

# **Self-Sacrifice, Womanhood, and Melodized Speech: Three Case Studies from the Caucasus and Anatolia**

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**Abstract:** This article explores a practice of melodized speech by senior women from the Caucasus and Anatolia and its implication in the daily lives of this region. Based on three case studies from fieldwork conducted in Azerbaijan, Turkey, and Armenia, the article shows how self-sacrifice emerged as a central theme in the worldview of elderly women. They view self-sacrifice as an ideal and melodized speech as its sonic embodiment. This article argues that women's daily dedication in melodized speech to the remembering of the deceased and the exiled relatives is a gendered sacrificial act that helps construct self-sacrifice as a positive moral value.

## **Introduction**

In this article, I explore the melodized speech practices of senior women in the Caucasus and in Anatolia and their implications for daily life in these regions. Always associated with feelings of loss and self-sacrifice, melodized speech resembles a chant: an indefinite number of syllables and words are uttered on a limited range of notes. This monotonous or singsong intonation in speech is a liminal form between music and language and considered locally not as song but as speech. Nonetheless, these utterances differ semantically from normal daily speech, as well as poetically in the specific treatment of pitch (which I here call melodization). Thus, I use the term "melodized speech" rather than "chant" to conform to the local typology of vocal performance that regards these utterances as forms of speech.

As illustration, I discuss my analysis of three fieldwork case studies conducted in Azerbaijan (2001–2), Turkey (2003–5), and Armenia (2006–10). In these regions, self-sacrifice emerged as a central theme for the worldview of these women. They view self-sacrifice as an ideal and melodized speech as its sonic embodiment. I draw linkages between a certain kind of womanhood, a type of voice, and a class of emotions. Furthermore, after child-bearing age, many women define themselves through their suffering. For example, in Kurdish they are referred to as "burning hearts" (*dilşewat*) with similar appellations in the other regional languages. These women complain of living in

a state of constant pain stemming from their own sorrows while at the same time being very sensitive to the sufferings of others. They claim they have sacrificed themselves for their relatives. These women often punctuate their conversations by striking their thighs and emitting sighs and onomatopoeic expressions of pain; they often also switch to melodized speech to narrate their sorrows. After carrying out various periods of fieldwork throughout the region, I was struck by the similarities of these women's relationships with pain. While important differences exist between their languages, religions, and social statuses, they seem to share a common worldview in which sorrow and self-sacrifice represent central values.

This discussion is based on encounters with such women in the three countries mentioned. In Azerbaijan, my fieldwork focused mainly on the Absheron Peninsula among Shia Muslims. In Turkey, I carried out fieldwork among Kurds (Sunni Muslims and Alevis) in the suburbs of Istanbul and Diyarbakir. Finally, in Armenia, I worked among the Kurdish-speaking Yezidi minority in the Aparan, Talin, and Hovikembeian districts.<sup>1</sup> The women chosen as case studies share similar destinies conveyed through comparable melodized utterances. These parallels raise the questions of the gendered nature of these utterances and a special notion of self-sacrifice in the Caucasus and Anatolia as conceived by women.

A sacrifice involves "a voluntary offer," and a self-sacrifice is "the giving up of one's own interests or wishes in order to help others or advance a cause" (Stevenson 2010, 1616). As evident by numerous studies, this voluntary deprivation may be linked to religious motivations or to national questions (see among others, Cook and Allison 2007; Cook 2007; Cragin and Daly 2009; Davis 2003; Dole 2012; Grojean 2007; Kaur 2010; Kepel and Ghazaleh 2008; Khalili 2009; Khosrokhavar and Macey 2005; Mayeur-Jaouen 2003; Pitcher 1998; Volk 2010). Though religious and national issues are often major questions pervading the region's politics, my own research findings show that people's respect for self-deprivation behaviors (designated by the word *qurban* [sacrifice]<sup>2</sup>) does not always interlink with such motivations (Amy de la Bretèque 2012, 2013). Melodized utterances of self-sacrifice are mainly commented on by people in moral and aesthetic terms and hence are not easily convertible into other kinds of considerations. Further, I argue that this is particularly true in the case of women's utterances of self-sacrifice.

Self-sacrifice links basically to auto-deprivation but also includes loss, both embodied by melodized utterances that some might consider song or chant. According to the respective specific situation, this loss might be the death of a close relative or loss of familiar surroundings (the village for those who

left for the city, the parental household for young brides, etc.) and is always characterized by the speaker as suffering through circumstances externally imposed. While this clearly does happen in the case of deceased relatives, exile from villages and households is presented as imposed in the context of these utterances, although in other settings the speaker may characterize the same events as the result of a voluntary decision. However, when performed as melodized speech, loss is expressed as deprivation and linked to sacrifice. Self-sacrifice is thus interlocked with loss as a deliberate and positive act in response to events beyond a person's control. Indeed, in these regions, statements related to loss are generally shaped by poetic and musical features. These transform the act of enunciation into a kind of "verbal mausoleum," which reflects the investment of the speaker while simultaneously producing empathy among listeners through their own experiences (Amy de la Bretèque 2010, 2012, 2013). Thus, this "positive" search for sad and painful feelings, rather than for catharsis that would seek to eliminate them, assumes a self-sacrificial dimension.

In its musical and poetic expression, self-sacrifice always represents a complex act with at least two components: the loss, suffered by the speaker, and devotion, a positive act by the speaker (and by the listeners with attendant empathy), which combine to arouse and keep alive a painful feeling linked to some initial loss. I argue that this ambivalence has particular significance given that it continually shapes the very ethics of these regions.

I begin by portraying one woman from each field research site.<sup>3</sup> Through these short portraits, I strive to render the essence of the emotions expressed by these women through performed melodized speech. I also show how melodized utterances are embedded in daily speech. The fluid boundary between song and speech indeed constitutes a common characteristic of women's narratives about traumatic events. I then analyze these utterances from linguistic, acoustic, and sociological points of view. This demonstrates that they not only reflect transitory affects but also constitute an ideal of life. They enact moral emotions (Haidt 2003) that collectively contribute to the emergence of a gendered public voice of suffering and loss. Finally, I argue that melodized speech constitutes a sacrificial act for women that parallels men's ideals of self-sacrifice and martyrdom. Regarded as positive moral values, self-sacrifice, martyrdom, and devotion are publicly shaped through a wide range of male figures (such as the loyal knight, the rebel, the suicide bomber, or the ascetic monk). Similarly, women's quotidian remembrances of deceased and exiled relatives through melodized speech is analyzed here as a gendered sacrificial act valorizing self-sacrifice as a positive moral value.



Figure 1. Mullah Nazkhanum (*middle*) with her students, Qobi, Azerbaijan, 2001 (photo by the author).

### **Guiding Mourning Ceremonies: Nazkhanum (Qobi, Azerbaijan)**

The red minibus making its way from Loq Batan to Qobi was full. In this desert of rocks, sand, and mud, the road often gets closed, especially in winter. Standing, well ensconced between my friend Delya, a plump woman wearing a thick fur coat, and the windscreens decorated with plastic flowers, portraits of local TV stars, and club flags of Ali and Mohammad, it took me over an hour to reach Qobi, a village situated just 15 kilometers from Loq Batan on the Absheron Peninsula. Mullah Nazkhanum (fig. 1), a 72-year-old woman, lives on the first floor of a small blue house in this isolated village. There is no running water, no gas, and little wood for heating in this arid land. Everything runs on electricity, when it runs. The first time I met Mullah Nazkhanum was on January 30, 2002. I was researching female mullah and mourning ceremonies in Azerbaijan.<sup>4</sup> I had come into contact with her through Pervana, a family friend of Delya, who had worked with Nazkhanum during the Soviet period (1920–91). At that time, Nazkhanum led the 300 women who worked at a carpet factory. From the bus, we had just seen the ruins of this factory occupied, since the fall of the Soviet regime, by flocks of sheep. Women still weave but at home. And, according to Pervana, they are regularly duped by middlemen who buy the carpets for 150,000 *manat* (in 2002 around \$40) and then sell them for \$200 to foreign tourists in the old town of Baku.

