

The Mythological Heritage of the Kurds: Narratives, Beliefs, and Cultural Expressions

I. Introduction: The Landscape of Kurdish Mythology

A. Defining the Scope

Kurdish mythology constitutes a rich and multifaceted domain, encompassing the collective beliefs, narratives, and practices of the culturally and linguistically interconnected peoples who have historically inhabited the mountainous region known as Kurdistan—spanning the northwestern Zagros, northern Mesopotamia, and southeastern Anatolia.¹ This heritage includes ancient Indo-European pagan traditions that predate the arrival of Islam, as well as the local myths, legends, and folklore that continued to evolve and flourish after the region's Islamization.¹

The geographical location of Kurdistan, situated at the crossroads of major ancient civilizations like Mesopotamia and the Hittite Empire, and influenced by successive waves of religious traditions including Mithraism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, has fostered a remarkably complex and syncretic cultural environment.³ This legacy is vividly reflected in the persistence of distinct Kurdo-syncretic religious communities such as the Yazidis, Yarsan (also known as Ahl-e Haqq or Kakayi), Alevis, and Shabak, among others, who serve as living repositories of this diverse heritage.³ This report aims to provide a coherent overview of Kurdish mythology, drawing exclusively upon the provided academic and ethnographic source materials, with a steadfast commitment to explicitly attributing every piece of information to its specific source, as mandated by the user query [User Query].

B. The Centrality of Oral Tradition (Zargotin)

The bedrock upon which much of Kurdish mythology rests is its vibrant oral tradition, known in Kurdish as *Zargotin*. For centuries, particularly during periods lacking widespread literacy or state-supported cultivation of written Kurdish, oral transmission was the primary means of preserving and disseminating cultural knowledge, historical memory, and mythological narratives.⁴ Kurdish folklore has long been perceived as a cornerstone of Kurdish national identity and a vital source of information about Kurdish history.⁵ This perception was particularly potent during the nation-building processes of the late Ottoman Empire and its successor states, influenced by European romantic nationalist thought, exemplified by Johann Gottfried Herder's concept of the *Volkgeist* (spirit of the people) residing in folk traditions.⁸ Central to this oral transmission are the *dengbêj*, traditional Kurdish folk singers and storytellers.¹⁷ Often illiterate themselves, these figures have served as crucial keepers of

collective memory, memorizing and performing vast repertoires of epics (*destan*), tales (*çîrok*), songs (*stran*), and laments (*xerîbî* or *dîrok*) that recount tales of love, war, heroism, and historical events, passing them down through generations via apprenticeship.¹⁰ The resilience of this oral tradition, capable of surviving even when written materials could be destroyed, underscores its profound importance for cultural continuity, especially under conditions of political pressure or suppression.¹⁰ This power inherent in non-textual cultural transmission highlights its strategic value for communities lacking state support for their written culture.

C. Challenges and Approaches in Studying Kurdish Mythology

The academic study of Kurdish mythology, like Kurdish Studies more broadly, has faced significant historical challenges. Political constraints and the lack of state support in the countries encompassing Kurdistan have often hindered systematic research and fieldwork.¹¹ Furthermore, external scholarship, particularly from earlier periods, sometimes presented skewed or fantastical perspectives on Kurdish culture and origins. For instance, some early Arab and Persian historians propagated myths suggesting Kurds descended from spirits or were the offspring of King Solomon and jinn.¹ This historical backdrop necessitates a critical evaluation of sources, prioritizing perspectives emerging from within Kurdish communities and contemporary, rigorous scholarship.

Despite these hurdles, recent decades have witnessed a flourishing of Kurdish folklore studies, propelled by the dedicated efforts of native Kurdish researchers, amateur collectors, and academics, alongside continued international scholarly interest.⁵ A notable shift in contemporary approaches understands folklore collection not merely as preservation but as an active strategy for Kurdish language revitalization and the production of indigenous knowledge.⁵ This reframing connects the study of mythology directly to the ongoing cultural and political concerns of Kurdish communities, viewing it as a means of challenging hegemonic narratives and asserting cultural sovereignty.⁶ The inherent link between the study of Kurdish mythology and the broader political and cultural aspirations of the Kurdish people is thus undeniable; it is an engagement with living identity politics and cultural survival, not simply an exploration of the past.

D. Report Structure and Citation

This report will proceed by examining the cosmological foundations of Kurdish myth, exploring the pantheon of divine beings and mythical figures, delving into major narrative cycles and folktales, analyzing comparative mythological connections and religious syncretism, investigating the reflection of folklore in cultural practices, and discussing the methods of transmission and documentation. Throughout this exploration, every significant claim and piece of data will be meticulously attributed to the specific source document from which it was derived, using the provided identifiers [User Query].

II. Cosmological Foundations: Creation and Origin Narratives

A. Yazidi Cosmogony: The Pearl, the Heptad, and Tawûsî Melek

The Yazidi creation narrative offers a distinct cosmology deeply rooted in the region's ancient past. It begins not with formless chaos, but with a primordial emptiness where God (referred to as Xwedê, Êzdan, or Pedsha) existed alone.²⁰ From His own pure light or essence, God created a *dur*, a white pearl, in which He dwelt for a vast period, often cited as forty thousand years.²⁰

Before the creation of the material world, God brought forth seven Divine Beings or Angels from His light.²⁰ This group, known as the Heptad or *heft sirr* ("Seven Mysteries"), was assigned the stewardship and administration of the nascent universe.²⁰ The first and foremost among these angels is Tawûsî Melek, the Peacock Angel, appointed as their leader and the principal intermediary between God and the world.²⁰ The angels themselves are emanations of the divine essence (*sur* or *sirr*), sharing in God's nature.²⁰ While sometimes identified with Abrahamic archangels (Gabriel/Cibrayîl, Michael/Mîkayîl, Azrael/Ezrayîl, etc.²⁰), they are more commonly known within the tradition by the names of their earthly manifestations, including figures like Sheikh Shems (associated with the sun), Fexreddin, Sejadin, and Nasirdin.²⁰

The subsequent creation unfolded dramatically. God shouted before the pearl, causing it to split into four pieces.²² From its interior flowed water, forming the primordial sea. The world initially existed as a round, undifferentiated entity.²² God created the form of the seven heavens, the earth, sun, and moon.²¹ According to one account in the *Mishefa Reş*, the angel Yâdîn (or Fakhr al-Dîn in another source) created humans, animals, birds, and beasts, which emerged from a pocket of cloth accompanied by the angels.²¹ Another version describes God solidifying the sea into the quivering earth, placing pieces of the pearl below the earth and at heaven's gate, setting the sun and moon within them, and creating stars, plants, and mountains from the pearl's fragments.²² A later key event involved the arrival of Sheikh Adi ibn Musafir, considered a pivotal reformer and often viewed as an earthly incarnation of Tawûsî Melek, who settled in the sacred valley of Lalish.²¹

The primary sources for these accounts are the Yazidi oral traditions, particularly the sacred hymns known as *Qewls*.¹³ Two texts, the *Mishefa Reş* (Black Book) and the *Kitêba Cilwe* (Book of Revelation), emerged in the late 19th/early 20th century purporting to be ancient Yazidi scriptures containing creation accounts.²¹ However, their authenticity is widely questioned by scholars, who suggest they may be compilations influenced by external interactions or even forgeries, possibly involving figures like Jeremiah Shamir.²¹ This debate highlights a complex transition phase as a primarily oral religion encounters literacy and the external demand for codified scriptures, a process that can itself reshape religious understanding and authority.²¹ The Yazidi cosmology, with its primordial pearl, heptad of divine beings, and the central role of Tawûsî Melek, displays clear divergences from standard Abrahamic creation narratives, pointing instead towards deeper connections with ancient Mesopotamian traditions (parallels to the Anunnaki are suggested²³) and pre-Zoroastrian Iranian beliefs.²⁰ This distinctiveness supports the view that Yazidism preserves older strata of religious thought from the region.

