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"Aslını inkar eden haramzadedir!"

The debate on the ethnic identity of the Kurdish Alevis

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The existence of Kurdish- and Zaza-speaking Alevi tribes, who almost exclusively use Turkish as their ritual language, and many of which even have Turkish tribal names, is a fact that has exercised the explanatory imagination of many authors. Both Turkish and Kurdish nationalists have had some difficulty in coming to terms with the ambiguous identity of these groups, and have attempted to explain embarrassing details away. Naive attempts to prove that Kurdish and Zaza are essentially Turkish languages have not been given up, and have after 1980 even received a new impetus.[1] Kurds, on the other hand, have emphasized the Iranian element in the religion of the Alevis and suggested that even the Turkish Alevis must originally have received their religion from the Kurds.[2] Several articulate members of the tribes concerned, appealing to alleged old oral traditions in their support, have added their own interpretations, often all too clearly inspired by political expediency.[3] The tribes have never had a single, unambiguous position vis-à-vis the Kurdish nationalist movement and the Turkish Republic. The conflicting appeals of these two national entities (and of such lesser would-be nations as the Zaza or the Alevi nation) to the loyalties of the Kurdish Alevis have torn these communities apart. The conflict has thus far culminated in the Turkish military operations in Tunceli and western Bingöl in the autumn of 1994, which were continued through 1995.

Who are the Kurdish Alevis?

I shall use the term 'Kurdish Alevis' as a shorthand for all Kurmanci- and Zaza-speaking Alevis, irrespective of whether they define themselves as Kurds or not. My use of this term does not imply any claim that they are 'really' or 'essentially' Kurds or whatever. The heartland of the Kurdish Alevis consists of Dersim (the province of Tunceli with the adjacent districts of Kemah and Tercan in Erzincan and Kiğı in Bingöl). The Dersimis themselves perceive a cultural difference between the (Zaza-speaking) Şeyhhasanan tribes of western Dersim (Ovacık and Hozat with parts of Çemişgezek and Pertek) and the Dersimi tribes proper of eastern Dersim (Pülümür, Nazımiye, Mazgirt), among whom there are both Zaza and Kurmanci speakers.

From Dersim, a series of Alevi enclaves stretches east, through Bingöl, northern Muş, Varto all the way to Kars. The largest and best known of these tribes, the Kurmanci-speaking Hormek (Xormek, Xiromek) and the Zaza-speaking Lolan (see Fırat 1970 and Kocadağ 1987, respectively) claim Dersim origins, and there are in fact sections of the same tribes still living in eastern Dersim (in Nazımiye and Pülümür, respectively).

Further west, we find another important Kurdish Alevi population, the Koçgiri tribal confederation, in and around the Zara district of Sivas. The Koçgiri claim a relationship with the Şeyhhasanan of western Dersim, although they presently speak a Kurmanci rather than a Zaza dialect.[4] There are several other small Zaza- and Kurmanci-speaking enclaves in Sivas, that also claim Dersimi origins. Another indication of their relationship with the Dersim Alevis is the presence of seyyids of the same lineages (notably Kureyşan) living in their midst.[5]

Another series of enclaves stretches south, through Malatya, Elbistan (in Maraş) and Antep to Syria and Adana. Little more is known of these tribes than the names of the most important among them. According to Dersimi (1952: 59-60) these tribes, all of which allegedly speak Kurmanci, also claim an old connection with Dersim. We do not know to what extent their religion corresponds with that of the Dersimis and how it relates to their Yezidi and Nusayri neighbours. At least some of these communities were served by seyyids of lineages based in Dersim, but there were also other ocak (seyyid lineages) among them.[6] The American missionary Trowbridge reports that the Alevis of Antep, whom he knew well, considered the Ahl-i Haqq seyyids of Tutshami (near Kirind, west of Kermanshah) as their highest religious authorities.[7]

It is only about the religion of the Alevis of Dersim and the Koçgiri that we have more than superficial information; we do not know to what extent these beliefs and practices are shared by the other Kurdish Alevis.[8] Most of our information is from older travellers' and missionaries' reports or in the form of memories of what people "used to believe" and "used to do", for, as Bumke aptly remarks, the Dersimis seem to adhere to "a religion that is not practised" (Bumke 1989: 515). This statement is perhaps taking it a little too far, for certain practices like the pilgrimage to mountain sanctuaries, small offerings at numinous spots to prevent bad luck, and making vows at holy places, are still very much alive, although perhaps only a small minority takes part in them.[9] It is true, however, that for most Dersimis the food taboos and the veneration due to sun, moon and fire are items frequently mentioned but rarely respected in practice.[10]

The beliefs and practices of the Alevis of Dersim, as they are known to us from 19th and early 20th-century sources, appear to be more heterodox and 'syncretist' than those of the Tahtacı and the central Anatolian Turkish Alevis — although this may of course in part be due to the fact that the latter have hidden their beliefs better or have gradually been further islamicized. The belief in metempsychosis, for instance, was more pronounced among the Dersimis; the Armenian author Andranig (1900) gives a fascinating account of the belief that human souls are reborn in animals.[11] The Dersimis apparently recognized, like the Ahl-i Haqq, various degrees of divine incarnation or theophany, from the full manifestation of God in Ali and possibly in Hacı Bektaş, to a more modest but nonetheless significant divine presence in the seyyids. Mark Sykes, usually a good observer, wrote of the Dersim tribes that they were in name Shi`is but appeared to him to be pantheists.[12]

Sun and nature worship appear to have had at least as prominent a place in the life of the Dersimis as the ayin-i cem and other common Alevi rituals.[13] Andranig adds to this the worship of the planets, of thunder and rain, fire, water, rock, trees, etc. (1900: 169). Each morning, the Dersimis used to worship the first spot that was touched by the sun's rays.[14] Melville Chater, who spent the night in a Kurdish Alevi village near Malatya in the 1920s, gives a slightly different description of this morning worship:

[The villagers woke well before sunrise and went to work in their fields.] "As the sun rose, each man, woman and child turned eastward, bowing to it a polite good-morning, then resumed to the day's routine." (Chater 1928: 498)

The same villagers also worshipped the moon (perhaps only on special nights). Chater noticed them climbing on their roofs at night, waiting for the moon to appear. As soon as it became visible,

"simultaneously the Kurds arose, making low bows and salaaming profoundly to the risen planet; then they descended their stone stairways and disappeared for the night" (ibid.: 497).