Qobi. Last stop. The crowd of people that had amazingly squeezed into the minibus emerged into the stinging wind. We rushed to the village shop to buy sweets and finally arrived at Mullah Nazkhanum's house, where she was waiting for us. She had already put the kettle on a tray full of sand on which she had placed a small electric stove. Her single room was very simple: carpets on the floor, pictures of saints on the walls, mattresses, blankets and pillows at the rear of the room, and a window open onto the brown wind-eroded hills. While drinking tea and eating sweets, Mullah Nazkhanum began telling us the story of her life. She was born to a shepherd's family in 1930. Her father had gone on pilgrimage to Mecca before the Soviet revolution and thus became a haji. Nazkhanum went to school until the tenth grade and also initially had the opportunity to enter an institution of higher learning. However, she had to quit a few months later because of poor transportation facilities, requiring hours of travel to and from college. Her family decided that she would be better off looking after her (many) younger sisters and brothers. However, that did not last long; she married at age 17. At that time, women were encouraged to work "outside the home."

She spent four years as a trainer in a pioneer camp for children but left upon giving birth to her first child. Staying at home while raising her seven children (three daughters and four sons), she learned how to weave carpets. When her children were older, she decided to return to work. The state found her a job at the Азерхалча (Azerbaijan Carpets) factory, where she worked 15 years as a forewoman. Nowadays, she is widowed, retired with her main duties related to her role as a mullah. Her duties as a mullah involve conducting mourning ceremonies by performing *marsiyalar* and *lailailar* and reciting *sureler*.<sup>5</sup> She is often helped at ceremonies by the women who study with her. As she puts it, "In all steps of life someone has to guide. At school, it is the teacher; at funerals, it is my responsibility to keep the attention of the participants."

When I first met Mullah Nazkhanum, I did not imagine she was over 70. She seemed so extremely active and strong, ready to tell stories for hours and to convince and hold crowds. I was able to see the level of deep respect her village held for her. Nazkhanum teaches Qur'an reading to children from the village and to women who want to become mullahs.

Nazkhanum decided to become a mullah following the death of her brother. She was in pain, cried for months, and frequently invited a mullah to her house to pray and perform *lailailar* for her beloved brother, often a practice on such occasions. As she failed to gain any relief, she decided to learn how to perform for her brother. At the time, 1980, she was still working at the carpet factory. Nazkhanum knew a few words of Arabic, so she decided to learn *sureler* and *marsiyalar* by herself from books. As she did not know the Arabic script, she learned from Cyrillic transcriptions (format for most

prayer books sold in Baku until recently). At some point, her husband suggested she study the Qur'an and *marsiyalar* with a mullah. According to religious rules, a mullah should study in a religious school (*medresse*), but during the Soviet period most *medresseler* were closed and it was thus common to learn at a mullah's house. Nazkhanum studied twice a week throughout one year with an erudite from the village of Akhmedli, who had learned Arabic and *marsiyalar*. She was unable to continue because the cost, 50 rubles per month, was expensive for her at that time.

Over the course of 2002, I visited Mullah Nazkhanum on several occasions. We spent time at the village cemetery visiting the tombs of both her beloved brother and her husband. I also accompanied her to mourning rituals. Female mullahs often perform rituals for the deceased and families that they do not personally know and are generally paid to do so. However, villagers in Qobi are very poor, and Mullah Nazkhanum says she often presides over groups of 50–60 persons during a complete day without any payment because the family simply has nothing to offer. According to her, payment is not a priority; what does count is remembering the death of relatives and the sufferings of the Muslim saints: Fatima, Ali, Hussein, Hassan, and Zeyneb, who had to undergo terrible pain, conflict, and thirst. "We have to remember them," she says, and at the same time, Nazkhanum began to strike her thigh and to slowly move her chest back and forth. She continued: "In funerals, women cry for the loss of their relatives, for our sufferings. But our pain is also theirs. My mother died, so while I cry for her, I also remember Fatima, Zeyneb, and Leyla. And my brother died as Hussein, and Hassan also died." The room remained silent for a few seconds. Then she started to utter the following words for her brother.<sup>6</sup>

Ferhad my heart	<i>Ürayimin Fərhadı</i>
My brother left this world	<i>Qardaş köçdü bu dünyadan</i>
My tears do not stop	<i>Göz yaşları vermir aram</i>
(He went) leaving his beautiful eyes open	<i>Ala gözü yolda qalda</i>
Leaving his sweet words in my memory	<i>Şirin sözü qaldı yadda</i>
Why did you leave us?	<i>Niya ayrıldın bizdən?</i>
My brother left this world	<i>Qardaş köçdü bu dünyadan</i>
With pleading eyes	<i>Yalvarardı baxışları</i>
With sorrow on his face	<i>Çöhrəsində guman qaldı</i>
Without saying his last will	<i>Bir demədi vesiyət</i>
My brother left this world	<i>Qardaş köçdü bu dünyadan</i>
His son would now say father	<i>Oğul balan indi atam deyərdi</i>
Every time the bitter grief reminds him	<i>Bağladıqca acı qəhər</i>
My brother left this world	<i>Qardaş köçdü bu dünyadan</i>
Fate wounded me	<i>Fələk vurdu mənə yara</i>

Ay father how beautiful were our days  
together  
How can I live now without you  
Nobody knocks on my door

*Nə xoş idi ay ata ay ansızınla  
bugünlər  
Sənsiz günüm necə keçar  
Bir qapımı açan olmaz*

The first lines were uttered in rhyme while Nazkhanum continued striking her thigh. Her student Fatima joined in, beating her chest, adding a strong and heavy rhythm to this utterance (which she defined afterward as a *marsiya*). After about six minutes, the rhythm broke and Nazkhanum turned her melodized utterance into melodized speech, which she afterward called a *laililar* (fig. 2).

*Vayy* mother who doesn't come back on  
that dark day *vayy*  
The love of the father is the dearest  
Their love is irreplaceable  
I can't live without you oh father!  
*Hey* father I say once more: "Father  
*vayy!*"  
Father raised his children with sufferings  
Your children needed your  
advice  
I don't know how to rest without you  
Let me die instead of you *vayy*  
Father I cry your name I wail  
I'll always remember you  
  
Without you in my life I'll never laugh  
again  
Father, your candle of life extinguished  
*vayy*  
Father with tears in their eyes  
Your children took you to your final  
destination  
You passed from life to the cemetery  
Father you left our eyes crying *vayy*  
I wish you protection from the Surats  
and Ayats<sup>7</sup>  
Your eyes went away for the eternal sleep  
I wish you a place in heaven  
Father you left us crying *vayy*  
Mourning *ya* Husseyin  
All our deceased are your sacrifice  
Agha *ya* Husseyin

*Vayy bugun kü gündə gəlməyən  
anam vayy  
Ata mehebbeti əzizdir əziz  
Atanın mehebbeti olar əvəzsiz  
Sebr edebilmirem ay ata sensiz  
Hey ata son bi daha edem "atam  
vayy!"  
Ata zəhmət çəkib övlad böyüütür  
Biz balalara lazımlı idi sənin öğüdün,  
nəsihətin  
Sensiz galnisix bilməm nə edim  
Metəm günündə ölem atam vayy  
Ata ata deyip fəryad eylerəm  
Atayı hər bahzimde men yad  
eylerəm  
Sensiz həyat gər men gülmerəm  
  
Ömür çırağı sənən atam  
*vayy*  
Ata gözlərə yas dola dola  
Seni son mənzilə saldırıyorlar  
balaglar  
Səfər eylədin heyeta, qabristanlıxa  
Gözümüzü axlar goyan atam vayy  
Surelər ayetler olsun gömlegin  
  
Əbədi uyxuya getti gözlərin  
Cənnətdə olaydı yerin  
Bizi axlar qoyan atam vayy  
Matəm ya Hüseyn  
Gəmi ölənlərimiz sənə qurban  
Ağa ya Hüseyn*



Figure 2. First lines of Nazkhanum's melodized speech  
(all notation engraving by LilyPond 2.16.0; [www.lilypond.org](http://www.lilypond.org)).