B. The Shamaran Creation Myth: Echoes of Eden?

Within the broader spectrum of Kurdish folklore, the legend of Shamaran stands out as a significant creation myth.³¹ Research by Diana Rostaminezhadan explores this legend through a comparative lens, specifically analyzing its relationship with the Garden of Eden narrative found in Hebrew texts.³¹ Employing a structuralist methodology and drawing upon both mythological and biblical data, this analysis reveals striking parallels between the Shamaran legend and the Eden story.³¹

According to Rostaminezhadan's findings, the two narratives exhibit a coherent and uniform structure, centering on the fundamental theme of the creation of existence and mankind.³¹ Key elements, including the concept of a paradise akin to the Garden of Eden and the broader motifs of creation, serve as focal points for comparison.³¹ The study seeks to identify common theological perspectives, shared motifs, and potential historical-cultural linkages between these narratives originating in adjacent geographical and cultural spheres.³¹ While the specific plot details of the Shamaran myth are not fully elaborated in the source, its identification as a major Kurdish creation narrative and its structural resonance with the well-known Eden story underscore the potential for cross-cultural mythological influence and shared narrative archetypes in the ancient Near East.

C. Mythic Origins of the Kurdish People

Several distinct, sometimes overlapping, legends circulate regarding the origins of the Kurdish people, reflecting the diverse cultural influences on the region.

1. **Supernatural Ancestry:** One set of legends, recorded initially by Judaic scholars and later referenced by early Islamic historians like al-Masudi (d. 956/7), attributes Kurdish origins to supernatural unions involving King Solomon.¹ In these accounts, Solomon arranged the marriage of 500 women to *jinn*s (spirits), or the Kurds are depicted as the offspring of Solomon's concubines and the demon Jasad (or angelic servants).¹ One version includes Solomon's purported exclamation upon discovering their identity: "*ukrudūhunna*" ("Drive them into the mountains and valleys"), possibly implying a sense of rejection or banishment.¹ These tales, while likely reflecting external perceptions rather than Kurdish self-identification, point to the integration of Kurdish origins into broader Near Eastern legendary frameworks.
2. **Saved Youths of Zahhak's Reign:** Perhaps the most widely recognized origin myth connects the Kurds to the era of the tyrannical ruler Zahhak (the Kurdish form of Aži Dahāka, often depicted as an Assyrian king in this context).¹ Zahhak, afflicted with serpents growing from his shoulders, demanded a daily sacrifice of two young men whose brains were needed to feed the snakes.¹ A compassionate figure charged with the sacrifices (or Kawa himself in some versions) secretly saved one youth each day, substituting sheep's brains, and sent the saved young men into the mountains.¹ According to the Persian epic poet Ferdowsi (d. 1020) in his *Shahnameh*, these youths who fled to the mountains became the ancestors of the Kurds.³ This narrative is

intrinsically linked to the rebellion led by Kawa the Blacksmith, who is said to have organized these youths into an army to overthrow Zahhak.¹

3. **Tribal Ancestry (Milan and Zilan):** Another tradition, documented by Mark Sykes through Ibrahim Pasha, chief of the Milli tribe, posits that the Kurds were originally divided into two main branches: the Milan and the Zilan.¹ The legend states there were once 1,200 Milan tribes, but they incurred divine displeasure and were scattered, with some vanishing entirely.¹ Some variations add a third branch, the Baba Kurdi.¹ This narrative reflects an internal framework based on tribal affiliations and historical migrations (one version places the Milan initially in Dersim before being partially settled or moved south by Sultan Selim¹).

The coexistence of these diverse origin stories—drawing from Abrahamic lore, ancient Iranian epic traditions, and internal tribal histories—underscores the complex, multi-layered process of identity formation among the Kurds. It reflects Kurdistan's historical position as a cultural melting pot where various narratives were adopted, adapted, and synthesized over millennia.

III. The Kurdish Pantheon: Divine Beings, Spirits, and Mythic Figures

The mythological landscape of the Kurds is populated by a diverse array of figures, reflecting the region's complex religious history, which includes ancient Iranian roots, Mesopotamian interactions, and the later influences of Abrahamic faiths and Sufism. This pantheon encompasses high deities, angelic beings, nature spirits, formidable monsters, and heroic archetypes.

A. Deities and Angelic Beings

1. **The Yazidi Heptad and Divine Triad:** Central to Yazidi theology is the belief in a remote, transcendent God (Xwedê), whose first emanation and active agent in the world is Tawûsî Melek, the Peacock Angel.²⁰ God created seven primary Angels, the Heptad (*heft sirr*), from His own divine essence (*sur* or *sirr*) to govern the cosmos, with Tawûsî Melek appointed as their chief.²⁰ Tawûsî Melek is revered as the Lord of this World, responsible for both good and bad occurrences, reflecting the complex nature of existence.²⁵ Yazidi belief also incorporates a concept of a Divine Triad, comprising the hidden God, Tawûsî Melek, and Sheikh Adi ibn Musafir (or Sultan Ezid), whose identities often blur, representing different hypostases of the divine.²⁰ Below this level, Yazidis also recognize *Xudans*, divine powers or spirits associated with specific natural elements and phenomena, seen as extensions of God's power.²⁰
2. **Goddess Ana/Anahita:** Evidence suggests the veneration of a mother goddess figure, Ana, associated with water, rain, fertility, wisdom, healing, and the protection of women, particularly during childbirth.³³ This figure strongly corresponds to the ancient Iranian water goddess Arədvī Sūrā Anāhitā ("damp, powerful, pure") from the Avesta, known as Anāhid or Nāhid in Persian.³³ Her worship may have been linked to the veneration of

natural phenomena, such as the eternal fires near Kirkuk, which attracted Mithraic and Zoroastrian devotion.³³ Traces of Ana's cult appear to have survived in later traditions across different Kurdish religious groups. She is potentially echoed in the Yarsani female deity Khātūn-i Razbār, the Yazidi Pīra Fātima, and the Reyā Heqī Ana Fātima, all holding significant roles within their respective belief systems.³³ Furthermore, shrines like 'Pīr Ana' among Muslim Kurds, references to a 'great mother' among the Mithra-linked Mīrag tribe, and the sanctity of certain holy springs in Yarsanism and Yazidism may point back to her ancient worship.³³

3. **Broader Iranian Context:** The Kurdish mythological framework exists within the wider context of Iranian religious history. This includes the ancient Indo-Iranian division of divine beings into *ahuras* (beings worthy of worship, associated with order/Asha) and *daevas* (beings rejected, associated with chaos/Druj), a distinction central to Zoroaster's reforms.³⁰ Key figures from this tradition include Ahura Mazda (the supreme creator in Zoroastrianism), Angra Mainyu (the destructive spirit), the Amesha Spenta (divine emanations/archangels), and numerous Yazatas (venerable beings) like Mithra (god of covenant, light) and Verethragna (god of victory).³⁴ While Zoroastrianism became dominant in parts of the Iranian world, scholars like Philip Kreyenbroek propose that traditions like Yazidism and Yarsanism may represent the continuation of older, pre-Zoroastrian forms of Iranian religion that were not fully assimilated into Zarathustra's specific theological framework.³⁰ These traditions might preserve elements of the worship of figures like Mithra or other ancient deities in forms distinct from orthodox Zoroastrianism.²³ The persistence of these distinct theological structures, such as the Yazidi Heptad, underscores the survival of pre-Islamic or highly syncretic religious ideas within specific Kurdish communities.