The Kurdish Alevis' sun worship especially is strongly reminiscent of identical practices among the Yezidis, about whom more will be said below. It also brings to mind a now extinct sect called Şemsi (i.e., sun-worshippers?), that is known to have existed in the districts of Mardin and Diyarbekir at least into the 19th century.[15]

Yet another minor but distinctive trait of religious practices in Dersim consists of the remnants of what may be called a 'snake cult' (which also once existed among the Armenians of this region). Several tribes have their own centres of pilgrimage, where the image of a snake is an object of veneration. The best known is that at the village of Kiştim near Erzincan, where a wooden snake known as the 'saint of Kiştim' (Kiştim evliyası) appears to come alive during pilgrimage rituals at the shrine. The Bektaşi çelebi Cemalettin, the nominal head of the rural Alevi communities, in the 1910s made a vain attempt to have the centre at Kiştim closed and the piece of wood destroyed.[16]

The more specifically Alevi rituals, however, appear to connect the Dersimis with the Turkish Alevis. Most of their gülbank (invocations) and nefes (religious songs) are in Turkish, and they were so well before the first efforts at assimilation under the Republic. According to Ali Kemali, who had been vali of Erzincan and knew the region very well, there were no Kurdish gülbank at all (Kemali 1992: 154-5); the same observation was made by Mehmet Zülfü Yolga, who was born in Pertek and became kaimakam of Nazımiye (1994: 99). Nuri Dersimi contradicts this and claims that the seyyids of the Kureyşan and Bamasor (Baba Mansur) lineages always recited gülbank in "an archaic form of Zaza" (Dersimi 1952: 24). Hasan Reşit Tankut, writing in 1949, claimed that the Dersimis had only recently, at the instigation of the nationalists Alişêr and Seyyid Rıza, begun to replace the Turkish nefes with poems in their own language.[17]

Another practice connecting the Alevis of Dersim with Turkish Alevis was the relationship with the central tekke of Hacı Bektaş. This is mentioned by Molyneux-Seel (1914: 66) as the chief place of pilgrimage outside Dersim.[18] In theory, the Dersimi seyyids, who acted as rehber and pir to the common tribes, recognized the çelebi at Hacı Bektaş as their murid, but in practice they all took seyyids of other lineages as their pir and murid and had little to do with Hacı Bektaş. Three minor ocak of western Dersim, however, the Aguçan, the Derviş Cemal and the Saru Saltık, claimed descent from khalifa appointed by Hacı Bektaş (Dersimi 1952: 27-8; cf. Birdoğan 1992: 152-7).

Turkish or Kurdish origins?

The Kurdish Alevis are commonly called Kızılbaş by their neighbours. This is also the term by which they occur in Cuinet's late 19th-century population statistics, without further ethno-linguistic designation. This name of course associates them with the Safavids, whose followers were mostly Turcomans. Sümer mentions in his study of the Safavids' Kızılbaş supporters (1976) only two Kurdish tribal communities, and those were relatively insignificant: the +ınıslu and the Çemişgezeklü. Many of the latter must have followed the shah into Iran, for we find in the 16th century a large Çemişgezek confederation living south of present Tehran, whence they were sent by Shah Abbas to Khorasan in order to protect Iran's northeastern border against Uzbek incursions.

The present Kurdish Alevis are too numerous to be the descendants of only the remaining parts of those two tribes. This raises the question where the Dersimis came from, and the answer suggested by most Turkish scholars, both of the official history school and liberal ones, is that they are kurdicized (or zazaicized) Turcoman Kızılbaş tribes. This assumption appears so reasonable that is has been unquestioningly accepted by some western scholars as well (e.g. Mélikoff 1982a: 145). However, it is hard to imagine from whom these tribes could have learnt Kurdish or Zaza, given the fact that social contacts with Shafi`i Kurmanc and Zazas are almost nonexistent. In Sivas, on the other hand, Kurdish (and Zaza) Alevis have long been in close contact with Turkish Alevis, without the latter being assimilated. I propose the alternative hypothesis that a considerable part of the ancestors of the present Alevi Kurds neither were Turcomans nor belonged to the followers of Shah Isma`il, but rather were Kurdish- and Zaza-speaking adherents of other syncretist, ghulat-influenced, sects. I shall presently present some evidence to support this hypothesis.

It has too often been taken for granted that the Kurdish tribes were, at least by the time they were incorporated into the Ottoman Empire (roughly 1515), staunch Sunnis, whereas the Turcoman tribes had an ineradicable tendency towards heterodox ideas. The idea of the Kurds as strict Sunnis may have been put into circulation by Idris Bitlisi, the diplomat who brokered the alliance of leading Kurdish families with Sultan Selim and his successors. Idris, and in his tracks other Ottoman historians like his son Ebü'l-Fazl, Sa`deddin, Hüseyin Bosnevi and Müneccimbaşı, as well as the historian of the Kurdish ruling families, Sharaf Khan Bidlisi, attributed the Kurds' preference for the Ottomans as against the Safavids to their religious convictions.[19] A profession of Sunni orthodoxy was a transparant promise of loyalty to the Sultan, and the Kurdish historians' insistence on the Kurds' orthodoxy may reflect what they wished the Sultan to believe rather than what they themselves knew to be the case. Even Sharaf Khan, who himself had spent a considerable part of his life in the service of the Safavids, emphasized that the Kurds' abhorred (Shi`i) heterodoxy. On the other hand, he made no attempt to hide the prominence of Yezidism among the Kurds, perhaps because this did not represent a political threat to the Ottomans.

