

## Echoes of Resistance: The Art and Cultural Association Hunergeha Welat in Rojava amidst Conflict and Violence

### An Approach to Art-based Peacebuilding in Kurdistan

von Ezgi Gülistan Gül

Erscheinungsjahr: 2024

Peer Reviewed

Stichwörter:

**Cultural activism | Conflict | Art-based peacebuilding | Kurdistan | Community Participation | Transformation | Kunstbasierte Interventionen**

#### Abstract

This paper examines the contribution of the arts and cultural association *Hunergeha Welat* in Rojava to peacebuilding in the region in times of conflict and violence. Based on the concept of *Strategic art-based peacebuilding* developed by Michael Shank and Lisa Schirch, the paper concludes that artistic interventions raise public awareness of the current problems faced by the Kurds. Using the music video *Serêkaniyê û Avaşîn* as an example, artistic measures and art forms as well as their contributions to peacebuilding are identified and evaluated. The analysis shows that the art and cultural association Hunergeha Welat contributes to strategic art-based peacebuilding through its work and is an important actor in manifesting peace in the region.

**Echoes of Resistance: Die Kunst- und Kulturvereinigung Hunergeha Welat in Rojava inmitten von Konflikt und Gewalt. Ein Ansatz zur kunstbasierten Friedensförderung in Kurdistan.**

**Zusammenfassung:** Der vorliegende Artikel untersucht den Beitrag der Kunst- und Kulturvereinigung *Hunergeha Welat* zur Friedensförderung in Rojava in Zeiten von Konflikt und Gewalt. Auf der Grundlage des von Michael Shank und Lisa Schirch entwickelten Konzepts der strategisch-kunstbasierten Friedensförderung wird festgestellt, dass künstlerische Interventionen das öffentliche Bewusstsein für die gegenwärtigen Probleme der Kurden schärfen. Am Beispiel des Musikvideos *Serêkaniyê û Avaşîn* werden

die künstlerischen Maßnahmen und Kunstformen bewertet und ihr Beitrag zur Friedensförderung identifiziert. Die Analyse zeigt, dass die *Hunergeha Welat* durch ihre Arbeit zur strategisch-kunstbasierten Friedensförderung beiträgt und ein wichtiger Akteur zur Friedensförderung in der Region ist.

Dr. Meike Lettau, Juniorprofessorin für „Cultural und Media Policy Studies“ an der Zeppelin University, hat diesen Beitrag für die *kubi-online* Rubrik „Forschung in progress/Qualifizierungsarbeiten“ empfohlen.

## **Kurdish music as a political instrument**

In a political climate that was characterized by legal and normative restrictions on the production, performance, and circulation of Kurdish music – or any cultural production in Kurdish language in general – the music scene, in response, developed almost entirely around political themes. These developments already began in the 1970s (Kuruoğlu/Hamelink 2017:103). In Kurdistan music is a frequent mechanism for discussing social and political issues. Especially in Rojava, Northeast Syria, the art and culture association Hunergeha Welat uses music to make others aware of the war crimes, class differences, and women's struggles (Kurdistan Report, 2020). In the video clips, they dance Govend, the traditional folklore dance of Kurdistan as a supporting element of Kurdish culture, and practice their traditional craft work. Thereby they rhythmically express values such as community, self-defense, and resistance. Through these elements of dance and music, they are creating an environment of memory. Yet art and culture are often seen as a “soft approach” to issues of conflict and violence (Shank & Schirch, 2008, 218), in the Kurdish case, Hunergeha Welat has entered a political field with their work. Art and culture are functional and are thus an important tool to lead to an ideological change and transformation in society (ibid., 218). These Kurdish cultural struggles address conditions of statelessness, attacks on indigeneity, subsequent decolonial struggles, and the prevalence of complex multivalent identities in these turbulent contexts (Benjamin, J./Bingol, H. B./Bajalan, D. 2018:4).

In this context, the following research question will be investigated: How does the art and cultural association in Rojava, specifically the work of Hunergeha Welat, contribute to peacebuilding during periods of conflict and violence? This will be explored by referring to the theoretical framework of *Strategic arts-based peacebuilding* from Michael Shank and Lisa Schirch (2008), which provides a helpful lens for analyzing the contributions made by Hunergeha Welat to the process of peacebuilding. In this context, it is important to highlight the profound importance of art and culture in asserting and enforcing Kurdish existence. Using cultural resistance in the Kurdish case as an example, this paper aims to “illustrate the intersection between art and peacebuilding” (Shank/Schirch 2008:1). Starting with a brief contextualization of the Kurdish revolution in Rojava within the scholarly debates, this paper will assess the cultural production of Hunergeha Welat. For this analysis, the music video [Serêkaniyê û Avaşîn](#) by Hunergeha Welat (2022) will be consulted and evaluated using the theoretical framework of *Strategic arts-based peacebuilding*.