B. Mythical Creatures of Lore

Kurdish folklore abounds with mythical creatures, many sharing roots with broader Iranian and Near Eastern traditions, yet often possessing unique local characteristics and roles within Kurdish narratives.

1. **Simurgh (Sīmir):** This majestic, benevolent mythical bird, known from the Avesta (as *mərəγō saēnō*) and prominently featured in Ferdowsi's *Šāh-nāma*, is called *sīmir* in Kurdish.¹ In Iranian lore, she nests in the Tree of All Seeds, brings rain, and embodies divine fortune (*farr* or *xvarnah*).³⁸ Her most famous role is as the rescuer and protector of the hero Zāl and his son Rostam, whom she aids with healing and guidance.³⁸ Significantly, the Simurgh also appears in Kurdish folktales, notably within the Mīrza Mihemed cycle (ATU 301), where she rescues the hero from the underworld after he saves her chicks from a serpent.¹⁹ While generally benevolent, some traditions also mention an evil counterpart.³⁸
2. **Shahmaran (Şahmaran):** Meaning "Chief of Snakes," Shahmaran is a prominent figure in Kurdish folklore, often depicted as a hybrid being with the upper body of a wise and beautiful woman and the lower body of a serpent.¹ She is associated with wisdom, the

guardianship of secrets, and is believed to dwell in a subterranean realm or cave.¹ The Shamaran creation myth, analyzed for its parallels with Eden, centers on this figure.³¹ Legend holds that upon her death, her spirit and wisdom pass to her daughter.¹

3. **Aždahā (Dragons/Serpents):** The term *Aždahā*, deriving from Avestan *aži* ("snake," "dragon"), refers to various snake-like monsters in Iranian and Kurdish lore.⁴⁰ This concept connects to ancient Indo-Iranian myths of cosmic dragons hoarding water or causing drought, who must be slain by a divine hero (like Indra slaying *Vṛtra*).⁴⁰ While this specific water-hoarding motif is less emphasized in Zoroastrian texts compared to Vedic ones, dragons remain significant monstrous figures.⁴⁰ The most infamous is *Aži Dahāka*, the three-headed dragon-tyrant who becomes the figure of *Zahhak* in later tradition, whose shoulder-serpents required human brains.¹ Dragons (*ejdeha*) also appear as adversaries in Kurdish folktales, such as the seven-headed dragon slain by *Mîrza Mihemed* in the underworld.¹⁹ The snake (*mar*) itself holds complex symbolism, embodying both positive and negative aspects across world mythologies, a theme explored in relation to folk narratives from the Muş region.⁸
4. **ĀL:** This folkloric being is a personification of puerperal fever, a danger to women after childbirth.⁴² Its name likely derives from Iranian *āl* ("red"), and descriptions often mention red features, though variations exist.⁴² The *ĀL* is believed to steal the mother's liver or placenta, causing illness or death.⁴² Protective measures involve items that repel it, such as iron, onions, coal, black color, and swords.⁴² Notably, a specific Kurdish practice involves the new mother wearing an iron bracelet for protection.⁴² The *ĀL* shares characteristics with figures like the Mesopotamian *Lamaštum* and the Jewish *Lilith*.⁴²
5. **Jinn:** These supernatural beings, known from broader Islamic lore, appear in some Kurdish origin legends, specifically the tale involving King Solomon arranging marriages between jinn and human women.¹

The presence of figures like *Simurgh*, *Aždahā*, and *ĀL* demonstrates the strong continuity between Kurdish folklore and the wider mythological tapestry of Iran and the Near East. However, the specific roles these creatures play in Kurdish narratives, such as the *Simurgh*'s interaction with *Mîrza Mihemed* or the particular prominence of *Shahmaran*, illustrate local adaptations and the unique evolution of these motifs within the Kurdish cultural context.

C. Heroic Archetypes

Kurdish mythology features compelling heroes who embody cultural values and historical narratives.

1. **Kawa the Blacksmith (Kawe-y Asinger):** *Kawa* stands as a paramount hero of liberation in Kurdish tradition.¹ He is the central figure in the rebellion against the oppressive tyrant *Zahhak*, famously using his blacksmith's apron as a banner to rally the people.³² His victory, often achieved with a mace or hammer¹, is commemorated by lighting bonfires on the mountains, an act directly linked to the celebration of *Newroz*.¹ Though sources vary on his exact profession (blacksmith, farmer, shoemaker) and

details of the story ³², his role as a symbol of resistance against tyranny and the fight for freedom is consistent and deeply ingrained in Kurdish national consciousness.¹ He represents collective action and the power of the common people to overthrow oppression.

2. **Mîrza Mihemed/Mehmûd:** This hero is a staple of Kurdish fairytales (*çîrok*), so much so that the phrase *çîrokên Mîrza Mihemed* ("the fairytales of Mîrza Mihemed") exists.¹⁹ Typically a prince (*mîrza*) or a brave youth, he embarks on perilous adventures, often conforming to the international folktale type ATU 301 ("The Three Stolen Princesses").¹⁹ His characteristic exploits include guarding a magical garden, descending into the underworld, battling monstrous *devs* or dragons, rescuing captive princesses, and ultimately being saved or aided by the mythical Simurgh bird.¹⁹ Mîrza Mihemed embodies the archetypal fairytale hero who overcomes supernatural challenges through courage, cleverness, and adherence to heroic codes, reflecting universal folktale motifs within a specific Kurdish narrative cycle.
3. **Mem and Zîn:** These are the eponymous protagonists of Ehmedê Xanî's 17th-century epic, considered a cornerstone of Kurdish literature.⁴⁵ Mem, of the Alan clan, and Zîn, princess of Botan, are tragic lovers whose union is thwarted by the malevolent Beko.⁴⁶ Their story, ending in their deaths and symbolic separation even in the grave, represents ideals of pure love, righteousness, and goodness.⁴⁵ Beyond the romance, they function as powerful allegorical figures, interpreted variously through mystical Sufi lenses (the soul's love for God) and, particularly in modern times, as symbols of the divided Kurdish nation yearning for unity and freedom.⁴⁵
4. **Rûstem-e Zal:** The hero Rostam (often referred to with his patronymic, son of Zal), the preeminent champion of the Iranian national epic, the *Šāh-nāma*, also figures in Kurdish contexts.⁵⁰ His connection to the Simurgh, who raised his father Zāl, is a key part of his legend.³⁸ The existence of a *Kurdish Shahnameh*, collected and published by figures like Heider Lotfînîya ⁵, suggests that Kurdish oral tradition likely includes unique adaptations and versions of the legends surrounding Rostam and other heroes from the broader Iranian epic cycle.

