

The Path: Dızgun Bawa, As an Example of Relation between Belief and Life Style¹

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This article is an anthropological examination and analysis of a Dersim-based mythical story, focusing on its meaning and function in belief and the practice of daily life. Within this scope, the Dızgun Bawa myth, revolving around a central sacred figure, is broached and analyzed here as a text comprising a basis for the construction of collective discourses giving way to socially functional meanings and forms of behavior. This mythical story serves as a vehicle for a discussion of its repercussions over history, contemporary discourse, and daily life. Discussions in the article also center upon a stateless society's effort to protect itself from the central state and its forces, the construction of the discourse of this effort, and its function in its implementation. With the hermeneutic and anthropological method pursued here, the ultimate aim of the article is to approach the effects of the story's content over the identity, personality, and eco-politics of the society in question.

Key Words: Dızgun Bawa, belief, life style, Dersim, eco-politics.

Introduction

The decoding of myths has to be evaluated as the oral archeology of human history. They are significant semantic categories, worldviews, and the operation of sociological institutions and rules. More importantly, they are treasures for social norms and memory. Myths are thus a crucial subject of discussion and research in anthropology. This study aims at decoding the Dızgun Bawa (mountain's) mythical story, which is the "dominant symbol" (Turner 1967) of Dersim, thus analyzing its meaning and function in belief and the practice of daily life.

The Dızgun Bawa myth, revolving around a central sacred figure, is here broached and analyzed as a text engendering socially functional

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meanings and ways of behavior, and generating the construction of discourses of collectivity. Therefore, this mythical story is dealt with in terms of its repercussions over history, contemporary discourse, and current daily life. The discussions here also center upon a stateless society's effort to protect itself from central state and its forces, the construction of the discourse of such an effort, and its function in its implementation. Analysed with a hermeneutic and anthropological method, this story is dealt with in terms of its effects on daily life, the configuration of personality, and politics within the semantic world of society.

Before proceeding with an analysis based on an eclectic use of anthropological approaches, a few theoretical words might be necessary. In his examination of myths, Claude Lévi-Strauss, a prominent spokesman for structuralism, points to the binary opposition molded on knowledge or meaning by the specific operation of human thought, which has long been known to be a characteristic of the *Homo Sapien* brain.¹ Victor Turner, a prominent scholar of symbolic interpretation, talks about the dominant symbols in myths and their function to the service of society. Clifford Geertz, on the other hand, focuses on the traditional performance of cockfighting, through which he decodes the symbolism in the reproduction of the hierarchical relations of society. And Mary Douglas centers her discussion on the impurity/purity symbolism, especially in Jewish culture, leading the social to take a distance against hybridity in order to intervene in merging with others. Drawing from similar analytical methods, this article aims at deciphering a story about the Dızgun Bawa mountain, which is a central sacred space in Dersim.

As mentioned above, the myth covered by this article is essentially a story about the Dızgun Bawa mountain, a central space in Dersim with sacred characteristics. The belief system espoused by people in Dersim is known as the Alevi belief, but it is locally articulated in the dialects of the region as Re/Raa or Reya Heq/Raa Haq. This belief system has its own philosophy, law, rituals, and social organization. And it is a structure in which the adoration of nature (i.e., sacred geography) takes on importance, thereby religiously unifying nature and humans with the ancestor cult. This structure is supported by two institutional pillars, which are the customs of *kirve*² and *musâhip*,³ and is put into practice

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1. Viewed from the way Lévi-Strauss looks at the fiction of mythical meaning, one within the structure of this myth a series of symbols of polarization, such as mountain vs. plain, father vs. son, verticality vs. horizontality, old age vs. youth, impurity vs. purity, death vs. immortality, shepherding vs. agriculture
 2. Kirve is the name given to the person playing a symbolical part in the circumcision ritual and thus constitutes an important fictive kinship institution called kirvelik.
 3. Musâhip is the name of an important fictive kinship institution in Alevi belief, by which a sacred brotherhood starts.

by way of an internal commitment or contract, known as *ikrar*, and the ensuing organization of social rights and responsibilities.

Apart from the last decades, all beliefs about social mechanisms have been conveyed in Dersim via oral culture. In this respect, oral communication is what determines the formulation, and handing down from generation to generation, of social rights and responsibilities—that is, social law, philosophy, social solidarity, and daily life practices. Mythical stories, which are cornerstones for oral record, continue their function in daily life in the form of songs (conveying the philosophy of the belief), elegies (enabling the continuity of historical record), and so forth. In this sense, mythical stories usually appear as sacred stories or rather as the settlement stories of sacred ancestors. Hence, the contents of such sacred texts incessantly make themselves felt in daily life, and a considerable portion of them serve as a certificate in terms of the organization of belief within the scope of ancestor cult. Miracle (*keramet*) stories are important in that they function as evidence determining the status (thus, rights and responsibilities) of the tribes defined as Ocak,¹ who provide religious service to society, and also of other tribes and the relations between each of them. Taking into account the fact that such stories have an important function, especially in designating the proper and secure way of conveying, from generation to generation, of sacred mythology, one needs to broach them as significant social and historical contents with long temporal paths.

