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Veneration of the Sacred or Regeneration of the Religious: An Analysis of Saints and the Popular Beliefs of Kurdish Alevi

WAKAMATSU Hiroki*

Introduction

For a long time, anthropologists have been describing the importance of religion for all human communities. They have shown that humans will always be interested in dimension of faith, belief, and religion, and established that there is a crucial relationship between the holistic signification and the social institution. At the same time, they have laid out the various reasons why the religion is important for people, such as the way it enables a form of social solidarity among people to add meanings to human life and uncertainty (suffering, death, secret, and illness). For all human progress, the embodiments of religion and faith and the process of discovery are related to collective cultural structuring, social representation, and cultural function.⁽¹⁾

The purpose of anthropology is to investigate people, social relations, and social structure, so faith is one of the most fascinating subjects for anthropologists. Atay mentions that religious anthropology explores religiosity, religious motives and practices that have been formed to represent the way of life and culture rather than their religious contents and sacred/divine sources.⁽²⁾ Therefore anthropologists have researched the dialectic relationship

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between the normative biblical system of Great Religion and the basic problematic of religions. While monotheism itself denies its relations with its past, religious practitioners within monotheism have established their own predecessors for belief systems. On one hand, religion evolves and becomes strong through a process of syncretizing pre-existing religions according to the necessity of social circumstance and replacing a sense of cultural emptiness. However, monotheism presents itself as exclusive perfect whole not related to pre-existing religious elements. In this respect, it ignores any religious elements that pre-existed, and assimilates what it unable to eliminate.

Saint worship in the Muslim world is prominent both in terms of intellectual activities for the elites and popular beliefs of the public. This is known as “the complex of Sufism-Tariqah-Saint worship.”⁽³⁾ On the one hand, the most intellectual level of this has been developed in Islamic theology, which has been traditionally handed down in the Muslim world. Of course we must not forget the fact that some Sufis were *Ulamas* in the Medieval Age. On the other hand, we can also find popular beliefs that are seen as “magical” practices in the Muslim world. For a long time, anthropologists have observed religious practices such as worship for rocks, fountains, and mountains in societies where Muslims have constituted the majority of the population. How are we to understand this, if popular beliefs are deemed contrary to the Monotheism?

The Dersim region of eastern Turkey is known for its multi-ethnic and multi-religious diversity. The majority of the population is of Alevi origin, so-called heterodox Islamic group, or Kurdish Shāfi’ī Muslims. Their mother tongues are Kurdish languages such as Kurmanci and Zazaki. The region is also inhabited by Turkmen-Alevi, Zaza-Shāfi’ī Muslims, Armenians and others. Drawing on my own research data, I shall first discuss the *ziyarets* in Dersim, and provide a brief outline of their meaning in Alevi theology. I shall then present the current situation of saint veneration and popular beliefs where Alevi sacred places are visited by other religious groups and discuss the underlying motives of the religious actors involved. Finally, I shall contextualize these cases within a broader theoretical and comparative perspective on “the sacred/the religious.”

I . Kurdish Alevi and Dersim

At the beginning of the twentieth century, when Western scholars, spies and soldiers visited Eastern Anatolia to research, they began to conduct ethnographic surveys. We can find descriptions concerning “heterodox religious groups,” whose mother tongues are Kurdish languages such as Kurmanci or Zazaki. One of the most representative ethnographic works from that period is Hasluck’s “Heterodox Tribes of Asian Minor.”⁽⁴⁾ According to Hasluck, these heterodox tribes were known as the name of “Kizilbash (Red Head)”; the title is said to have originated at the battle of Siffin. At the same time, tribes are said to have derived from the descendants of the Safavid Dynasty, founded by Shah Ismail Hatayi in 1501. Their priests are known as *dede*, and they have bishops and patriarchs above them. The patriarchs are descendants of Ali and considered infallible in doctrine. The religious leader of the Kizilbash lives in Dersim.⁽⁵⁾

Trowbridge also discusses these heterodox tribes in Anatolia. According to him, these groups are referred to as Alevis both by themselves and by the Sunni Muslims.⁽⁶⁾ The Alevis are either defined as a heterodox Islamic sect and community or as the continuation of pre-Islamic Zoroastrian and Manichaean beliefs. Generally the existing literature adheres to the former definition. Due to these differences in definition, “Alevis” is best seen as a blanket term describing a large number of heterodox groups with largely differing beliefs and rituals. This group is particularly widespread in Anatolia. They are estimated to constitute between 10 and 40 percent of the overall population of Turkey. The population of Kurds among Turkey’s Alevi populations is estimated at between 10 and 30 percent, and about 30 percent of Turkey’s Kurds are Alevis. The Alevis in Turkey include Arabic, Azerbaijani, Turkish and Kurdish speaking groups, with the latter two groups being quantitatively the most significant. The Kurdish-speaking group is divided into speakers of the Zaza and Kurmanci dialects.⁽⁷⁾

The Alevis have generally supported the Turkish Republic, whose official secularism has promised a certain protection for heterodox groups. During the existence of the Turkish Republic the importance and strength of Alevi identity decreased; in the early 1980s, this led to speculation about the disappearance of Alevism as a community. As the 1980s progressed, this resulted not only in a vivid debate on the definition of Alevism, but also in a “major cultural and political struggle... for the souls of the Alevis of Turkey.”⁽⁸⁾ The major contending loci of loyalty are therefore, Turkish nationalism, Kurdish nationalism, and Alevism.⁽⁹⁾