These heroic figures illustrate different facets of Kurdish cultural ideals: Kawa embodies collective resistance and national liberation, Mîrza Mihemed represents individual heroism within the magical realm of folklore, and Mem and Zîn encapsulate enduring love and the poignant narrative of national struggle.

Table 1: Key Mythological Figures in Kurdish Tradition

Figure Name(s)	Type	Key Characteristics/ Domain	Associated Myths/Narratives	Primary Sources
Tawûsî Melek	Angel (Chief/Heptad)	Peacock Angel, leader of 7 Angels, world ruler, God's	Yazidi creation myth, Divine Triad, daily prayers,	²⁰

		emanation	Lalish focus	
Ana / Anahita	Goddess	Water, rain, fertility, healing, protector of women	Pre-Islamic Iranian roots, potential links to Yarsani/Yazidi female deities (Khātūn-i Razbār/Pīra Fātima), holy springs, specific rituals (Dersim)	³³
Simurgh / Simir	Mythical Bird	Benevolent, wise, bestower of fortune (<i>farr</i>), healer	Iranian <i>Šāh-nāma</i> (Zāl/Rostam), Kurdish folktales (Mīrza Mihemed ATU 301 rescue), Tree of Seeds	¹
Shahmaran / Şahmaran	Mythical Creature	Human-snake hybrid (female), Queen of Snakes, wisdom, secrets	Shamaran creation myth, folklore narratives	¹
Aždahā / Ejdeha	Dragon / Serpent	Monstrous snake, often malevolent, associated with chaos	Aži Dahāka/Zahhak myth, Indo-Iranian dragon-slaying motifs, folktale adversary (Mīrza Mihemed), Muş narratives (Marê Ziha?)	¹
ĀL	Folkloric Being	Female spirit, personifies puerperal fever, steals liver/placenta	Postpartum danger, protection rituals (iron bracelet in Kurdistan, onions, swords)	⁴²
Kawa / Kawe-y Asinger	Hero	Blacksmith/Farmer/Shoemaker, rebel leader, liberation symbol	Defeat of Zahhak, Newroz origin myth, Kāvian Banner, Kurdish nationalism symbol	¹

Mîrza Mihemed / Mehmûd	Hero	Fairytales prince/protagonist , adventurous, brave	<i>Çîrokên Mîrza Mihemed</i> , ATU 301 cycle (underworld journey, dragon-slaying, Simurgh rescue)	¹⁹
Mem	Hero (Epic)	Tragic lover, righteous, poetic	Ehmedê Xanî's <i>Mem û Zîn</i> , represents love, suffering, national allegory	^{45_49}
Zîn	Heroine (Epic)	Tragic lover, princess, beautiful, virtuous	Ehmedê Xanî's <i>Mem û Zîn</i> , represents love, suffering, national allegory	^{45_49}

IV. Major Narratives: Epics and Folktales

Kurdish oral and literary traditions are rich with extended narratives that encapsulate core cultural values, historical memories, and mythological themes. Among the most significant are the Kawa and Zahhak cycle, the epic of Mem û Zîn, and various thriving folktale traditions.

A. The Kawa and Zahhak Cycle: Myth of Liberation and Renewal

The story of Kawa the Blacksmith and the tyrant Zahhak forms a foundational myth for Kurdish identity, deeply interwoven with the celebration of Newroz.¹ The core narrative depicts the reign of Zahhak (Zuhak), often identified in Kurdish lore as an oppressive Assyrian king, whose defining characteristic is the pair of serpents growing from his shoulders.¹ These serpents required a daily feeding of human brains, leading to the sacrifice of the kingdom's youth.¹ Kawa, a figure representing the suffering populace (variously described as a blacksmith, farmer, or shoemaker whose own sons were victims¹), rises in rebellion. He uses his leather apron, fixed to a spear, as a makeshift banner—the precursor to the legendary Kāvian Banner—to rally the oppressed.³² Leading the saved youths and other discontented subjects, often in coordination with the legitimate prince Ferêdun³², Kawa confronts and defeats Zahhak, typically slaying him with a hammer or mace.¹ To signal the victory and the end of tyranny, Kawa and his followers light massive bonfires on the mountainsides.¹ This act is symbolically reenacted during Newroz celebrations.

The myth is inextricably linked to Newroz, the Kurdish New Year celebrated on the vernal equinox. Zahhak's evil reign is said to have caused spring to cease, and Kawa's victory brings about its return.¹ Thus, the story functions as a powerful allegory for renewal, the victory of light over darkness, life over death, and freedom over oppression.² While the *Šāhnāma* provides a major literary source for the broader Iranian version of the myth³², numerous

variations exist in Kurdish oral tradition and later accounts like Bal'ami's history, concerning Kawa's profession, the number of his sons, the banner's material, and the precise role of Ferēdun.⁴³ Regardless of these variations, the Kawa and Zahhak cycle remains a potent symbol of Kurdish resistance and the enduring hope for liberation, resonating deeply within Kurdish cultural and political consciousness.¹

B. Ehmedê Xanî's *Mem û Zîn*: An Epic of Love and Nation

Completed around 1695 by the influential Kurdish poet, scholar, and mystic Ehmedê Xanî (1650–1707), *Mem û Zîn* is widely regarded as the Kurdish national epic and a foundational text of Kurdish literature.⁴⁵ While Xanî gave the story its definitive literary form, the tale itself likely originated in older oral traditions, known as *Memê Alan*, possibly dating back to the 15th century.⁴⁷

The epic recounts the tragic love story of Mem, a young man of the Alan clan, and Zîn, the beautiful sister of the prince of Botan (Jazira).⁴⁶ They meet and fall instantly in love during a Newroz festival, a setting deliberately chosen by Xanî to imbue the story with national significance.⁴⁵ Their love, representing righteousness and purity, is doomed by the machinations of the antagonist Beko, an envious and malevolent counsellor to the prince.⁴⁶ Beko's scheming leads to Mem's imprisonment.⁴⁶ Despite attempts by Mem's loyal friend Tacdîn to intervene, Mem dies in captivity.⁴⁶ Upon hearing the news, Zîn wastes away from grief and dies shortly after.⁴⁷ They are buried side-by-side, but Beko, killed by Tacdîn after his treachery is revealed, is buried nearby at Mem's dying request. A thorny bush, nourished by Beko's malevolent blood, grows from his grave, its roots penetrating the earth to separate the lovers even in death.⁴⁷

Xanî himself indicated that the epic operates on multiple levels.⁴⁶ On the surface, it is a poignant romance comparable to Romeo and Juliet, exploring the ecstasies and torments of love.⁴⁵ Influenced by Sufi thought, it can also be read as a mystical allegory, where the unfulfilled earthly love between Mem and Zîn ("metaphorical love") becomes purified and transmuted into a symbol of the soul's yearning for union with the divine ("literal love").⁴⁶ However, particularly since the late 19th century, a secular-nationalist interpretation has gained prominence.⁴⁶ In this reading, the tragic fate of the lovers serves as an allegory for the plight of the Kurdish people—divided, unable to unite, and thus prevented from achieving self-determination and freedom from the domination of neighboring empires (Turks, Arabs, Persians are explicitly mentioned in a famous verse expressing this longing for unity).⁴⁵ Crucially, Xanî's conscious decision to compose this sophisticated, 2,650-couplet epic in Kurmanji Kurdish, rather than the more prestigious literary languages of Arabic or Persian, was a deliberate act of cultural nationalism.⁴⁶ He aimed to demonstrate the capacity of Kurdish as a language of high literature and art, thereby elevating its status and fostering a sense of distinct Kurdish cultural identity, even while acknowledging his debt to the broader Persianate literary tradition.⁴⁶ This act represents a pivotal moment, transforming an oral tale into a written masterpiece that bridged folk tradition and high culture, profoundly influencing Kurdish literature and national consciousness. Despite periods of suppression and being

banned by states controlling Kurdish regions, *Mem û Zîn* continues to resonate deeply, inspiring numerous songs, films, plays, and scholarly analyses, including applications of modern literary theories like Vladimir Propp's morphology of the folktale.⁴⁷ The multi-layered nature of both the Kawa cycle and *Mem û Zîn*, preserving memory, articulating values, and serving as potent political allegories, explains their enduring power.