## **Theoretical framework of strategic arts-based peacebuilding**

According to the scholars Michael Shank and Lisa Schirch, the term *Strategic arts-based peacebuilding* describes art as a tool for “transforming intractable interpersonal, intercommunal, national, and global conflicts” (Shank/Schirch 2008:217). Instead of using traditional conflict resolution methods, in the paper *Strategic arts-based peacebuilding* (2008). Shank and Schirch utilize creative artistic practices to promote

peace. In their paper, the authors provide the conceptual framework for *Strategic arts-based peacebuilding* and set out to outline assumptions and definitions of the concept. Drawing on empirical material from previous arts in the context of peacebuilding, their research, and literature, Shank and Schirch analyze how the arts work for peacebuilding, when different art forms are appropriate in the conflict cycle, and how the arts are so effective in peacebuilding (ibid.:219). Therefore, the task for peacebuilding practitioners is to find ways to incorporate the arts into peacebuilding work and to create a space where people in conflict can express, heal, and reconcile through the arts. The paths to peacebuilding are diverse and complex, as conflicts themselves often are, making it even more important to also develop multidimensional ways to foster peace.

Art is a central concept in the discussion of peacebuilding and conflict resolution. Research and experience have shown that art can make an important contribution to conflict resolution and peacebuilding. By engaging people regardless of their language or cultural background through artistic expression, art provides a unique platform for inclusive participation and empowerment (Shank/Schirch 2008:1).

In this concept, the term "strategic" implies that arts-based methods should be conceptually sound, integrated with other approaches to peacebuilding, imbued with a long-term perspective regarding social change, and committed to the evaluation of their impact. While peacebuilding processes are generally criticized for their lack of strategy, these criteria are even more often not met in arts-based peacebuilding. A strategic approach to arts-based peacebuilding can make a significant difference by leveraging the arts to achieve specific goals and make a measurable contribution to peacebuilding (Shank/Schirch 2008:218).

The term "arts" in this context refers to a means of communication through expression. Art cannot be easily confined to specific categories. In this article, the authors adopt a broad definition of the arts, encompassing both transient and traditional approaches, and encompassing various forms such as visual arts, literary arts, performance arts, and movement arts (ibid.:218).

When the authors refer to "peacebuilding", they encompass a wide range of endeavors aimed at preventing, reducing, transforming, and aiding in the recovery from violence in all its forms, throughout all stages of conflict. To effectively utilize the arts in the field of peacebuilding, it becomes crucial to understand the specific contributions that the arts can make to peacebuilding, determine the appropriate use of different art forms throughout the conflict cycle, and explore the underlying effectiveness of the arts in fostering peacebuilding efforts (ibid.:219). The possibilities for approaches to peacebuilding are endless, as peacebuilding encompasses a range of approaches and requires flexibility. That's why it is helpful to strategically categorize these approaches into specific tasks and themes. In this context, the authors suggest four themes and tasks —*waging conflict nonviolently, reducing direct violence, transforming relationships, and building capacity* (Shank/Schirch 2008:220).

In situations where power dynamics are imbalanced and there is limited public awareness of the underlying issues, it can be challenging to engage conflicting parties in negotiations. In such cases, employing nonviolent strategies becomes crucial. *Strategic nonviolence* is an active and assertive approach to addressing conflict. It aims to raise public awareness and empathy, and balance power by persuading or pressuring others to acknowledge the needs and desires of all involved (ibid.:221). Artists engaged in nonviolent conflict employ their creativity to establish an artistic platform that is imaginative and demands serious attention. They utilize specific artistic mediums to raise awareness about underlying local issues and conflicts. Through mediums like invisible theatre, symbolic reinterpretation, spoken word, music,

documentary filmmaking, public murals, installation art, and chants, artists escalate the intensity of the conflict, making it impossible to ignore (ibid.:222).

Another task to be addressed in this context is *Reducing direct violence*. Reducing direct violence in the context of peacebuilding aims to curtail acts of violence, protect victims, and establish safe spaces for peacebuilding activities. This category encompasses legal systems, peacekeeping initiatives, and programs like refugee shelters that provide safety. By preventing victimization, and creating secure environments, these programs interrupt the cycle of violence and lay the groundwork for further peacebuilding. Artists working in the realm of reducing direct violence employ various art forms. They offer victims a sanctuary within the artistic medium, allowing respite from ongoing racial, political, or economic conflicts (ibid.:223).

Transformation is a key principle of all peacebuilding programs. Therefore, the category *Transforming Relationships* keen on transforming relationships and using the artistic medium to heal collective trauma and make public demands for justice. Artistic practices that fall within the *Transforming Relationships* category encompass various modalities, such as visual arts therapy, drama therapy, music therapy, rituals, and image theatre. These approaches aim to facilitate the transformation of relationships by utilizing artistic techniques and processes to promote healing, self-expression, and communication within communities (ibid.:224). Finally, the category *Building capacity* looks more at long-term peacebuilding efforts by focusing on cultivating existing capacities and skills to meet human needs. Efforts include education and training, development, and research and evaluation. These activities aim to build just structures that support a sustainable culture of peace. Sustainability is a key principle of this category of peacebuilding. It requires long-term thinking and planning (ibid.:226). The mentioned approaches to peacebuilding are most effective when applied in specific phases of a conflict, namely when the conflict escalates, progresses, or de-escalates (ibid.:228).