Heterodox Kurds in pre- and early Ottoman history

There are, in fact, indications that extremist Shi`i ideas were more widespread among the Kurds than the said Kurdish authors were willing to concede. Bitlis, the home town of both Idris and Sharaf Khan, has produced its share of unorthodox thinkers. The Hurufi text Istiv¯an¯ame, written around 1450 by Ghiyathuddin al-Astarabadi, speaks of a certain Darvish Haji `Isa Bidlisi as the originator of a deviant doctrine, which declared the shar`£ obligations not binding to true believers because these already lived in Paradise.[20] This resembles what one may still hear present-day Alevis in Dersim say: "heaven and hell are here." Secondly, there are reasons to believe that the religious ideas of the well-known 15th-century heterodox mystical teacher, Shaikh Bedreddin, reflected views that were well-established in the same region: Bedreddin's chief mystic teacher was Hüseyin Akhlati, a peripatetic scholar and mystic hailing from a district near Bitlis.[21]

There are yet other indications that Kurdish tribes have played a part in the propagation of certain forms of Alevism (though not necessarily of the Safavid variety). As Irène Beldiceanu-Steinherr gathered from her archival research, the major Bektaşi communities of the 15th and 16th centuries appear to have consisted of nomadic tribes.[22] Ottoman documents contain numerous references to these tribal groups (named Bektaş, Bektaşlu or Bektaşoğulları) and associate them with a wide range of localities, in an arc from Sivas by Malatya, Mar`aş and Antep to Aleppo and Adana and incidentally even further west. Most surprising, perhaps, is the explicit reference to the Kurdish element in these tribes. Cevdet Türkay classifies them as Konar-göçer Türkmân Ekrâdı taifesinden, "nomadic Turcoman Kurds."[23] This term, which occurs often in his list of tribes, appears to refer to tribes of mixed composition.

As Xavier de Planhol was one of the first to observe, the arrival of large numbers of Turcoman tribesmen in eastern Anatolia from the 11th century onward gave rise to intensive cultural exchanges and the emergence of a new type of pastoral nomadism (combining the vertical, short-distance transhumance of the Kurds and the horizontal wanderings of the Turcoman) and of new tribal formations, incorporating smaller groups of various origins. The Karakoyunlu and Akkoyunlu must have incorporated Kurdish clans in their outwardly Turkish component tribes, and in the Ottoman period the large tribal confederation Boz Ulus is known to have had Kurdish as well as Turkish sections. Some tribes that can be traced through the centuries changed their language, from Turkish to Kurdish or the other way around; the composition of their members may also have shifted over time.[24]

The said tribal Bektaşis were found in the same regions where we later encounter Kurdish Alevis. But they must be only one of numerous Kurdish tribal elements that went into the formation of the present Kurdish Alevis. Several major Dersimi tribes are found by name in Ottoman sources. Türkay lists, for instance, numerous occurrences of the Lolan, Dirsimli and Dujik/Duşik (a name that we find used in the 19th century to refer to the tribes of Dersim collectively), and all of them he classifies as Ekrâd taifesinden; only one major Dersim tribe, the Balaban, are listed as Yörükan taifesinden.[25]

Shifting views of self

Some of the local historians of the Kurdish Alevi tribes, notably Fırat, Rışvanoğlu and Kocadağ, have forcefully emphasized the Turkish origins of their tribes, claiming to base themselves at least in part on oral tradition. Their works contain useful bits of information but have to be used with extreme caution because of the politically motivated desire to 'prove' the Turkishness of these tribes, in conformity with the official kemalist view of history. Other local historians such as Dersimi, on the other hand, have emphasized their Kurdishness, and more recently there is a school of thought among people of Dersimi origins that stresses Zazaness as distinct from Kurdishness (Pamukçu, Selcan, Dedekurban).

I have found no references prior to the republican period that call these tribes anything other than Kurds or Kızılbaş.[26] A mid-19th century Kurdish source used by Jaba, the Russian consul at Erzurum, calls them Dujik Kurds (after Dujik Baba, the name of a mountain in central Dersim that by extension referred to the entire mountain range of Dersim), and adds that "the Turks call them Dujik or simply Kurds (Ekr¯ad), whereas the proper Kurds give them the name of Kızılbaş."[27] Taylor, the British consul at Diyarbakir, who visited Dersim in 1866, speaks exclusively of Kızılbaş (with Şeyhhasanlı and Dersimli proper as subdivisions); the Austrian officer Butyka, who travelled there in 1879, speaks of "Dersim Kurds" and "Seyyid Hasanlı Kızılbaş Kurds".

There were oral traditions, however, which appeared to suggest that at least some of the tribes had foreign origins. Taylor (1868: 318) already was told that the Şeyhhasanan were originally from Khorasan, and had come to Dersim more recently from the Ağcadağ region near Malatya. (The Dersimis proper were, in his view, descendants of an "original pagan Armenian stock".) The Kurdish nationalist Nuri Dersimi also, without a trace of scepticism, mentions this tradition. In his description the belief in Khorasani origins appears even more widespread: not only the Şeyhhasanan but also several eastern Dersim tribes, the Izoli, Hormek and Sadi, as well as the major seyyid lineages, Kureyşan and Bamasoran, claimed to have come from Khorasan many centuries ago (1952: 24-5). Dersimi associates these Khorasani origins with the popular Alevi hero, Abu Muslim of Khorasan, whom many Kurds believe to have been a Kurd, and secondarily with Hacı Bektaş. This is no doubt one reason why the tradition was popular and appears to have spread further from the seyyids to the tribes who were their 'disciples': Khorasan was felt to be the original homeland of the Alevis. Dersimi also emphasizes that these tribes already spoke Zaza when they arrived and that even in his day the said seyyids could not even speak Turkish. This is a hardly veiled reaction to the official Turkish view that declared these tribes to be Turkish and pointed to the Khorasan connection as a corroboration. (It appears that before the republican period, people never equated Khorasani with Turkish origins.)

