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‘ “Ashını inkar eden haramzadedir!”:

The debate on the ethnic identity of the Kurdish Alevis’

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"Aslımı inkar eden haramzadedir!"

The debate on the ethnic identity of the Kurdish Alevi¹

Martin van Bruinessen

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,² 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.³ Kurds, on the other hand, have emphasized the Iranian element in the religion of the Alevi and suggested that even the Turkish Alevi must originally have received their religion from the Kurds.⁴ 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.⁵ 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 Alevi 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.

¹ This is an extended version of a paper originally presented at the conference on Bektashis and similar syncretistic groups in the Middle East, held at the Free University in Berlin in April 1995. A shorter version of this paper will appear in the proceedings of that conference.

² Names like Koçuşağı and Aşağı Abbasuşağı are common in Turkish-language sources (see the tribal lists in Kemali 1992[1932]: 157-65, Yavuz 1968: 351-96 and Dersimi 1952: 46-69), and local people themselves refer to their tribes by these Turkish names when speaking Turkish. When they speak Zaza, however, they do not use these Turkish forms but say, e.g. Kozu instead of Koçuşağı, Abasanê Cêrî instead of Aşağı Abbasuşağı. It is not clear whether these are more authentic forms or, to the contrary, bastardisations of the Turkish. Mustafa Düzgün (1992) gives the local (Zaza or Kurmanci) equivalents to many of the Turkish names occurring in Nuri Dersimi's well-known history of the region.

³ The semi-official Türk Kültürünü Araştırma Enstitüsü in Ankara has published a long series of books on this and related themes.

⁴ See e.g. Cemşid Bender's books and articles, especially Bender 1992b.

⁵ E.g., Dersimi 1952; Fırat 1970 [1946]; Kocadağ 1987; Pamukçu 1992; Selcan 1994, all making contradictory claims concerning the 'original' ethnic identity of Kurdish Alevi.

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).⁶

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.⁷ 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.⁸

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

⁶ Dersimi (1952: 65) also notes Hormek at Refahiye, and there is another Lolan enclave near Yozgat in Central Anatolia.

⁷ 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).

⁸ The Kureyşan, perhaps the most important seyyid lineage of the Dersim Alevis, 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).

Dersim, but there were also other *ocak* (seyyid lineages) among them.⁹ 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.¹⁰

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.¹¹ 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.¹² 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.¹³

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 islamized. 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.¹⁴ The Dersimis apparently recognized, like the Ahl-i Haqq,

⁹ The Baliyan tribe of southwestern Malatya considered Hüseyin Doğan Dede (d. 1983), a seyyid of the Ağuçan lineage, as their *mürşid-i kamil* but also had *dedes* of local lineages such as the Kalender (Şahhüseyinoğlu 1991: 83-8). The Ağuçan are one of the minor Dersim *ocaks*, identified there as the descendants of an eponymous khalifa of Hacı Bektaş.

¹⁰ "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").

¹¹ 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).

¹² For a description of perhaps the major pilgrimage of Dersim, to the mountain sanctuary of Düzgün Baba, see Ferber & Grässlin 1988: 145-156.

¹³ Recent publications referring to these taboos and forms of 'nature worship' are Bumke 1979; Ferber & Grässlin 1988: 138-41; Özkan 1992: 259-74; Düzgün 1988; Düzgün et al. 1992; Dedekurban 1994.

¹⁴ 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

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.¹⁵

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.¹⁶ Andranig adds to this the worship of the planets, of thunder and rain, fire, water, rock, trees, etc. (1900: 169). Worship of the sun, however, was the most regular of these rituals, taking place each morning at sunrise. The form of this worship varied from place to place. Ali Kemali writes that the Dersimis worshipped the first spot that was touched by the sun's rays (Kemali 1992[1932]: 152). 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). More reliably perhaps, a study of the traditional religion of Dersim by a person of local origins has it that "when the sun comes up, people turn towards it and utter prayers and invocations; or they prostrate themselves and kiss the earth, or each brings his hand to his mouth and utters a supplication"¹⁷.