Mythology is a kind of cultural record system and a kind of language. The particular significance of approaching myths as a language is underpinned by the fact that myths mediate a symbolical narrative and, at the same time, protect the historical context. In its

1. Ocak is a kind of tribe that has a miracle story for their ancestor. Having these miracle stories, which connect all ancestral tribal lines, proves their sacredness; in a sense, “ranking” the tribe among the Ocaks. The people who belong to these tribes are accepted as Seyid. They are considered to be genetically linked to the Prophet. The male members of such tribes have the right to perform religious services in society. As Seyid, they have the respect of all members of society and as such, are named and act as Pir, Raywer, and Mursid. These three names are the name of the sacred ranks for Seyid people. They have different duties. Raywer is the person who introduces people in the religion and ceremonies, and also assists Pir and Mursid. Pir is the person who leads ceremonies and makes leadership decisions when problems arise. Mursid acts as the Pir of the Pirs who can act as a secondary decision maker, considering misjudgements made by Pirs. In Dersim, these Ocak have a circle. They also have their Pir, Raywer, and Mursid.

Every Ocak has several tribes they serve. This never changes. When you are born in a tribe you know which Ocak is your Pir, Raywer and Mursid, no one is without. If you do not have one, then you are not Alevi or Reya Heqi (the True Path) people. There are several Ocaks who serve more than one hundred tribes in Dersim. These names are in Kurdish; some of them are in Turkish as well.

synchrony, a historical discourse is located in an updated language, and the demands and discourses of the past are thereby carried to this day by way of using a series of meanings related to contemporary conditions. Hence, a main symbolical essence is formed with a series of symbolic discourses or forms acquainted by the local mass, or such an essence is borrowed from another source for the same purpose, with modifications and updates required by the specific condition. This updated version enables multiple semantic stratum from the past to be located within the current semantic stratum, so that the accumulated symbolic discourse, simultaneously coming from the past, is also perpetuated. In other words, on the one hand, such myths continue historicity by locating the traces of contemporary history into this diachronic flow; on the other hand, they feed this historicity but also use it as a means of social education.

With its myriad overlapping semantic stratum, this *accumulated-symbolical* (*yiğimsembolik*)¹ form is often transformed into a collection of messages that can be read or communicated only by the society in question. This historical and contemporary message is constructed on the specific semantic stratum of the society, thus paving the way for a sort of social/group fiction/history of privacy. Forming a specific oral history curriculum for such an “us” is also a necessity in this framework. And this points to the significance of a kind of “subterranean/secret” language for a collective entity in search of molding and maintaining its difference. Therefore, this symbolical language and message are transformed and reproduced as intergenerational educational material. And even if the story has other versions in other places, what is communicated through the secret specific language/meaning is the social essence/message/discourse, and this is how privacy is maintained.

The transmission of discourse is part of social education and a significant activity continued from generation to generation. By nature of their structure, mythical stories are, as also pointed out by Lévi-Strauss, the main materials for the education of generations, especially of oral cultures. Therefore, oral educational material becomes functional as part of a curriculum, espoused by elders, who are the most important carriers of such material, “helping to keep young generations under an order and discipline” (Lévi-Strauss 1963, 44). Hence, in those societies lacking written history, the mythical record becomes the main record system and thus serves as a prominent means in the construction and survival of the identity of “us.” The mythical stories of Dersim dramatically contain such characteristics too. And so, as mentioned above, they serve as means for transmission with its own socially secret meanings.

1. Conceptualization made by the author; see Deniz (2012).

Dersim and Mythology

Dersim has always been positioned at a distance from central administrations in pre-Ottoman times, throughout the Ottoman era and as well as during the Republican period. There are a variety of reasons for this; the main reason has two separative elements: ethnicity and religion. Unlike the Sunni Kurds' existing, albeit shifting, relations between the Ottoman administration, this region, which is in fact ethnically Kurd, has always been a place that has tried to protect itself from the central administration, due to their belief in Rê/Raa Heq. As a matter of fact, this has not been an option but a mandatory situation for survival. Located directly in the center of the power conflict between the Seljuks and the Safavids, it was continually made to pay the price of a trauma with the victory of the latter and persistently encoded as a potential threat.

As known, the Ottoman state is a governmental entity emerging after the collapse of the Seljuk state at the hands of Ismail I (also known as Shah Ismail), the warriors of Ardabil and its Dervish tradition. Owing its existence to the conflict between the Seljuks and the Safavids, the Ottoman state, which was, in fact, the successor of the Seljuks, directed its rage to Alevis, the most prominent representatives of the dervish tradition, with the fear that they might succumb to the same outcome. Alevis are a social group forced with fear and pressure to conversion—a process which has been largely accomplished. But they are also the embodiment of the most long-standing and deeply rooted resistance tradition of the region. This violent hunt against Alevis continued until the end of the Ottoman era (Şener 2003; Gündoğdu and Genç 2013). Despite some small quantitative modifications, this campaign has also continued during the Republican period.¹ Therefore, virtually all Alevis tried to survive in high locations, to which it would be difficult for central powers to reach, and to which they could escape and take refuge in when a danger appeared. These locations are generally high mountains, unapproachable valleys, and forestlands. Dersim is just such a region adorned with sheer slopes, high mountains, dense forestlands, caves, valleys, cliffs without clear paths or markings. As such, it is a protective “sacred geography.”