In the 1930s, however, several authors speak of tribes considering themselves the descendants of troops of the Khwarizmshah Jalaluddin, a military adventurer who had moved to eastern Anatolia before the Mongol invasion.[28] A Turkish intelligence report of the early 1930s has it that old men in the Pülümür district still remembered legends about the Khwarizmshah Jalaluddin, and that the mountain Dujik Baba was considered as his grave and therefore also known as Sultan Baba.[29] It is not clear to me whether this really was a living tradition or one recently invented by amateur historians embellishing the Khorasan theme with historically possible Turkic ancestors.[30]

The First World War and Turkey's War of Independence, in both of which a strong appeal was made to Sunni Muslim solidarity, did not have a great impact on Dersim society as a whole. The Young Turks, seeking to recruit Dersimi support for the struggle against Russians and Armenians, and clearly believing the Dersim Alevis to be something like village Bektaşis, invoked the support of the Bektaşi çelebi Celaleddin Efendi to incite the Dersimis to war. According to Nuri Dersimi, who accompanied the çelebi, these efforts remained almost completely without success, showing that the Bektaşi mother tekke had little authority in Dersim (1952: 94-103). Fırat (1970) claims that his own tribe, the Hormek, did take active part, but the generally apologetic character of his book warrants some scepticism.

Participation in the War of Independence, too, was at best half-hearted. The assertion by Baki Öz that the Alevis of East Anatolia at this early period considered Mustafa Kemal as a reincarnation (don değiştirmesi) of Ali and Hacı Bektaş (Öz 1990: 29) probably is an anachronism and refers to a later period. Ali Kemali, who was one of the first (republican) governors of the region, and who wrote his book only a decade after the war, is a more reliable source, and he only mentions Kurdish separatist rebellions against the Ankara government. It is true that Mustafa Kemal managed to coopt several important Dersim chieftains and made them deputies. But as long as the kemalist movement appeared as a movement of (Sunni) Muslims it did not generate much enthusiasm in Dersim; its becoming a new government can only have made it less attractive to the average Dersimi.

Kurdish nationalism did find a certain following among the people of Dersim and Sivas in this period. The first rebellion of an expressly Kurdish nationalist character in the emerging new Turkey took place among the Koçgiri, with some reverberations in Dersim.[31] Nuri Dersimi, who was one of the organizers of the Kürdistan Te`ali Cemiyeti, relates that in Sivas not only Kurmanci and Zaza-speaking Alevis, but also Turkish Alevis joined this Kurdish nationalist association and began calling themselves Kurds - apparently in opposition to the new Ankara government that was seen as Turkish (Dersimi 1952: 64-5). That this was a Kurdish rebellion receives confirmation from Ali Kemali (who was one of the last Turkish official authors to call a Kurd a Kurd). But it was clearly as much an Alevi rebellion as a Kurdish rebellion, judging from the alleged participation by the Turkish Alevis and from the absence of response among Sunni Kurds. The most charismatic leader, Alişêr, as said before, began composing nefes in Kurmanci instead of Turkish, which also indicates that his orientation was not a secular Kurdish nationalist one, but at once Alevi and Kurdish.

The Kurdish Alevis who lived further east (Bingöl, Muş, Varto), surrounded by Sunni Zaza and Kurmanci-speakers with whom they had a long history of conflict, were less inclined to see themselves as Kurds. When their traditional enemies took part in Shaikh Sa`id's Kurdish nationalist-cum-Sunni rebellion, these tribes, notably the Hormek and Lolan, opposed the Kurds and threw their lot in with the kemalist government (Fırat 1970[1945]). Both these Alevi tribes and Shaykh Sa`id's supporters were, incidentally, Zaza speakers, but this clearly was no sufficient reason for expressions of solidarity; there were persons who pleaded for unity against the Turkish state, but they did this in the name of common Kurdish, not Zaza identity. Sections of the leading elite of the Hormek and Lolan have emphatically defined themselves as Turks at least since the 1930s; it cannot yet be established whether this was only as a response to the emerging official policy of defining the Kurds out of existence or had older roots.

Zaza, Alevi and Dersimi as deliberately embraced ethnic identities

Until the 1930s, Dersim had never been completely brought under control by the central government, and it was the major target of the kemalist government's efforts to pacify the eastern provinces and assimilate the non-Turkish population. The great Dersim rebellion of 1937-38 was in fact little more than some low-intensity resistance to the pacification program but it was suppressed with great excess of violence, resulting in the massacre of at least 10 per cent of the population (van Bruinessen 1994a). Mass deportations — only a part of the deportees returned to Dersim, now named Tunceli, after a decade — contributed to the relatively successful assimilation of the Dersimis and their integration into the public life of Turkey. As Alevis with a libertarian streak of mind, many educated Dersimis no doubt felt closer to the secular kemalist reformers-from-above than to the, in their eyes, bigoted Sunni Kurds - in spite of the memory of 1937-38.

