. Second, there are municipal theatres funded by the municipalities. And third, there are numerous private or independent theatre companies, which are self-sufficient (some more commercial than the other) and/or partially dependent on government subsidies. Şermola Performans belongs to the third category. As a theatre space, they also shared their facilities with different Kurdish groups. Recently, they moved out of their spaces in Beyoğlu (Istanbul), but they continue to tour as a company while performing in other private theatres in Istanbul, such as Moda Sahnesi, Oyun Atölyesi, and Kumbaracı50.
17. Other, notable support from the Ministry of Culture and Tourism included a grant of two consecutive years for *Ar Tiyatro*, a TL 21,000 government grant for the production of *Cert* (The Experiment) in 2009–2010, and a TL 30,000 subsidy for *Buka Leki* (The Plastic Bride) in 2010/2011. “Both plays opened to audiences in Istanbul and Anatolia with both Kurdish and Turkish surtitles. The financial support provided by the ministry marked a real milestone” (Kaya 2012).
18. The Minister of Culture and Tourism changed to Mehmet Nuri Ersoy as part of the new cabinet under the newly installed executive presidential system.
19. Among the independent theatres that stage Kurdish plays, there is Teatra Jiyana Nû (which produces under the MKM), Seyri Mesel Theatre, Theatre Avesta, Theatre Bakur, DestAr Theatre, Şermola Performans, Mezopotamya Theatre, Theatre Evîna Welat, and Arsen Poladov Theatre. They are promoting the Kurdish language, culture, and art throughout Turkey (Kurpiewska-Korbut 94).
20. We would like to thank Dr. Özgür Çiçek for her helpful comments on this matter.
21. We are refraining from making any judgmental statements regarding nationalism on either side. We are also not suggesting any ideological profiles of our respondents. We are merely observing such positions from an informed and situated point of view, as it is important to be sensitive to the ideological underpinnings of the debates regarding politics and aesthetics in Kurdish theatre, however ambivalent they are in themselves.
22. We should, of course, stress here that we limited our outlook to Kurdish theatre in Turkey. In Armenia, one could obviously find aesthetic approaches in Kurdish theatre that are more varied and differentiated from its Turkish counterpart.
23. Ever since the 1960s, in spite of the then rather nationalistic 1961 (post-coup) constitution, which included a new bill of rights in accordance to the European Convention of Human Rights, Kurdish activist intellectuals took a leading role in Kurdish cultural and political activism (Güneş 2012, 49; Arslan 2015, 40).
24. Among the Kurdish cultural institutions closed down in the wake of the post-coup witch hunt are the Diyarbakir Metropolitan Municipality City Theatre (*Diyarbakir Büyükşehir Belediyesi Şehir Tiyatrosu*, DBŞT), Batman and Hakkari’s municipal theatres (Ince and Siyah Bant 2017), the NGO Kurdish Institute of Istanbul (Bozarslan 2017), the Feqiyê Teyran Arts and Culture Centre in Hakkari (Ince and Siyah Bant 2017), the Seyr-î Mesel in Istanbul, and various other branches of the Mesopotamia Cultural Centre.
25. *Türkiyeli* is an umbrella term that encompasses all subidentities in Turkey. As Oran (2011) explains in a policy brief for the FPC: “*Türkiyeli* is a term that is just like the term ‘British’—that is the supra-identity of the people who live in Great Britain. The term Turkish, on the other hand, corresponds to ‘English.’” . . . The

term *Türkiyeli* caused a huge turmoil in Turkey, but its use is nowadays considered as normal. In fact, the term has been in use since the 1960s to identify those people who went to Europe for work, or to distinguish the Cypriot Turks from those who went there from Turkey. Yet, the history of the term goes much further back. It was in use before the republic was established. Kurds of Turkey used the term between 1967 and 1969 before they had established the Revolutionary Eastern Cultural Societies (DDKO) in 1969. The term would be forgotten again as “Peoples of Turkey” was used instead as Kurdish nationalism soon developed” (n.p.). Note that reintroducing this term may depend on its use by the imprisoned leader of the PKK, Abdullah Öcalan, but it is uncertain if Mehmet Emin meant the term here in any politically revisionist sense. We think he probably wanted to simply draw a line between Kurds of Kurdistan and those living in Turkey who are supportive of Kurdish theatre.

26. One needs some caution for historical generalizations here, since Turkey’s nationalist traditions were also entangled with Kurdish nationalist ambitions in the Early Republican Period.

27. Until a couple of years ago, Aydın Orak used to run his own one-man, independent theatre, Theatre Avesta in Istanbul.

28. Video excerpts can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=grScRGdniLo>.

29. The HEDEP (1997–2005) brought forth a series of pro-Kurdish parties that sought political representation in the Kurdish districts: DTP (2005–2009), BDP (2008–2014), and HDP (2012–today).

30. Fifty-one out of 106 municipalities in the Kurdish region were recently controlled by the BDP.

31. This idea is similar to Deleuze and Guattari’s in *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature* (1986) that with a minor literature, everything is political (17).

32. Its support included the EU, the Ministry, and the municipality (Scalbert-Yücel 2).

33. In this light, we are wary of any implied “coherence” of our essay where it not only looks for logical consistency between our interviewees’ responses but also takes part in an “imaginative” consistency that history writing inevitably requires. Our contextualized and situated outlook is then not just another subjective “bias” pushing a complicated debate on Kurdish cultural production in a certain direction, but an attempt to unearth the ambivalences in that debate.

34. Many video clips can be found on YouTube. See, for instance, samples of the dengbêj parts: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=czxbBIELyn4>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wp5klypTwk>.

35. Abdullah Öcalan is the imprisoned leader of the PKK.

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