The official Turkish stance towards Alevism has been to define it as a specific form of Islam linked to pre-Islamic Turcoman roots. It is therefore often considered to represent the heart and soul of Turkish culture, which has been maintained throughout the centuries. The sympathy of official government institutions toward the developing crystallization of a specific Alevi identity in the 1980s was also aiming to make a point to the Kurdish national movement. By showing public support for Alevis, the state particularly targeted the Kurdish speaking Alevis in the hope of preventing a shift of identity towards Kurdish nationalism.⁽¹⁰⁾

The participants in the Alevi debate during the last decade have been involved in constructing their own community which had previously not existed as such. With a process best described as an “invention of tradition,” the community has constructed a history. The authors have, therefore, tended in recent years to de-emphasize the Turkishness of Alevism and to stress the importance of the cultural mosaic in Anatolia. Nevertheless, nearly all Turkish and Zaza speaking authors agree that Alevism has a vaguely defined Turkish origin.⁽¹¹⁾ The “Kurdishness” of Alevism plays a marginal role within this debate. This stance is well represented by Cemşid Bender who can be seen as the link between the current debates on Kurdishness that are analyzed in this article and the debate on Alevism, which is analyzed by Vorhoff.⁽¹²⁾

The Kurdish national movement also sees Alevis as an important group to include. As a large proportion of the Kurdish-speaking Alevis speak Zaza dialect, this group is of special relevance in the definition of the boundaries of Kurdishness. Since 1994, the PKK has published a special Alevi journal, *Ziüfikâr*, with the slogan “The one who denies his origin is a bastard!” For instance, Kurdish nationalists such as Bender argue that Alevism is

based on Kurdish roots.⁽¹³⁾ They advance three main arguments in order to promote the Kurdishness of Alevism. Firstly, they argue that Alevism is an extension of Zoroastrianism, which was the religion of the Kurds. By citing a number of similarities between the two beliefs including the holiness of fire or monogamy, they present the idea of continuity over time between these “Kurdish” religions. Furthermore, they clearly dissociate the Alevism from Islam. By presenting Islam as the aggressive outsider, the Kurdish nationalist narrative continues that “one part of the Kurdish people converted under compulsion to Islam, while a large part retracted towards the heights of the Zagros and tried to protect their old beliefs under an Islamic Cloak. The name of this development: Alevism.” Lastly, the Kurdish nationalists try to dissociate Bektashism⁽¹⁴⁾ from Alevism, by representing it as a later development under the Ottomans, and not linked, as is often claimed, with Hacı Bektaş Veli.

So how do we define the group of Turkish-speaking Alevis? In the texts under scrutiny, this group is often implicitly included into the Kurdish community. Whereas a “Turkish Alevism” is never mentioned, “Kurdish Alevism” is often referred to, and it is stated that Alevis “no longer speak the language that their mothers and fathers spoke.” This trend is also observed by other authors, such as Vorhoff who describes this Turkish thesis concerning Alevism as “invented.” Nevertheless, the above distinction between Turkish Bektashism and Kurdish Alevism is probably meant to create dissociation between Turkish- and Kurdish-speaking Alevis. Although Bender does not view Bektashism as linked with Hacı Bektaş Veli, his writings have a similar emphasis to nation-oriented discussions among Alevis: Turkish-speaking Alevis tend to use Hacı Bektaş Veli as their symbol, while Kurdish-speaking Alevis use the sixteenth-century poet and rebel Pir Sultan Abdal as their symbol.⁽¹⁵⁾

In fact, the Alevi issue represents a more obscure and less understood important socio-political phenomenon in Turkey today. A major cultural and political struggle is under way for the souls of the Alevis of Turkey. Increasingly disenchanted with the status quo, Alevis have taken to the streets to protest and sought alternative sources of representation, including the formation of their own parties. This is a process that will be a long time in unfolding, and could have potentially dramatic consequences for Turkey.⁽¹⁶⁾

According to van Bruinessen’s notion, the term “Kurdish Alevi” is shorthand for all Kurmanci- and Zaza-speaking Alevis, irrespective of whether or not they define themselves as Kurds.⁽¹⁷⁾ The identity of the Kurdish Alevis is defined primarily through religion, secondarily through tribal definition, and thirdly through language. Their affinities with other Kurdish-speaking Alevis are perceived as greater than those with Sunni Kurds, permitting occasional intermarriage and substantiated through a set of ritual practices carried out using a Turkish liturgy. The same polarity between Alevis and Sunnis exists among the Kurds as among the Turks, as was demonstrated when Sunni Kurds helped the Turks to suppress the Alevi revolt in Dersim (the province of Tunceli with the adjacent districts of Tercan sub-province in the province of Erzincan and Kiğı sub-province in the province of Bingöl) in 1916.⁽¹⁸⁾

Dersim is the heartland of the Kurdish Alevis. The Dersimis themselves perceive a cultural difference between the Zaza-speaking tribes of western Dersim (Ovacık and Hozat

with part of Çemişgezek and Pertek) and the original Dersimi tribes of eastern Dersim (Pülmür, Nazımiye, and Mazgirt), where there are also both Zaza and Kurmanci speakers.⁽¹⁹⁾ Further west, we find another important Kurdish Alevi population, the Koçgiri tribal confederation, in and around Sivas. The Koçgiri claim a relationship with the tribes of western Dersim, although they currently speak Kurmanci rather than Zaza dialect. There are several other small Kurmanci- and Zaza-speaking enclaves in Sivas, which also claim Dersimi origins. Another indication of their relationship with the Dersim Alevi is the presence of *seyit* of the same lineages (notably Kureşan) living among them. The Kureşan, perhaps the most important *seyit* lineage of the Dersimi Alevi, are most concentrated in Mazgirt and Nazımiye, but there are also sections of them in Kiğı, Hınıs and Varto, Pülmür, and Sivas.⁽²⁰⁾