In Dersim, the relation between humans and geography is made through common belief and daily life practices. It is precisely for this reason that mythical stories, providing the historical record of this commonality, gain such an importance, for this is a region in which, except for the last fifty years, there was no writing technology, and thus experienced ensuing problems. As such, it strived to record all its past

1. The massacres of Dersim, Çorum, Maraş, and Sivas, three provinces in Turkey, are dramatic examples of this violence. There are also some discriminatory and violent practices.

and present through oral communication. Being the most typical of these oral record systems, mythical stories marked with holiness offer us information about the relation between humans and nature in Dersim and Dersim's history, thus playing an enormous role in the formulation of daily life. These appear before us as structures in which social knowledge, norms, and demands are inscribed following a concentrated process of distillation. Hence, they have always been functional in the transmission of society, its structure, and discourses. In this regard, the central mythical story of Dızgun is a part and carrier of an essential discourse in this society.

Dızgun Bawa

Dızgun Bawa is a mountain near the village of Qıl/Kıl in the district of Nazimiye, with an approximate height of 2,090 meters. It is one of the few mountains where there are almost no trees. We cannot know how it was in the past, but unlike how it is presented in the legend, only sporadic trees are located in its foothills. Dızgun, which also serves as a basis for the foundation myth of the Kurêşan tribe/Ocak, is a shepherd in the legend, a young boy who takes goats to the mountains at the coldest time of the winter, enabling the trees to turn green only with a touch of his stick, thereby feeding the animals. Seeing everyday that the goats return with full stomachs, his father begins to wonder how this happens. So one day he secretly follows his son and thus witnesses Şaheyder's miracle.

When a goat notices him, it sneezes in order to inform Şaheyder about this situation, upon which Şaheyder asks, "What's happened? Have you seen the deaf Kurêş?" and notices his father. This makes him ashamed; he escapes to the mountain and never comes back, and thus he becomes a *secret (sır)* in the mountain. Although the narration has various versions, this is the basic setup of the story (Deniz 2012).

At first glance, this story offers us a series of data about the ecological and social life of the society. As also pointed out by these data, Dersim is a high location, covered in snow five to six months of the year, a geography ruled by cruel winter conditions. There is very little farm land in this region, and the arable lands are often rugged, high, and covered with forests. Therefore, the economic activity most appropriate to this environment has often been sheep and mostly goat breeding. Hence, in the other two important mythical stories (that is, the *Mızur* story), we see the goat as the most appropriate animal to breed in this geography, and shepherding as the most appropriate economic activity. This is not only because there are no domestic animal species other than goats that can adapt itself to this steep slope, but also because there is no pasture to be used for the breeding of animals in long winter months. The only existing flora is oak trees spread all over the mountains as a green layer. Therefore, virtually the only source of food

for animals is the leaves of oak trees, and it is goats that can afford to bear the winter season with less food. The miracle in the story, as presented in the form of trees turning green with a touch of a stick, is primarily evidence of the daily life of the region, especially of the hardship experienced in long winters.

Therefore, one of the most important activities in Dersim for people preparing for winter is to cut, especially in September, branches of oak trees and store them for winter. They are brought in winter to where animals are located, or animals are taken where stored branches are located and fed. Leaves are consumed by animals, and the remaining branches are used for heating and other domestic tasks. All these activities—cutting down branches, carrying them, and feeding off animals—are predominantly carried out by the young male members of households. This is also the case in our mythical story. The Dızgun character in the story is mainly an animal keeper—that is, a shepherd whose tasks also include the above-mentioned chores, which appear in the story as non-sacred activities executed by Dızgun.

Miracle Stories and Belief System

The most important features of the belief system in Dersim are the miracle stories serving as a basis for social organization and the laws of solidarity. In this regard, one can speak of three miracles worked out by Dızgun: first, traversing a six-kilometer road with just three steps and coming to the mountain known today by his own name; second, his touching the trees with his stick and turning them green at the coldest time of the winter; and third, becoming a secret in the mountain upon seeing his father. On the other hand, Kurêş, who is here characterized as the father of Dızgun, has an independent narrative and also has a series of miracle stories.¹

1. In the context of these miracles, involving the circle of the maxim “Hand in hand, hand to God” in Dersim belief system, the Kurêşan tribe/Ocak gains holiness, taking its place within the system as a Pir (sage) Ocak. There are some miracle stories about it, but in comparison to Dızgun, it has a lesser importance in the Dersim belief system. The space belonging to him—i.e., the site where he used to live—is located within the village, and it is still frequented by his own circle of talips (aspirants). On the other hand, as a mountain, Dızgun Bawa is still the most central and popular sacred space not only in the whole of Dersim, but also for the Dersim-based Kurdish Alevism. Unlike the village Zevê, the space of the father Kurêş, which is only occasionally visited by aspirant, Dızgun Bawa is frequented by hundreds of people especially in the summer, and almost sixty animals are sacrificed for its sake. One may think, however, that Kurêş must be more important as he has more miracle stories. Another interesting point worthy of discussion is that the one having more miracles (i.e., the father) is mortal, whereas the one with less miracles (i.e., the son) is immortalized as a “secret.” For an extensive discussion, see Deniz (2012).