Dersimis explained their sun worship to Ali Kemali with a legend according to which Ali after his death had risen to heaven and changed into the sun — an interesting statement for those who wish to recognise remnants of the worship of (old Turkish) Gök Tengri or (Iranian) Ahura Mazda in the Alevis' veneration for Ali. Öztürk, however, reports that in Dersim the sun is associated with Muhammad and the moon with Ali, which appears to defy such simple single-origin explanations. 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 Diyarbakir at least into the 19th century.¹⁸

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.

¹⁵ 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."

¹⁶ Riggs, one of the best informed missionary writers, emphasizes the worship of sun and fire and only later mentions the *ayin-i cem* (1911).

¹⁷ "Sabahları güneş doğarken karşısına geçilip dua edilir ve salavat getirilir. Ya yerde secde edilerek yer öpülür veya her kes elini ağzına götürerek niyaz eder" (S. Öztürk 1972: 100).

¹⁸ 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

Moon worship, though less frequently mentioned in the literature, is perhaps even more typical of the Dersim Alevi. Our sources do not make clear whether this also was a daily ritual or took place on certain nights only. Melville Chater gives the only eyewitness account, from the same Malatya village. He noticed the villagers climbing on their roofs in the evening, 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" (Chater 1928: 497).

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 Kıştim near Erzincan, where a wooden snake known as the 'saint of Kıştim' (*Kıştim evliyası*) appears to come alive during pilgrimage rituals at the shrine. The Bektâşî *çelebi* Cemalettin, the nominal head of the rural Alevi communities, in the 1910s made a vain attempt to have the centre at Kıştim closed and the piece of wood destroyed.¹⁹

The more specifically Alevi rituals, however, appear to connect the Dersimis with the Turkish Alevi. Most of their *gûlbank* (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 *gûlbank* 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 *gûlbank* 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 Alişer and Seyyid Rıza, begun to replace the Turkish *nefes* with poems in their own language.²⁰

Another practice connecting the Alevi of Dersim with Turkish Alevi was the relationship with the central *tekke* of Hacı Bektaş. This is mentioned by Molyneux-Seel (1914: 66) as 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.

¹⁹ Dersimi 1952: 96-8. The cult of the 'saint of Kıştim' is also described 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.

²⁰ Tankut claimed they wrote in Zaza (1994b: 298). His editor, Mehmet Bayrak, corrects him and states that Alişer'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).

chief place of pilgrimage outside Dersim.²¹ In theory, the Dersimi seyyids, who acted as *rehber* and *pir* to the common tribes, recognized the *celebi* 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 it 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 Shafî'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

²¹ 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.

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.²² A profession of Sunni orthodoxy was a transparent 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'i* obligations not binding to true believers because these already lived in Paradise.²³ 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 Akhlatai, a peripatetic scholar and mystic hailing from a district near Bitlis.²⁴

²² Idris gave his account in a report to the sultan published by Sevgen (1968) and in his *Sal'umn-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 *T-acü'l-tev'ar* and by Hüseyin [Bosnevi] in *Bed-ayi'ü'l-vax-ayi'*.

²³ "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 £n pañ nam-az bar m-a takl'f ast*), sie brauchen also nicht verrichtet zu werden..." (Ritter 1954: 45).

²⁴ Babinger 1921: 103-4. Akhlatai 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 Akhlatai 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 (Bidl's 1860: 351). In the 16th century, the most conspicuously heterodox Kurdish tribe mentioned in the *Sharafn-ame*, the Pazuki, also were based around Akhlatai.

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 Bektaşî communities of the 15th and 16th centuries appear to have consisted of nomadic tribes.²⁵ 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."²⁶ 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.²⁷

The said tribal Bektaşîs 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 *Yörükân taifesinden*.²⁸

²⁵ 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.

²⁶ 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 Bektaşîs, for the *Vil`ayetn`ame* also relates that Hacı Bektaş first visited Kurdistan before moving further west to central Anatolia.

²⁷ Examples are mentioned in van Bruinessen 1989.

²⁸ 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).

