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Environmental Ethics in Alevism: the case of Dersim

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Summary

Environmental ethics in Alevism reflect a relational worldview in which connections to land, nature, and non-human life are shaped through oral tradition, ritual practice, and embodied spirituality. Ethical responsibilities toward nature are configured through the sanctification of landscape—spaces that serve as sites of both spiritual continuity and cultural survival. Sacred natural sites such as mountains, rivers, trees, and springs are regarded as spiritually potent and morally binding. Shaped by the memory of genocide, displacement, and environmental destruction, these landscapes carry profound political and affective significance.

Definition and Conceptual Background

In the Alevi belief system practised in Dersim—self-expressed as *Rae* or *Yol* (meaning a spiritual path), and often referred to as *Raa Heqi / Rîya Haq*, *Kızılbaş*, *Kurdish Alevism*, or simply *Dersim Alevism*[1]—environmental ethics are not codified through formal doctrine but are expressed through ritual practices and deeply embodied relationships with the natural world. Alevi cosmology posits a relational worldview in which humans, nature, and the divine are not separate domains, but coextensive and interdependent (Hanoğlu et al. 2025; Gültekin 2021a).

This environmental sensibility emerges through the embodied experience of sacred landscapes, where natural elements such as mountains, rivers, rocks, and trees are perceived as spiritually active and morally significant (Hanoğlu et al. 2025). These are spaces where geography, spirituality, and natural forces converge, and to which people assign profound spiritual and cultural meaning through ritual engagement (Gültekin 2024; Hanoğlu 2016). In contrast to institutionalised, building-centred forms of religious expression, this spatial logic—grounded in the sanctity of nature, life, and existence—is inherently ecological. It reflects a cosmology in which theology, memory, and geography are intertwined (Hanoğlu et al. 2025; Gültekin 2024). As such, sacred landscape functions as a moral compass for communal life, structuring social and ecological relations through recurring pilgrimage and oral transmission (Gültekin

2024).

Sacred natural sites are experienced not as symbolic abstractions but as spaces of spiritual potency, historical memory, and ethical responsibility. These places are considered both spiritually powerful and morally binding, requiring reverence, protection, and careful engagement. Ethical responsibilities toward nature are enacted through pilgrimage, storytelling, and embodied acts of reverence—transmitted intergenerationally through oral tradition, seasonal ritual, and landscape-based memory.

Sacred Landscape and ritual practices

Sacred natural sites—referred to as *jarê/jiarê* in Kırmancki (Zazaki) and Kurmanji, or *ziyaret* in Turkish—are often associated with water sources, ancient trees, caves, hilltops, or rocks, and engagement with these sites represents one of the most tangible expressions of environmental ethics in Alevism. Visiting them is both a devotional and ethical act that reaffirms the relationship between community, ancestry, and landscape, and reinforces a reciprocal connection with the land.

These visits are shaped by embodied and memorised forms of reverence. Individuals often bring offerings—ritual food specific to the visit (known as *miyaz* or *loqma/loqme*), light candles (traditionally handmade, called *çıla*), or tie cloth to sacred trees and bushes (Hanoğlu 2016). Sharing food, engaging in prayer, or simply sitting in the presence of a *jarê* are considered ways of both honouring the site and seeking its blessings. All these acts are considered forms of worship in Dersim Alevism.

These practices persist despite displacement, often reconfigured in the diaspora through summer returns, commemorative ceremonies, and participation in local revitalisation projects (Hanoğlu et al. 2025; Gültekin 2021a). Visits to sacred sites during summer holidays or commemorative rituals function as powerful acts of reconnecting with land-based memory, where sacred geography is deeply interwoven with histories of violence and resilience (Hanoğlu et al. 2025). In this context, *jarê* is not only a spiritual practice but also a means of cultural survival—sustaining continuity with the ancestral past and ethical orientation in the present. Through *ziyaret* practices, Alevis enact a religiously grounded environmentalism that is at once ethical, political, and mnemonic. Sacred geographies are not simply preserved through such practices; they are reanimated as political and moral terrains and remain central to the struggle for cultural continuity, justice, and ecological renewal.

Ecological Destruction and Memory

Sacred landscapes are not passive backdrops to history, but active bearers of memory and meaning. The sacred geography of Dersim is intimately bound to histories of violence and survival. The Dersim genocide of 1937–38 transformed the region's mountains, caves and valleys into sites of massacre and survival. Villages were bombed and burned, civilians were killed, and entire family lineages disappeared or were exiled to western cities. These places continue to function as mnemonic landscapes, where the land bears witness to atrocity and suffering.