Many years have passed since Mullah Nazkhanum lost her son and father. She nevertheless still has an overwhelming need to share her sufferings. I recall one day eating a sweet *plof* (rice with pumpkin, raisins, and dates) at her house while surrounded by pictures of saints. She was explaining to me that performing *marsiyalar* and *lailailar* was a necessary ordeal in order to embody the saints' sufferings and to share their tragic destiny. In the unsteady half-light of a 20-watt bulb, her eyes glistened as she shared that *laililar*.

### **Displaced from Southeastern Turkey: Vediha (Istanbul, Turkey)**

Another crowded minibus dropped me off by the side of a road. Down the road, the metallic roofs of Gazi sparkled like diamonds. I had come to Istanbul to carry out research on Kurdish narratives of exile and displacement. On February 23, 2003, Hülya, a Kurdish girl working for the Göç-Der association (involved with forcibly displaced people),<sup>8</sup> introduced me to Vediha. It was a cold but sunny day. Fortunately, the snowfall did not allow the sand to become mud or dust clouds. Vediha Apamarak lives in Gazi *mahallesi* with a three-generation household (fig. 3), a remote neighborhood forgotten by public transport, water pipes, and waste trucks. Consisting of houses “built overnight” (*gecekondu*), this instantly created shantytown expanded enormously in the 1990s following intensified and forced mass displacement of the Kurdish population from homelands in the eastern and southeastern regions of Turkey.

Vediha’s house is very simple and clean. We left our shoes at the entrance and sat in the main room on a threadbare carpet. Vediha immediately summoned one of her daughters to bring cushions for her guests and to turn up the stove. In addition to the massive TV standing on a wooden box, the only other furnishing in the room was the stove. On the walls, a calendar advertising BILIR brand household appliances and a pink plastic clock were colorful distractions. Soon the room’s frozen humidity turned into a cozy and

warm atmosphere. Every few seconds, a new young face with curious eyes appeared at the door. Vediha's children already knew Hülya, but they were curious about who I was. They quickly understood that their mother was telling stories and joined us on the floor. The kettle on the stove began to steam.

Once tea was served, Vediha began her story. She was born in a remote village in the Siirt region (eastern Turkey). Her parents raised sheep, as did all the villagers, and used to spend summer in pasturelands (*zozan*), high up in the mountains. She recalls nostalgically the nights spent under the tent with her sisters and brothers, the fresh air and the cold, pure water coming from springs near the permanent snow line. Her parents were illiterate, and her father was the only family member who could speak a few words of Turkish. On Vediha's identity card, her birth date is given as 1952. However, Vediha says she is probably older because her parents did not immediately register her with the authorities. Vediha got married when she was about 13. She gave birth to four children of which only one is living—two of them died in childhood, and one became a PKK (Partiya Karkerêñ Kurdistanê) guerrilla martyr.<sup>9</sup> When her husband died, following custom she married her husband's younger brother (who was slightly older than she) and gave birth to six more children.

In the 1980s, life became extremely difficult in the village due to frequent visits by the Turkish army. As she described, "Army soldiers frequently broke



Figure 3. Vediha (*standing, second from right*) with her family, Gazi, Turkey, 2003 (photo by the author).

windows and doors; animals were shot. From time to time, the army would burn down a house whose occupants were suspected of supporting the PKK guerrillas. Men were taken off to nearby hills and tortured or killed. Two houses were burnt with their occupants and sheep locked inside. People lived in fear. In 1994, the army shot nine men and gave the villagers three days to evacuate the village." Vediha fled with her family to Diyarbakir. For some months, her husband worked as a shepherd for richer families. These years were extremely difficult, as they had neither housing nor regular food. After about three years, they moved to Gazi. Life was also miserable in Gazi. Her husband had no job; their only income came from Vediha washing clothes for wealthy families. However, as the years passed, her elder son worked delivering propane gas tanks, and they adjusted to their new environment.

Vediha says that she is unable to forget the days when they had to flee their home. She remembers the dead bodies lying in the sun next to the soldiers. They did not allow mothers or sisters to pick up the bodies and bury the dead. "May sisters be the sacrifice of their brothers; may mothers be the sacrifice of their sons," she said. The pain is deep and sharp in her heart. Fortunately, she said, "[m]y younger children didn't have to experience such events. But, on the other hand, they don't know how beautiful life was in the village before the army came." She dried her cheeks, wiped her nose, and began to utter melodized speech.<sup>10</sup>

<i>Ax eywax eywax my household ax</i>	<i>Ax eywax eywax lê mala min ey ax</i>
<i>Eywax, poor me mama, my household</i>	<i>Eywax limin lê yadê lê mala min i</i>
<i>Eywax, I said: "This year is a difficult</i>	<i>Eywax, limin min got yadê isal</i>
<i>year"</i>	<i>sala</i>
<i>I swear, I swear that I said:</i>	<i>Wele eman yadê dinya xwedê min got</i>
<i>"Look we are in a difficult situation,</i>	<i>Mazê ketiye gire daran</i>
<i>ax, ax"</i>	<i>ax ax</i>
<i>Ax the world ax</i>	<i>Ax lê hey dinya ax</i>

Vediha sniffed and said, "We are acorns fallen from the oak. When I was going to *berî* (the place for milking the animals) in the pasture, I was melodizing words that came to my mind; I always did so." She goes on, explaining that when they arrived in Gazi, she felt a constant need to remember in melodized speech about her lost land, lost house, lost family members, and lost villagers. She has never returned to the village that had been sealed off to the civilian population. She then started to melodize the following words (fig. 4):<sup>11</sup>

Come <i>keko</i> , <sup>12</sup> come, come	<i>Were were were, keko were, hele</i>
Come back to your land to the country	<i>werin werin keko werin</i>

*Welat û welatê xwe vegerin tev*

*welatê xwê vegerin*

Brothers and sisters are looking forward  
to your return, *ax* their heart is full  
of pain

God their heart is full of pain  
Come *peşmerge*<sup>13</sup> we lose our roots we  
are helpless

From Iraq to here, blood has been shed  
over the rocks

We will lament for the brothers

We will lament for our beloved  
*Ax* come *keko* come  
Return to your land and country sisters  
and brothers are looking forward to  
your return

Their heart is sad and full of pain

Henifayê is calling for Fatîma

Henifayê is calling for Fatîma

Go please sister  
Hurry up please  
If you go (you'll see) all over there are  
ruined and burned lands  
The aircraft ruined, burned down  
Evdaniyan  
Make all countries aware (with your cry)  
77 foreign countries make them hear  
Your uncles and brothers liberate them  
from prison  
Help all my uncles and cousins<sup>14</sup> are  
calling for help

I said: "Kemal Pasha<sup>15</sup> came from  
Ankara  
İsmet Pasha<sup>16</sup> came by airplane"  
God damn this bad government and tear  
down their homes over their heads!

*Welle xwisk û biran hevia we ne,*  
*ax le dile wana bi kedere*

*Wella dile wana bi kedere*  
*Hele werin werin peşmergene emê*  
*bê Kurmanci bê çare ne*  
*Welle ji Îraqê heyâ vira, xwin*  
*rejiyan ser keviran*

*Emê axîn bikin deriya xwudê ji*  
*derdê biran*

*Emê axîn bikin ji derdê dilan*  
*Ax were were keko were*  
*Welat û welatê xwe vegere xwisk û*  
*biran hevia we ne*

*Wele dilê wane bi keder e, wele dilê*  
*wane bi keder e*

*Welle Henifayê sê denga dike gazî li*  
*Fatîma yê*

*Welle Henifayê sê denga dike gazî li*  
*Fatîma yê*

*Here lê lê xwayê*  
*Wele tû lez bike, bilezîne*  
*Wele ti heri kê xopana evderiyan*  
*şewiti, bilezîne*

*Teyyarokan xopanan Evdaniyan,*  
*şewiti bilezîne*  
*Ti yé dwel û dwelingan xwe heline*  
*Hevte hevde ejnebian pe behesin e*

*Apoki biraye xwê hefs u zindana*  
*biderin e*

*De hewar hewar, mamo de pismano*  
*de gele xalq û mamo de pismama*  
*de hewar e*

*Wele min got Kemal Paşa ji Enqere*  
*ra bû*

*Lê İsmet Paşa ji teyyare siwar bû*  
*Welle xwedê mala wan xerab ke, bi*  
*dewleta bi xayin e!*

Sitting next to their mother, Vediha's children listened, half serious, half bored. Vediha stopped melodizing and asked her elder daughter to bring something for the guests to eat. She had prepared pies filled with chopped cartilage, the cheapest "meat."