A scientific analysis of this subject shows that it would be logical to argue that Dızgun is not, contrary to what is claimed, the son of Kurêş, but a strategy used by a religious leader and his followers coming to the region from outside in settling down in the region. Hence, attaining a sacred and popular personality—with the claim that he is the father of Dızgun—facilitates settling down in the region in a more secure and prestigious way. This is a clever strategy for guaranteeing one's existence in the region. One may even argue that this is perhaps the only secure way of settling down in the region. In this case, one can postulate the following thesis: There are internal monitoring dynamics in the region, and the most salient feature of these dynamics is that they concretize in the figures regarded as the sacred leaders of the region, most of whom are shepherds. A series of settlement stories and attribution of these stories generally to those coming from outside offer us remarkable data about the settlement, power relations, and religious history in the region. Departing from this point, it is possible to assert that a new external religious approach is associated with the existing religions in the region. Thus, without being much intertwined—but also without excluding each other—a concensus is attained, ultimately taking on a completely new form.

Land: Shepherds and Fathers

The fact that Dızgun moved away from Kurêş, his alleged father, and disappeared as a secret in the mountain is a matter of fundamental importance, which needs to be analyzed for its underlying reasons. This is too specific of a detail to be just explained away, as is done in most interpretations, as just an act of “embarrassment.” One can logically infer that this is in fact a kind of reflex shown towards those coming from the outside, for, in as much as we see in the myth, the father lives below in a place relatively more suitable to agriculture and gardening. Settlement also invokes the rise of land property on the basis of ancestor cult and the tribal system organized around it. Today, in Kurdish society in general, and in Dersim Kurds specifically, there exists a land property in conformity with the tribal system. This seems to be a serious crisis occasioned by the disappearance of Dızgun in the mountain, a fact primarily corresponding to the death of shepherding culture as a consequence of the distribution of land with personal/communal property. The distribution of land means the restriction, or even the liquidation, of shepherding activities. In this regard, it is quite likely that Dızgun's behavior is in fact a harsh response to the expropriation of the lands below by newcomers.

This is, therefore, a clever strategy, aiming at preempting a possible objection against settlement, by claiming the fatherhood of Dızgun. Such a potential threat seems to have been staved off thanks to good strategy, but Dızgun Bawa's positive and strong influence over the neighboring peoples could not be vitiated. However, by looking at the

situation in favor of the people below and his disappearance in this mountain, one can also infer that he and others engaged in shepherding were isolated and stuck in the mountains, but still continuing their lives. This is because a similar situation appears again in Mızur, which is also a central myth and sacred figure. Mızur is also a shepherd, disappearing as a secret in mountains after escaping from a landowner.¹ This theme invoking the encounter between shepherding and agricultural culture can be read not only on the basis of the sacredness of the whole mountain where Dızgun disappeared as a secret, but also on the basis of the symbolism of the Kurêş Ocak, where the only sacred place is the Ocak itself, himself mortal. The landowner in the Mızur myth, who is a kind of father, is also mortal and points out to Mızur as sacred.

The Dızgun Bawa mountain, referred to in the Kurmanci dialect as Kevirê Dızgunê and as Kemero Dızgun in the Kurmancki dialect (the rock of Dızgun), is wholly stamped with sacredness. The people going on a pilgrimage to this mountain visit symbolic points on their journey, light candles, and pray. The mountain has two entrances. The first is the entrance from the site near the village of *Gerê* in the district of Nazimiye, where there is now located a *cemevi*, a place of assembly for Alevis. And the other entrance is on the central road to Dersim, in the Qil village of Nazimiye. A *cemevi/cemxane* has recently been built here too, and a visiting route circling the mountain starts from this spot. Here, visitors are welcomed by a rock, spontaneously transformed into a monument in time, with the piling of the horns of sacrificed animals. This is where the candles are first lit. If one begins to climb the upward slope, one of the first destinations is Henia Xaskar/Kaniya Xaskarê (i.e., the Haskar Fountain). Haskar is one of the sisters of Dızgun. What is called a fountain is just a meagre source of water flowing in a small cave. People drink this water with a spoon for healing.