Decades later, in the 1990s, Dersim's ecology was confronted with a new wave of destruction—this time in the context of intense conflict between the state and the PKK, under the pretext of eliminating 'terrorist hideouts' through military operations. During this period, military operations severely damaged the region's human and ecological landscape. In this context, the land became not only a witness but also a victim: forests were widely burned, the environment was damaged by chemicals, villages were destroyed, accompanying displacement of thousands of families and imprisonment and torture of many residents (Hanoğlu et al. 2025). Agricultural fields and orchards were demolished, alongside widespread forest burning. These operations resulted in a dramatic demographic and infrastructural collapse: the rural population declined by 75%, with 287 of the region's 417 villages evacuated and 242 of its 268 primary schools closed (Hacaloglu 1996). It is estimated that approximately 25% of Dersim's forest cover was destroyed during this period. [2]

These events marked a turning point in Dersim's contemporary history, galvanising Dersimis across Turkey and the diaspora. Widespread forest burnings sparked the first coordinated protests against environmental destruction, followed by transnational campaigns that called on emigrant Dersimis to spend summers in their hometown as a form of economic and symbolic solidarity (Hanoğlu et al. 2025). The Munzur Festival, initiated during this period of ecological awakening, embodies this fusion of environmental and cultural resistance. Here, memory becomes an ethical and political act—where the defence of sacred space symbolises not only cultural survival, but resistance against historical marginalisation and persecution (Hanoğlu et al. 2025).

Environmentalism and politics of sacred landscape

The intimate connection between landscape, memory, and spirituality has been shaped historically by the marginalised and often persecuted position of Alevi communities. Sacred natural sites function not only as religious places but also as repositories of cultural continuity. Reverence for these sites thus carries both spiritual and political weight—especially where sacred geographies have been threatened by state-led infrastructure projects and ecological disruption.

In recent decades, the sacred landscape of Dersim has increasingly become a site of ecological and cultural struggle. Concepts such as “spiritual ecology” and “sacred geography,” widely used in Indigenous movements as religious and political symbols of environmental claims (Orndorff 2020; Sponsel 2016), resonate in Alevi efforts to protect rivers, springs, and forests. Framing these sites as sacred and emphasising the need for their protection as centres of faith reinforces the legitimacy of resistance against state-sponsored ecological destruction—particularly in the face of mining operations, dam construction, and other extractivist interventions (Hanoğlu et al. 2025). In contexts marked by deforestation, displacement, dam construction, and mining, sacred sites have become focal points of cultural resistance and ecological mobilisation (Hanoğlu et al. 2025). What was once enacted primarily through ritual has been reframed as part of a broader politics of survival and visibility.

These efforts are increasingly supported by diaspora communities, particularly in Europe. Return visits to sacred sites, community festivals, and commemorative rituals are frequently paired with ecological campaigns and cultural heritage initiatives—guided by a moral ecology of care rooted in spiritual responsibility and ancestral memory (Hanoğlu et al. 2025; Gültekin 2021a). Environmentalism in this context is not a secular project, but a spiritual, embodied, and politically charged action. It seeks not only to protect nature, but to restore cosmological balance and historical justice—resisting through ritual and remembering through land. Campaigns to defend sacred places in Dersim emphasise not only ecological concern but the right to exist, return, and remember. These movements confront both historical erasure and ongoing ecological violence by reactivating sacred relationships to land, rooted in memory, ritual, and collective responsibility (Hanoğlu et al. 2025; Gültekin 2021a).

Environmental activism has thus become a space where spiritual memory, political agency, and ancestral land converge. Rather than aiming solely at ecological preservation, these movements seek to restore spiritual and cultural ecologies disrupted by displacement and destruction. In this context, sacred landscapes function as living archives of memory and resistance. Their defence represents not only environmental concern but a spiritually grounded ethic of survival—an environmentalism rooted in listening to the land and acting through it.

Conclusion

Environmental ethics in Alevism are deeply intertwined with memory, place, and ritual. They arise not from written doctrine but from relational cosmology and emplaced spirituality. In Alevi cosmology, the natural world is understood as a sentient and spiritually charged entity. The relationship between humans and nature is one of

interdependence and ethical accountability. This worldview fosters an ethical conduct toward the environment and emerges as an extension of spiritual responsibility. These ethics do not simply oppose environmental destruction—they offer a vision of ecological justice rooted in sacred responsibility and sustained through nature-oriented spiritual practice.

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Endnotes

[1]: See some studies for a further reading on this (Gültekin 2019; Deniz 2019; Gültekin and Gezik 2019; Gültekin 2021b; Çem 2000; Aksoy 2006; Çakmak 2013; Deniz 2012; Hanoğlu 2016; Aksoy 2012; Hanoğlu et al. 2025)
[2]: For further readings on this (Bruinessen 1995; Jongerden, de Vos, and van Etten 2007; Van Etten et al. 2008; Dinç 2020).

References & Further Readings