Strategic arts-based approaches in peacebuilding can also be nonverbal. While not all art forms possess this quality, many have a unique ability and inclination for nonverbal expression, which is advantageous in peace work. Given the predominance of nonverbal communication, peacebuilders should pay special attention to messages conveyed through symbolic channels of facial expression, and body posture as these convey vital information about emotions, energy, and thoughts (ibid.:235). Artistic peacebuilding acknowledges the limitations of verbal communication and proposes using the arts to gather information and convey meanings that are challenging to articulate verbally. Art forms such as music, dance, theater, and visual arts utilize symbolic references to nonverbally communicate something about the real world that cannot be captured by the direct logic of words. The more peacebuilders understand their bodies, senses, and emotions and how to utilize them, the more effective they can be in peace work, and the more receptive their bodies will be to conveying physical, emotional, and sensory communication. Additionally, art helps reclaim the body that has been alienated by oppression, abuse, and violence, serving as a powerful instrument for liberation, and transformation (ibid.:236).

## **Mapping Kurdistan - Rojava**

Throughout history, patriarchal and colonial violence often served to control society and oppress resistance. Organized women's struggle early evolved in interaction with causes such as anti-capitalism, anti-colonialism, and the abolition of slavery (Lorde 1979:2; [Combahee River Collective 1977](#)).

The world public has heard about the struggle of Kurdish women in Rojava from 2014 onwards through the fight against the so-called Islamic State. The history of the Kurds is narrated as that of the world's largest

nation without a state ([Gunter 2004:197](#)). The lack of a state is accompanied by the division of the Middle East by Europeans after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. The Kurdish population is estimated to be about Forty million (Dirik 2022:19). The similarities and differences in the lives of Kurds in the four nation-states who together claim all of Kurdistan within their borders - Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria - have shaped Kurdish people's knowledge of the state and violence (Dirik 2022:4). In 1978, in response to the state oppression of Kurds, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) was founded as a Marxist-Leninist party organization and started guerilla warfare against the Turkish state in 1984. They aimed to establish a state to liberate all of colonized Kurdistan. The armed struggle is labeled as terrorist by most Western countries. Later in the mid-1990s, the movement began to discuss, critique, and abandon the idea of establishing a Kurdish nation-state and rather realize non-state forms of self-determination such as in Rojava today (ibid.:6). Therefore, in 2005 PKK Leader Abdullah Öcalan proposed from prison to build a so-called "Democratic Confederalism". Such a system should be based on "autonomous self-organization, realized through communes, assemblies, cooperatives, academies, and congresses, a model outside, against and despite the nation-state framework" (ibid.:7). The so-called "Kurdistan freedom movement", to which political sociologist Dilar Dirik refers, is a secular, socialist mass movement that attracts people from different regions, ethnicities, religions, and class backgrounds (2022).

In July 2012 the conflict-ridden region of Northeast Syria declared revolution in the context of the regional Arab Spring Uprising. There, the Kurdistan freedom movement started to implement Abdullah Öcalan's political ideas of a self-reliant non-state system (ibid., 10). Kurdish communities first took control of Kobanî, Afrîn, and Cizîre and decorated the governmental facilities with yellow, green, and red banners. With these scenes, the "Revolution of Rojava" was called out. In Rojava, Kurdish women started to participate in guerrilla struggles against occupation and patriarchy (Dirik 2022:2). In the wake of the Syrian military's withdrawal in 2012, it is important to consider the political developments that unfolded in this context. Kurdish-majority areas, particularly the Turkish-Syrian border region, came under the control of forces led by the PKK and affiliated political parties like the Democratic Union Party (PYD). These forces received support from a local population sympathetic to the ideas of the Kurdish movement, which had been mobilizing since the 1980s. This presented an opportunity for the establishment of grassroots autonomous administrations, eventually leading to the formation of the Cantons of Rojava in January 2014 as administrative bodies to govern the de facto autonomy after the fight against the Islamic State. Subsequently, in March 2016, the Cantons were unified under the federal administration of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria (Burç 2020:327).

The principles of grassroots democracy, women's liberation, and inclusive representation of all societal groups through a council system were established as the foundational principles of the social contract in the region (Rojava Assembly 2016). Since 2018, the autonomous entity has been officially recognized as the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES). However, the region of Rojava has faced challenges due to military operations by the Turkish army, such as the "Olive Branch" operation in Afrîn in early 2018 and another offensive in other parts in October 2019. As a result, parts of Rojava have come under partial occupation by the Turkish army and its proxy militias, leading to concerns about demographic engineering, persecution of minorities, and forced displacement (Burç 2020:327). The Turkish state is pursuing an approach similar to that of the 1990s when the remaining Kurdish population was resettled in majority Turkish or Turkish-occupied areas ([Burç & Oveysy 2019](#)).

## **Hunergeha Welat: Art and Cultural association in Rojava**

The context in which Hunergeha Welat is embedded in Rojava is characterized by a complex socio-political landscape. Rojava has been a site of conflict and struggle for many decades, experiencing both internal and external challenges. Rojava has faced the threat of Islamist terrorism and has been engaged in armed conflicts with various actors in the last decade. Hunergeha Welat is an art and culture association that was founded in Qamişlo, Rojava, on July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2014. The Kurdish name Hunergeha Welat means “Studio of the Homeland”. As an art and culture association, they produce songs and music videos dedicated to the Rojava revolution and the resistance in other parts of Kurdistan such as Bakur, Başûr, and Rojhelat. The current revolutionary spirit and the feelings of the society of Rojava are to be reflected in the pieces (ANF 2023). Hunergeha Welat is present on various social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, Telegram, and Facebook. They upload their work on internet portals for video films such as YouTube, where they have 178,000 subscribers (Hunergeha Welat, in: YouTube 2024).