When the political liberalisation of the 1950s and 1960s made a wider spectrum of political organisations available, the Dersimis generally tended to end up on the left or extreme left of that spectrum. In most of the left-wing movements since 1960 the Dersimis have been represented, often in leading positions. Dersimis were also actively involved in the rise of Kurdish nationalism as a mass movement towards the end of the 1960s. Perhaps the most radical of Kurdish political leaders of those days, known by the code name of Dr. Şıvan (Sait Kırmızıtoprak) was a Dersimi.[32] In fact he belonged to Nazımiye branch of the Hormek, the same tribe as M.Ş. Fırat, who a generation earlier had insisted on their Turkishness! Several of the Kurdish movements of the 1970s again had Dersimis in their leadership, from the intellectual Özgürlük Yolu movement to the activist PKK.[33]

It is true that more young Dersimis in the 1970s were active in 'Turkish' radical left movements than in Kurdish nationalist ones, but this did not appear to reflect disagreements about their ethnic identity. The leftists did not deny being Kurds but they simply did not consider this identity as relevant for the political struggle. They condemned Kurdish nationalism as a feudal and petty-bourgeois movement - not because it was Kurdish but because it was nationalist. Something similar was true of their Alevi identity: they were proudly aware of the Alevis' history of rebellion against the state but rejected Alevi belief and ritual as well as the traditional enmity towards Sunnis. The movement that found the most widespread support in Dersim, TİKKO/TKP-ML, was a maoist movement believing in rural guerrilla, the following of which initially cut across ethnic and religious boundaries.

In the course of the 1980s this began to change, at least in part as a result of the collapse of virtually the entire left movement in Turkey and the rise of the PKK as the single most important opposition movement. Tunceli remained the last stronghold of TİKKO/TKP-ML, which elsewhere practically disappeared. The organisation became so closely identified with Dersim that its character changed: from part of the 'Turkish left' it became an organisation of secular, radical Alevis. By the end of the decade some of its leaders were talking about the Alevis as an ethnic group, on a par with (Sunni) Turks and Kurds, others about the Dersimis as a distinct group.

Although both left-wing and Kurdish nationalist parties and organisations retained a measure of support among the young people in Dersim, many others turned their backs on radical politics. The politicisation of the 1970s had only resulted in more repression, for which the elder generation blamed the left youth movements. Their reaction was a return to religion - an emphasis on the Alevi identity as a religious, not necessarily ethnic, identity. This response was no doubt influenced by the wider Alevi resurgence elsewhere in Turkey and among migrants in Europe: the mushrooming of Alevi associations, a flood of publications on Alevism and the public celebration of cems. The Alevi resurgence was further reinforced when government authorities in the late 1980s began openly endorsing it. This official support probably was not only meant to counterbalance the growth of Sunni Islamism but also to stop Kurdish nationalism making further inroads among the Kurdish Alevis. There was some pressure to emphasise the Turkishness of Alevism.

Meanwhile in Europe Zaza-speaking Kurds — some of them Sunnis, others Alevis — were bringing about a minor revival of Zaza literature, in the margin of the remarkable resurgence of Kurmanci literary activities. A minority among them began perceiving the Zaza as a distinct ethnic group that had to liberate itself from cultural domination by Kurds as well as the Turkish state. By the end of the 1980s a Zaza journal had coined the name of Zazaistan for the 'homeland' of the Zazas, which included Dersim and the districts astride the Murat river (populated by Zaza-speaking Sunnis). The Dersim rebellion of 1937-38 was declared to be a Zaza rebellion (rather than a Kurdish or an Alevi rebellion). So was the rebellion of Shaykh Sa`id, in which Zaza-speaking Sunni tribes had played the major role, and which had hitherto been known as a Kurdish or a conservative Muslim rebellion against the new Republic.[34] This

Zaza 'nationalism' still is largely a matter of exile politics, and it may still appear as a marginal phenomenon, but gradually it is also influencing the debate among Dersimis inside Turkey.[35]

Thus there were, by the late 1980s, three competing national or ethnic movements that appealed to the loyalties of the Alevi Kurds: Turkish, Kurdish and Zaza. The Alevi identity represented a serious fourth option, with a potentially stronger emotional appeal than the bonds of language alone. This situation gave rise to an intensive debate among Dersimis (and Kurdish Alevis in general) about their 'real' or 'original' identities and a quest for their roots. One aspect of the quest was an analysis of the names by which, before the arrival of Turkish and Kurdish nationalism, their grandparents referred to themselves and their neighbours. Not surprisingly, the results were inconclusive; earlier generations obviously did not think in contemporary ethnic terms. The names used and their referents appear to vary from valley to valley, and moreover are also different depending on the context and language of discourse.[36]

When speaking Zaza, Dersimis often refer to themselves as Kırmanc and to their language as Kırmancki, which are almost the same names as those by which Kurdish speakers refer to themselves and their language (Kurmanc and Kurmanci), but which obviously have different referents.[37] When speaking Turkish or other foreign languages, both may in fact translate these names as Kurd and Kurdish, which appears to support the Kurdish nationalist viewpoint. However, the Dersimis (when speaking Zaza) call the Kurmanci language Kırdasi, and they refer to the Sunni Kurdish tribes as Kır or Kur. Their eastern Zaza-speaking but Sunni neighbours, in the districts astride the Murad river, are called neither Kur nor Kırmanc but Zaza and their language Zazaki, although it is practically identical with the Kırmancki spoken in Dersim. Another term used by some Zaza speakers (mostly in the Siverek region, but apparently here and there in Dersim as well) is Dımılı, which as some orientalists (Hadank, Minorsky) have suggested could possibly derive from Daylami and thus point to Daylam as the Zazas' region of origin. 'Zazaists' have not failed to appeal to this name as proof of the distinctness of the Zazas.[38]