Alevis and Yezidis

The fact that some of the present Yezidi leaders represent their religion as extremist anti-Alid sect (a member of the amir's family is even named Mu`aviye) should not blind us to the close similarity in ideas and practice with those of the Kurdish Alevis and the Ahl-i Haqq or Kaka'i of southern Kurdistan. The now extinct şemsis were mentioned above as a fourth, perhaps similar religion.²⁹ The relationship between these religious groups may even be more intimate than has thus far been assumed. The German anthropologist Felix von Luschan, who travelled through Anatolia measuring skulls around the turn of the century, noticed that Yezidis and Alevis were, at least by some of their neighbours, considered as one and the same sect:

"In some places in Western Kurdistan, people that are exactly like the Kyzylbash are called *Yezidi*, and protest that they have nothing at all to do with the Kyzylbash; in other places, so I was told one day at Kiakhta on the Böilam River and again near Diarbekr, that Yezidi and Kyzylbash were two words for the same thing, the one being Arabic, the other Turkish. I do not know if this is correct, but, as far as I could ascertain, the creed and the social condition of both groups are fairly identical." (von Luschan 1911: 231)

An aged Zaza Alevi whom I interviewed in a village in Tercan (east of Erzincan) in 1977, though disclaiming any contact with Yezidis, appeared to know the name of Melek Ta'us and some legends that struck me then as Yezidi-flavoured. Yolga, writing in the 1940s, in fact claimed that there were some Yezidis among the Dersim tribes (1994: 96).

Luschan's observation that the Yezidis were "exactly like the Kyzylbash" referred to their measured skulls. He found that the cranial indexes of all the sectarian Shi'i groups of Anatolia - the Tahtaci and Bektaş of Lycia, the central Anatolian Kızılbaş (and the Yezidis who so much resembled them), as well as the 'Ansariye' (i.e. Nusayri) - were highly similar to each other, and contrasted strongly with those of the neighbouring Arab and Kurdish groups. All sectarians whom he had measured were brachycephalic, and their Sunni neighbours dolichocephalic. Von Luschan concluded that the former represented "the remains of an old homogeneous population, which have preserved their religion and have therefore refrained from intermarriage with strangers and so preserved their ancient characteristics" (ibid., p. 232). Later Turkish nationalist authors were to see in the same skulls proof of the Turkishness of all these groups - with the exception, perhaps, of the Yezidis and Nusayris.

Shifting views of self

²⁹ Among the scholars who have commented upon these similarities are Ivanow, Mokri, and Mélikoff. Izady (1992) goes further and subsumes the three under the name 'cult of angels', which in his view represents an old Kurdish religious substrate.

Some of the local historians of the Kurdish Alevi tribes, notably Fırat, Rışvanoğlu and Kocadağ, have forcefully emphasised 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 emphasised their Kurdishness, and more recently there is a school of thought among people of Dersimi origins that stresses Zazanness 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.³⁰ Writing in the mid-19th century, Alexandre Jaba, the Russian consul at Erzurum, who had good local informants, refers to them as 'the Dujik tribe' (thus named after Dujik Baba, a mountain in central Dersim that by extension referred to the entire mountain range of Dersim). Jaba comments that "the Turks call them Dujik or simply Kurds (*Ekrad*), whereas the proper Kurds give them the name of Kızılbaş."³¹ 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 Dersimi 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 İzoli, 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 Alevi. Dersimi also emphasises 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

³⁰ With the exception of the Balaban who, as said, are listed as Yörük in Türkay's work, although other sources call them Kurds too.

³¹ Jaba 1860: 6n-7n. As important component tribes of the Dujik Kurds, Jaba mentions the Balaban, Kureyşan and Gülabi. See also the observations in Blau 1862: 621-7, where the Dujik (or Duşik) Kurds are described as a subgroup of the Kurdish tribes.

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, several authors mention tribes considering themselves the descendants of troops of the Khwarizmshah Jalaluddin, a military adventurer who had moved to eastern Anatolia before the Mongol invasion.³² 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.³³ 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.³⁴

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 Alevi to be something like village Bektaşis, invoked the support of the Bektaşî *çelebi* Celaledin 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 Bektaşî 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.