Figure 4. First lines of Vediha's melodized speech.

Vediha never went to school and is illiterate. Furthermore, she does not speak Turkish. As she hardly ever leaves her neighborhood, she does not really need Turkish: the majority of the population of Gazi *mahallesi* is Kurdish. All of them fled the eastern and southeastern regions of Turkey in the 1980s and 1990s. In this new urban environment, Vediha interacts with Kurds from all over Turkey, who often speak a Kurdish not of her village, and she experiences a diversity of lifestyles new to her.<sup>17</sup> Vediha strongly resents these changes and the differences. However, over time, she managed to develop a common language and a way of life with her new neighbors. In contrast, for her youngest children this commonality uncritically represents present Kurdish identity.

She wrapped her ID card back up in an old piece of newspaper. I could see on the page a photograph depicting Turkish soldiers in front of a helicopter. Vediha whispered that, although she may not know exactly how old she is, she has certainly reached the age of being in pain.

### Spending Winter Far from Home: Şuşık (Rya Taze, Armenia)

As soon as I recognized the old zoomorphic graves standing at the entrance to the village through the dusty windscreen of the minibus, I approached the driver and shouted, “Stop, please!” My (many) co-travelers grumbled and looked at me with eyes of astonishment as the driver slammed on the brake pedal. Closing the side door of the minibus, I overheard the comment coming from inside: “What is this foreigner doing in such a backward and dirty village! That’s not a place for tourists!” The minibus with its complainers took its loud and smoky exit. Split by the narrow road leading from Yerevan to Tbilisi,

the settlement of Rya Taze is crossed by many trucks, minibuses, and cars. Before the war in Karabagh (1988–94), people reached Tbilisi by the highway built during Soviet times. However, this crossed the Azerbaijan border, and the road has remained closed ever since the two countries became enemies in 1988. The authorities announced that the new highway (100 percent Armeno-Georgian built) will be finished soon.<sup>18</sup> But on that day in September 2006, the flock of children climbing on the old horse-shaped gravestones could admire the huge Turkish and Iranian trucks still passing through the village on their way to Tbilisi, Kiev, or Moscow, producing clouds of sand.

Rya Taze was a prosperous village during the Soviet period, but the 1988 earthquake destroyed the school, the milk factory, and the collective farm (*kolkhoz*). Fortunately, some years ago (around 2000), a “businessman” living in Moscow and aware of his “roots” in the village, had built a new school (equipped with five computers) and brought gas pipes to the entrance of the village. The computers were still new and untouched: kept safely in the office of the school director and proudly exhibited still wrapped in plastic to the rare visitor. The huge metallic gas pipe remained unconnected to the houses but served as a convenient bench for the men of the village.

I had already visited Rya Taze several times. Its inhabitants belong to the main minority group of post-Soviet Armenia: the Yezidis. The first time I met Şuşik Cemal (fig. 5) was in September 2006. I had come with Mraz Cemal,



Figure 5. Şuşik, Rya Taze, Armenia, 2006 (photo by the author).

Şuşik's brother, who lives in a half-built (and unfinished) 20-story building in Yerevan. Mraz wanted to visit his sister before her departure for Moscow. We came fully equipped with a large bottle of vodka, cucumbers, a piece of salami, and a long time ahead of us.

Şuşik's house is located 100 meters to the west of the road. Built during the Soviet period, the house had three rooms, one (empty) for the sheep, one for the feed, and the last one—with an oven dug into the ground—for the family. A metallic stove, a long table covered with a checkered oilcloth, a chair, and two single metal beds stand on the compacted earthen floor. The narrow window opens onto a view of Mount Aragats and a high-voltage electric pylon. Şuşik lit a small camping stove and prepared local coffee. She felt sad and shared her thoughts with us. Her entire life was in this village: she was born, finished school, became a bride, worked in the *kolkhoz*, raised her children, and buried her brother, two of her daughters, and her husband here in this village. Şuşik's husband passed away in 2004. "God damn the day my son called me to spend the winter at his place in cursed Moscow!" she said. Every fall Şuşik receives a call from her son asking for her to come and stay with him during the winter. He says that life in the village during winter is too harsh for an elderly woman living alone. Şuşik is happy to see her son, but six months in the Russian capital are for her a painful exile far away from her house and the graves of her beloved.

Şuşik is over 70. She raised seven children: five daughters and two sons. All of them have left the village. Her two sons live in Moscow and Kiev, respectively. Four of her daughters followed their husbands to Yerevan, Krasnodar, Stavropol, and Novosibirsk. The eldest daughter, Toksin, remained in the village with her husband. Şuşik curses the day when the Spitak earthquake took Toksin's life (December 7, 1988). "On that day a deep fog entered my eyes, and I saw nothing! Many people died, and my Toksin didn't have a proper funeral," she sighed. Toksin had seven daughters but no son. "What a pity; Toksin died without a single son! She's gone for nothing!" repeated Şuşik several times. She added: "It is such a deep pain for a mother not to give birth to a son. Who then carries the mother's coffin to the cemetery?"

Şuşik also remembers the day when her youngest daughter, Ita, was returned from Novosibirsk. Ita left behind a boy and a girl. It was winter, and a car brought her coffin from Yerevan airport to the village. The coffin stayed in the house of Ita's husband for three days. Şuşik did not leave the room until the coffin was taken to the cemetery. Many people came to visit and perform laments at her bedside.

It was already nightfall, and Mraz had cut the cucumber and the salami. We drank a glass of vodka to the memory of Toksin, who died with no son.

Then followed a toast to the memory of Ita, who died in exile. The third glass was dedicated to Şûşik and Mraz's brother. "May sisters be the sacrifice of their brothers," said Şûşik. All remained silent for a few seconds. Sitting on the side of a bed, Şûşik was slightly moving the upper part of her body back and forth. We drank a fourth glass to the memory of her husband. Şûşik still remained silent. The fifth toast was to mothers and motherhood. Mraz took a small tape recorder out of his bag. He wanted to record a few words on a tape that Şûşik would take with her to Moscow and give to her son. Mraz pressed the "rec" button and slowly recited a poem he composed on homeland, family, and Kurdishness. He conveyed his greetings to his nephew in Moscow and asked me to do the same. Afterward, Mraz moved over toward Şûşik, who had remained silent all this time, and asked her to say a few words. Şûşik uttered the following melodized narrative (fig. 6):<sup>19</sup>

I said, "Ax li minê ax li minê" <sup>20</sup>	Min go, Ax li minê ax li minê
The hostess is 74	Bê kevanya heftêçar salî
In the hospitable house the numerous visitors came and went	Mala ber-mêvana hatin-çûyînê bûye
God is our witness ask the neighbors what kind of household we were	Xwedêva eyanê der-cînara bipirsin maleke çi mal bû
When guests come back to my house	Wextekê der-mêvane min vedigerin berbi mal têñ
They say, "A household with no householder no hostess"	Divên mala bê malxuêye bê kevanî
They turn over and go back	Rabin berê xwe diguhêzin careke dinê poşman vedigerin
Ax li minê ax li minê ax li minê	Ax li minê ax li minê ax li minê
How to live with this pain this pain	Ezê çawa bikim xwe vê kulê vê kulê
The householder comes closer and says, "Why are you wandering here and there?"	Malxuê min tê divê porkurê çira der-dora digeri
He says, "Everything was gained with my hands and your hands"	Divê axir eva temam emekê destê min û teye
He says, "Don't leave, don't leave, you will regret"	Divê were neçe were neçe were neçe tê poşman bivi
Ax miserable when you left this house	Ax divê malxiravo wexta tu mala min derketî
Whatever you do the past doesn't come back	Dikim-nakim dema çûyî idî naê
Miserable miserable	Malxiravo malwêrano
Ax the wind blows it is raining	Ax ba tê baran dililîne
I say, "My poor daughters cry bitterly	Ez divêm gelî qîzê mine porkurno