II. *Seyit*: Saints Venerated by Kurdish Alevi in Dersim

Seyit (Ar. *Sayyid*) is an honorific title; it denotes males who are accepted as descendants of the Prophet Muhammad through his grandsons, Hasan and Hüseyin, the sons of the Prophet's daughter Fatıma and his son-in-law. Alevi venerate as saints those *seyits* who are descended from *Ehl-i Beyt* (the Prophet's family). *Seyits* are also known as "*pir*" or "*dede*" by people.⁽²¹⁾

Seyits make a form of religious groups known as *ocak*, which represents their special lineage.⁽²²⁾ According to van Bruinssen, when *ocak* performs rituals in a house of *seyit* lineage, it is the sacred center around which life revolves. *Ocak* has a hierarchical master-disciple structure as shown in **Figure 1**.

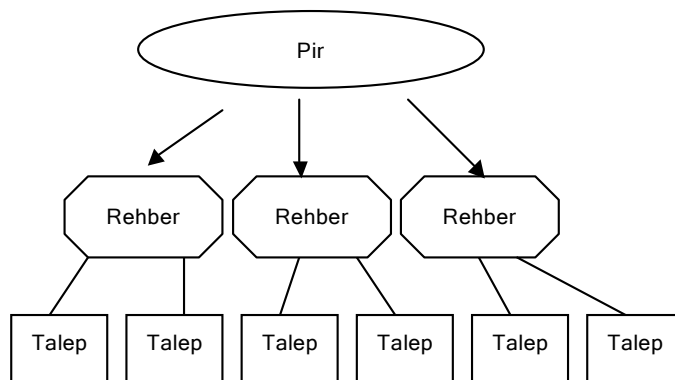


Figure 1: Ocak as a master-disciple relation

The *pir* must be a *seyit* but *rehbers* (the guides) are selected from among the *taleps* (disciples) by the *pir* according to their religious background and personality. The *pir* manages all religious practices including the *kurban* (sacrifice), family ceremonies like *sünnet* (circumcision), weddings, funerals and *ikrar* (blessing), and one of the most important rituals called *cem*.⁽²³⁾

The *seyits* also form an *ocak* (household) which represents the holy lineage of the

saints. Like many Anatolian Alevi *ocaks*, their members believe that their forefathers were among the Saints of Horasan (*Horasan Erenleri*), the Turkmen mystics who encountered and inter-married with the descendants of the Prophet Muhammad in Horasan as they migrated across Central Asia. The sanctity of *Ehl-i Beyt*, or the family of the Prophet, and the perceived descent of the Alevi *ocaks* from this family, is foundational to Alevi history and religious practice. Here, using the background data from my field research, I introduce *ocaks* who are venerated by Kurdish Alevis in Dersim. (See **Table 1.**)

Table 1: *Ocaks* in Dersim

Name of ocak	Founding saint	Origin	Place of tomb (Local name)
Ağuiçen	Seyit Temiz	Horasan	Unknown
Baba Mansur	Baba Mansur	Erzurum	Darıkent (Muxıdu) Village/Tunceli
Derviş Cemal	Seyit Cemal Sultan	Horasan	Döğer Village/Afyonkarahisar
Kureşanlar	Seyit Hacı Kureyiş	Tunceli	Bostanlı Village/Tunceli
Sarı Saltuk	Şerif Hızır	Erzurum	Saltuk Village/Tunceli
Şeyh Çoban	Şeyh Çoban	Horasan	Mazgirt Sub-Province/Tunceli

I will now examine a few *ocaks* in particular. Saint Seyit Temiz was a disciple of Ahmet Yesevi who was the patron saint of Tarīqah Yasawiyah of Central Asia in thirteenth century. He is also said to have been descended from Zayn al-Abidin, the fourth Imam. According to the narratives in Dersim, Seyit Temiz might have been born around 1200, and he moved to Anatolia due to the Mongolian invasion to Central Asia. When his grandfather Seyit Lokman Perende died in Ardabil in 1221-1222, he initially immigrated to Mâmülatü'l-Aziz (now Elazığ Province) with his brothers. While they were staying in Sün village there, local Beys of Mâmülatü'l-Aziz tried to test whether or not they were able to perform miracles. Beys gave Seyit Temiz a poisoned cup of tea. He drained it without leaving a drop left in the cup, or suffering any ill effects. After this miraculous event, people began to call Seyit Temiz and his descendants “Ağuiçen,” which means “Poison Drinker.”

According to legend, one of the sons of Seyit Temiz named Kose Seyit was a shepherd. He removed to Ulukale Village, sited in the Çemişgezek sub-province of Tunceli. One day he was walking down into a valley, the villagers wanted to tease him and shouted to him, “Shepherd! You are a noble descendant. Show us a miracle, with this huge rock.” He came and kept on one side of the rock. He rolled it, shouting “Ya! Xızır.”⁽²⁴⁾ The villagers were surprised and said, “This shepherd is *Evliya* (Saint)!”. However, someone said, “This shepherd is *Şeytan* (Satan).” Afterward, the villagers chased him away from the village because they were scared of him. Then he moved to plateau named Sekel on the Mt. Karpan, north of the village where he died. His tomb is still there and many Alevis visit and make pilgrimages to his tomb as *ziyaret*.