If there was any participation by the Dersim tribes in the War of Independence, it was at best half-hearted. The assertion by Baki Öz that the Alevi of East Anatolia at this early period considered Mustafa Kemal as a reincarnation (*don değiştirme*) 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; he only mentions Kurdish separatist rebellions against the Ankara government. It is true that Mustafa Kemal managed to coopt several important

³² Jalaluddin is a historical person, and his peregrinations in eastern Anatolia are well-documented. After his death his troops, mostly Kipchak Turks, entered the service of the Selçuk ruler Kay-Kubad, who gave them his eastern marches, Erzincan, Amasya and Larande-Niğde as a fiefdom (*iqṭ'a*) (Cahen 1968: 245-6).

³³ 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* (district governor) of Nazimiye, goes even further and makes most of the tribes of eastern Dersim the descendants of Jalaluddin's armies (1994: 83-4).

³⁴ 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 rather than Kipchak Turks, as Jalaluddin's men were.

Dersim chieftains and made them deputies in the National Assembly.³⁵ But as long as the kemalist movement had the character of 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.³⁶ Nuri Dersimi, who was one of the organisers 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, writing in 1932, 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 Turkish Alevis, and 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 not 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 these tribes 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.

Kemalist officialdom defines the Alevi Kurds

The Kemalist view of the Kurds has always been marred by internal contradictions. On the one hand, the official view came to declare them Turks, on the other hand they were always

³⁵ Dersim, with five deputies, probably was even overrepresented in the first National Assembly. The names of these deputies, as well as those in the earlier Ottoman parliament and in later republican assemblies, are given in Kalman 1995: 483-8.

³⁶ See Kemali 1992[1932]: 125-43; Dersimi 1952: 120-68; Komal 1975; Kieser 1993).

mistrusted because they were not, and deliberate attempts were made to assimilate them and make them loose all non-Turkish traits. The attitude towards the Alevi Kurds has been even more paradoxical and inconsistent. On the one hand, being Alevis they have been hailed as adhering to a really Turkish variety of Islam and as natural allies of the kemalists' program of secularisation, on the other hand their Zazanness or Kurdishness made them alien and unreliable. The fact that the language used in ritual by the Kurdish Alevis was Turkish appeared to offer promising prospects for their easy assimilation, but on the other hand their history of opposition to the state made them highly suspect. Thus a study of Dersim prepared by the Gendarmerie in the early 1930s made the following observations:

"[As for the Zazas,] with them the language used for religious and customary purposes is Turkish. Those taking part in the rituals are obliged to speak Turkish. It is due to this obligation that the Alevi Zazas, in spite of centuries of neglect, have not moved away too far from Turkdom. Among the Alevis of Dersim it is possible to make oneself understood in Turkish, though one cannot expect an answer [in the same language]. It is noteworthy and regrettable that, whereas one can reach mutual understanding in the Turkish language with everyone over 20 or 30, their Turkish is being completely Zazaicised, so that it is impossible to come across the Turkish language in children below the age of 10. This proves that the Alevi Turks of Dersim have started losing their language, and if [this problem] remains neglected the day will come when no Turkish speakers will be found here."³⁷

Thus the Zaza Alevis are represented as Turks by origin, who were gradually being Zazaicised. The paragraph that immediately follows, however, asserts that it is more than language that divides them from Turkdom:

*"The worst aspect of Alevism, and one that deserves analysis, is the deep abyss separating them from Turkdom. This abyss is the Kızılbaş religion. The Kızılbaş do not like the Sunni Muslims, they bear them a grudge, they are their arch enemies. They call the Sunnis 'Rumi'. The Kızılbaş believe that divine power is embodied in [human] carriers, and that their imams have been tortured to death at the hands of the Sunnis. Therefore they bear the Sunnis enmity. This has gone so far that for the Kızılbaş, Turk and Sunni are the same, as are the names of Kurd and Kızılbaş."*³⁸