Call your brother for help and bring  
a doctor”  
*Ax* they say, “Mother the medicine is  
illusory  
 It will deceive the householder  
Your household will be destroyed”  
*Ax* I say, “Brother father”  
 We lost our mind our household

I dedicate a lament to my son-in-law  
 Ah, my brother, he says, “Early in the  
morning”  
 He says, “The earth and the sky  
cry out”  
 He says, “When the earthquake  
happened  
 Darkness came to my eyes”  
 I couldn’t see anyone  
 My father my beloved son-in-law  
 I dedicate this lament to my beloved  
*Toksın*  
 She was the mother of seven daughters  
 She was herself my first daughter  
*Ax* my brother my beloved  
 Don’t leave I know nothing about you  
 I heard distressed news  
 The snow and the rain closed my door  
*Ax* my beloved my dear  
 Today a terrible grief happened  
 As if a glass bottle was struck on  
 my head  
 As if someone was nearly killed in the  
 house  
 My darling left for nothing  
 Mother of seven daughters  
*Ax* I said, “Bérivan, Bérivan”  
 My Bérivan these last years doesn’t  
 come to visit me any more  
 Îşan I beg you and your single son  
 Take my Bérivan by the hand and  
 bring her home  
 My Bérivan says, “No pan, no pot  
 I won’t come back home”  
 Îşan I will be your sacrifice

*Were xwe birê xwera bigihîne*  
*he’kim bîne*  
*Ax divê daê doxtirî derewîne*

*Wê serê malxuê mala te dixapîne*  
*Mala teê ji hev betalbe*  
*Ax divêm birê min bîo bavê min bîo*  
*Me hişê xwe unda kir mala xwe*  
*unda kir*  
*Ezê yekê bavême ser ze’vê xweda*  
*Ax, birê mibio divê siveye*

*Divê daê e’ rd-e’zmana kirye gazî*

*Divê wexta e’rd hejyaye*

*Usa ber çevê min bûye mij-dûmane*  
*Me kir, nekir kes qe nedî*  
*Bavê mibio ze’vê minî delal*  
*Ezê yekê bavêjim ser Toksîna xweye*  
*delal*  
*Wekî dayka hevt qîza bûye*  
*Xwexwe jî serî pêşdanîbye*  
*Ax birê minê delala dilê minê*  
*Were neçe haj ji te tuneme*  
*Were hewareki min daketye*  
*Usa berfe baranê derî-baciê min girtye*  
*Ax tu delala dilê min bibyê*  
*Îro e’cêbeke reş bûye*  
*Qe nizam daê istegene nav çevada*

*Qe nizam xwe malêda nekuştine*

*Delala dilê min, badilhewa xwera çûye*  
*Dayka hevt qîzaye*  
*Ax min go bêrîvanê bêrîvanê*  
*Were bêrîvana min idî çendik-çend*  
*sale naê malê*  
*Îşan bextê te û taê t'enême*  
*Were destê bêrîvana min bigre bîne*  
*malê*  
*Bêrîvana min divê ne sîtile, ne beroşe*  
*Ezê tucar berê xwe nedime malê*  
*Bê Îşan qurbana teme*

Take my Bêrivan by the hand and  
bring her home  
Ax I said, “Misfortune brings  
misfortune”  
I said to the guardian of the pasture  
Perîşan’s father Xezal’s mother  
decomposes in the grave  
Ax my brother I’m like a crane who  
told its grief  
I went to Axbaran region to  
Leninakan  
Nobody was able to say something  
clear  
I came back with my heart burnt  
  
Ay destiny you betrayed me  
Poor and miserable fatherless and  
motherless why destiny have you  
done this to me?  
The destiny answered, “I didn’t do  
anything to you  
You lost your senses  
You destroyed your household by  
yourself”  
Ay miserable destiny  
And what can I say or not say  
I will say something and you will say  
the contrary brother  
May I be your sacrifice  
I will say fraternally to my brother  
“May I be your sacrifice”  
They left me alone in this country  
I don’t know why I remained alone I  
have no brother left  
Ax my poor brothers

*Were destê bêrîvana min bigre  
bîne malê  
Ax mi go ç’ya gote ç’ya*  
*Ezê temîkê bikim qorixçya  
Divê bavê Perîşanê dayka Xezalê axê  
gorada dih’elya  
Ax, birê mibio ezê qulingim halê dilê  
xwera diqîryam  
Ezê ketime welatê Ax’baranê  
Lénînakanê digeryam  
Neke neke kesî salix-solixê min neda*  
*Ezê carekê dinê poşman dilê kul  
dageryam  
Ay felekê te li min barkir  
Malxiravê ax bêbextê feleka dê-bavê te  
çira usa serê min kir?*  
*Felek divê min usa serê te nekirye*  
*Te h’işê xwe unda kirye  
Te xwexwe mala xwe bela kirye*  
*Ay felekê bêbextê  
Ez idî ci bêjim ci nevêjim  
De were were yeke mine yeke teye birao*  
*Ez qurbana teme  
Ezê bêjim birao bi biratî  
Ez qurbana weme  
Ez tenê hiştîme vî welatî  
Nizam çira usa dûrî zara bêxwey  
mame  
Ax bêbextno, wey birano*

Şûşik dried her tears and asked to listen to the recording. Mraz rewound the tape and gave the recorder to his sister. Şûşik listened, and the tears started to flow down her cheeks again. Her chest was moving slowly back and forth, and she punctuated her sayings with heavy sighs and sobs. The neighbor’s daughter knocked on the door. Şûşik told her to call her mother in for something important. A 45-year-old woman entered the room, and we all listened together a third time to Şûşik’s melodized narrative. Mraz was lying



Figure 6. First lines of Şuşık’s melodized speech.

on the bed with his eyes half closed, while Şuşık continued moving her body back and forth, soon followed by her neighbor.

In the silence of the room, the neighbor asked if Şuşık had received any news from Bêrîvan. Şuşık moaned and answered briefly that Bêrîvan was no longer her daughter. Bêrîvan had married an Armenian without the permission of her parents. Among the Yezidis, alliance rules are strict: marrying a non-Yezidi or marrying a Yezidi who does not belong to the same endogamic group is absolutely forbidden. Bêrîvan had left home without any possible return. She now lives in Krasnodar in southern Russia. “I lost three daughters,” says Şuşık, “but one has no grave.”

The neighbor left; Mraz was already sleeping. I lay head to foot with Şuşık on the second bed. In the next days, Şuşık went to the cemetery, cleaned her house, and visited most of the houses in the village, telling everybody how sad she was to leave for the land of exile (*welatê xeribiye*). A few weeks later, she caught a plane to Moscow.

