

Kurdish folklore collectors are helping to revitalize endangered languages, study shows

September 7 2023



Kurdish Sorani edition of Oskar Mann's *Die Mundart der Mukri-Kurden* (new 2023 edition). Credit: *Folklore* (2023). DOI: 10.1080/0015587X.2023.2205777

A new generation of young Kurdish folklore collectors is helping to revitalize endangered languages and create a living archive, a new study

shows.

Stories and songs could be saved from oblivion thanks to the efforts of activists, who risk harassment and arrest for their work, which is led by a sense of responsibility to deliver the endangered language and knowledge from one generation to another.

Collecting Kurdish stories in Turkey and Iran has become increasingly popular among the younger generation over the past decade.

[The study](#), published in *Folklore*, shows how these collectors hope recording songs and stories in Kurdish dialects of Kurmanji, Sorani and Zazaki that can both protect and develop the Kurdish language.

The research was led by Dr. Farangis Ghaderi, from the University of Exeter's Institute of Arab and Islamic, and Dr. Joanna Bocheńska, from the Jagiellonian University, Poland.

Dr. Ghaderi said, "Stimulated by the desire to prevent the loss of indigenous languages and their spiritual and intellectual heritage, the Kurdish folklore collectors focus on saving from oblivion the rich vocabulary in songs and stories. At the same time, they attempt to discover and discuss the oral tradition's potential for modern culture and knowledge production. The recovered vocabulary is being introduced into modern writing and applied in the process of teaching Kurdish in [private schools](#)."

Dr. Ghaderi and Dr. Bochenska carried out 29 interviews with collectors and Kurdish language activists in Turkey and Iran.

Dr. Bochenska said, "While reasons behind collecting and publishing folklore are still firmly rooted in Kurdish [national identity](#) and linked to a sense of patriotism, they can no longer be reduced to building a

national heritage or inspiration of only Kurdish locality.

"All folklore collectors we interviewed shared a desperate sense of urgency. They often voiced their concerns that Kurdish oral tradition and the language which expresses it is in imminent danger of disappearing and may be entirely lost in the next 20 to 50 years. Their anxiety is justified, considering the ongoing process of assimilation of the Kurdish people in Turkey and in Iran. Turkey was notorious for its ban on the Kurdish language, lasting until 1991."

Two of the Kurdish [language](#) varieties, Hawrami/Gorani and Zazaki, have respectively been classified as "endangered" and "vulnerable" in the 2009 UNESCO report on languages in danger. Less common Kurdish dialects such as Zazaki, which is spoken only in Turkey, are at greater risk.

In Iran, several collectors highlighted the loss of a noticeable number of old performers to COVID-19 over the last two years. They also spoke about anxiety of the overwhelming influence of Hollywood and Western media. Loqman Nadirpûr, a teacher and collector of Kurdish folklore, noted his unease with seeing his children immersed in Hollywood animations, yet totally oblivious to their own heritage and stories. That prompted him to "act" and collect folktales of his hometown, Saqez.

Nadirpûr said, "I think about my grandchildren, my father told me those stories, what have I left for my children? An American imposes their ideas via the internet, films, and animations. What shall we do? Don't we have anything of interest? We have more interesting stories in Kurdish that if they are made into movies or animations they would be much more fascinating than the likes of Harry Potter."

The establishment of modern schools, urbanization, and arrival of radio and television were noted by several collectors as the death knell of

folklore. Migration from village to city was another significant cause of such loss.

Collectors recommended that the United Nations and UNESCO recognize Kurdish folklore as a world heritage and strive to protect it.

More information: Joanna Bocheńska et al, 'Gan qey bedenê yeno çi mana' (What the Soul Means for the Body): Collecting and Archiving Kurdish Folklore as a Strategy for Language Revitalization and Indigenous Knowledge Production, *Folklore* (2023). [DOI: 10.1080/0015587X.2023.2205777](https://doi.org/10.1080/0015587X.2023.2205777)

Provided by University of Exeter

Citation: Kurdish folklore collectors are helping to revitalize endangered languages, study shows (2023, September 7) retrieved 29 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-09-kurdish-folklore-collectors-revitalize-endangered.html>

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