In some Sufi chronicles, Baba Mansur is known as Manşūr ibn Arslān Bābā.⁽²⁵⁾ He was born in Erzurum in 1145 and was son of local Bey, Seyit Muhammet Saltuk. He was a descendant of the fifth Imam, Muḥammad al-Bāqir. His father sent him to Horasan to become a master of the Ahmet Yesevi School. He studied there with other noble Anatolian saints including Seyit Lokman Perende. After he returned to Erzurum, his grandfather Seyit Izzettin Saltuk appointed him to work as Sancak Bey (principal officer) of Mazgirt (now the Mazgirt sub-province of Tunceli). While he was working as Sancak Bey of Mazgirt, Rum

Seljuk Sultan Rükıyettin Süleyman Şah sent an army to kill him. He fled to Muxındu village in the mountains to escape this persecution.

According to legends, one day Baba Mansur built a house. Seyit Hacı Kureyiş visited him riding a big bear, and with a huge snake wrapped around his wrist. Baba Mansur wanted to show Seyit Hacı Kureyiş a miracle, and walked to him riding the wall of his house. Seyit Hacı Kureyiş was amazed at Baba Mansur's deed and said, "I have the miraculous ability to make animals move under my control. But you are greater than me because you have given life to lifeless wall." After that Seyit Hacı Kureyiş kissed the hands of Baba Mansur showing reverence to his lineage.⁽²⁶⁾

Seyit Cemal Sultan is said to have been a descendent of İmām Mūsā al-Kādhim, the seventh Imam. Legend has it that he was also a favorite of Hacı Bektaş and that he lived with him at the great saint's *tekke* in modern-day Nevşehir province until Hacı Bektaş's death, where he set out to discover the land (*yurt*) that Hacı Bektaş had promised beforehand to give him. The basic content of the story that follows is well-known within the *ocak*, and can be found in *Velayetnâme*,⁽²⁷⁾ the work that details the life and miracles of Hacı Bektaş.⁽²⁸⁾

According to narratives, after the death of Hacı Bektaş, his disciples moved from Nevşehir to various different places, according to his instruction. Hacı Bektaş loved Seyit Cemal more than any of his other disciples, so everyone respected Seyit Cemal. One day, Seyit Cemal sat down and thought "I wonder if my master (Hacı Bektaş) will show us the land (*yurt*)." Hacı Bektaş understood what he had thought, and said to him, "Oh my Cemal, to get to the Land of Existence, buy a donkey, then begin a journey. When a wolf eats your donkey, you have reached the Land of Existence. Allah will give you a son there." Seyit Cemal obeyed these instructions, bought a donkey and set out on a journey. He reached Altıntaş (now one of the sub-provinces in Kütahya province, western Anatolia), where he died. As his Master told him, he had a son, whom he named Asıldoğan.

One of the sons of Asıldoğan named Seyit İsmail Ertuğrul was very ill, but his son, also called Seyit İsmail Ertuğrul, immigrated to Dersim. He lived in a village there called Derviş Cemal where Alevi people visited and took pilgrimage to him to gain his *bereket* (grace). His descendants offered religious services such as *kurban* (sacrifices), *cem*, and other family ceremonies to certain tribes there.

The *ocak* of Kureşanlar is the biggest *ocak* in Dersim. The forefather saint is Hacı Kureyiş, who was descended from İmām Mūsā al-Kādhim, the seventh Imam. According to local legend, he was born in Bostanlı village in Nazimiye sub-province of Tunceli. His tomb and *cemevi* can be found in the village and are maintained by his descendants. Many Alevi people take pilgrimage to visit this place. I have already told the story about the miraculous events that occurred between Baba Mansur and Hacı Kureyiş. However, his son named Seyit Mahmut Hayrani is more famous in Dersim than Hacı Kureyiş himself. One day, Seyit Mahmut Hayrani visited Hacı Bektaş with three-hundred *Dervişes*. They were his disciples. He rode on a big lion and had a snake instead of a whip. Hacı Bektaş said, "Who is coming here riding on an animal? I shall ride on an inanimate creature." He sat on a huge rock and shouted, "Go!" The rock became a big bird and flew to greet Seyit Mahmut Hayrani. After that, he kissed the hands of Hacı Bektaş to show respect for him.

This story is very similar to the story about Baba Mansur and Hacı Kureyiş that I described above. A similar story concerning the Sarı Saltuk *ocak* and Hacı Bektaş is narrated in Dersim. Sarı Saltuk was also descended from the genealogy of Imām Mūsā al-Kādhim, the seventh Imam. His life and miracles are detailed in *Saltuknâme*.⁽²⁹⁾ Şeyh Çoban is another *seyit* descended from Imām Mūsā al-Kādhim, the seventh Imam. He received authority (*icazet*) from Sarı Saltuk and lived in Ismaili village (now the center of Mazgirt sub-province). He is also known by his many *keramet* (miracles).