C. Key Folktale Traditions

Beyond these major epics, Kurdish oral tradition encompasses a vast and diverse landscape of folktales (*çîrok*).

1. **The Mîrza Mihemed Cycle:** As previously noted, tales featuring the hero Mîrza Mihemed constitute a distinct and popular cycle within Kurdish folklore.¹⁹ His adventures, particularly those aligning with the ATU 301 plot type (underworld journeys, encounters with *devs* and dragons, rescue by the Simurgh), form a recognizable narrative pattern widely disseminated in the Kurmanji-speaking regions.¹⁹ The existence of such specific cycles, alongside the grander epics likely performed by *dengbêj*, points to a rich oral environment with narratives suited to various performance contexts and audiences.
2. **Collections and Examples:** The richness of this tradition is further evidenced by the extensive collection efforts undertaken by modern Kurdish folklorists. Works compiled by figures like Ehmed Behrî (*Beyt Gencî Ser be Mor*), Ibrahîm Ehmedî (dictionaries of idioms, similes, riddles), and Loqman Nadirpûr and Heider Lotfînîya (thousands of tales collected, published in volumes like *Awêney Bêgerd* and *Tîşkî Dêrîn*) demonstrate the sheer volume and variety of narratives being preserved.⁵ Academic journals like the *Journal of Kurdish Literature* (JOKL) publish analyses of specific tales, such as "Pir-e-Kharkan" examined through an ecofeminist lens, or comparative studies like that of the Kurdish "Manijeh and Bizhan" and Ferdowsi's version.⁵¹ The application of international typologies like the Aarne-Thompson-Uther (ATU) index to tales like Mîrza Mihemed's¹⁹ shows how Kurdish folklore participates in global narrative currents while maintaining its unique local flavor and characters.
3. **Shamaran Legend:** The legend of Shamaran, the wise serpent queen, also circulates primarily through folklore and oral tradition, underpinning its cultural significance beyond its role in creation myth analysis.¹

V. Interwoven Threads: Comparative Mythology and Religious Syncretism

Kurdish mythology does not exist in isolation but is deeply interwoven with the broader religious and cultural tapestry of the Near East, particularly reflecting connections to ancient Iranian and Mesopotamian civilizations, while also showcasing unique syncretic developments, most notably in Yazidism.

A. Links to Ancient Iranian and Mesopotamian Heritage

Strong continuities link Kurdish mythological figures and motifs to ancient Iranian traditions. The Simurgh bird (*sīmir*) is directly traceable to the Avestan *mərəyō saēnō* and plays a role consistent with its depiction in the *Šāh-nāma*.¹ Similarly, the concept of *Aždahā* (dragon) derives from Avestan *aži*, with the figure of Zahhak being a direct descendant of the mythical *Aži Dahāka*.⁴⁰ The potential veneration of the goddess Ana links back to the prominent Iranian water deity Anahita.³³ These shared elements point to a common cultural substratum shared across the Iranian world.

Connections to Mesopotamia are also evident. Comparative studies, like Rostaminezhadan's analysis of the Shamaran myth, suggest structural and thematic parallels with Mesopotamian (and Hebrew) creation narratives, specifically the Garden of Eden story.³¹ Furthermore, the structure of the Yazidi Heptad (Seven Angels) has been compared to the seven Anunnaki aspects in ancient Mesopotamian theology.²³

The relationship with Zoroastrianism, the ancient state religion of Persia, is complex. While Zoroastrianism historically flourished in regions inhabited by Kurds⁵⁴, and some shared concepts might exist, certain Kurdish traditions, particularly Yazidism and Yarsanism, appear to preserve elements that are either pre-Zoroastrian or represent parallel developments within the broader ancient Iranian religious milieu.²³ Philip Kreyenbroek argues that these groups may descend from Iranian tribes who did not adopt Zarathustra's specific reforms and maintained older forms of worship.³⁰ This perspective highlights the diversity within ancient Iranian religion itself. In recent times, there has also been a renewed interest and even conversion to Zoroastrianism among some contemporary Kurds, often linked to nationalist sentiments seeking pre-Islamic roots.⁵⁴ Broader Indo-Iranian connections are also visible, for example, in the shared archetype of the dragon-slaying myth, although the specific narratives (like Indra and *Vṛtra* in India versus various Iranian versions) developed distinctly.⁴⁰ The figure of Mithra, an important Indo-Iranian deity, is also invoked in discussions of potential influences on Kurdish traditions.²³

B. Yazidism: A Unique Synthesis

Yazidism stands as a distinct ethnoreligious tradition primarily practiced by Kurds.² It is fundamentally monotheistic, centered on belief in one God (*Xwedê*), but its cosmology and practice differ significantly from surrounding Abrahamic faiths.²⁰ Key tenets include the creation myth involving the primordial pearl and the Seven Angels (Heptad) led by *Tawûsî Melek*, the concept of a Divine Triad (God, *Tawûsî Melek*, *Sheikh Adi/Sultan Ezid*), belief in reincarnation (*kirasgorîn*), the sanctity of the four elements, prayer towards the sun, and the central importance of the pilgrimage to the holy shrine of *Sheikh Adi* in Lalish, northern Iraq.²⁰ Yazidism is characterized by its profound syncretism. Scholars identify deep roots in ancient Iranian (likely pre-Zoroastrian or non-Zoroastrian) and Mesopotamian beliefs.²⁰ These ancient foundations were significantly overlaid with Sufi influences, particularly following the arrival of *Sheikh Adi ibn Musafir*, an apparently orthodox Sufi sheikh who settled in Lalish in the 12th century and whose teachings became central to the faith.²¹ This blend resulted in a unique religious system with its own distinct mythology, rituals, and social structure (including

hereditary priestly castes).²⁸

The relationship between Yazidism and Kurdish identity is multifaceted. The vast majority of Yazidis speak Kurmanji Kurdish, and their religious traditions are transmitted in this language.⁵⁷ Historically, major Kurdish tribes and emirates were Yazidi.⁵⁷ While most Yazidis today identify ethnically as Kurds (and are recognized as such in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq), a minority assert a distinct Yazidi ethnicity separate from Muslim Kurds, sometimes citing myths of separate ancestry from Adam.²⁹ This debate reflects complex historical dynamics and contemporary identity politics.⁵⁷

The study of Yazidism has advanced significantly thanks to the work of scholars like Philip Kreyenbroek, Christine Allison, Garnik Asatrian, and Victoria Arakelova. Kreyenbroek, in particular, has emphasized the religion's ancient Iranian roots, its non-scriptural nature, and the crucial importance of analyzing its oral sacred texts (*qewls*).²⁷ Allison has focused on the performance context of the oral tradition, including genres like laments.¹⁴ Asatrian and Arakelova have explored the intricacies of Yazidi ethno-religious identity and cosmology.²⁵ Their work, often based on extensive fieldwork and analysis of oral materials, represents a vital shift away from earlier, often inaccurate, external accounts that labeled Yazidis as 'devil-worshippers'²⁷ and struggled with the lack of accessible, authentic written scriptures.²⁷ This scholarly evolution underscores the challenges and necessity of studying primarily oral, syncretic traditions on their own terms.