³⁷ "[Zaza alevilere gelince:] Bunlarda mezhep ve âdet dili Türkçedir. Ayinlerde iştirak edenler Türkçe konuşmak mecburiyetindedirler. Bu mecburiyettirki alevi zazalık asırlardan beri ihmal edildiği halde türklükten pekte uzaklaşmamış. Dersim alevileri arasında cevap istememek şartile Türkçe meram anlatmak mümkündür. şayani nazar ve esef olan nokta şudurki 20-30 yaşından yukarı yaşlı her fertle Türk dili ile mütekabilen anlaşılmak ve dertleşmek mümkün olduğu halde bunun [...(?)] türk dili tamamen Zazalaşmakta ve hale 10 yaşında küçük çocuklarda ise türk diline rastlamak imkânı kalmamaktadır. Bu netice Dersim alevi türklerinin de benliklerini kaybetmeğe başladıklarına ve ihmal edilirse günün birinde Türk dili ile konuşana tesadüf edilemeyeceğine delildir." (Jandarma Umum Kumandanlığı n.d.: 38-39).

³⁸ *"Aleviliğin en kötü ve tefrika değer cebhesi Türklükle aralarında derin uçurumdur. Bu uçurum kızılbaşlık itikatıdır. Kızılbaş, Sünni müslimini sevmeyiz, bir kin besler, onun ezelden düşmanıdır. Sünnileri rumi diye anar. Kızılbaş ilahi kuvvetin hamili bulunduğunu ve imamlarının sünnilerin elinde işkence ile öldüğüne itikat ederler. Bunun için sünnilere*

This last observation is the reverse of what later written apologetic works like Fırat's assert: for the Dersimis, Kurd and Kızılbaş are identical, and so are Turk and Sunni.

The report just quoted owes much to the work by one of the architects of official history, Hasan Reşit Tankut.³⁹ From the late 1920s to the 1960s he wrote a series of research papers and policy counsels on 'ethnopolitics', i.e. on how to turkicise the other ethnic groups. A number of his previously unpublished, mostly confidential papers have recently been published by Mehmet Bayrak. The quotations above echo an anonymous report, probably by Tankut, submitted to the Birinci Umumi Müfettiş (the 'super governor' of those days), İbrahim Tali, in 1928 (Bayrak 1993: 510-23). Tankut, who knew eastern Anatolia well, in his confidential reports never pretended that the Kurds were Turks, but he wrote that the Alevis' use of Turkish in their rituals should make the task of assimilation much easier than it would be in the case of the Şafîî Zazas (ibid.: 515).

In all his writings Tankut made a point of distinguishing between Sunnis and Alevis, Kurds and Zazas — although he often subsumed them all under the blanket term Kurds. In a study of the Zazas, both Şafîî and Alevî (1994a), he emphasised the Iranian background of their religion (as exemplified by their use of the term 'Homay' for God). In spite of his explicit recognition of Zoroastrian influences in the religion of the Alevis, he thought that they were originally Turkic and could (should) be made into Turks again. His advice was to keep (Sunni) Zazas, Kurmanc and Dersim Alevis as far apart as possible in order to turkify them more easily. In a policy paper written in the wake of the 1960 coup he proposed to literally drive a wedge between the Zazas and Kurmanc by resettling Turks in a 50 kilometers wide corridor between these linguistic groups' major settlement zones (1994c).

Execution of this proposal appears never to have been considered seriously, but there certainly have been less drastic state-sponsored efforts to dissociate the Zazas from the Kurmanc and the Alevis from the Sunnis. The Alevî revival of the late 1980s as well as the recent movement proclaiming the Zazas to be a distinct people have had complex causes but both received encouragement from circles within the state apparatus intent on reducing the danger of Kurdish nationalism.

Zaza, Alevî and Dersimî as deliberately embraced ethnic identities

düşmandır. Bu okadar ileri gitmiştir ki kızılbaş *Türk ile sünni ve Kürt ile kızılbaş kelimesini aynı telâkki eder.*" (ibid., emphasis added).

³⁹ Hasan Reşit Tankut is best known as one of the fathers of the pseudo-scientific Sun-Language Theory (which holds that all languages derive from Turkish and all civilisations from the Turks). Brought up as a young orphan in an Alevî Kurdish family in Elbistan, Maraş, he later travelled extensively in eastern Turkey. See the biographical notice in Bayrak 1994: 197-204.

