

the sacred and nonsacred: is that the question?

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In the exhibition *Goat on the Mountain, Moon in the Sky, Fish in the Water*, rezzan gümgüm invites us to reflect on sovereignty, biodiversity and cultural diversity through the particular ecological construct exemplified in Dersim, where humans are regarded as only a part of nature. In this text, I will try and contemplate outloud a question gümgüm's works in the exhibition have led me to: Can we read Dersim's history of otherisation and marginalisation as a history of separation of the sacred and the mundane?

Since the last century of the Ottoman Empire, the people of Dersim have been labeled as a community of mountain and stone worshippers, and claimed to have systematically “reversed the unsacred” by refusing to adhere to the modern framework of the period with its hegemonic religious and administrative forms.¹ The shape and colour of these labels varied depending on the extent of racism and discrimination the perpetrator wished to enact. At times, Kurmanci and Kirmancki spoken in the region were deemed “mountain Turkish” to undermine Kurdish history, with the presumption of written cultures' supremacy over oral cultures. Occasionally, the notions of looting and “worshipping mountains and stones,” would be taken as indicators of a lack of authority and religious institutionalisation, which would then be used to legitimatise massacres, including genocides. When the intention was to emphasize the sovereignty of the state by establishing a continuity between different massacres, the fictional subject of “Kurdish-Alevis under Armenian influence” would be put forth, in reference to the Armenians who survived the Armenian Genocide thanks to the Dersim people's refusal to cooperate with the state. Although such claims would first be put in circulation by central authorities, these labels have been used by different political, cultural and ethnic groups to assert their sovereignty on Dersim, to various degrees and time and time again.

mountain goats, hunters, memory

I will explore the uses of these labels in asserting dominance by distinguishing between the sacred and nonsacred, through the video work “The Goat on the Mountain.” “The Goat on the Mountain” draws attention to the wild goat hunting auction initiated by the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, targeting a species otherwise under protection on the grounds of danger of extinction. In June 2020, the hunting of mountain goats, chamois and red deers was “put up for auction” in Malatya, Tunceli, Kahramanmaraş and Sivas by the Elazığ Regional Directorate of Agriculture and Forestry to stimulate hunting tourism.² As the result of efforts put in through different channels,³ there was a ruling to “prepare a report on the wild goat hunting auction and its effects on social life, religion, illegal hunting, the wild goat population and safety in the region” and the hunting auction was postponed indefinitely thereafter. The reasoning seems to be in line with local governments' custom of preparing reports on regions densely populated by Kurdish and Alevi people, and on Dersim in particular. At the same time, it is apparent that the numerous reports published so far have not been sufficient to comprehend this region in terms of its “social life, religion and security.”⁴ The video “The Goat on the Mountain” offers a great selection of ecological perspectives on that which remains unknown, misunderstood and foreign despite all the reports written about it so far.

The video begins with a shot of the Munzur River, which has been the object of many potential dam projects since the '38 plans.⁵ It continues on to a group of mountain goats wandering the rocky terrains on the Munzur Mountains, and the Halvori Springs which was densely populated by Armenians prior to the genocide. We watch a mountain goat grazing with great selectivity, while listening to the interviewees' recounting of the hunting auction. The first interviewee introduces the audience to the burden that comes with what the faith in the region regards as good and bad. Describing the hunting of mountain goats as a "great sin," he states that if not the murderer, their descendants will pay for the killing of goats, since they are a part of the sacred world of Dersim. The vital cycles that are part of this depiction of sanctity transcend the individual's lifetime, implying an understanding of time where debts can be passed down through generations. This temporality also includes the inheritance of ongoing political struggles for justice for unpunished crimes against humanity. While policies of denial and impunity persist, and result in inherited debt through generations, the desire for justice extends far beyond the crime, with many of these debts still lingering in the air today. Thus, each generation is born having inherited the consequences of crimes against humanity that have gone unpunished, and reconstitutes the collective identity of Dersim by adding their own struggles and experiences of violence to it.