The identity debate, especially among Dersimis living in European exile, tended towards the ever more forceful assertion of the distinctness of Dersim (and the Kurdish Alevis in general): Alevi, but unlike the Turkish Alevis, Zaza or Kurdish, but unlike the Sunni Zazas or Kurds. Some of the protagonists in the debates were quite aware of how their perceptions of their own ethnic identity were shifting. A revealing illustration is given in a programmatic statement by the editor of a new journal addressing specifically the Zaza Alevis, Desmala Sure. Like many others of his generation, this man had begun his political career in a Turkish left-wing organisation and later moved to the Kurdish left. In the course of the 1980s he evolved to a Zazaist standpoint, and more recently yet he developed the view that centuries of Sunni-Alevi conflict had divided the Zaza 'nation' into two 'nations' of different creeds. Reviewing his earlier analyses, the editor writes:

"There was a time when I defended the view that the Dersim rebellions did not have a 'national' character [meaning here: 'Kurdish national'], but I have since quite some time changed my mind. In one of my writings I characterised the Dersim rebellions as 'Zaza movements'. I now feel obliged to correct myself on this point: the Dersim rebellions were Kırmanc-Alevi rebellions. I include the Koçgiri rebellion among the Dersim rebellions, for Koçgiri is [culturally] a part of western Dersim. I now consider the Shaykh Sa`id rebellion as a national rebellion [i.e., of the Sunni Zaza 'nation']. In 1987 I described the Shaykh Sa`id rebellion as a Zaza rebellion; I still adhere to that view."[39]

At least some former activists of TİKKO/TKP-ML and other left organisations appear to be receptive to such views.

Although the Zazaist and 'Kırmanc-Alevi' movements still appear to be marginal in Dersim and elsewhere in Turkey, Kurdish nationalists perceived them to be potentially dangerous and suspected the Turkish secret police of being the true motor behind this separatism in Kurdish ranks. For obvious reasons, they were equally distrustful of the official sponsorship of the Turkey-wide Alevi resurgence, which they considered as an ill-disguised attempt to drive a wedge between the Kurdish Alevis and the other Kurds. The recent accommodation of the PKK, the most important Kurdish nationalist movement, with Sunni Islam[40] had stirred up old Alevi fears, making a rejection of Kurdish nationalism more likely.

To counter these dangers, the PKK launched an ideological counter-offensive with an appropriately named journal Zülfikar, which specifically addressed the Alevi Kurds.[41] With the well-chosen slogan 'Aslını inkar eden haramzadedir!' in its masthead, and in a language rich in Alevi symbolism, the journal warned them not to forget that they were Kurds and to beware of state propaganda associating Alevism with Turkdom as well as of bourgeois

Alevi leaders collaborating with the (Sunni and state) establishment.[42] The journal specifically attempts to disassociate the Kurdish Alevis from Bektaşism, which it represents as the state-dominated variety of Alevism.

The debate on the ethnic identity of Dersim was not carried on with words alone. In 1994 the PKK stepped up its guerrilla activities in the greater Dersim area, in what probably was a deliberate effort to force the Dersimis to make a political choice, for or against the Kurdish movement. It had since 1984 done this with some success in the districts north of the Iraqi border, where it gained popular support precisely because of the Turkish army's brutal reprisals against the civilian population. The government responded by one of the most massive military operations since the establishment of the Republic, forcibly evacuating and partially or completely destroying around a third of Dersim's villages.[43]

Conclusion

The debate on the identity of the Kurdish Alevis still is in a state of flux. Among no other group in Turkey is there such an intensive and self-conscious search for the most appropriate way to define oneself. The gradual evacuation of Dersim — there are far more Dersimis elsewhere in Turkey and in Europe now than in Dersim itself — probably means that much of the traditional culture and religious practices of Dersim has gone, or will soon be, lost. Young Dersimi intellectuals have, it is true, made efforts to record and preserve oral tradition, but these very efforts show that much of the tradition is dead already. Another aspect of this effort to preserve is the deliberate intention to reinvent Dersim and its culture and to reaffirm its origins. Oral tradition is directly relevant to the debate on the ethnic identity of the Kurdish Alevis, and representatives of all rival views have had recourse to it, systematising and interpreting it in the light of their own ideological positions. Thereby they are contributing to a new living tradition, one that is written and stripped of elements that are too strictly local. It is unlikely that the question of the origins of the Kurdish Alevis will ever be unambiguously and convincingly answered, however; the debate is likely to continue.

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[1] The semi-official Türk Kültürünü Araştırma Enstitüsü in Ankara has published a long series of books on this and related themes.

[2] See e.g. Cemşid Bender's books and articles, especially Bender 1992b.

[3] E.g., Dersimi 1952; Fırat 1970 [1946]; Kocadağ 1987; Pamukçu 1992; Selcan 1994, all making contradictory claims concerning the 'original' ethnic identity of Kurdish Alevis..

[4] See Dersimi 1952:61-2. Tankut, though usually well-informed, calls the Koçgiri Zaza-speakers, perhaps because of this relationship with western Dersim (1994a:415). Sykes remarks that their language is "seemingly a dialect of Kurdish, but hardly comprehensible to Zazas or Baba Kurds, or Diarbekir Kermanjis" (1908:479).

[5] The Kureyşan, perhaps the most important seyyid lineage of the Dersim Alevi, have their largest concentration in Mazgirt and Nazımiye, but there are also sections of them in Kiğı, Hınıs and Varto, Pülümür, and Sivas (Jandarma Umum Kumandanlığı, n.d.:33).

[6] The Baliyan tribe of southwestern Malatya considered Hüseyin Doğan Dede (d. 1983), a seyyid of the Aguçan lineage, as their *mürşid-i kamil* but also had *dede*s of local lineages such as the Kalender (Şahhüseyinoğlu 1991: 83-8). The Aguçan are one of the minor Dersim *ocak*s, identified there as the descendants of an eponymous khalifa of Hacı Bektaş.