C. Exploring 'Yazdanism' and Pre-Islamic Beliefs

In an attempt to reconstruct a potential pre-Islamic religious unity among Kurds, scholar Mehrdad Izady proposed the term "Yazdânism" or "Cult of Angels".²³ He suggested this represented the "original" religion of the Kurds, predating Islam by millennia, and argued that its modern continuations are found in Yazidism, Yarsanism (Ahl-e Haqq), and certain forms of Kurdish Alevism.²³ Izady identified core tenets of this supposed ancient faith, including belief in a transcendent God who delegates world governance to seven benevolent angels (the Heptad) led by Melek Taus, belief in reincarnation, and successive divine manifestations in human form (*mazhariyyat*).²³

While Izady's concept has gained traction in some nationalist discourses²³, it remains controversial within mainstream academic scholarship of Iranian religions.²³ Critics argue against the assumption of a monolithic ancient religion, suggesting that religious diversity, rather than unity, is more likely the further back one goes in history.⁶² However, recognized scholars like Kreyenbroek do acknowledge the "striking" and "unmistakable" similarities between Yazidism and Yarsanism.²³ These similarities, including belief in a heptad of divine beings and reincarnation, might point to a shared origin in an ancient Western Iranian religious stratum, related to but distinct from Zoroastrianism.²³ This substrate may have incorporated elements of Mithraism, given the association of figures like the Yazidi Sheikh Shems with the sun god Mithra and the general importance of sun veneration.²³

The search for a distinct pre-Islamic Kurdish religious identity—whether framed as Yazdanism, Zoroastrianism, or ancient Mithraic traditions—is undeniably fueled by modern Kurdish

nationalism (*Kurdeyeti*).⁶² Establishing ancient, non-Islamic roots serves the ideological purpose of differentiating Kurdish culture from the dominant Islamic cultures of neighboring states (Turkey, Iran, Arab nations) and asserting a unique, long-standing national heritage.⁶² This political dimension inevitably shapes how mythological narratives and religious history are interpreted and deployed in contemporary contexts.

Table 2: Comparative Elements in Yazidism, Yarsanism, and Alevism

Feature/Belief	Yazidism	Yarsanism (Ahl-e Haqq)	Kurdish Alevism	Potential Ancient Roots/Parallels	Key Sources
Supreme Deity	Transcendent God (Xwedê, Êzdan); inactive relative to creation	Belief in a Divine Essence (Haqq)	Belief in Haqq (Truth/God), often associated with Ali	Ancient Iranian/Mesopotamian concepts of high gods	²⁰
Seven Angels/Saints (Heptad)	Central belief (<i>heft sirr</i>); emanations of God led by Tawûsî Melek	Central belief (<i>Haft Tan</i> - Seven Persons); primary manifestations of the Divine Essence	Belief in holy figures, sometimes incorporating the concept of seven (e.g., Seven Great Poets)	Ancient Iranian Amesha Spenta; Mesopotamian Anunnaki parallels; Mithraic hierarchies?	²⁰
Key Figures	Tawûsî Melek (Peacock Angel), Sheikh Adi ibn Musafir, Sultan Ezid	Sultan Sahak (primary divine manifestation), Baba Yadegar, Dawud, Benyamin, Pir Musî	Ali, Hacı Bektash Veli, Pir Sultan Abdal	Tawûsî Melek (potential links to Dumuzi/Mithra?), Sheikh Adi (Sufi founder), Ali (Islamic figure)	²⁰
Reincarnation	Central belief (<i>kirasgorîn</i> - change of garment)	Central belief (<i>dunaduni</i>); transmigration of souls	Belief present in some Alevi traditions, though not universal	Ancient Iranian/Indian beliefs; possibly Pythagorean/Greek influence	²⁰
Founding/Referring Figures	Sheikh Adi ibn Musafir (12th c. Sufi reformer)	Sultan Sahak (14th/15th c. founder/reform)	Hacı Bektash Veli (13th c. Sufi mystic)	Integration of historical Sufi figures into	²¹

		er)		potentially older belief systems	
Ritual Practices	Pilgrimage (Lalish), prayer to sun, baptism, festivals, hymns (<i>Qewl</i>)	Communal gatherings (<i>jam</i>), music (<i>kalam</i> , <i>tambur</i>), animal sacrifice	<i>Cem</i> ceremonies (music, <i>semah</i> dance), fasting (Muharram), veneration of saints	Shared Sufi practices (<i>jam</i>), pre-Islamic festival elements (Newroz?), veneration of nature/elements, importance of music	²
Connection to Kurdish Identity	Strong link; Kurmanji language; most identify as Kurds, some distinct ethnic identity	Primarily Kurdish (Gorani, Sorani, Kurmanji speakers); strong cultural link	Significant Kurdish Alevi population; identity often complex (Kurdish/Alevi/Turkish)	Religions originating/flourishing among Kurdish populations, preserving distinct cultural/linguistic elements	²³

VI. Living Myths: Folklore in Cultural Practice and Identity

Kurdish mythology is not merely a collection of ancient tales but a living tradition that continues to shape cultural practices, inform identity, and resonate within contemporary Kurdish society. Its elements are actively embodied in rituals, festivals, social norms, and political expressions.

A. Mythology Embodied in Rituals and Festivals

1. **Newroz:** The most prominent example of myth enacted in ritual is the celebration of Newroz, the Kurdish New Year on the vernal equinox.¹ This festival is explicitly linked to the foundational myth of Kawa the Blacksmith defeating the tyrant Zahhak.¹ The central ritual involves lighting large bonfires on hills and in public spaces, directly symbolizing the fires Kawa lit to announce his victory and the end of oppression.¹ Newroz thus becomes an annual reenactment of liberation, the triumph of spring over winter, light over darkness, and freedom over tyranny, reinforcing core themes of the Kawa myth.² Its significance is further cemented by its role in Ehmedê Xani's *Mem û Zîn*, where the lovers first meet during Newroz festivities.⁴⁵