The second interviewee, Hasan Hüseyin Irmak, begins his story with a mountain goat hunt in the 70s. His memory of this hunt reveals how the notion of sanctity is perceived even by locals as a factor determining one's level of development. When he expressed hesitation upon being invited to go on a goat hunt, saying "it's a shame and a sin", his reservations were not taken seriously and deemed "reactionary" which led him to join the hunt. In Dersim's collective memory, the 70s are regarded as the second major blow to the local belief system after '38. Dersim played an important role for leftist movements in the 70s, when on one hand Alevi sayings and folk songs were meshed together with leftist jargon, while the belief system built around sacred kins and place cults was thought of as feudal and reactionary, and rejected by the leftist imagination. It would not be a stretch to assume that Irmak's hunter friends in this story from the 70s were probably involved in leftist politics as well.

Irmak continues to recount his memory by saying that he made an agreement with Hızır, who has an important place in the faith of Dersim, before he fell asleep the night before the hunt. According to this agreement, Hızır would prevent the hunt if he did not consent to the shooting of the goats. In accordance with the agreement, Hızır prevented the goats from being shot, making Irmak miss during the hunt. On the night following the hunt, Hızır appeared in Irmak's dream and scolded him by saying, "I created you as a shepherd for my cattle, how did you dare do harm to them?", emphasizing the doctrine that rejects the domination of animals by humans. Regarding the current goat hunting auction, which Irmak feels a connection to due to his experience in the 70s, he says that "he will make sure that this crime does not go unpunished" and reminds us that this sacred nature is not only slaughtered by auctions led by the state.

from the shepherd to the river: from Mizur to Munzur

The third interviewee, Hatice Çorman, sends the audience off to see the rest of the exhibition upon having emphasized the union presumed by the faith in Dersim, between great spirits such as Hızır and Düzgün Bava (Kemerê Duzgı/Bava Duzgı),⁶ natural elements such as the sacred Munzur River and mountain goats, and humans, noting that they are all part of a common state of existence. The myth of the formation of the Munzur River, which we meet at the beginning and end of the video, clearly depicts the contentious relationship between sovereignty and the sacred ecology, in which humans, animals, mountains and rivers coexist. The myth of the formation of the river, which is now officially known as Munzur, is the story of the young shepherd Mizur's transformation. Mizur used to work for an agha. While his agha was gone on pilgrimage, he visited his wife, telling her that her husband wanted halva, and that he could deliver it to him if she could prepare it. Assuming that Mizur wanted the dessert for himself, she made the halva and gave it to him. Mizur disappeared after picking up the halva. When he returned, he told the lady that he had delivered it to the agha, but she did not believe

he could have traveled the distance in such a short amount of time. When the agha returned and everyone gathered to greet him, he said that “the actual pilgrim was Mizur”, causing Mizur to flee the community in shame of his ability to move at a speed that transcended time and space being discovered. Today’s Munzur River and Springs are thought to be first formed by the milk that Mizur spilled from the bucket he was carrying while he escaped. Mizur, on the other hand, would disappear on the mountains.

The Munzur legend is told in numerous ways, with each iteration focusing on different themes and resulting in diverse analyses. What I want to discuss is the argument claiming the tensions that arise when people try to distinguish between what is sacred and not, to be at the root of the question of sovereignty. This is a war of delimitation not only waged by central authorities, but also by various political actors attempting to establish local authority. In the third interviewee’s remark on the correlation between the mountain goat and Mizur, who transforms into the Munzur River, lies a broad mythological repertoire. The particular perception of nature, humans and sanctity which constitutes this mythological corpus, and often initially shocks outside observers of Dersim like me, holds the power to radically invert the categorical distinctions at the root of the concept of sovereignty. Are the central authority’s continuous attacks on this ideal of sanctity that aims to keep the link between all living beings active becoming more inevitable, as it undermines the central authorities’ existence and relations of dominance at a time when people are also struggling to comprehend their connection to one another? In other words, can we regard the marginalisation of the Dersim belief system, as a history of the normalisation and integration of the principle of human domination over nature, to an ideal of a social order where sanctity is distributed equally among humans and nature?