### Shared Destinies

There are certain differences between these stories. First, the circumstances in which Nazkhanum, Vediha, and Şuşık resort to melodized speech vary slightly. Nazkhanum does so mostly in ritual contexts or while “teaching” novices. Şuşık performs melodized speech in daily life, while visiting her neighbors and at all funeral wakes in her village. Vediha does it mostly at home with her children (sometimes while lulling them) or when remembering her life with some visitor. Second, the three women do not share exactly the same relationship with the sonic expression of mourning. Mullah

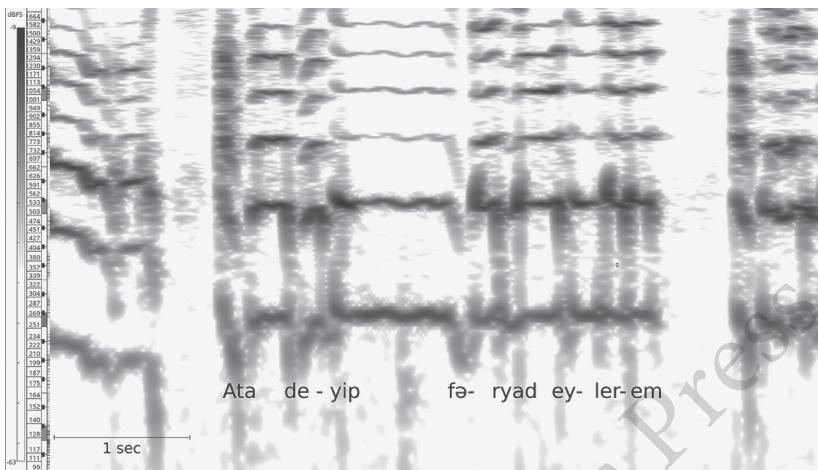
Nazkhanum is a professional and regularly paid to guide mourning ceremonies. In addition to melodized speech, she performs hymns (*marsiyalar*). Şüsik and Vediha are never paid and are not considered professionals even though Şüsik is renowned in her village for her vocal expertise for funeral wakes. Finally, Vediha's relationship to mourning and loss is shaped by war, violence, and forced displacement. Her life is clearly divided between a "before" and an "after," while Nazkhanum and Şüsik suffered the loss of relatives but did not personally experience either forced displacement or war.

However, beyond these differences, the three vignettes portray an "old" woman in "permanent mourning" who embodies pain through melodized speech. Nazkhanum, Vediha, and Şüsik are all over 50, have raised their children (or at least no longer have babies), and already have grandchildren. All of them are widows (although Vediha married her husband's brother after the former's death). All three have been struck repeatedly by the death of close relatives and at least one of their children. Nazkhanum, Vediha, and Şüsik jointly speak of permanent pain, very much embedded in their hearts, a feeling that calls for melodized speech. All three frequently switch to melodized speech while lamenting their destiny and claim that the pain that "burns their heart" is the consequence of the unbearable sorrow they have had to overcome, that is, the mark of their "black destiny" (*felekê reşê*). This portrayal of bereaved women in permanent mourning is an ideal that they embody on a daily basis. And, conversely, melodized speech represents a way to embody pain and keep it present.

## Musical Features

The melodized speech of Nazkhanum, Vediha, and Şüsik share common features that can be described as musical. All of them are vocal performances in which melodic lines are uttered over a few pitches within a narrow range. Each line is semantically autonomous and separated by breath pauses. Their rhythm is non-isochronic, and the melodic lines generally follow a descending path.

Nazkhanum's melodized speech is composed of groups of three or four sonic plateaus.<sup>21</sup> Each plateau contains syllables uttered flowing fast within a single breath over one or two notes. The arrangement of plateaus follows roughly the same pattern: two or three plateaus each at a slightly different range (with the second often lower), and the third or fourth follows a descending path that reaches the lowest note of the utterance toward its end. This last note is also generally emphasized by a longer duration and a vibrato in the voice. Complete with tears and sighs, Nazkhanum's voice displays "icons of crying" (Urban 1988, 389), which are audible mainly in the voice inhalation



Spectrogram 1. Detail from Nazkhanum's melodized speech.

and disjointed sounds, especially the unvoiced consonants sounded with a strong pressure on the glottis. Spectrogram 1 displays the first breath in a series of plateaus.<sup>22</sup> The level melodic line is interrupted by strongly marked unvoiced consonants ("t" and "f"). Toward the middle of the narrative, when Latifa joins in with beatings on her knees, the rhythm becomes isochronic and sentences are repeated several times on the same melodic line. Afterward, Nazkhanum described this part as a *marsiya* (religious lament). A few minutes later, Nazkhanum returns to the unmetered melodic plateaus, a part that she calls *lailailar*.

Similar to Nazkhanum, Şûşik's melodized speech is composed of a series of plateaus and a descending path.<sup>23</sup> Again, each plateau is uttered within a single breath. A fast flow of clearly marked syllables alternates with large vibratos on some word-ending vowels. Spectrogram 2 displays the first breath of a series of plateaus uttered by Şûşik and conveys the features described previously, as well as two "icons of crying": voice inhalation and the falsetto on vowel /i/.

Vediha's melodized speech slightly differs from those of the two previous women.<sup>24</sup> Sentences are uttered over greater temporal space, and the plateaus consist of three notes that she repeats sequentially several times. The melodic shape is thus less monotonous than those of Nazkhanum and Şûşik. Each third or fourth breath has a descending melodic curve and a long vibrato on the last note. Spectrogram 3 displays three breaths uttered by Vediha. On the last syllable, /-ran/, Vediha changes the vowel slowly, intensifying the second and eighth harmonics. In comparison to the two previous performers,

Vediha's consonants are less marked and the voice less tense. This feature may be due to the fact that Vediha was not literally crying at that specific moment.

The utterances of Nazkhanum, Vediha, and Şuşik combine speech, song, and weeping in a way typical of lamented utterances elsewhere (Urban 1988; Feld 1990; Feld and Fox 1994). They also display strong links with lullabies and epic songs. Nazkhanum qualified her utterance as *lailailar*, which



Spectrogram 2. Detail from Şuşik's melodized speech.



Spectrogram 3. Detail from Vediha's melodized speech.

literally means “beddy-byes” and is the term used for a lullaby. As opposed to *marsiyalar*,<sup>25</sup> which are rhythmic religious laments in responsorial form accompanied by striking the chest or knees, *lailailar* are uttered by a single voice with no isochronic rhythm. Vediha’s second melodized utterance shows influences from an epic style. The Yezidi utterances of Nazkhanum, Vediha, and Şûşik thus seem to oscillate between genres that share not only a common range of emotions but also similar destinies conveyed through a similar type of melodized utterances.<sup>26</sup> This brings us to the question of the relationships between womanhood and voice in this region.

### **Gendered Utterances**

Scholarly sources on gender and family in the Caucasus, the eastern Mediterranean, and Central Asia describe extensively the situation of females as young brides (see, for example, Abu-Lughod 1986; Delaney 1991; Doubleday 1988; Farkhadova 1991; Grima 1992; Nicolas 1972). Most societies in this region are patrilineal and patrilocal, and, as a consequence, young brides have to take up residence in their husband’s household, which they often describe as a place of exile. During the first years of their marriage, their lives are mainly located inside the husband’s household, with little opportunities for public voice. They certainly attend weddings and other feasts where they may sing as part of a group. However, a young woman rarely raises her voice (spoken or sung) alone in public. After motherhood and as years pass, her own sons begin to marry and bring their brides into the household; her public voice becomes potentially louder, especially for utterances of sorrow. Older women become involved in more activities outside the home: weddings, feasts, visits to other households, and funeral wakes. Women over 40 rarely perform at weddings (except to sing a lament for the bride leaving home); rather, they perform more frequently at funerals and mourning ceremonies. Usually melodized, these utterances constitute public channels for expressing sad feelings and referencing personal tragedy, creating a privileged place for the public expression of their emotions.<sup>27</sup>

Nazkhanum, Vediha, and Şûşik do not represent their utterances as fictional but as personal and lived sufferings. They tell their “own real stories,” although one could certainly doubt that Vediha actually saw Atatürk (1881–1938) coming by plane from Ankara or that Nazkhanum actually witnessed the Battle of Karbala (AD 680). As documented in previous studies, life stories are shaped narratives that can differ from the life as lived (for example, see Atkinson 1990; Abu-Lughod 1993b). Furthermore, melodized narratives become even more unique utterances as their sonic features define a space for uninterrupted enunciation; that is, there is no possibility to comment, con-

tradict, or correct the words presented during performance. Melodized utterances of sorrow often endow the words with a state of uncertainty. Reported speech, use of ambiguous time, and space markers blur the distinction between witnessed facts and imagined situations (Amy de la Bretèque 2012). So, how to understand the Nazkhanum, Vediha, and Şüsük claims to truth? I suggest that their narratives may be better understood as testimonies to an affective state, that is, an “affective truth” (Schäfers 2013) conveyed through words and sounds as well as embodied feelings. By doing so, Nazkhanum, Vediha, and Şüsük create through their melodized utterances a hyperreality of affect and memory. They become emotionally charged personae. Of course, not all women become “burning hearts.” However, Nazkhanum, Vediha, and Şüsük represent ideal types (in the Weberian sense [1949]) of bereaved women.