Until 1991, Kurdish music faced severe restrictions and censorship in Turkey, making it illegal to perform, distribute, or possess Kurdish music. Those who openly engaged in Kurdish music or were involved in the production and dissemination of Kurdish music were at risk of facing arrests, imprisonment, and even torture (Kuruoğlu/Hamelink 2017:105). Similarly, in Syria during the 1970s to the 1990s, Kurdish identity was systematically suppressed, particularly in the Cizîre region. This included changing Kurdish place names to Arabic, prohibiting many businesses from using Kurdish letters in their names, and discriminating against people with Kurdish names by excluding them from educational institutions or denying them citizenship. In addition, the gathering of Kurds and participation in Kurdish political parties was criminalized, so those who participated in such activities were constantly threatened with arrest (Allsopp 2016:102). The Kurds wish for the Kurdish language to be encouraged in education and recognized as an official language in places where Kurds are habited. In addition to this, it is requested that original Kurdish region names and symbols be returned, including their flags, colors, and anthems. Hunergeha Welat, therefore, sees itself as a studio of new revolutionary art. Amid these challenges, Hunergeha Welat emerges as an important actor, working within the realm of arts and culture to promote peace and resilience. They operate in a context where the expression of cultural identity and the celebration of diversity are essential in fostering unity and resilience among the diverse communities of Rojava. In this regard, Hunergeha Welat's contributions to peacebuilding are rooted in the “intersection between art and peacebuilding” (Shank/Schirch 2008:1).

Mediha Inan (2021; 2023), a pioneering scholar in this field initially approached Kurdish music and the recent developments in Rojava through Hunergeha Welat from a post-nationalist perspective. Her analysis is centered on the concept of cascades and the geopolitical contexts surrounding music as a form of (self-)agency. As such, the context in which Hunergeha Welat operates is one of ongoing conflict, political complexities, and the pursuit of peace and self-determination. That explains why Hunergeha Welat's lyrics frequently focus on decolonial struggles, women’s struggles, and anti-war anthems. The artists of Hunergeha Welat employ their creativity to establish an artistic platform that is imaginative, thought-provoking and demands serious attention.

## ***Serêkaniyê û Avaşîn by Hunergeha Welat***

In Kurdistan, chants have a long history of waging nonviolent conflict by communicating dissent against social, political, and economic structures. Kurdish music, therefore, became famous as a method of

addressing social and political injustices (Kuruoğlu/Hamelink 2017:105). In this section, the role of Hunergeha Welat as a peacebuilding actor in creating and manifesting peace in Rojava will be addressed. I will look at their music video [Serêkaniyê û Avaşîn](#) and assess their actions. In *Serêkaniyê û Avaşîn*, they communicate the social dynamics between workers, Kurdish soldiers, and civilians. The music video *Serêkaniyê û Avaşîn* was released on November 11th, 2022, against Turkey's chemical weapons attacks in Rojava and has gained about 4,8 million views (Hunergeha Welat, in: YouTube 2024). Serêkaniyê and Avaşîn are two towns in Rojava that the pro-Kurdish Firat News Agency (ANF) reported were particularly affected by Turkish chemical weapons attacks (ANF 2021). The music video, however, refers to all parts of Kurdistan and is intended to make the consequences of the chemical weapons attacks in Kurdistan visible. Even though the use of chemical weapons is proven, Turkey still denies the use of chemical weapons in Northeast Syria ([Deutsche Welle 2018](#)). Turkey has already been criticized for its invasion of northeastern Syria in violation of international law since 2018 ([Deutscher Bundestag 2018:8](#)).

Therefore, reporting wars and conflicts is important and necessary. Music videos such as from Hunergeha Welat raise public awareness about conflict by acting as a mirror to society, showing in sometimes exaggerated, vivid color a symbolic portrait of oppression and conflict between different groups in society. Thus, it is significant to keep reading and interpreting the music video in the socio-political context. The assessment of arts-based peacebuilding goes hand in hand with the assumption of art as a tool for discussing social and political issues.

In the case of Hunergeha Welt and in the context they are embedded, they are transforming a conflict (Shank/Schirch 2008:217). Hunergeha Welt is not just a culture and art association. It is also a community and a safe place, in particular for young people. According to Shank this respect for freedom of expression in dance and music socially conditions young artists that the institution of art is a safe place where judgment is withheld, and respect is guaranteed (2005:536).

It is important to highlight that *Strategic Arts-based Peacebuilding Approaches* are ideally context-sensitive (Shank/Schirch 2008:234). Throughout the music video, everyone involved, from soldiers to farmers and workers, wears a respirator mask against poison gas attacks. This means that everyone in the affected regions is trying to go about their daily work despite the chemical weapon attacks. Admittedly, however, daily life is made highly difficult by the attacks. Even the animals wear respirators [Minute 1:31].