We can see that Alevi people venerate for the grace, miracles and sacred genealogy of the *Ehl-i Beyt*. In this sense, they worship God within the Islamic tradition through the religious form of the *ziyaret*. Each *ziyaret* is part of a larger complex of outbuildings, including a building that contains a number of tombs of lesser saints, a building for hanging and draining sacrifices and one for cooking them. These buildings have been re-roofed and structurally overhauled, the areas around the *ziyaret* cleaned up and their gardens tended. Generally there are plans to develop the site further, and to build a separate *cemevi* as well as a guesthouse, an *aşı evi* (cooking house) and a library.

III. *Ziyaret*: Tradition of the Sacred

In Arabic-origin Turkish, *ziyaret* means “visit.” In religious contexts, this refers to the practice of visiting a tomb or shrine for prayers. For the Alevis, the term *ziyaret* has three dimensions, referring to the sacred site itself, to the soul of person who is venerated at the site, and finally to all of the ritual actions performed by those visiting the site.

The practice of venerating local saints and visiting of the *ziyaret* is well-known in the Middle East and the Islamic world at large. Much has been written about the architecture of these shrines and the concept of *bereket*, the beneficial force or grace that is usually believed to emanate from such sacred places. In the early Islamic period, the practices of visiting gravesites were considered lawful and even recommended, as it is evident from different reports in the *ḥadīth*, before it was finally prohibited by the Prophet due to the exaggerated importance that was attributed to it. The admissibility of the practice of *ziyaret* was extensively discussed in early works of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and in the great collections of the *ḥadīth*.⁽³⁰⁾ The rules of *ziyaret*-conduct were “prescriptive as well as proscriptive,” and consisted of specific guidelines of proper conduct to which a Muslim should adhere. However, even if the Alevis still heed most of these guidelines, they do also deviate from the normative rules of conduct at pilgrimage sites. Moreover importantly, the Alevi practice of *ziyaret* is based on a very specific idea about the soul which necessarily entails a different way of conceptualizing the *ziyaret* saints and the *ziyaret* shrine.⁽³¹⁾

The *ziyaret* in Alevi ritual includes the kissing the tomb, lighting candles and essence, rubbing one’s body with oil, reciting the *fātiha*, and attaching pieces of cloth (cut from rolls of fabrics left in the tombs) either to trees in front of the site or to a person’s limbs. The last practice aims to heal a person or to shield someone against the evil eye or *jinn*s. These ritual practices can be observed at all Alevi *ziyarets*.⁽³²⁾

Here I describe a few examples of *ziyarets* in Dersim. These cases are not specifically

related to the veneration of the *Ehl-i Beyt*. First, I introduce Munzur Baba Ziyareti, which is situated in Ovacık sub-province in Tunceli. There are no *cemevis*, tombs, or guesthouses there, only big rocks and springs in the Munzur Mountain (**Photo 1**).

Munzur Baba is name of a shepherd: it is said that he was able to practice *keramet*, as described in the following oral tradition. One day, Munzur's master went to Mecca for the pilgrimage. While he was there, Munzur visited his master's wife and said, "Madam, my Lord desires something sweet now. If you can prepare something sweet, I'll take it to him." At first, she was surprised, but then she thought that Munzur might want the sweet food for himself. She prepared the food and gave them to him. In the twinkling of an eye, Munzur took the sweet food to his master. When the master saw Munzur in Mecca with the sweet foods, he was puzzled.



Photo 1: Munzur Baba Ziyareti

The River Munzur has its source in Munzur Gözeleri. People call it Munzur Baba Ziyareti. It is a popular spot for pilgrimages, picnics etc. It is the only place in Turkey where people can openly barbecue and drink alcohol, even during Ramadan. They slaughter sacrifices such as sheep and goats to thank God and pray to Him. People visit and pray to God through sacred places such as huge rocks, old trees and springs to gain *bereket*.

Hızır Çeşmesi is situated in the Varto sub-province of Muş province. Not only Alevists visit there but also Sunni (Shāfi'ī) Kurdish people. The spiritual power of Hızır Çeşmesi (Spring of Khidr) is attributed to the nature of Khidr as one of the emanations of God on Earth, meaning that supplications to Khidr will be channelled directly to God. The Alevists consider Khidr to be *baṭīn* epiphany of Ali, who is permanently traveling between the earth and the domain of the Light World. In the course of his wanderings, Khidr is believed to have generated numerous holy sites, since — as the legend goes — small oases and springs emerged wherever his feet touched the ground. Therefore, Hızır Çeşmesi can be easily recognized, as their sacred core usually consists of an extraordinary site within the natural landscape (a tree, spring, rock, etc.), which nowadays are often also enshrined (**Photo 2**).

People go to Hızır Çeşmesi to pray to God (*dua*) and to have their diseases cured. It is said that when Kihdr visited this place, a spring had appeared with a large amount of water. This water is used for healing the human soul and curing illnesses. People travel here to gain the *bereket* of Kihdr and to pray to God. The foot-steps of Kihdr can be found on the rocks in this place, and they exert magnetic power on the stones around them.



Photo 2: Hızır Çeşmesi

(Left) The place for hanging Kurban. / (Right) The foot-steps of Kihdr

We can see that there are many *ziyarets* in Dersim, which are visited by many Alevi people. Some *ziyarets* are directly related with saint veneration through a combination of tombs, miracles, and the sacred genealogy of *Ehl-i Beyt*. Others are not related to saint veneration but to super-natural power and miraculous events. However, through conducting my field research, we discovered that Kihdr is very important for Alevi theology. So, what is the exact role of Kihdr in contemporary Alevi theology?