Nevertheless, melodizing utterances of sorrow are not restricted to women. While conducting fieldwork in Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Turkey, I observed that epic songs, which are always narratives of sorrow and tragic destiny, are performed mainly by men. The stories narrated in such songs are not personal, and the performers do not claim to have witnessed the events (even if the lyrics often say so). Furthermore, among the Yezidis of Armenia, professional male musicians are frequently invited to funerals (see Amy de la Bretèque 2008, 2013).<sup>28</sup> They perform on demand, often for people they do not personally know. Thus, in most cases, the lyrics are not personal, and the musicians do not perform in any state of mourning. The main difference between the melodized speeches of men and women, therefore, seems to revolve around the degree of involvement by the speaker in the utterance. Women melodize mainly what they see as their own “black” destinies (or those of their children and brothers), while men relate stories of tragic heroes whom they have in most cases never met. In Armenia, “burning heart” women such as Şüsük used to tell me that men’s melodized utterances are “accurate” (*rastin*), whereas women’s melodized utterances are “honest” (*bi namûs*). And, in fact, women switch to melodized voice only when they consider themselves in a state of mourning (which some of them extend, as we have seen, to the whole of their life). In that way, even if women have no personal stories to tell, their narratives are considered to be pervaded by lived emotions, felt in their hearts. This is clearly evident in the second part of Vediha’s melodized utterance. She speaks about the destiny of the Kurds, which, while addressing a broader topic, she mixes with personal feelings.

### **Embodied Pain and Self-Sacrifice**

While narrating their stories, Nazkhanum, Vediha, and Şüsük were seated, with slight upper-body swaying and the head oriented slightly downward.

They moaned and sighed between sentences, and Nazkhanum would strike her thighs (an action Vediha and Şuşık did only at the end of a melodized utterance). While conducting fieldwork, I observed that these gestures are more common among elderly women, even when not performing melodized speech. After a certain age, for example, on becoming a grandmother, most women sigh in conjunction with almost all body movements (while sitting down, getting up, and so on), they fulfill silences in conversations by onomatopoeic expressions of pain and sorrow (such as *wey*, *vay*, *ah*, *vah*, *of*, and so on), and they also accompany most narratives with strikes on their thighs or chest. By doing so, they convey how they seem to embody a physical pain they can never be rid of.

Numerous studies on laments have mentioned their strong cathartic dimensions (for example, Andreesco and Bacou 1986; Doubleday 1988; Herndon and Ziegler 1990; Khouri 1993; Tolbert 1990; Xanthakou 1990). Experiencing in words, sounds, and gesture the suffering of loss has been analyzed as a means of shedding individual sorrow. However, catharsis is certainly not what Nazkhanum, Vediha, and Şuşık are seeking. They say they do not experience any relief while (or after) performing melodized utterances. Whereas they claim that performing the pain “burning their heart” in melodized speech constitutes a vital need, they also confess that they feel even worse afterward. Performed on a daily basis, these utterances seem to keep old wounds open. They do not wish to be rid of their sufferings but, rather, to share them. This is clear in Şuşık’s story when she calls her neighbor to listen to the recording. By doing so, she shows no hesitation in bringing her neighbor to the same mood. Feld has already pointed out that the concept of catharsis is not relevant among the Kaluli of Papua New Guinea, where laments are better understood as a “pulling together” of affects” (1990, 257). My three cases seem to exhibit a similar function. Indeed, as I have argued previously, melodized speech constitutes the best means for effecting a shared pulling together of affects (Amy de la Bretèque 2012). The words uttered are molded into a form that may not be specifically personal but that remains easily accessible to the audience in emotional terms. This formal shape gives the speaker the possibility to distance herself from her own narrative while simultaneously making the emotions available to the listeners who can live and invest in the performance individually.

This embodiment of pain through words, sounds, and gestures is conceptualized as self-sacrifice (*qurban*) by women. Taken to the extreme, self-sacrifice can lead to death (in the case of armed conflicts, suicide attacks, or martyrs for faith). However, it does take on other forms, such as exile, devotion, or dedication to another being. In everyday conversations, it is common

for mothers and grandmothers to express their wish to be sacrificed for the sake of their sons and grandsons. In Kurdish, for example, the sentence “May I be your sacrifice” (*Ez qurbana te me*) is a very common address for mothers and grandmothers to their sons or grandsons.

In their utterances, Nazkhanum, Vediha, and Şûşik also enact a set of feelings reflecting dedication to another being. Şûşik wants to be sacrificed for her brother (“May I be your sacrifice”), Nazkhanum begs to die instead of her father (“Let me die instead of you *vayy*”), and Vediha wishes for sisters and mothers to be sacrificed before their brothers and sons (“May sisters be the sacrifice of their brothers; may mothers be the sacrifice of their sons”). Such feelings may be understood as “moral emotions.” Defined as “those emotions that are linked to the interests or welfare either of society as a whole or at least of persons other than the judge or agent” (Haidt 2003, 853), moral emotions propagate moral values and cover a wide range of feelings, such as compassion, shame, culpability, anger, contempt, and respect. Moral emotions thus become reactions to social events that reach beyond the direct interests of the self, whereas emotions in general are reactions to perceived changes, threats, or opportunities that directly affect the self. In the utterances of Nazkhanum, Vediha, and Şûşik, moral emotions are central. They enact relationships and call for emotional reactions from their listeners, thus being led to enter the same emotional mood. These moral values are mainly conveyed in melodized speech. Conversely, women’s self-sacrifice appears as an inevitable feature of this kind of melodized speech.

On a larger regional scale, public expressions of self-sacrifice are often shaped by poetic and musical means. Laments are commonly practiced by women in funeral wakes and mourning ceremonies,<sup>29</sup> but they also frequently occur outside the scope of such rituals. Among the few studies concerning such practices, Allison and Kreyenbroek (1996, 43) and Koening (2011) report cases of Kurdish women (from Iraq and Turkey) who chose to answer the journalists’ questions about their forced displacement in melodized utterances. Similarly, Abu-Lughod describes the songs of loss among Bedouin women as “close to funeral laments in sound and sentiment” (1993a, 191). Uttered in daily life, these songs assert an attachment to those who have gone, whether absent or deceased. More generally, the repertoire dedicated to an aesthetic of self-sacrifice (generally related to loss and exile) is widespread not only in Anatolia and the Caucasus but also in Central Asia and the eastern Mediterranean. Genres such as *gazeller*, *ghazal*, *amanedhes*, *rembetiko*, *kilam*, and *taziye* testify to a shared need for poetico-musical expressions of suffering and pain.<sup>30</sup>

## Conclusion

I have analyzed the predisposition developed by elderly women for melodized utterances of self-sacrifice and the consecrated status that they acquire through the feelings embodied and shared in these utterances. As described previously, “moral emotions” are not only lived in the self’s subjectivity; they also enact relationships through the various modes of addressing the living, the exiled, and the dead. In this sense, melodized utterances construct and mold social relationships as much as they express individual feelings. The fact that Nazkhanum, Vediha, and Şuşık strive to institutionalize pain through melodized speech may be understood from the perspective of a regional culture of sacrifice, which is gendered. If men’s “ideal” sacrifice is a tragic ending, women’s sacrifice may be understood as a permanent dedication to others, particularly a dedication to lost relatives. Even if this implies negation of the self, self-sacrifice is, in the Caucasus and in Anatolia, primarily a positive act, thus admired to the point of becoming heroic and to be narrated in melodized utterances. Through their sacrifices, bereaved women command a respected status and a public voice audible in all circumstances.