As Inan (2023) correctly outlined in her analysis, Hunergeha Welat's piece centralizes the colonial and capitalist reality of Kolbar by bridging fieldwork with musicians from all fields. In the music video, the so-called *Kolbar* are shown [Minute 0:17]. Kolbars are Kurds who have to cross the Iran-Iraq border to earn money because they are excluded from the labor market in Iran. They transport objects like washing machines from Southern Kurdistan (Iraq-Kurdistan) to Eastern Kurdistan (Iran-Kurdistan) over the mountains to provide for their families. *Kolbar* means in Kurdish: The one who carries the load ([Bahrami 2021](#)). According to a report by the Kurdish human rights organization Hengaw, at least 215 Kolbar in the border regions of Rojhelat Kurdistan fell victim to the dangers associated with their work in 2021. These included armed attacks by Iranian border guards, and in some cases by Turkish or Iraqi border guards (Hengaw 2022).

Further, it says in the video "Tirko cû Berlinê, da jehrê bi xwe re bîne" which means: the Turk goes to Berlin to bring the poison with him [Minute 0:35]. In the text where "Gaz avêtin nav giya Li Serêkaniyê û Avaşîn Jehra ji Berlînê anîn" is sung, it is indicated that the gas is brought to Serêkaniyê and Avaşîn from Berlin. Turkey received 344.6 million euros worth of war weapons from Germany in 2019, which they are using in

their controversial invasion of Rojava, Northeastern Syria ([tagesschau 2020](#)). Furthermore, the video of Hunergeha Welat shows the everyday work with animals, in the yard and the mountains [Minute 1:28 and 0:43]. These are local works that the people of Rojava succeed in preserving despite Turkish state violence. The bombing of Kurds and their mountains often takes place under the guise of "fighting terrorism". The bombing is also destroying the ecological diversity in the region. This is also called *ecocide* in the literature (Robinson 2022:317).

Inan (2023) examines this phenomenon through the lens of socio-ecological transformation, demonstrating how the transmission of values and ideas in a globalized world enables capitalism-detached solidarity among people. In line with the previous point, the video also shows the importance and use of rhythms for daily work. In the video, rhythm sets the physical movement, such as in the four women [Minute 0:06]. Also, with the women and men hammering the clay on the wall or the people in the mining industry [Minute 0:01]. This is a technique used in many indigenous and collective peoples to conserve, balance, and pool labor (Inan 2023).

Hunergeha Welat uses symbolic acts to set the stage for peace and communicate through symbols that require interpretation (Schirch 2004:17). In minute 2:14 a book with the inscription "Zimanê kurdî", which means "The Kurdish language" is shown. Kurds are always accused by the four nation-states Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and Syria that they are not a people and are denied their cultural autonomy (Loizides 2010:514). Yet the self-attributions of Kurds show that they see themselves as colorful and culturally rich people. This understanding comes from their local diversity and history. Kurds have therefore never sought homogenization. Language, as one of the key elements in ethnic and national identification, is significant in drawing ethnonational Kurdish identity boundaries (Çifçıl 2021:42). In her work, Inan (2021) distinguished between myth and memory landscapes, noting that Kurds often encounter narratives that suggest their understanding of land and history is shaped by myths. The Kurds create music because music is the realm of language and memory. At the end of the video, residents stand together on a mountain wearing respirators, facing the camera. There, peasants, workers, and guerrilla fighters stand united, challenging the normative hierarchy as they stand interspersed, rather than in hierarchical order. Consequently, everyone is equally vulnerable and affected by chemical weapons attacks.

Using art forms such as music, dance, and documentary videos, symbolic references are used to nonverbally communicate aspects of the real world that cannot be grasped through the direct logic of words. Hunergeha Welat uses various art forms such as symbolic reinterpretation and documentary videos. Instead of resorting to armed actions to express their opposition to ruling Turkey, these artists employ music videos to permanently document their voices in the public sphere.

## **Contributions of Hunergeha Welat to Peacebuilding**

At the same time, measuring Hunergeha Welat's contributions and effectiveness proves difficult because, on the one hand, they require further research and on the other hand, the effectiveness can vary because their impact often manifests itself in intangible changes. The artists from Hunergeha Welat are urging their listeners to become more politically active and are directly challenging Turkey's policies in Northeast Syria. In Rojava, various bands, film, and drama groups embrace diversity by incorporating multiple cultures and performing revolutionary songs. The region has witnessed the establishment of new centers dedicated to theater, cinema, music, dance, and fine arts. Many of these artistic endeavors are organized under the



revolutionary culture and art association of Hunergeha Welat or Kevana Zêrîn, a Culture Movement of Women (Dirik 2022b:39). They actively engage with local communities, displaced individuals, and refugees, reviving traditional folkloric dances, artistry, songs, and unique forms of musical expression like dengbêj. Dengbêjîs are traditions of singer-poets who have formed historical songs and history in performance (Kuruoğlu/Hamelink 2017:105). These creative efforts are further amplified through media outlets often supported by local self-administrations (Dirik 2022b:40).