This tour continues on a long trail winding toward the peak. There is a plane between the two slopes, where people can also sacrifice animals and light candles. One needs to pass through steep cliffs in order to move up to the slope. It is such a narrow passing that it even resembles an initiation rite. Having passed through this quite narrow passage, one encounters a site alleged to be Dızgun's tomb, which has

1. Here is the similar theme also at stake in Mızur's story, a narrative of the origin of the Mızur/Munzur river, which is the most important water source today. Mızur is a shepherd working for a Sunni landowner. He realizes that his master, who has gone on a pilgrimage to Mecca, craves for halva, so tells the wife of his master that, if she cooked halva, he could take it to his master before it gets cold. And his miracle is only understood when his master returns from pilgrimage. Upon the revelation of his secret, Mızur feels ashamed and thus disappears as a secret in the mountains. While running away, he slops around the milk from the churn, and this scattered milk wells out as water.

apparently only recently taken the form of a grave. This is a point of contact where people used to light candles. It has now become part of a ritual, in which people circle the tomb barefoot for three times in a way reminiscent of what is referred to as the “invention of tradition.”¹

Following this ritual, people pass to another site called Topê Dızgunê (meaning Dızgun’s Balls), where they witness stones resembling balls; then they begin to climb down towards the other face of the mountain. Here, people first come to the cave where Dızgun used to lie. Visitors drink from the leaking water inside the cave, light candles, visit the site believed to have harboured his *saz* (i.e., a stringed musical instrument), and his bed, and finally reach the main place called Mığara Çile. *Çile* means the very hard time of winter in Kurdish, particularly February. The basic importance of this place is that it used to be the location where dervishes used to enter a forty-day novitiate at the coldest time of winter before admission into their order. People were required to spend at least one night in this cave as the main space of the ritual, but with the recent escalation of military control, the surrounding area has been transformed into a de facto forbidden area, especially in the evenings, thus bringing this religious practice to a standstill. Therefore, people nowadays try to sleep here for a shorter span of time in order to continue the practice. This is done because it is important to have a dream here, and having a dream is regarded as a fundamental communication with Dızgun, the sacred power. For example, wishing for a child is of prime importance here—which is why there are many stories about such wishes and the miracle whereby these wishes were reciprocated by a hidden power. After such wishing, one of the customs is to give the name Dızgun to boys, and Xaskar to girls.

In daily life, Dızgun is a salient sacred form and a holy place where people visit to pray for a child. That is why there is a considerable number of males with the name Dızgun. Though not at the same proportion, Xaskar is also one of the widespread names. One of the main reasons for the prevalence of the name of Dızgun is that people go to Dızgun and sleep in the Cave of Çile especially in order to pray for a boy. Demand for a male child is a “natural” consequence of the patriarchal society in Dersim. Men are “valuable,” so their supply is high. Therefore, people going to Dızgun not pray only for a child, but a male child. Female children are wished for usually when people have difficulty in having a child. And the female child thus seeing the light of the day is given the name Xaskar.

The importance of wishing a child from Dızgun lies for the most part in the fact that he is a young, miraculous shepherd/protector/power. As the physical power of society, the kind of power necessitated by economic conditions and environmental difficulties, and as a kind of

1. This terms was first suggested by the Eric Hobsbawm.

military power against external threats, a young man refers to resistance. In this regard, the fact that Dızgun is a young man and a shepherd also shows that he has all requirements necessitated by the reference to protectiveness. When all these qualities are coupled with faith, it takes on the identity of “us” with a socio-psychological impetus. And this means the construction and consolidation of a socio-psychological resistance required for survival. This is what responds to the social psychology of a community always living under a threat. The existence of a protector or a guard, his disappearance as a secret within the *precious geography* where he could continue to live—his trace in every part of this geography—is a symbolic emphasis on a sacred geography, a whole territory to which the community owes its existence. This can be read either as a debt of gratitude to this geography or a construction of a symbolic discourse demanding people to step up to protect their own spaces marked with their most sacred values, their geographies consecrated by a secret power to which they owe their social existence. Hence, as a protective “ancestor,” Dızgun guards and protect them, and the people, for their part, regard themselves obliged to protect and guard the sacred space where Dızgun disappeared as a secret—their homeland with all the creatures living in it. This situation is best described as *herda bav u kalan* (the land of father and ancestors). It, therefore, refers to the origin of the law of land property, still maintaining its effect in no small measure.

Tribe, Land, and Property

The land property in Dersim has a specific law. Though under the external scope of state laws, it keeps its internal law to a large extent. In the predominating system in Dersim, there are lands belonging to tribes. These lands belong to the whole tribe, but they are distributed as individual properties. In other words, they are registered with a title deed given to individuals, and treated as private property. However, the tribe continues to hold rights and authorities over them. What is at work here is the principle forbidding the sale of land, especially of land belonging to the tribe symbolizing the continuity of ancestors, to those who are not part of the tribe. An individual can sell his property, but one has to do it in deference to the internal legal laws of the tribe. In the scope of this law, one can first sell it to a tribe member. One has to bargain first with the closest relatives, and if no agreement can be found, proceed to the most distant ones until an agreement is reached.

Tribal boundary is the last boundary. If no one within that tribe purchases the land in question, it is then not possible to sell it anymore. Supposing that one set one’s mind on selling a piece of land and has found a purchaser, this would be a cause of conflict within the tribe. This is an unacceptable act in the eyes of the tribal law, stipulating that its “ancestral” land cannot be sold to foreigners. Therefore, in such a

case, any member of the tribe has the right to engage in conflict and other members have also to take the same position. In the end, “ancestral” land is at stake, and all tribal members have a right and authority in this context.