During the past three decades, violence and conflict have rampaged throughout the Caucasus and Anatolia. Omnipresent in daily life and in the media, violence and conflict are in some cases related to political and religious understandings of self-sacrifice and martyrdom. However, as I have shown, the latter ideas also shape ways of living that are not violent and are not directly linked to political or religious issues. Indeed, exile, devotion, and extreme dedication to someone else are often understood in the region simply as alternative forms of self-sacrifice. By describing the “tragic mind” that pervades the politics of the region, Bozarslan (2008) and other historians have called for an analysis of the daily ethics of self-sacrifice. I have considered how the daily ethics of self-sacrifice are sonically embodied in different ways, largely by women. Bozarslan (2004) points out how in the Middle East the criminalization of political, ethnic, and sectarian identities has contributed to the formation of a “tragic mind,” perceiving violence as the surest provider of justice and hope. In a societal model that takes martyrdom and sacrifice as an ideal, the examples of women like Nazkhanum, Vediha, and Şuşık could contribute to a better understanding of the interplay between the political and quotidian contexts of sacrifice as well as their nature as gendered behavior.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> I carried out fieldwork in Azerbaijan in 2001 and 2002 (see Amy de la Bretèque 2005). I spoke Russian with most of my interlocutors and was assisted in translation to/from Azeri by my friend Dilara Ismayilova. From 2003 to 2005, I conducted several periods of fieldwork with Kurds in Turkey. The material presented here comes from the suburbs of Istanbul where I lived in 2003 (see Amy de la Bretèque and Bilal 2013). I am grateful to Melissa Bilal and Emir Kamer, who helped me in many respects, including translations to/from Turkish and Kurdish. At that time, my Kurdish language skills were insufficient to hold interviews alone. I then engaged in fieldwork among the Yezidis of Armenia between 2006 and 2010, mostly in the Aparan region (see Amy de la Bretèque 2008, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013; and Amy de la Bretèque and Stoichita 2012). I spoke Kurdish (which I had in the meanwhile learned) and Russian with my interlocutors. I would especially like to thank Cemile Avdal, Nahro Zagros, Mraz Cemal, Emerik Serdar, and Nure Serdar for their considerable aid and assistance in the field.

<sup>2</sup> *Qurban* is a word of Arabic origin used in many languages in the eastern Mediterranean and the Caucasus. It refers primarily to the sacrifice of animals.

<sup>3</sup> Considering restrictions on the length of this article, I preferred to give a rather detailed portrait of three women I consider representative of the senior women's worldview in the area rather than use more diverse samplings from various interviewees. As these stories may include sensitive details, I first hesitated about using pseudonyms or keeping these women's real names. I asked them during fieldwork what they preferred, and all preferred to have their real names included. Vediha even asked if I could send the recordings I made to the Kurdish TV station broadcasting from Brussels.

<sup>4</sup> In Azerbaijan, the word "mullah" refers to religious people, either men or women, with low status. Women are mainly in charge of guiding rituals in the women's room.

<sup>5</sup> *Marsiyalar* (sing. *marsiya*) is a word of Arabic origin (*marthiya*) that refers to hymns of commemoration (mainly of the saints). In Azerbaijan, they are often responsorial and accompanied with beating on the knees or chest. *Laililar* are lamented melodized utterances. The word is always used in this context in its plural form. The singular form (*lailai*) means "lullaby." On the link between lullabies and laments, see Amy de la Bretèque (2005); Amy de la Bretèque and Bilal (2013); and O'Callaghan (2008). *Sureler* (sing. *sure*) are Qur'anic chapters (in Arabic: *surat*). As a mullah, Nazkhanum is also invited to recite *sureler* at birth or wedding ceremonies.

<sup>6</sup> The audio field recording is available at [www.ebreteque.net/self-sacrifice](http://www.ebreteque.net/self-sacrifice).

<sup>7</sup> Literally, “I wish you to wear the Surats and Ayats.” Surats and Ayats are, respectively, chapters and verses of the Qur'an.

<sup>8</sup> Göç Edenler Sosyal Yardımlaşma ve Kültür Derneği (Migrants' Association for Social Cooperation and Culture).

<sup>9</sup> Kurdistan Workers' Party.

<sup>10</sup> The audio field recording is available at [www.ebreteque.net/self-sacrifice](http://www.ebreteque.net/self-sacrifice).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Older brother, a term for addressing a man.

<sup>13</sup> Kurdish military force in Iraq.

<sup>14</sup> *Mamo, pismano*: literally, uncles and cousins from the maternal side.

<sup>15</sup> Kemal Atatürk.

<sup>16</sup> İsmet İnönü: in the Republican era, he was considered second in rank to Atatürk.

<sup>17</sup> Along with the Kurdish nationalist discourse, displacement from eastern Turkey and interbreeding with Kurds from other areas (as well as Turks) have contributed to a transformation of local cultures into a more standardized and general Kurdish culture. On the standardization of Kurdish culture and language, see, among others, Kanakis (2013); Scalbert (2005); Uçarlar (2009); and Yükcel (2011).

<sup>18</sup> In 2014, when I wrote this article, the highway was indeed completed.

<sup>19</sup> The audio field recording is available at [www.ebreteque.net/self-sacrifice](http://www.ebreteque.net/self-sacrifice).

<sup>20</sup> *Ax li minê* means literally “ah on me.” *Ax* (ah) is an onomatopoeic expression of sadness. *Ax li minê* expresses the state of being in pain.

<sup>21</sup> For an extensive musical analysis of Azeri women laments, see Amy de la Bretèque (2002, 2005); Efendieva (2001); and Sipos (2004).

<sup>22</sup> I used a vertical logarithmic scale to create spectrograms 1, 2, and 3. The rhythmic scale differs, however. I used dbfs2 for spectrograms 1 and 2, and a linear scale for spectrogram 3.

<sup>23</sup> For an extensive musical analysis of the melodized utterances of sorrow of Yezidi women, see Amy de la Bretèque (2013) and Rudenko (1982).

<sup>24</sup> For an extensive musical analysis of Kurdish women laments in Turkey, see Amy de la Brèteque (2004).

<sup>25</sup> The short rhythmic section in the middle of Nazkhanum's melodized narrative is a *marsiya*.

<sup>26</sup> On the porosity of these genres, see O'Callaghan (2008); Trehub and Prince (2010); Allison (2001); and Amy de la Bretèque and Bilal (2013).

<sup>27</sup> Of course, this description does not fit so well for women who live in cities and who have been involved in a public role via their professional activities. See, for example, Naroditskaya's (2000) article on professional women singers in Azerbaijan.

<sup>28</sup> In the funerals I attended in Azerbaijan and Turkey, men did not perform laments. Some informants stated that such may occur on very rare occasions of tragic death, but they added that in these cases men overwhelmed by their emotions act “as women.” In most cases, the vocal participation of men at funerals was linked to the canon: prayers and religious utterances.

<sup>29</sup> See, for example, Alexiou 1974; Allison 2001; Caraveli-Chaves 1980; Herzfeld 1993; Khouri 1993; Doubleday 1988; Guiart 1979; Rivoal 2000; Rudenko 1982; Savvidou 1996; Seremetakis 1991; Vrinat 1996; and Yalcin-Heckmann 2005.

<sup>30</sup> Here is a short and non-exhaustive list of musical genres linked to pain and loss: *amanedhes* (Zerouali 2004); *gazeller, ghazal* (Fortier 2004); *rembetiko* (Holst 1977; Holst-Warhaft 2003; Papazahariou 1980, 2005); *mirologia* (Xanthakou 1990; Seremetakis 1991); *kilam/kilamê-ser* (Amy de la Bretèque 2013); *taziye* (Esmaili 2004); *marsiya* (Naroditskaya 2000; Efendieva 2001); and *tarab* (Racy 2003). On the development of a special taste for bittersweet feelings in music, see Demeuldre (2004).

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