The waging conflict non-violently approach applies to Hunergeha Welat (Shank/Schirch 2008:220). Hunergeha Welat strives to build consciousness among marginalized sections of society and educate them regarding their basic rights and uses art to facilitate dialogue on social and political issues like chemical weapons killings, bonded labor, and gender equality. In addition, the reducing direct violence approach also applies, as Hunergeha Welat artists work to reduce direct violence. They interrupt cycles of emotional, physical, and psychological violence through visual, performance, and movement-based art forms. This is done through Kurdish music and the Govend dance. Hunergeha Welat represents for many in the region a safe place where victims can find refuge and security from ongoing political conflicts.

Using the arts to interrupt or reduce direct violence is by no means an easy task according to Shank and Schirch (2008:223). Shank's diagram links peacebuilding terminology to the phases and intensity of conflict (2005:231).

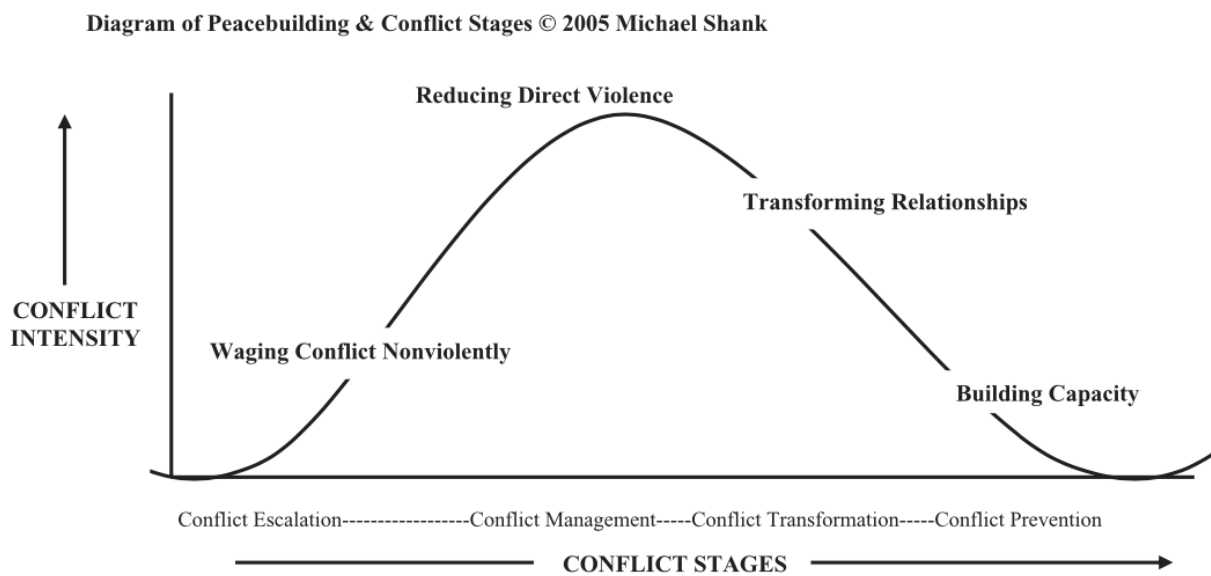


Figure 2 Diagram of Peacebuilding & Conflict Stages (Shank, 2005)

Because art is a powerful tool that has to be used nonviolently and strategically, especially in the context of peacebuilding, an assessment process, sensitivity to cultural contexts, maximizing the nonverbal communication capacity of the arts, and careful planning of the transformative impact of the arts on peacebuilding efforts must be pursued (ibid.:229). Looking at the symbolic channels of facial expression, and body posture as these convey vital information about emotions, energy, and thoughts the music video of Hunergeha Welat shows the urge to take action.

The music videos of Hunergeha Welat can also portray an idealistic vision of the future, such as “Li Qamişlo Li Ber Derî” (Hunergeha Welat, in: [YouTube 2023b](#)). The video portrays life in Qamişlo as a potential vision of peace and harmony, free from the devastating impacts of war and conflict. It envisions a community where people can thrive, coexist peacefully, and enjoy the benefits of stability and security. Through this portrayal, the video highlights the importance of peacebuilding efforts in creating a better future for all. According to Cohen, by this communities will be allowed to concretize their ideas (Cohen 1997:17).

In addition, Shank emphasizes the role of music in promoting social change (2005:538). Music as a form of art offers practitioners a powerful nonverbal tool to communicate meaning, which they did. Kurdish music echoes denied histories and existences. In this story, dancing becomes symbolic and changes the entire social context. The death camp becomes a dance floor. The dancers begin to move around the space in a radically different way from the solemn line it has been in. At the last moment, the victim and murderer exchange places. There is no peace here, but for a moment there is a revolution (Schirch 2005:1). It is similar to the music video "[Li Herî Jorê](#)" where Govend is danced, and the dance is dedicated to the revolution in Rojava. The power of community performance empowered the people and showcased the potential of music to fuel the drive for freedom (Hunergeha Welat, in: [YouTube 2023a](#)).

Moreover, art's creative and innovative nature enables alternative approaches to conflict resolution that promote long-term positive change and the building of a sustainable culture of peace. Hunergeha Welat utilizes specific artistic mediums to raise awareness about underlying local issues and conflicts in Kurdistan. The politicization of musical performance is a response to state interventions.