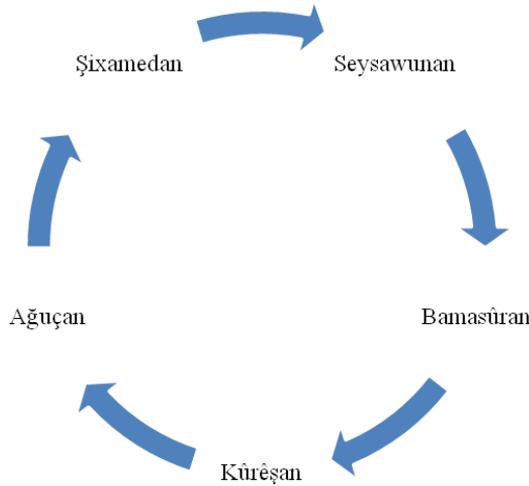
As a matter of fact, this also points to a collective unconscious, shedding light onto the still effective perception of the people of Dersim regarding their homeland. In this sense, we see, as configured in the context of Dersim and people from Dersim, a very special example of the concepts of “country” and “homeland,” because each of them, as it were, has been entrusted to each other. Dersim is where their ancestors, potential might, and most precious entities are blended. This is a land where there is an embedded potential might that touches them and protects them. The reason underlying the fact that the local figures regarded as sacred do not have any grave and that there is a widespread belief that all these figures are a “secret” is that there is a particular kind of land which is blended with ancestor cult. Thus, the figures included in the ancestor cult do not have any grave. And the natural places where they disappeared as a “secret” strengthens the perception that all land is communal property.

Property, Shepherding, and Agricultural Cultures

Within this configuration, shepherds, as those charged with protection and watching over, appear as the objectors of an interim period evolving from shepherding culture into an agricultural one and also into another form of the establishment of property. There must be a relation between the newly-formed agricultural culture, registration of land into ancestors’ property, and the fact that Dızgun, a representative and symbol of shepherding culture, disappeared into a nonarable mountainous region. Departing from this, we can speak of a new perception in the division of land, the defeat of shepherding culture at the hands of agricultural culture, a process whereby shepherding and shepherds themselves were reduced to a dependent position. But we can also argue that this was not a categorical defeat, a product of a long and painful process, leading to a forced reconciliation on a certain line and thus enabling the continuation of the adoration of Dızgun as the “arch-shepherd.”

The land in shepherding culture is a relation under the control of a mobile, provisional, and seasonal calendar. It has a continuity, but it does not have the rigid perception of a boundary. The boundary is only the boundary of the physical or an insurmountable natural thing or suitable ecological conditions. With its permanent, human-determined, and imagined boundaries, it was probably hard to understand and accept this newly instituted property. Hence, land property and surplus value as a consequence of agricultural culture did not lead into a substantial transformation in the form of deep social stratification due to the

influence of shepherding culture. And this reduced the hierarchical sequencing, at a very simple level, to a level where there were a protective leader and other equals. Therefore, along with the adoration of Dızgun, this horizontal hierarchy appears as a significant characteristic in the configuration of the belief system in Dersim. Here we see horizontally organized tribes, and again horizontally organized *seyid*¹ Ocak tribes, which are non-economic in nature, but considered, to a certain extent, higher than tribes in sacred terms. Within this sequencing, horizontal circularity precludes a vertical hierarchy. This situation, on the other hand, maintains the ancestor cult, which is the organizing factor of agricultural culture.



Picture 4. *Hand in hand, hand to God (El ele, el Hakka, this is not the exact one is an example)*

This original form is also at work in the relation between *Pir* (sage) and *Talip* (aspirant), indicated as the higher position of belief. The sage and the aspirant always sit at the same table, eat the same food, have a seat in the same place; they are thus in an equal relationship. The hierarchy determined through *kissing the hand* does not go beyond being a tribute paid to the institutionality in the person of a particular individual. Nevertheless, Ocaks have also their horizontal and internal organizations. As they are also horizontally organized, it is very hard to see an obvious verticality. Within the system, being a sage corresponds to a higher position in comparison to being an aspirant. However, a sage is always an aspirant of another sage. Therefore, being a sage ceases to

1. See footnote 7 above.

be a static position of superiority and transforms into a positional situation. And this ensures that people do not remain within a rigid hierarchical position. Although it seems that it gains its authority from the ancestor cult, the agricultural culture's belief system, shepherding culture does not allow deep hierarchies, and it is apparent that it gave way here to a different configuration. Thus, as in the case of Kurêş, no matter how many miracles they had worked through, Dızgun and Mızur, the two shepherds of Dersim, continued to be the collective sacred leaders of society. And this still has its daily repercussions. In this sense, the tribal system in Dersim appears as a community, as a common action for survival, rather a strict land feudalism. The internal relations within tribes are also supported with this characteristic. The continuous state of vigilance for the purpose of protection from neighbouring communities and especially from central powers has led to a coalescence of the tribe in the form of segments. This segmentation enables a swift dissolution and action, thus a rapid diffusion and fusion in the face of a threat. Consequently, the tribal leader again appears as the "shepherd," charged with protecting and watching over the tribe, and thus takes the lead in decision-making processes.¹