IV. Kihdr: Transition between the Sacred and the Religious

When I was stayed in Tunceli, I heard of certain expressions and idioms concerning Kihdr. As **Photo 3** shows, worship of Kihdr penetrates into the daily lives of the people of Dersim. For instance, Zazaki invocations such as “Xızır tîri yardım bı ki (may Kihdr help you)” can be heard all over Dersim. The phrase “Xızır mirâde tobu kerî (may Kihdr give you success)” is often used for farewell greetings.

It is generally understood that the origin of these practices was derived from the ancient, pre-Islamic and indigenous religion of the past. For example, we can find Kihdr mentioned in the Qur’an. He was a mysterious figure who is sometimes described by Muslims as a water nymph. According to this narrative, most researchers considered veneration for the Kihdr alongside worship for the Elias which had traditionally been spread out across the Mediterranean Sea coast. At the same time, they have concluded that pre-Islamic religions survived in the Muslim world. While this agreement has substance, it is hard to explain to these religious practices as simply remnants of pre-Islamic religions, without discussing what is actually practiced. It must be a form of Islamic faith, as almost all those who practice it are Muslims. At first sight, as Tonaga suggests, these practices may



Photo 3: An amulet of Khidr

This is an amulet of Khidr made out of traditional Armenian lace called *oya*. It is the emblem of Fenerbahçe, a successful Turkish football teams. A sentence in the Zazaki language, “YA XIZIR,” meaning “Oh Khidr, [help and protect me from evil]” can be found the center of the amulet.

have been magical phenomena, but we now have to understand them within the Islamic framework.⁽³³⁾

Khidr, or al-Khādir (the verdant or green man), is a legendary Muslim figure of rebirth and renewal who occupies a unique place in the Muslim imagination thanks to his role as an elusive figure of immortality and esoteric knowledge. Islam counts Khidr as one of four figures — including Jesus, Elias, and Idris — endowed with the gift of immortality. Muslim tradition defines Khidr as the unnamed companion of Moses who is identified as a servant of God (Q 18: 60-62). He is also commonly connected to three pre-Islamic traditions: the Jewish legend of Elias, the Alexander romance, and the Epic of Gilgamesh.⁽³⁴⁾ Each of these accounts stresses his importance as someone who holds the secrets of life and performs a series of enigmatic actions that exemplify both the attainment and possession of esoteric knowledge.⁽³⁵⁾

Today, a large number of natural and man-made places are described as Khidr sites. These include hills, lakes, and villages, as well as mosques and other buildings. Although the earliest reports of encounters with Khidr occurred in Iraq, the Hijās, Egypt, Syria, and Palestine, it was not until traumatic events such as the Crusader conquests and the wars with the Byzantines that Khidr became linked to a significant number of specific buildings and sites. Large numbers of these Khidr sites are clustered along the frontier zones where these battles and conquests took place. In the Muslim World, the major frontier zones were in medieval Anatolia and Syria. In these regions, mixed Muslim populations came into close contact with diverse populations, both Christian and Jewish. Not only were these frontier zones places where mixed populations came into contact, but they also contained a number of pre-Islamic structure that were modified by Muslim inhabitants.⁽³⁶⁾

Because of Khidr’s complex nature, it has been very easy to misunderstand and even dismiss the functions of this polyvalent figure. Khidr’s status was a topic of controversy throughout medieval times. Interestingly, while Muslim scholars debated whether he was a prophet, saint, or angel, and whether he was really immortal, Khidr’s status became redefined through the changing landscape of the late medieval period. During this period, he became fused with other saints and prophets, notably Saints George and Theodore, with whom he shares the identity of being an equestrian military dragon-slayer. This correlation is so strong in Syria and Palestine that contemporary and medieval authors describe them as one and the same. At the same time, Khidr’s attainment of immortality has resulted in his special relationship to the prophet Elias; this mixing has resulted in a composite figure

known as *Khiḍr-Ilyās* (*Hidrellez* in Turkish). The relationship between these two figures has become so intertwined that they are often depicted together in manuscripts. The composite *Khiḍr-Ilyās* is also often associated with other saints. By the fourteenth century, visitors to Turkey wrote that the Turks worshipped St. George in the figure of *Khiḍr-Ilyās*.⁽³⁷⁾ Figures and buildings dedicated to the composite *Khiḍr-Ilyās* can be found in Syria and Iraq, with dedications to *Khiḍr* in combination with St. Sergius and Mar Behnam, a Syrian saint who was martyred in the fourth century by the Sassanians.⁽³⁸⁾

Gola Çeto is a prominent example of worship for *Khiḍr* in Dersim. This place is one of the most important *ziyarets* of Alevi in Dersim (**Photo 4**). Here, two rivers joint; the river flowing from the right side is from Ovacık sub-province, and the river flowing from left



Photo 4: Gola Çeto Ziyareti

side is from Pülümür sub-province. The water of the former river is blue, and that of the latter is brown. This is said to symbolize the meeting of *Khiḍr* and *İlyās*. At the *ziyaret* of Gola Çeto, people participate in the *Hidrellez* festival and *Xızır orucu* (the fast for *Khiḍr*). The fast begins on February 13 and is for three days every year. It is believed that *Khiḍr* and *İlyās* visit this place at that time of year. On the last day of the *Hidrellez*, people make sacrifices and cook the meat, then share a meal together. They believe that when *Khiḍr* and *İlyās* visit Gola Çeto, spring has come. They celebrate the arrival of spring at the end of a cold, harsh winter.