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. Şivan (Sait Kırızitoprak) was a Dersimi.⁴⁰ 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.⁴¹

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

⁴⁰ Dr. şivan 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.

⁴¹ *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.

important opposition movement. Tunceli remained the last stronghold of TIKKO/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. 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.

The recently emerging Zaza and Alevi nationalisms in Turkey are best understood in their dialectical relationship with the development of Kurdish nationalism. The same process of urbanisation and migration that gave rise to a modern Kurdish awareness in the large cities also brought Alevi villagers (Turkish as well as Kurdish or Zaza speakers) to the Sunni towns of the region and into direct competition for scarce resources with their new Sunni neighbours. The political polarisation of the 1970s aggravated Sunni-Alevi antagonism as rightist and leftist radicals chose these communities as their recruiting grounds and contributed much to the mutual demonisation ("fascist" Sunnis versus "communist" Alevis). A series of bloody Sunni-Alevi clashes, perhaps better called anti-Alevi pogroms, did much to strengthen a common Alevi awareness.⁴² In the region where these clashes took place, it did not matter

⁴² On the clashes, see Laçiner 1978, 1989.

much whether one was a Kurd or a Turk, one's primary identity was the religious one. There were Turks and Kurds on both sides of this divide - which gave rise to such surprising phenomena as Sunni Kurds supporting the pan-Turkist Nationalist Action Party and young Turkish-speaking Alevis declaring themselves to be Kurds.

The 1980s witnessed a veritable cultural and religious revival of Alevism, beginning among the Turkish and Kurdish immigrant communities in western Europe. Activists of various persuasions — leftist, Sunni Muslim, fascist, Kurdish nationalist — had earlier made some attempts to organise these communities, but the 1980 military coup in Turkey represents a real watershed. Unprecedented numbers of experienced organisers came as refugees to western Europe. The most successful among them were radical Sunni Muslim groups and Kurdish nationalists, among whom the PKK gradually became dominant. The Turkish regime meanwhile attempted to regain some control of the immigrant communities by taking over the major mosque federations and sponsoring an ultra-conservative and nationalist brand of Sunni Islam known as the "Turkish-Islamic synthesis".⁴³

It was probably as a reaction to, and in part in imitation of, increased Sunni religious activities in Germany that Alevis also began organising, after long having kept a low profile or even hidden their religious affiliation. For the first time, large Alevi religious ceremonies were held in public (in republican Turkey these ceremonies were officially banned and could at best be held semi-clandestinely). Alevi associations were established, and these attracted many young Alevis who previously had been prominent in various leftist or Kurdish organisations. A few of the smaller leftist organisations were entirely Alevi in membership; these too now tended to emphasise their Alevi identity in combination with their marxism-leninism, and to think of the Alevis as a sort of nation, to the extent of speaking of Alevistan as their homeland.⁴⁴ These activities abroad stimulated an Alevi revival in Turkey too, where the gradual political liberalisation made the establishment of religious and social Alevi associations possible.

In the late 1980s, the Turkish government began making conciliatory gestures towards the Alevis, and granting Alevism a certain formal recognition, in a transparent effort to neutralise the community's alienation from the state and to prevent the radical Kurdish movement PKK from making further inroads among the Kurdish (and Zaza) Alevis. In fact, the one region where the PKK has had great difficulties in establishing itself, and where it always has had to compete with other radical political movements, was Dersim (i.e., the present province of

⁴³ On this semi-official state ideology, see Ahmad 1988; Toprak 1990.

⁴⁴ I first encountered the name of Alevistan in the Turkish newspaper *Hürriyet* in 1976, in a report on subversive activities in Germany. Maoist enemies of the state allegedly conspired to divide Turkey into Kurdistan in the east, Alevistan in the centre, and a Sunni Turkish remnant in the west. In the 1980s there was an ephemeral ultra-left organisation in Germany, *Kızıl Yol*, that similarly proclaimed its intention to liberate Alevistan. Many Kurdish nationalists and leftists of other persuasions suspected that these were machinations by the Turkish intelligence services, designed to provoke a Sunni and Turkish nationalist reaction.