[7] "The Geographical Centre of [the Alevi] religion is in the town of Kirind, Kermanshah province, Persia. Four of Ali's male descendants now reside in Kirind. They are by name, Seyyid Berake, Seyyid Rustem, Seyyid Essed Ullah, Seyyid Farraj Ullah. (...) These men send representatives throughout Asia Minor and northern Syria for preaching and for the moral training of their followers" (Trowbridge 1909: 342-3). Sayyid Baraka (d.1863) and his grandson and successor Sayyid Rustam (still alive in 1920) had established themselves as the chief religious authorities of the Guran Ahl-i Haqq, and commanded great respect among other Ahl-i Haqq communities in Iran (see my "Satan's psalmists").

[8] See however Trowbridge 1909 (on Antep), Chater 1928 (on a village between Elazığ and Malatya), and Şahhüseyinoğlu 1991 (on a tribe living between Malatya and Elbistan).

[9] For a description of perhaps the major pilgrimage of Dersim, to the mountain sanctuary of Düzgün Baba, see Ferber & Grässlin 1988: 145-156.

[10] Recent publications referring to these taboos and forms of 'nature worship' are Bumke 1979; Feber & Grässlin 1988: 138-41; Özkan 1992: 259-74; Düzgün 1988; Düzgün et al. 1992; Dedekurban 1994.

[11] Andranig 1900: 167-70. I wish to thank Professor Jos Weitenberg of Leiden University for translating these passages for me. One of Andranig's interlocutors, a seyyid, told him that humans return after their deaths as mammals, then as snakes, birds, insects, butterflies, mosquitoes and finally as flies. Another claimed to still remember a previous existence as a donkey. He had been reborn human again because a previous human existence had ended unnaturally, in the war, and had therefore not been properly completed.

[12] Sykes (1908: 479) wrote of the Kureyşan, Balaban and Şadilli that they were "Shias or Pantheists" and noted of the Koçgiri, "In religion I take them to be advanced Pantheists, who recognize nature as a female principal and God as male. This opinion I give with every reservation as the result of interpreted conversations with well-to-do elders."

[13] Riggs, one of the best informed missionary writers, emphasizes the worship of sun and fire and only later mentions the ayin-i cem (1911).

[14] Kemali 1992[1932]: 152. This corresponds with Öztürk's observation that "*[s]abahları güneş doğarken karşısına geçilip dua edilir ve salavat getirilir. Ya yerde secde edilerek yer öpülür veya her kes elini ağzına götürerek niyaz eder*" (1972: 100). This sun worship had been explained to Ali Kemali by the legend that Ali after his death had risen to heaven and changed into the sun. Öztürk on the other hand claims that the sun is associated with Muhammad and the moon with Ali.

[15] These Şemsi are mentioned by the 17th-century Polish Armenian traveller, Simeon (ed. Andreasyan 1964: 100), by Carsten Niebuhr, who also met them at Mardin (1780: 376-8), and by the Italian missionary Campanile (1818: 194-200). An old Şemsi place of worship near the city of Diyarbakir was only recently destroyed when the Mardin road was widened. Niebuhr remarked that many Şemsi converted to Jacobite Christianity; others may have merged with the Yezidi or with the Alevi. A major tribe among the Yezidi of Armenia is presently named Şemsiki, but nothing is known of their relation to these earlier Şemsi.

[16] Dersimi 1952: 96-8. The cult of the 'saint of Kiştim' is also decribed by Asatrian & Gevorgian 1988: 588. Another 'snake' pilgrimage centre, Bone Ocak in the district of Hozat, is briefly described in Kaya 1995: 97. On the snake cult among the old Armenians, see Abeghian 1899:74-6.

[17] Tankut claimed they wrote in Zaza (1994b:298). His editor, Mehmet Bayrak, corrects him and states that Alişêr's poems were in Kurmanci; he also claimed that Turkish had never been the only language used in ritual. Informants from Dersim give contradictory accounts regarding the use of Zaza and/or Kurmanci in the ritual of the *cem*. Very few prayers and *nefes* in these languages have been published, however (Düzgün et al. 1992).

[18] The list of other pilgrimages given by Molyneux-Seel — Hasan(?) at Sivas, Ali at Kufa (*sic!*), Musa [Kazim] at Baghdad and Husayn and Abbas at Kerbela — gives the impression of having been mentioned by the author's informants to satisfy his curiosity only. The number of Dersimi actually visiting them must be minimal (although a few Dersimi later did claim to have visited Kerbela and to have been imparted important esoteric knowledge there). This makes one wonder how popular the pilgrimage to Hacı Bektaş ever was.

[19] Idris gave his account in a report to the sultan published by Sevgen (1968) and in his *Sal£mn¯ame*; this account was incorporated by Ebü'l-Fazl in his *Zayl-i Hasht Bihisht* (which probably was the source for von Hammer's account in *GOR* II, 432-4), by Sa`deddin in his *Tacü'l-tevarih*= and by Hüseyin [Bosnevi] in *Bedayi`ü'l-vaqayi`*.

[20] "Seine Behauptung war, dass es im paradies kein unterworfensein unter das gesetz (*takl£f*) gebe. Wir sagen aber, dass wir im paradiese sind, und daher kann es für uns kein takl£f geben. Diese fünf gebete gehören zu unserm takl£f (*va in panç namaz bar ma taklif ast*), sie brauchen also nicht verrichtet zu werden..." (Ritter 1954: 45).

[21] Babinger 1921: 103-4. Akhlat was at most times in Bitlis' sphere of influence. It was, of course, also an important Selçuk settlement, but Sharaf Khan, who mentions Hüseyin of Akhlat with great respect ("the most prominent among the `ulama of his age in both the exoteric and the esoteric sciences"), appears to imply that he was a fellow Kurd (Bidlisi 1860: 351). In the 16th century, the most conspicuously heterodox Kurdish tribe mentioned in the *Sharafname*, the Pazuki, also were based around Akhlat.