Thus, the hierarchy in the Dersim pantheon is as the following (with increasing order of importance): visits at the lowest strata, the places of Ocaks, Dızgun and Mızur, Xızır, and Xwadê/Heq. It cannot be a coincidence that these two "sacred shepherds" serve as the interconnection between the ancestor cult at the bottom, and Xızır and Heq, which transform into abstract forms, at the top. On the contrary, they are the signs symbolizing main points of contact in the formation of the idiosyncratic belief in the region. With the ancestor cult and its subject settling on land at the bottom and sacred shepherds escaping to/taking refuge in mountains, we can thus see the monotheistic transformation of divinity, which first appeared in concrete forms and then took abstract forms. Despite this sequencing, the living conditions in the region, the continuous state of vigilance due to environmental threats, and the fact that goat raising is an economic and cultural activity appropriate to this dangerous way of living have always maintained the importance of shepherding and shepherd gods. The form of land property in the ancestor cult must have been adapted to shepherding; that is, to a social structure configured in accordance with mobility. And this must be a fact rendering "shepherd leaders" more important and taking them to higher ranks of holiness.

In this sense, Dızgun appears not only as a stereotype of protective sacred leader, but also as an invitation to young men to become the shepherds of society and thus to protect and watch over other people.

1. For an extensive discussion, see Deniz (2012).

As a sacred form of a sort of collective shepherding, Dızgun is thus also encoded as a young asexual man,¹ manifested as a form of collective holiness, as the totality of a young man's tasks with regard to society and its belief in daily life. He belongs to everyone as the ideal son of society and he is the protector of all.

In addition to the responsibility of protection, Dızgun is regarded important also as the young *ideal son* of society. Being a secret serves as a reference to a personality beyond the mysterious and all "bad" habits. The reason for this is that his merit (i.e., being a "secret") reaches the highest ideal, which is the eternity of society and its belief. In this regard, being a "secret," a very important factor within belief, points out to a significant moral purity (*pakî*). One of the most important elements within belief, being clean refers not only to physical cleanliness, but, more importantly, to moral/internal cleanliness. First of all, this refers to the application of social rules with respect to sexuality, which is one of the moral standards of society. This corresponds to abstaining from all sexual activities unapproved by society—the part referring to "waist" in the maxim of "be in control of your hand, waist, and tongue," which is the most fundamental discourse of Alevi belief, also covers Dersim. In this sense, non-marital affairs are very rigidly rejected in Dersim and its belief of Rê/Raa Haq.

This state of control corresponds not to an external monitoring, but to an internal one. This is why the rate of sex crimes and non-marital affairs in the Dersim region is quite low. One should also consider that this is a society in which women and men do not lead rigidly segregated lives. In Dersim, a particularly rural area, economic and social activities are largely carried out by women and men together. Adultery is rarely seen here, and unlike other Kurdish communities where adultery can lead to murders, such violent dealings are seldom observed in Dersim.

What is practised here is to exclude, on a large scale, those participating in such acts, for one of the codes of belief is the prohibition of murder. As each individual is deemed *a semblance of God*, every attack against him or her is regarded as an act against God and thus a sheer crime. Therefore, during the legal process of the belief, no sage can issue an order for murder. For inflicting the heaviest crime, one is charged with the heaviest punishment, which is being ostracized from society/driven into an excommunicated state. What this means is that no one talks to the person in question; no one can take one's animals into theirs; and that person cannot participate in any social celebration or ritual like religious meeting, wedding, association, funeral, or circumcision feast. This is a socially paralysing punishment, and no one can endure such a situation for long in a rural society. Given that social

1. See Deniz (2012).

mobility was also low in the past, one can understand that this situation becomes all the more difficult to bear.

Excommunication is not a revocable punishment either, for the most important elements of the declaration of excommunication are sexual crimes and murders. There are different punishments for crimes other than these two. In consequence of the execution of punishment, this has to be declared. And this declaration can be annulled only by the sage authorized with imposing a punishment. No one other than him can annul this punishment. There is only one exception: counterappeal by the sage of a sage. But such an appeal is made only when the guide is certain that the said punishment is not just and incompatible with *the law of path*. Within the law of path, crimes are personal. In other words, if a crime is perpetrated by an individual from a family comprising ten people, the punishment is inflicted only on the said person, not to the family in general. Even if the families of the said people are naturally affected by this exclusion, reaction is shown not toward the family but towards guilty individuals. And this is the natural consequence of accepting crime as a “personal act.”