Conclusion

The saint veneration of the Kurdish Alevi people is based on the *ocaks*, which are sustained by ritual practices organized by the *dedes*, including those that celebrate the miracles of saints and traditions related to their saints. While a *dede* is still alive, the tradition that people narrate concerning the Holy Lineage makes him sacredness. The sacredness of a saint is represented by a shrine that is dedicated to him. There are numerous

ziyarets for Alevi saints in Anatolia, and they are crowded with pilgrims during every memorial service. Alevi people assert their religiosity through this veneration for their saints (*Evlîya*), the family of the Prophet within an Islamic context.

One way that people venerate the Prophet's family is through practicing the *cem* ceremony, led by the *seyit* or *rehber* appointed by the *seyit*. It is very important to observe the *cem* ceremony and to research the genealogy of the saints, in order to for understand the relationship between the veneration of the Prophet's family and ritual practice within the Alevi communities. The most crucial aspect of this is the way the *cem* ceremony, mediated by the prophet's family, solves disputes and promotes among the people. Only someone who is a descendant of *Ehl-i Beyt* (*seyit*) or his *rehber* is permitted to organize a *cem* or ritual practices such as a funeral and wedding.

On the other hand, people also practice *ziyarets* right across Dersim as a way of praying to God. Of course these practices are carefully differentiated from *cem* and other religious practices such as *ibādah*. In *ziyarets*, people venerate the super natural power of God as sacred. In this respect, the role of *Khiḍr* is particularly important for contemporary Kurdish Alevi religion in Dersim. *Khiḍr* is seen as a rescuer and as a form of divine existence. Therefore, people venerate *Khiḍr* as sacred and he is seen to creates a bridge between the sacred and the religious.



Map of Eastern Turkey

Notes

- (1) R. Lavebda & E. Schultz, *Core Concepts in Cultural Anthropology*, Boston: McGraw Hill, 2005, pp. 73-87.
- (2) T. Atay, *Din Hayattan Çıkar: Antropolojik Denemeler*, İstanbul: İletişim, 2004, p. 27.
- (3) Cf. Akahori M., “The Perspective for the Complex of Sufism and Saint Worship,” Akahori M. et al. (eds.), *Sufism and Saint Veneration in Islam*, Islamic Area Studies vol. 7, The University of Tokyo Press, 2005 (赤堀雅幸「スーフィズム・聖者信仰複合への視線」赤堀雅幸他編『イスラームの神秘主義と聖者信仰』(イスラーム地域研究叢書7) 東京大学出版会) .
- (4) F. W. Hasluck, “Heterodox Tribes of Asian Minor,” *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 51, 1921, pp. 310-342.
- (5) *Ibid.*, p. 334.
- (6) S. R. Trowbridge, “The Alevis or Deifiers of Ali,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 2 (3), 1909, p. 340.
- (7) K. Hirschler, “Defining the Nation: Kurdish Historiography in Turkey in the 1990s,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 37 (3), 2001, p. 157.
- (8) H. J. Barkey & G. E. Fuller, *Turkey’s Kurdish Question*, New York: Rowman & Littlefield, pp. 67.
- (9) Hirschler, “Defining the Nation,” p. 157.
- (10) *Ibid.*
- (11) M. van Bruinessen, “Aslımı inkâr eden haramzadedir!: The Debate on the Ethnic Identity of the Kurdish Alevis,” in K. Kehl-Bodrogi (ed.), *Syncretistic Religious Communities in the Near East*, Leiden: Brill, pp. 1-23. For example, Vorhoff differentiates between ‘Kurds’ and “speakers of Zazaki.” See K. Vorhoff, “Academic and Journalistic Publications on the Alevi and Bektashi of Turkey,” in T. Olsson et al. (eds.), *Alevi Identity: Cultural, Religious and Social Perspectives*, İstanbul: Svenska Forskingsinstitutet, 1998, pp. 23-50.
- (12) See K. Vorhoff, *Zwischen Glaube, Nation und neuer Gemeinschaft: Alevitische Identität in der Türkei der Gegenwart*, Berlin: Schwarz, 1995, p. 111.
- (13) C. Bender *Kürt Uygurluğında Alevilik*, İstanbul: Kaynak Yayınları, 1991. The other representatives of Kurdish nationalist Alevis, including Rıza Zelyut and Munzur Çem assert that traditional Alevi religious practices are derived from Kurdish Zoroastrianism. R. Zelyut, *Öz Kaynaklarına Göre Alevilik*, İstanbul: Karacaahmet Sultan Derneği Yayınları, 2008; Ç. Munzur, *Dersim Merkezli Kürt Aleviliği: Etnisite, Dini İnanç, Kültür ve Direniş*, İstanbul: Vate Yayınevi, 2009.
- (14) This is a Sufi order traced back to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and to Hacı Bektaş Veli. Owing to its close interweaving with Alevism, the two terms are often used interchangeably today.
- (15) Hirschler, “Defining the Nation,” p. 158.
- (16) Barkey & Fuller, *Turkey’s Kurdish Question*, p. 67.
- (17) Bruinessen, “Aslımı inkâr eden harâmzâdedir!” pp. 1-2.
- (18) P. J. Bumke, “The Kurdish Alevis: Boundaries and Perceptions,” in P. A. Andrews (ed.),