[22] Beldiceanu-Steinherr 1991. This finding is based on a painstaking combing of the available tax registers and other documents for Amasya; Beldiceanu-Steinherr's research did not cover the other provinces where Bektaşlu communities are mentioned.

[23] Türkay 1979: 239. Unfortunately Türkay gives no indication of the dates and type of documents in which he found the references to these tribes. It is not so surprising that there were Kurds among the early Bektaşis, for the *Vilayetname* also relates that Hacı Bektaş first visited Kurdistan before moving further west to central Anatolia.

[24] Examples are mentioned in van Bruinessen 1989.

[25] Altan Gokalp has suggested that the terms Türkman and Yörük as used in these documents were not ethnic-linguistic labels but referred to different statuses for purposes of taxation; he believes that neither Yörük nor Türkman were necessarily turcophone (personal communication; cf. Gokalp 1989: 530-2).

[26] With the exception of the Balaban who, as said, are listed as Yörük in Türkay's work, although other sources call them Kurds too.

[27] Jaba 1860: 6n-7n. As some of the most important tribes of the Dujik Kurds the Balaban, Kureyşan and Gülabi are mentioned. Cf. Blau's observations on the Dujik Kurds (Blau 1862).

[28] Jalaluddin is a historical person, and his adventures in eastern Anatolia are documented. After his death his troops, mostly Kipchak Turks, entered the service of the Selçuk ruler Kay-Kubad, who granted them the eastern marches of his empire, Erzincan, Amasya and Larande-Niğde, as a fiefdom (*iqta`*) (Cahen 1968: 245-6).

[29] Jandarma Umum Kumandanlığı n.d.: 32, 38. The association of the Dujik Baba with Jalaluddin Khwarizmshah is also noticed by Tankut (1994a[1937]: 442-3), who appears to consider the Bahtiyar tribe as descendants of Jalaluddin's companions. Yolga, a former kaimakam of Nazımiye, goes even further and makes most of the tribes of eastern Dersim the descendants of Jalaluddin's armies (1994: 83-4).

[30] Edip Yavuz, a former kaimakam of Pülümür and vali of Tunceli, who attempts to prove the Turkishness of all Dersim tribes, also mentions the belief that Jalaluddin Khwarizmshah is buried on the Dujik Baba (1968: 368), but he does not relate this to any tribe's claims of descent — perhaps because of his wish to prove the Dersimis to be Oghuz Turks.

[31] See Kemali 1992[1932]: 125-43; Dersimi 1952: 120-68; Komal 1975; Kieser 1993).

[32] Dr. Şıvan led the left-wing branch of the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Turkey and began preparing for a prolonged guerrilla struggle as early as 1969, from a base in Iraqi Kurdistan. He was killed there in 1971. One of the major movements of the 1970s, DDKD, acknowledged him as its ideological leader.

[33] *Özgürlük Yolu* leader Kemal Burkay is a Dersimi, as are many of his associates; among the founders of the PKK we find the Dersimis Mazlum Doğan and M. Hayri Durmuş, who both were killed in Diyarbakır prison in 1982.

[34] This was not an entirely new idea. Some Turkish authors, such as Sevgen (1950), had earlier presented the Zaza speakers as a distinct ethnic group different from the Kurds. The first attempt to construct a history of the Zazas as unrelated to the Kurds and to recuperate the 1925 and 1937-38 uprisings as 'the two great Zaza rebellions' was made in a series of articles by the first ideologist of the 'Zazaist' movement, Ebubekir Pamukçu, in the Zaza journal *Piya* in 1989-90, and later in a book published in Turkey (Pamukçu 1992).

[35] The emergence of this doubly separatist (from the Kurdish as well as the Turkish nations) Zaza particularism is discussed in greater detail in Bruinessen 1994b.

[36] See Malmîsanij 1992 and Selcan 1994 for two such analyses, reaching opposite conclusions that supporting the Kurdish resp. 'Zazaist' position of their authors (who both are Zaza speakers).

[37] In Kurdish, the term 'Kurmanc' frequently refers to peasants as opposed to nomads, who are then called 'Kurd'. This could also be the primary meaning of Zaza 'Kırmanc'. However, as early as the 17th century the Kurdish poet Ahmed-i Khani used the names 'Kurd' and 'Kurmanc' interchangeably to refer to the collectivity of the Kurds.

[38] A difficulty with this explanation is that most Zaza speakers do not even know the name of Dımılı. Sevgen (1950) distinguishes three groups of Zaza speakers, in Dersim, around the Murad river and around Siverek, and claims that only the third group is also named Dımılı or Dımbılı. This suggests an alternative derivation of the name, from that of the well-known Dumbılı, a Yezidi tribe known to have lived in the same region in the 16th century before most of its members migrated eastward.

[39] Cengiz 1991:2; the comments between brackets are by the present author. Note that in the course of his argument the author narows down the referent of the term Zaza to the Sunni Zaza speakers, but that his 'Kırmanc-Alevi' include now the Koçgiri, who are not Zaza speakers

[40] In 1989 the PKK, realising the grip Islam still exerts on the mass of Kurdish villagers, radically revised its attitude towards religion, from rejection to accommodation and lipservice. The new position is authoritatively expounded in Abdullah Öcalan's *Din sorununa devrimci yaklaşım* (Istanbul: Melsa, 1991).

[41] The first issue of *Zülfikar* appeared in Germany in June 1994. Half a year later publication was continued in Istanbul, under the name of *Çağdaş Zülfikar*.

[42] The English translation of the phrase *Aslını inkar eden haramzadedir*, 'Who denies his origin is a bastard', fails to convey the strong emotive power of the Turkish original.

[43] Detailed analysis of these military operations and village evacuations of autumn 1984 in: Netherlands Kurdistan Society 1995