## **Transformative Power of Art in Rojava**

The results of my paper show how the art and culture association Hunergeha Welat contributes to preparing symbolic structures on which the creation of peace in times of conflict and violence can flourish. It follows that the political and artistic practices are forms of *Strategic art-based peacebuilding*. Their artistic work addresses the world public to create visibility for the current problems in Rojava and the state violence against the population there. Based on the analysis, Hunergeha Welat Arts and Culture Association is considered highly relevant as a peacebuilding actor. Through the implementation of diverse art-based measures, Hunergeha Welat has made meaningful contributions to raising public awareness concerning attacks on Rojava. These artistic endeavors have played a crucial role in reclaiming the identity of the Kurdish people and facilitating open dialogue about their pressing political and social challenges. The power of art to evoke empathy, foster understanding, and ignite conversations has been instrumental in shedding light on the plight of the Kurdish association and advocating for a just and peaceful resolution to the ongoing conflict. Culture and art are important spheres of promoting democracy-based relations in Rojava. The cultural resistance of Hunergeha Welat organizes activities such as bands, dance, and music groups to render Kurds' and especially women's struggles more visible in the process of anti-patriarchal social transformation. As such, the role of Kurdish music is one that frames, remembers, and mediates memories for the survival of its nation. Therefore, Hunergeha Welat's increasing role in the national and global space is the promotion of minority rights and inclusiveness as a practical implementation of peacebuilding. Their efforts within this context aim to harness the transformative power of art and culture to build bridges, empower communities, educate, and foster a sense of collective identity and peace in Rojava. The application of the *Strategic Arts-Based Peacebuilding* concept undoubtedly holds the potential to bring about significant positive changes and offers a unique perspective on peacebuilding. Integrating art and culture allows for penetrating deeply rooted social structures and promoting emotional, and non-verbal

communication that conventional approaches may not achieve. However, critical appreciation should also acknowledge artistic peacebuilding's challenges. Contextual adaptation and ensuring long-term sustainability are crucial. Developing appropriate assessment mechanisms is vital to evaluating the effectiveness of artistic initiatives and integrating them into broader peace efforts. Critical reflection and continuous improvement of these approaches will help unleash the full potential of artistic peacebuilding and bring about positive and sustainable changes in conflict zones. It is important to note that this approach does not claim to be the method for building peace. However, it can be used to complement and accompany other traditional approaches to conflict resolution and peacebuilding to date. Moreover, evaluating the effectiveness of artistic approaches to peacebuilding can be difficult as their impact often manifests itself in intangible changes such as shifts in perceptions, and emotions among individuals and communities and an increase in awareness of social and political issues.

---

## Verwendete Literatur

- Allsopp, Harriet (2016)**, *The Kurds of Syria Political Parties and Identity in the Middle East*, London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- ANF News**, *KNK-Dossier: Die Türkei setzt Chemiewaffen in Kurdistan ein* (2021), in: <https://anfdeutsch.com/hintergrund/knk-dossier-die-tuerkei-setzt-chemiewaffen-inkurdistan-ein-28604> (Letzter Zugriff am 23. Juli 2023).
- ANF News**, *Hommage an die Guerilla: „Li Herî Jorê“ von Hunergeha Welat* (2023), in: <https://anfdeutsch.com/kultur/hommage-an-die-guerilla-li-heri-jore-von-hunergeha-welat-37193> (Letzter Zugriff am 25. Juli 2023).
- Bahrami, Abbas (2021)**, *In eisigen Höhen*, in: <https://www.fluter.de/kolbar-irak-iran-fotos-bahrami> (Letzter Zugriff am 23. Juli 2023).
- Benjamin, Jesse/Bingol, Haluk Baran/Bajalan, Djeen (2018)**, *Kurdish Culture as Resistance, and the Rise of Global South Epistemologies*, Zanj: The Journal of Critical Global South Studies, 2:1, 1- 23.
- Burç, Rosa/Oveysy, Fouad (2019)**, *Rojava is under existential threat*, in: <https://jacobin.com/2019/02/rojava-united-states-withdrawal-syria-erdogan> (Accessed 23rd July 2023).
- Burç, Rosa (2020)**, *Non-territorial autonomy and gender equality: The case of the autonomous administration of north and east Syria-Rojava*, Philosophy and Society, 31:3, 319-339.
- Cohen, Cynthia Eames (1997)**, *A Poetics of Reconciliation: The Aesthetic Mediation of Conflict*, University of New Hampshire.
- Combahee River Collective (1977)**, *The Combahee River Collective Statement*, in: <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/combahee-river-collective-statement-1977/> (Letzter Zugriff am 25. Juli 2023).
- Deutscher Bundestag/Wissenschaftlicher Dienst (2018)**, *Völkerrechtliche Bewertung der „Operation Olivenzweig“ der Türkei gegen die kurdische YPG in Nordsyrien*, in: <https://www.bundestag.de/resource/blob/546854/07106ad6d7fc869307c6c7495eda3923/wd-2-023-18-pdf-data.pdf> (Letzter Zugriff am 23. Juli 2023).
- Deutsche Welle (2018)**, *Turkey denies use of chemical weapons in Syria*, in: <https://www.dw.com/en/turkey-denies-use-of-chemical-weapons-in-syria/a-42627819> (Letzter Zugriff am 23 Juli 2023).
- Dirik, Dilar (2022a)**, *Stateless citizenship: 'radical democracy as consciousness-raising' in the Rojava revolution*, Identities, 29:1, 27-44.
- Dirik, Dilar (2022b)**, *The Kurdish Women's Movement: History, Theory, Practice*, Northampton: Pluto books.
- Gunter, Michael (2004)**, *The Kurdish Question in Perspective*, World Affairs, 166:4, 197-205.
- Hengaw (2022)**, *2021: Kolbar - Ein statistischer Bericht*, in: <https://hengaw.net/de/news/2021-kolbar-ein-statistischer-bericht> (Letzter Zugriff am 25. Juli 2023).
- Hinton, Alexander Laban & O’Niell, Kevin Lewis (2009)**, *Genocide: Truth, Memory and Representation*, Durham: Duke University Press.