Tunceli and neighbouring districts), which is largely Zaza-speaking and Alevi. The people of Dersim had, at least since the 1960s, always been more inclined towards left radicalism than Kurdish nationalism. The PKK, which initially had been militantly antireligious, had in the late 1980s moreover adopted a conciliatory attitude towards Sunni Islam, in a successful attempt to gain more grassroots support in the Sunni region. This obviously did not contribute to its popularity among the Alevis, and it may even have strengthened Alevi particularism.

In the perception of the PKK, the entire Alevi revival was directly engineered by the state in order to sow division among the Kurds, and its protagonists were all agents. This has also led to suspicions, and purges, of Alevis in the party's own ranks, which in turn did little to warm the Alevis' hearts to the PKK. The renewed emphasis on Alevism as one's primary identity, with an increasing awareness of the religious dimension of that identity, is largely a reaction to Sunni fundamentalism and inclusive Kurdish nationalism.

There has always existed a distinct Alevi awareness, although sometimes submerged under other ethnic loyalties. The present Zaza nationalism, however, is something entirely new, and it is still forcefully opposed by numerous Zaza-speakers who stick to their self-definition as Kurds. For the conditions of its emergence we shall again have to look to the migrant communities in Western Europe rather than to Turkey (unless one subscribes to the popular conspiracy theory that blames it all on the Turkish intelligence services).

In Turkey, where all local languages besides Turkish were banned, it did not appear to matter much whether one originally was a Kurmanci or a Zaza-speaker. In Europe however, one of the issues with which Kurdish activists attempted to mobilise Kurdish migrant workers was the demand for mother tongue education, i.e. for official recognition of the fact that Turkish is not the native language of every immigrant from Turkey, and for the acceptance of Kurdish among the immigrants' mother tongues taught in school. This placed the Zaza-speakers in an awkward dilemma: should they also demand that their children in German schools be taught Kurmanci instead of Turkish as their 'mother tongue'? Some in fact did, like generations before them had always learned Kurmanci as the *lingua franca* in their region, but a certain uneasiness remained. This was clearly an issue on which the interests of Zaza-speakers and Kurmanci-speakers were not identical.

A related issue that contained the seeds of conflict was the language to be used in Kurdish journals published in Turkey and especially in European exile. Several journals appeared during the 1960s and 1970s, and most of them were exclusively in Turkish, with at the most an occasional poem in Kurdish.⁴⁵ The first periodical that completely avoided Turkish was the short-lived cultural magazine *Tirêj*, published in Izmir. This was also the first significant

⁴⁵ The most complete survey of periodicals published by and for Kurds in Turkey is given by Malmîsanij & Lewendî, (1992). They list 65 periodicals published between 1960 and 1980, many of them appearing semi- or illegally.

modern Kurdish journal to have a small section in Zaza.⁴⁶ After the 1980 military coup, Kurdish publishing activities no longer were possible in Turkey, but writers and journalist carried on in European exile, especially in Sweden. A true revival of Kurmanci literature took place here. Children's books, collections of folk tales, and the first novels were published, and a whole range of journals appeared.

The Iranian revolution and the Iraq-Iran war also brought large numbers of intellectuals from the other parts of Kurdistan as refugees to Europe. For the first time since the early twentieth century, there were common Kurdish cultural activities on a significant scale. In Paris a Kurdish Institute was established, the first significant all-Kurdish institution, with an important library and various periodical publications. The old dream of a common standard language resurfaced, but since neither Kurmanci nor Sorani-speakers were likely to make concessions to the other, journals targeting readers from all parts of Kurdistan had sections in both Kurmanci and Sorani. The literary magazine published by the Kurdish Institute then decided to add a section in Zaza, as the third relevant Kurdish language.⁴⁷ This led to strong negative reactions from certain nationalist intellectual circles, which for political reasons fiercely opposed linguistic fragmentation. Some of them strove for a synthetic unified Kurdish language, others believed they could put up with two written Kurdish languages, but agreed that developing Zaza, which previously hardly had any written tradition, as another written language amounted to sowing division among the Kurdish nation.