- Ethnic Groups in the Republic of Turkey*, Wiesbaden: Ludwig Reichert Verlag, 1989, pp. 510-518.
- (19) Bruinessen, “Aslımı inkâr eden harâmzâdedir!” pp. 3-4.
- (20) *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.
- (21) The precise meaning of the term *Ehl-i Beyt* (Ar. *Ahl al-Bayt*), meaning “the family of the Prophet,” can be understood in different ways. The orthodox view is given in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, as “the Prophet, Ali, Fatima, Hasan and Hüseyin, together with the wives of the Prophet,” in I. Goldzieher et al., “Ahl al-Bayt,” *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 1st ed., Leiden: Brill, vol. 1, pp. 257-258. Among the Alevis, it is not uncommon for the term to be used in self-reference, as they consider themselves to be the true family of the Prophet.
- (22) The word *ocak* literally means “household.” However, it is used among the Alevi people to denote an extended family unit who claim a shared, holly descent from a particular medieval saint. See M. van Bruinessen, *Mollahs, Sufis and Heretics: The Role of Religion in Kurdish Society: Collected Articles*, Istanbul: ISIS, 2000, p. 263.
- (23) The central Alevi communal worship service is performed at *Cem Evi* (Cem house). Alevis believe that the *cem* has its roots in an original worship and teaching meeting of forty spiritual individuals (*Kırklar Meclisi*) led by Ali. The ceremony’s supposed prototype is the Prophet Muhammad’s nocturnal ascent into heaven, where he saw a gathering of forty saints (*Kırklar Meclisi*), and the Divine Reality made manifest in their leader Ali. For more detail about *cem* ceremony, Shankland’s work is very helpful. He investigates the case of Turkish Alevis in western Anatolia, where the *cem* of Kurdish Alevis is performed in Turkish even though their mother tongues are Kurdish languages. I observed *cem* ceremonies many times in Dersim and listened to some Kurdish hymns but generally the *cem* is performed in Turkish because they believe that they originate from Horasan-Turkish culture. D. Shankland, *The Alevis in Turkey: The Emergence of a Secular Islamic Tradition*, London: Routledge, 2003, pp. 121-128.
- (24) *Hızır* is Turkish equivalent of Arabic *Khidr*. The Kurdish equivalent is *Xızır*.
- (25) J. S. Trimingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971, pp. 58-60.
- (26) For more details concerning Baba Mansur Ocak, see my article: Wakamatsu H., “The Saint Veneration of Kurdish Alevis in Turkey: The Ocak of Baba Mansur,” *Bulletin of the Society for Near Eastern Studies in Japan* 52 (1), 2009, pp. 84-104 (若松大樹「クルド系アレヴィー集団にみる聖者崇敬——ババ・マンズール系のオジャク構造と関連付けて」『オリエント』).
- (27) H. Duran, *Vilâyetname-i Hacı Bektâş Velî*, Alevi-Bektâşî Klasikleri Dizisi, Ankara: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı Yayınları, 2007.
- (28) For more detailed information concerning Derviş Cemal Ocak, see C. Tee, “Holy Lineages, Migration and Reformulation of Alevi Tradition: A Study of the Derviş Cemal Ocak from Erzincan,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 37 (3), 2010, pp. 335-392.
- (29) Ş. H. Akalın, *Saltuknâme*, Ankara: Kültür ve Turizm Bakanlığı, 1998.
- (30) A. Sachedina, “Rituals Connected with Ziyârah,” *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed.,

- Leiden: Brill, vol. 11, p. 533-534; R. C. Martin, “Ziyāra,” in R. C. Martin (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Islam and Muslim World*, New York: Thomson Gale, 2004, p. 533.
- (31) L. Prager, “Alawī Ziyāra Tradition and Its Interreligious Dimensions: Sacred Places and Their Contested Meanings among Christians, Alawi and Sunni Muslims in Contemporary Hatay (Turkey),” *The Muslim World* 103 (1), 2013, pp. 47-48.
- (32) *Ibid.*, p. 48.
- (33) Cf. Tonaga Y., *Islam and Sufism: Mysticism, Saint Veneration, and Ethics*, The University of Nagoya Press, 2013, pp. 162-165 (東長靖『イスラームとスーフィズム——神秘主義・聖者信仰・道徳』名古屋大学出版会) .
- (34) For more information about the particular qualities of Khidr and Khidr-Ilyās (Hızır-İlyas) in the Turkish world, see P. Boratav, “Türklerde Hızır,” *İslâm Ansiklopedisi* 5, pt. 1, Istanbul, 1987, pp. 462-472 and A. Y. Ocak, *İslam-Türk İnançlarında Hızır yahut Hızır-İlyas Kültü*, Ankara: Ankara Üniversitesi Basım Evi, 1985.
- (35) E. S. Wolper, “Khidr and the Changing Frontiers of the Medieval World,” *Medieval Frontiers* 17, 2011, pp. 122-123.
- (36) *Ibid.*, p. 123.
- (37) A recent study of the cult of St. George is relevant to this discussion: A. Y. Ocak, “XIII-XV Yüzyıllarda Anadolu’da Türk-Hıristiyan Dini Etkileşimler ve Aya Yorgi (Saint George) Kültü,” *Türk Tarih Bellten* 55, 1992, pp. 661-675.
- (38) Wolper, “Khidr and the Changing Frontiers,” pp. 124-127.