**Hunergeha Welat (2022)**, *Serêkaniyê û Avaşîn*, Youtube, in: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=weql\\_zo3k9w](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=weql_zo3k9w) (Letzter Zugriff am 18. Mai 2023).

**Hunergeha Welat (2023a)**, *Li Herî Jorê* Youtube, in: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VIHuQrM89Zs> (Letzter Zugriff am 18. Mai 2023).

**Hunergeha Welat (2023b)**, *Li Qamişlo Li Ber Derî*, Youtube, in: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=06LlkqoABp8> (Letzter Zugriff am 18. Mai 2023).

**Inan, Mediha (2021)**. "What is the Role of Kurdish Music in the Transnational Space and the Post-National Discourse? On the Transnationality and (A-)Political Nature of Kurdish Music", London.

**Inan, Mediha (2023)**. "What is Kurdish Music's Role in the Transnational Space and Postnational Discourse?", Vortrag auf der LSE Kurdish Studies Conference, London.

**Kurdistan-report.de (2020)**, *Kurdistan Report - Şervano: Das Lied des Widerstands*. (2020), in: <https://www.kurdistan-report.de/index.php/archiv/2020/74-kr-207-januar-februar2020/917-servano-das-lied-des-widerstands> (Letzter Zugriff am 25. Juli 2023).

**Kuruoğlu, Alev/Hamelink, Wendekmoet (2017)**, Sounds of resistance: performing the political in the Kurdish music scene, in: Karakatsanis, Leonidas/Papagodiannis, Nikolaos (Hg.) (2017), *The Politics of Culture in Turkey, Greece and Cyprus: performing the Left since the sixties* (103-121), First, London: Taylor & Francis Group.

**Lorde, Audre (1984)**, *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House*, Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches. Ed. Berkeley, California: Crossing Press.

**Loizides, Neophytos G. (2010)**, *State Ideology and the Kurds in Turkey*, Middle Eastern Studies, 46:4, 513-527.

**Robinson, Darryl (2022)**, *Ecocide — Puzzles and Possibilities*, *Journal of International Criminal Justice*, 20:2, 313-347.

**YPG International (blog), Rojava Assembly Declaration (2016)**, "Final Declaration of the Rojava-Northern Syria Democratic Federal System", in: <https://ypginternational.blackblogs.org/2016/07/01/final-declaration-of-the-%20rojava-northern-syria-democratic-federal-system-constituent-assembly/>

**Shank, Michael/Howard, Zinn (2005)**, *Redefining the Movement: Art Activism*, *Seattle Journal for Social Justice*, 3:2, 20.

**Shank, Michael/Schirch, Lisa (2008)**, *Strategic Arts-Base Peacebuilding in Arts and Peace*, Escola de Cultura de Pau.

**Schirch, Lisa (2004)**, *Ritual and Symbol in Peacebuilding*, Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press.

**Schirch, Lisa (2014)**, *The Little Book of Strategic Peacebuilding: A Vision and Framework for Peace and Justice*, New York: Good Books.

**Tagesschau (2020)**, *Für 344,6 Millionen Euro: Deutsche Waffen an die Türkei*, in: <https://www.tagesschau.de/wirtschaft/waffenexporte-tuerkei-109.html> (Letzter Zugriff am 23. Juli 2023).

## Zitieren

Gerne dürfen Sie aus diesem Artikel zitieren. Folgende Angaben sind zusammenhängend mit dem Zitat zu nennen:

Ezgi Gülistan Gül (2024): Echoes of Resistance: The Art and Cultural Association Hunergeha Welat in Rojava amidst Conflict and Violence. In: KULTURELLE BILDUNG ONLINE:

<https://www.kubi-online.de/artikel/echoes-of-resistance-the-art-and-cultural-association-hunergeha-welat-rojava-amidst> (letzter Zugriff am 02.01.2025)

## Veröffentlichen

Dieser Text – also ausgenommen sind Bilder und Grafiken – wird (sofern nicht anders gekennzeichnet) unter Creative Commons Lizenz cc-by-nc-nd (Namensnennung, nicht-kommerziell, keine Bearbeitung) veröffentlicht. CC-Lizenzvertrag:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.0/de/legalcode>