The debate on the development of, or ban on, written Zaza made a strong impact in the small circle of Zaza intellectuals in exile, causing a parting of the minds among them. In the late 1980s, the first Zaza journal was published, and it was emphatically non-Kurdish. It carried articles in Zaza, Turkish and English but not in Kurdish, it spoke of the Zazas as a separate people, whose identity had too long been denied not only by the Turkish state but by the Kurds as well, and it coined the new name of Zazaistan for the ancient homeland of these Zazas, indicating its rejection of the term Kurdistan as a geographical name.⁴⁸ The journal at first had only a very small circle of readers, but the many angry Kurdish reactions suggested that the journal did have a point after all, and gradually growing numbers of Zazas were won

⁴⁶ Only three issues of *Tirêj* could appear in Turkey in 1979 and 1980. A fourth and final issue was published in Sweden. There was in fact one earlier journal that published a few brief pieces — a song text, a folktale and a word-list — in Zaza. This was the short-lived *Roja Newê*, the first and only issue of which appeared in Istanbul in 1963 (see Malmîsanij & Lewendî 1992: 159-61).

⁴⁷ This magazine, *Hêvî / Hîwa*, began publication in 1983. Its Zaza section appeared under the responsibility of Malmîsanij, who had also written the Zaza contributions in *Tirêj*, and was later also to contribute Zaza material to various other journals. While continuing his efforts to preserve Zaza oral tradition and to win more respect for Zaza culture, Malmîsanij was to firmly oppose Zaza separatism when this emerged.

⁴⁸ *Ayre* and its successor *Piya* were published monthly in Sweden from 1987 on. The editor, Ebübekir Pamukçu, was a Sunni Zaza speaker who had previously been marginally involved in Kurdish cultural activities and had at a yet earlier stage in his life been attracted to Turkism. His most substantial contribution to the journal, an analysis of the Dersim rebellion from a Zaza nationalist point of view, later appeared as a book in Turkey: *Dersim Zaza ayaklanmasının tarihsel kökenleri* (Istanbul: Yön, 1992).

over to its views. There appears not to be an organised Zaza nationalist movement yet, but the publishing activities go on increasing, with two new journals appearing in Europe and recently a series of booklets in Turkey, all of them proclaiming the Zazas to be different from the Kurds.⁴⁹

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.⁵⁰

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.⁵¹ 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 *Dimili*, 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.⁵²

⁴⁹ The most substantial of these booklets is Selcan 1994. Presently the most important Zaza journals are *Desmala Sure* and *Ware* (both published in Germany).

⁵⁰ 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).

⁵¹ 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.

⁵² A difficulty with this explanation is that most Zaza speakers do not even know the name of Dimili. 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 Dimili or Dimbili. This suggests an alternative derivation of the name, from that of the well-

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 Kirmanc-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."⁵³

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

Although the Zazaist and 'Kirmanc-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 Islam⁵⁴ had stirred up old Alevi fears, making a rejection of Kurdish nationalism more likely.

known Dumbili, a Yezidi tribe known to have lived in the same region in the 16th century before most of its members migrated eastward.

⁵³ Cengiz 1991:2; the comments between brackets are by the present author. Note that in the course of his argument the author narrows down the referent of the term Zaza to the Sunni Zaza speakers, but that his 'Kirmanc-Alevi' include now the Koçgiri, who are not Zaza speakers

⁵⁴ 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).

To counter these dangers, the PKK launched an ideological counter-offensive with an appropriately named journal *Zülfikar*, which specifically addressed the Alevi Kurds.⁵⁵ 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.⁵⁶ The journal specifically attempts to disassociate the Kurdish Alevis from Bekttaşism, 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.⁵⁷

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.

⁵⁵ 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*.

⁵⁶ 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.

⁵⁷ Detailed analysis of these military operations and village evacuations of autumn 1984 in: Netherlands Kurdistan Society 1995.

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