Secondly, being open and honest to everyone is a fundamental vector in society, and its opposite, lying and deceitfulness, is an impurity in the eyes of the belief. Therefore, individuals are obliged to tell the “truth,” no matter what happens. This obligation to *tell the truth* is again positioned within an internal monitoring. It means that every lie is witnessed by a series of surrounding potential powers—Xızır, Xwadê/Heq, Dızgun—which are ultimately partners, and other latent sacred forms: “Whatever lie you say, you will surely get your comeuppance.” This comeuppance is not in the form of going to hell in the afterlife, but, as the occasion requires, in the form of a series of worldly sanctions. If this crime continues, and if some other negative attitudes accompany it, one gets his or her comeuppance on the basis of the form one would take in the afterlife. In other words, a sanction is imposed through metempsychosis. Therefore, by force of the Kurdish and Alevi belief, a Kurmanc is obliged not only not to tell a lie, but also to *tell the truth one knows*.

This is, therefore, a fact that explains why one can so frequently see a Kurmanc from Dersim in all dissident segments in society. It is because Dersim, a region where a Kurmanc mass lives, is a social location where dissident/leftist viewpoint has always predominated. Therefore, even before the extermination attempt in 1938, it was encoded, not only in the Ottoman era, but also in the Republican period, as an alterity, as a region that continually needs “discipline” (Gündoğdu and Genç, 2013). Transmitted from generation to generation, this cultural genetic code has always kept its distance from central powers. In spite of all acts of domination and extermination, this act of *telling and doing the truth* directed by belief has been configured as the distinct

characteristic of Kurmancs from Dersim (Deniz 2012). Hence, Kurmancs from Dersim not only continue to feed all dissident organizations throughout the country, but also offer substantial support to either the survival or formation of internal oppositions within these dissident organizations themselves. In this regard, as *the opposition within opposition itself*, they always articulate a demand for justice on the basis of being “pure/pakî” required by their belief and culture (Deniz 2012). As such, they become the target of all forces and powers in society. However, especially considering the case of Turkey, they also become the most important dynamic of all democratic processes, no matter how imperfect and problematical these processes are.

Since they have all these characteristics, they are led to become victims of a systematic and surreptitious discrimination with regard to public resources. Moreover, in a society where all resources are distributed in accordance with Turkish-Islamic understanding and the Hanafi sect of Islam, this palpable discrimination at work in daily life operates with heavier costs for Kurmancs from Dersim.¹ In other regions, Alevi can hide their identity; but as Dersim is a place predominantly populated by Alevi, one cannot hide his or her identity if one is from here. Under these circumstances, no matter where they are located in the country, they find themselves in a potential state of threat as members of a mass excluded from public resources. This state of affairs once again consolidates their dissident identity. Yet this is an interactive relationship, in which they also become the object of discriminatory practices due to having a dissident identity.²

Towards a Conclusion

The Dızgun Bawa story appears as a myth in which a society, all sociological norms, and anthropological discourses, are focused on the unity of social life, and this is such a myth defined by Victor Turner as a *dominant symbol* (Turner 1967). It is possible to conceive this story as the reflection of a process whereby, as Leslie White points out, the zoomorphic gods (totemism) of hunter-gatherers evolved into anthropomorphic characteristics as a result of the development of the human capacity to produce its own food—that is, the rise of the agricultural and shepherding culture.³

Mary Douglas defines impurity as a “matter out of place” (Douglas 2002), and in the Dızgun Bawa myth, “being in place” attains a practice

1. For discrimination practices against Alevi in Turkey, see Massicard (2005), Şahhüseynoğlu (2001), and Shankland (2003).

2. For example, they are kept out of high level posts, tasks requiring confidentiality, police and university cadres, civil service, and especially of high ranks requiring promotion

3. This is an informal translation from Kottak (2001, 479) in Turkish version.

related to the usage of the geographic site and land. In a society where violation of rules is regarded as impurity, the violation of land or boundary is also perceived as an impurity or a threat against the purity of society. Being at a distance from those out of place—that is, from those coming from outside—is symbolized by his escaping to mountains and becoming a secret. And this mythical story is conveyed from generation to generation to draw attention to those “things to be avoided,” all with an eye to the continuation of the specific social organization. Within a spectrum of polarized semantics, wishing a child—the continuation of society—from rocks or a naked mountain, which are symbols of inertness or death, has a figurative emphasis for the reproduction of society. Hence, both Mızur and Dızgun are encoded as “higher” immortality. Consequently, the law, social solidarity and philosophy of surviving as a stateless society are rendered continuous via a mythical discourse.

Briefly stated, as a central symbol and sacred form, Dızgun Bawa occupies a significant place in the operation and signification of the society of Dersim, which is a *stateless society*. As the phases of the development of the capacity of such a society to produce its own food, as the transitional period between production processes, and as the socially significant discursive and practical form, Dızgun Bawa is a critical narrative for its own society, and as such, it has become immortalized.¹ Therefore, this mythical discourse and its form of eternity gain importance as the DNA or core of the identity and general existence of this society. An attentive analysis will suffice to decipher the fact that they continue to be treasures for society’s past and today. Thus, in this regard, Dızgun Bawa is a central or dominant symbol enciphering, through a series of polarities, the codes of belief and society in Dersim. As such, it will continue to exist as long as it is required.

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1. F. C. Wallace (1966) argues that societies with states are more powerful thanks to the functionality of their religions over the administration of a stratified society, but that stateless societies have a communal type of religion where some gods are in partial control of society (see Kottak 2001, 479).

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