dreams and realities

Answering these questions only by looking at how Dersim has been perceived by the central authorities can provide us mythical narratives to hold onto. It might also be a good idea to help disperse the sacred ecological myths of Dersim to aid the nature’s rebellion, which we call the “climate crisis.” Looking at the Ocak system within the radical relationship between humans and nature told by myths, provides us a different image of sovereignty people claim on each other. Feminist anthropologist Dilşa Deniz interprets Mizur’s preference for secrecy as a means for sacred kins to assert dominance in the region by way of the Ocak system.⁷ If we take the temporality of the Myth of the Munzur River as reference, we can say that the Ocak system, which is one of the cornerstones of Dersim Alevism or the Raa Haqi faith, combines equal distribution of sanctity between humans and nature with the unequal distribution of it between pir lineages and suitors to form the contemporary belief system. When the sanctity of the places where the founding myths of different Ocak are set, begin to be associated with the stories of these Ocak, we also observe that the hierarchy between these centers is also reflected in the relationship established with nature thereon.

Today, there is another institutional actor that plays a role in redefining and framing the sacred: the Cemevis. The fact that the rituals held in sacred places are seen as rival to the Dedes’ authority, or the more reconciliatory approaches such as the construction of Cemevis on sacred grounds, also constitute attempts to delimitate and a desire to establish sovereignty.⁸

Although various quests of dominance (the central authority, the revolutionary imagination, Alevi institutions and all kinds of political subjectivities that feel the need to claim progressiveness through an absence of institutionalisation) make it difficult to experience the ideal of an equal relationship and distribution of sanctity between humans and nature, Dersim is the only region in Turkey that keeps this ideal alive against all odds and labels. I hope that rezzan gümgüm’s works, where she becomes one with the rocks and soil of Dersim, can bring us together in dreams and realities where relationships of dominance between humans and nature can be turned upside down.

¹ For reports on Dersim during the Ottoman Empire, see Cihangir Gündoğdu and Vural Genç. *Dersim'de Osmanlı Siyaseti: İzale-i Vahşet, Tashih-i İtikad ve Tasfiye-i Ezhan 1880-1913*, İstanbul: Kitap Yayınları, 2013.

² Republic Of Türkiye Ministry Of Agriculture And Forestry, "15. Bölge Müdürlüğü 15 Parti Halinde Toplam 31 Adet Yaban Keçisi, 2 Adet Çengel Boynuzlu Dağ Keçisi ve 2 Adet Kızıl Geyik Acente Kotalarının Avlattırılması İşi İhale İlanı" accessed April 2023, <https://bolge10.tarimorman.gov.tr/Duyuru/138/15-Bolge-Mudurlugu-15-Parti-Halinde-Toplam-31-Adet-Yaban-Kecisi-2-Adet-Cengel-Boynuzlu-Dag-Kecisi-Ve-2-Adet-Kizil-Geyik-Acente-Kotalarinin-Avlattirilmesi-Isi-Ihale-Ilani>.

³ For more detail on the struggle against the hunting auction, see Bia Haber Merkezi, "Dersim'de 17 Dağ Keçisinin Avlanması için İhale Açıldı" accessed April 20, 2023, <https://bianet.org/kurdi/hayvan-haklari/227233-dersim-de-17-dag-kecisinin-avlanmasi-icin-ihale-acildi>.

⁴ For reports on Dersim published throughout the history of the Republic, see Bulut, F. *Dersim raporları: İnceleme*, İstanbul: Evrensel Basım Yayın, 2005.

⁵ Beşikçi, İ. *Tunceli Kanunu (1935) ve Dersim Jenosidi*, İsmail Beşikçi Vakfı Yayınları, 2013 [1990].

⁶ For detailed information about the sacred place called Düzgün Baba in the video, see Gültekin, A. K. *Kutsal Mekanın Yeniden Üretimi: Kemere Duzgı'dan Düzgün Baba'ya Dersim Aleviliğinde Müzakereler ve Kültür Örüntüleri*, Bilim ve Gelecek Kitaplığı, 2020.

⁷ Deniz, D. *Yol/Re: Dersim İnanç Sembolizmi: Antropolojik Bir Yaklaşım*, İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2012. For a similar interpretation, see Gezik, E. *Geçmiş ve Tarih Arasında Alevi Hafızasını Tanımlamak*, İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2016.

⁸ Gültekin, A.K. "Cemevi mi Ziyaret (Jiar) mi? Dersim'de Mekânın "Kutsal" Halleri" in *The Journal of Alevi Studies* 2006, no. 11, Ankara: 2016.