2. **Yazidi Practices:** Yazidi religious life is rich with rituals deeply connected to their unique cosmology and mythology. The annual pilgrimage (*haj*) to the sacred valley of Lalish is a central obligation, connecting believers to Sheikh Adi and the heartland of their faith.² Daily prayers are performed facing the sun, reflecting a reverence for celestial bodies potentially linked to ancient solar or Mithraic traditions.²⁰ Yazidis practice infant baptism²⁸ and observe numerous festivals throughout the year, including the great Autumn Gathering (*Jema'îya*) at Lalish and local festivals centered around village shrines dedicated to specific holy beings.²⁹ The chanting of sacred hymns (*Qewls*) during religious occasions transmits mythological narratives and theological concepts.²⁷ Funerary practices include the performance of laments (*xerîbî, dîrok, stranêd şînî*) by women, expressing grief and recounting the virtues of the deceased, a tradition documented by Christine Allison, though its form and prevalence may be changing.¹⁴ The Yazidi reverence for the four sacred elements (fire, water, air, earth) also informs various ritual prohibitions and practices.²⁰
3. **Ana-Related Customs:** Rituals possibly stemming from the ancient worship of the water goddess Ana persist in some Kurdish communities.³³ These include the veneration of holy springs, specific ceremonies performed by women involving water drawn from multiple wells mixed with pebbles and flowers (reported from Dersim), ritual washing of newborns after forty days using water containing wheat grains, and festivals featuring special foods (cakes made from ritually grown wheat), music (daf, tambûr), fruit offerings, and the crafting of dolls potentially representing the goddess.³³ These practices highlight the enduring connection between female figures, water, fertility, and ritual action in Kurdish folk religion.
4. **Protective Rites:** Folklore informs practices aimed at warding off malevolent entities. The fear of the *ĀL* spirit, believed to attack new mothers, leads to specific apotropaic measures, such as the Kurdish custom of wearing an iron bracelet, or the use of onions, drawn swords, pieces of coal, or specific chants and boundary-drawing rituals mentioned in older sources.⁴²
5. **Life Cycle Rituals:** Mythological beliefs and folkloric customs permeate various life-cycle events, including childbirth (*ĀL* protection⁴², forty-day ceremonies³³), marriage (customs like the groom throwing an apple¹⁹), and death (formalized laments¹⁴).

These examples demonstrate that Kurdish cultural practices are not static traditions but dynamic performances that continually engage with and give meaning to mythological narratives and beliefs, ensuring their transmission and relevance across generations.

B. Folklore as a Cornerstone of Kurdish Identity

Folklore, in its broadest sense, plays a crucial role in the construction and maintenance of Kurdish collective identity (*Kurdeyeti*).

1. **Source of Memory and History:** In the frequent absence of state-sponsored institutions dedicated to preserving and teaching Kurdish history from a Kurdish

perspective, oral traditions—myths, legends, epics, tales, songs—serve as a vital repository of collective memory and a primary source for understanding the past.⁸ Dengbêj, in particular, are often viewed not just as entertainers but as historians, their songs chronicling significant events and social conditions.¹⁰

2. **Foundation for National Consciousness:** Influenced by European romantic nationalism, Kurdish intellectuals from the late Ottoman period onwards began to view folklore as reflecting the unique "soul" (*Volkgeist*) of the Kurdish nation.⁸ Figures like the Bedirxan brothers actively promoted the collection and study of oral traditions through publications like *Hawar* as part of a broader cultural nationalist project aimed at fostering literacy, standardizing the language, and building a sense of shared nationhood.⁸ While early nationalists sometimes viewed folk culture ambivalently, needing 'modernization', the Herderian idea of folklore containing ancient wisdom and defining the nation soon became prevalent.⁸ This perception has evolved, with contemporary efforts focusing on folklore as a tool for language revitalization and asserting indigenous knowledge against state assimilation policies.⁵ This dynamic relationship shows how folklore's perceived value and utility adapt to changing political and cultural contexts.
3. **Symbols of Resistance and Liberation:** Mythological narratives provide a powerful symbolic language for expressing Kurdish political aspirations. The Kawa myth, with its theme of overthrowing tyranny, is ubiquitously employed as a symbol of Kurdish resistance and the struggle for freedom.¹ Similarly, the epic of *Mem û Zîn* is frequently interpreted as an allegory for the Kurdish quest for unity and statehood.⁴⁵ These stories offer frameworks for understanding historical suffering and articulating hopes for the future.
4. **Cultural Resistance and Survival:** Oral traditions have proven remarkably resilient in the face of state policies aimed at suppressing Kurdish language and culture (linguicide and culturicide).⁵ The ability to maintain and transmit folklore orally, even when written materials are banned or destroyed, constitutes a form of cultural resistance.¹⁰ Contemporary efforts to collect, archive, and publish folklore are explicitly framed by collectors and scholars as acts of defiance against assimilation and as a "ceremony" celebrating cultural survival and reclaiming indigenous knowledge systems.⁶
5. **Shaping Social Norms:** Folklore and religious narratives also inform social structures and ethical codes within specific communities. Examples include the traditional caste system among the Yazidis²⁸ and the deeply ingrained concept of honour (*namûs*), particularly concerning female behavior, which many traditional Yazidis closely associate with their religious identity.²⁹

In essence, Kurdish folklore is far more than entertainment or historical remnant; it is an active force in shaping identity, articulating political consciousness, preserving cultural memory, and navigating the challenges of the present.

VII. The Flow of Tradition: Transmission,

Documentation, and Evolution

The rich tapestry of Kurdish mythology and folklore has been sustained and shaped over centuries through complex processes of transmission, documentation, and ongoing scholarly engagement. Understanding these processes is crucial for appreciating the nature and evolution of this heritage.

A. The Vital Role of Oral Tradition

Historically, orality has been the dominant mode for transmitting Kurdish mythology, folklore, religious knowledge, and cultural memory.⁴ This reliance on the spoken word, often in contexts where literacy was not widespread or where the Kurdish language faced restrictions, has shaped the tradition in profound ways.

Key figures in this transmission are performers like the *dengbêj*, who specialized in memorizing and reciting extensive narratives, including epics (*destan*), historical songs (*stran*), folktales (*çîrok*), and mournful laments (*xerîbî* or *dîrok*).¹⁰ This often involved years of apprenticeship to master the repertoire and performance techniques.¹⁰ Similarly, within religious communities like the Yazidis, specific priestly classes (e.g., *Qewwals*) were responsible for memorizing and chanting sacred hymns (*qewls*) and transmitting religious lore (*mishabet*, prose stories or *çîrok*).¹³

The oral tradition encompasses a wide range of genres, each with its own conventions and contexts: heroic epics, intricate folktales, didactic proverbs (*pend*), clever riddles (*metel*), lyrical songs (*stran*), emotionally charged laments, and sacred religious texts like Yazidi *qewls* and *beyts*.⁵ This oral system, while allowing for variation and adaptation over time⁴³, proved remarkably resilient, preserving cultural knowledge even under adverse political conditions.¹⁰

B. From Orality to Text: Collection and Archiving

The process of documenting Kurdish oral traditions in written form has a long history, accelerating significantly in recent times.

1. **Early Interest:** European Orientalists and travelers began recording aspects of Kurdish folklore and language in the 19th century, often as part of broader linguistic or ethnographic studies.⁶
2. **Nationalist Impulses:** In the early 20th century, Kurdish intellectuals associated with the nascent nationalist movement, such as the Bedirkhan brothers (Celadet, Kamiran, Sureya) and figures like Cegerxwîn and Osman Sabri, recognized the political utility of folklore.⁸ Through influential journals like *Hawar*, *Ronahî*, and *Roja Nû*, published primarily in Syria during the 1930s and 1940s, they discussed oral traditions as instruments for crafting a national identity, promoting literacy in the newly Latinized Kurdish script, and standardizing the language.⁹ Their interest during this period was often theoretical, focusing on the symbolic potential of folklore.¹⁶ Soviet scholarship also played a role, sometimes leading to what Michiel Leezenberg terms the "folklorization of the Kurds," emphasizing oral traditions as the primary reflection of the Kurdish 'soul'.⁸

3. **Contemporary Surge:** The late 20th and early 21st centuries have seen a dramatic increase in the collection and publication of Kurdish folklore, driven largely by native Kurdish collectors, activists, and academics within Kurdistan (Turkey, Iran, Iraq) and the diaspora.⁵ Numerous individuals have dedicated themselves to this work, including Ehmed Behrî (compiler of *Beyt Gencî Ser be Mor*), Ibrahîm Ehmedî (collector of tales, idioms, riddles), Loqman Nadirpûr and Heider Lotfînîya (collectors of thousands of folktales and the *Kurdish Shahnameh*), Ali Aydın Çiçek (Zazaki folklore), Bahoz Baran, Gulê Şadkam (Khorasan Kurmanji traditions), Mikail Bûlbûl, and Zeyneb Yaş (Kurdish music), among many others.⁵
4. **Motivations and Institutions:** Modern collection efforts are propelled by a desire to preserve traditions perceived as endangered by modernization and assimilationist policies, to revitalize the Kurdish language by documenting its rich vocabulary and expressions, to promote indigenous knowledge systems, to challenge dominant state narratives, and to create educational materials.⁵ This work is often facilitated by cultural institutions like Kurdî-Der, the Mezopotamya Foundation, the Wardoz Publishing House, and academic journals such as *Mahabd*, *Folklor Me*, *Folklor û Ziman*, and *Vate*.⁵
5. **Scripturalization:** In religious contexts, particularly Yazidism, the transition from orality to text involves complex processes of "scripturalization".¹³ As sacred oral texts like *qewls* are increasingly written down, issues arise concerning which versions to record, how to standardize them, the potential creation of a fixed canon, and the impact on traditional modes of transmission and religious authority, which were previously vested in specific lineages of oral performers.¹³

This ongoing shift from a primarily oral to an increasingly textual and archived tradition represents a significant transformation. While documentation aids preservation and accessibility, it also inevitably alters the dynamics of transmission and interpretation. The act of collecting itself is not neutral; it is shaped by the collectors' motivations and ideological frameworks, whether nationalist, revitalizationist, or academic.⁵

C. Scholarly Engagement and the Study of Kurdish Mythology

The academic study of Kurdish mythology and folklore is an inherently interdisciplinary endeavor, drawing methodologies and insights from folklore studies, linguistics, religious studies, anthropology, history, and literary criticism.⁵ Kurdish Studies as a field has evolved over time, with early contributions from Russian/Soviet Kurdology¹⁸, Polish scholars¹⁸, and Western Orientalists and academics.⁶⁶

Numerous scholars have made significant contributions to the understanding of Kurdish mythology as reflected in the provided sources. Diana Rostaminezhadan has explored the Shamaran myth and its comparative context.³¹ Joanna Bocheńska and Farangis Ghaderi have documented the contemporary folklore collection movement and its links to language revitalization.⁵ Christine Allison's work provides crucial insights into Yazidi oral tradition, particularly performance genres like laments, and the politics of folklore.⁸ Philip Kreyenbroek is a leading authority on Yazidism and Yarsanism, emphasizing their ancient Iranian

connections and the centrality of oral texts (*qewls*).⁵ Michiel Leezenberg has analyzed Ehmedê Xani's *Mem û Zîn*, language ideology, and the impact of Soviet folklorization.¹⁵ Garnik Asatrian and Victoria Arakelova have focused on Yazidi cosmology and ethno-religious identity.²⁵ Khanna Omarkhali has conducted detailed research on the Yazidi religious textual tradition and the process of scripturalization.¹³

This scholarship is disseminated through various academic journals, including the *International Journal of Kurdish Studies*³¹, *Kurdish Studies*⁶⁶, *Folklore*⁵, the *Journal of Kurdish Literature* (JOKL)⁵¹, *Oral Tradition*¹⁴, and the *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*⁹, reflecting the growing academic engagement with this rich field.

VIII. Conclusion: Synthesizing the Mythic Heritage

A. Recapitulation of Key Themes

This report has surveyed the complex and vibrant landscape of Kurdish mythology, drawing upon a range of academic and ethnographic sources. The analysis reveals a rich tapestry woven from diverse threads:

- **Cosmological Narratives:** Distinct creation myths, such as the Yazidi account of the primordial pearl and the Seven Angels led by Tawûsî Melek, and the Shamaran legend with its echoes of Eden, provide foundational frameworks for understanding the world. Various origin legends connect the Kurdish people to supernatural events, ancient Iranian epics (Zahhak and Kawa), and internal tribal histories.
- **Diverse Pantheon:** The mythological realm is populated by unique figures like Tawûsî Melek and the Yazidi Heptad, ancient deities like Ana/Anahita potentially surviving in folk belief, creatures drawn from broader Iranian lore (Simurgh, Aždahā, Shahmaran, ĀL) but adapted within Kurdish narratives, and potent heroic archetypes like the liberator Kawa, the fairytale adventurer Mîrza Mihemed, and the tragic lovers Mem and Zîn.
- **Major Narrative Cycles:** Epic traditions surrounding Kawa's rebellion and Ehmedê Xani's *Mem û Zîn* serve as cornerstones of Kurdish cultural and national identity, operating on multiple symbolic levels – historical, romantic, mystical, and political. Thriving folktale traditions, exemplified by the Mîrza Mihemed cycle, showcase the richness of the oral narrative landscape.
- **Syncretism and Ancient Roots:** Kurdish mythology demonstrates profound connections to ancient Iranian and Mesopotamian heritage. Syncretic traditions, particularly Yazidism and Yarsanism, stand out as unique religious expressions preserving significant pre-Islamic elements alongside later influences, notably Sufism.

B. The Enduring Relevance of Myth and Folklore

Far from being mere relics of the past, Kurdish mythology and folklore remain deeply relevant in contemporary Kurdish life. They are actively performed and perpetuated through cultural practices, most visibly in the annual celebration of Newroz, which reenacts the Kawa myth of liberation. Folklore continues to be a vital source of collective memory and historical consciousness, providing narratives of identity and resilience. Mythological themes and

figures are frequently invoked in modern Kurdish nationalism (*Kurdeyete*), serving as powerful symbols of struggle, unity, and cultural distinctiveness. Furthermore, the ongoing efforts to collect, document, study, and teach oral traditions underscore their perceived importance for language revitalization, indigenous knowledge production, and cultural survival in the face of political and social pressures. The vitality of the oral tradition, historically carried by *dengbêj* and religious specialists, persists even as it undergoes transformation through documentation and scholarly analysis.

C. Final Statement on Methodology

This report has endeavored to provide a comprehensive overview based solely on the provided source materials. Adhering strictly to the requirement for explicit attribution, every major data point and claim has been linked to the specific document(s) from which it was derived. While this approach inherently limits the scope to the information contained within these sources, the depth and breadth of the materials have allowed for a detailed synthesis and analysis of Kurdish mythology, its comparative context, its cultural expressions, and the dynamics of its transmission and study. The resulting overview highlights the richness, complexity, and enduring significance of this vital aspect of Kurdish heritage.

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