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The Şîn Tradition: Lament as Memory and Resistance in Kurdish Alevism

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Summary

The tradition of şîn (lament) in Kurdish Alevi communities is not merely a poetic expression of mourning after death, but a sacred form of speech that carries collective memory, identity, and resistance. Deeply rooted among the Kızılbaş Kurds of the İçtoroslar region, this tradition binds individual sorrow to communal tragedy, generating a sense of historical continuity and spatial belonging. Performed and transmitted primarily by women, şîns articulate a sacred relationship with nature and express a deep longing for justice—mountains, rivers, and animals become active participants in these laments. Figures such as the “virtuous bandit” and themes of resistance against oppression lie at the heart of many kılam (lament-songs), while the tradition continues to survive in oral culture and digital spaces despite pressures of linguistic assimilation. In the memory of Kurdish Alevism, şîn is both a sound of mourning and a poetic expression of truth.

Şîn (Lament)

In the spiritual and aesthetic universe of Kurdish Alevism, *şîn* (lament) holds a distinct and revered place. Far beyond a mere expression of mourning following death, it is a living form of oral literature that carries a community’s historical memory, collective identity, and spirit of resistance. Especially deeply rooted among the Kızılbaş Kurds of the İçtoroslar region, this tradition transforms individual grief into communal remembrance. Laments stand as some of the most powerful expressions of the oral memory techniques developed by the Kurdish people in the face of historical experiences of persecution, war, injustice, and tragedy. In this sense, a *şîn* is not merely a linguistic performance-it is also a sacred act, a ritual of remembrance.

The İçtoroslar region-comprising the mountainous zones of Maraş, Adana, Malatya, Adıyaman, Gaziantep, Kayseri, and Sivas-has historically been more than just a geographic transitional zone. It is a cultural centre where Kurdish and Alevi identities have concentrated, taken shape, and intertwined. For centuries, this region has witnessed numerous social uprisings, mystical-religious movements, and struggles for

justice. From the Babai revolt to the Şah Kalender rebellion, and from there to the revolutionary guerrilla movements of the 1970s, it has served as the backdrop for various resistance practices. This historical background elevates the region's lament tradition beyond the scope of a conventional mourning narrative. Each *şîn* is not merely a poetic tribute to an individual, but a poetic reactivation and transmission of a community's traumatic past to future generations.

The *şîn* tradition is among the oldest forms of literary expression in Kurdish oral culture. A striking example is the tombstone poem of a Kurdish poet named Borazboz, dated to the 4th century BCE and written in the Kurmanji dialect. This lament, expressing longing for his wife, begins with the lines: "I miss the days we spent together / Especially when we left in the morning." It illustrates that confronting death is not solely a personal experience, but one deeply intertwined with nature, place, and shared memory. In this way, the lament simultaneously articulates a person's ties to the mountains, rivers, beloved, and the past. Thus, *şîns* are not merely expressions of grief-they are a way of making sense of the world.

The *şîn* tradition in the İçtoroslar region has endured primarily through the agency of women. Female lamenters such as Êmkê Simke and Gülizar Doğan have not only voiced their sorrow but have also served as oral historians, transmitting memory, language, and culture to future generations. A lament voiced by a woman becomes a mode of public presence and audibility, challenging conventional gender roles. Through the language of mourning, women articulate both the personal and the collective; they speak simultaneously to the dead, the oppressor, and the community. In this sense, *şîn* is not merely a literary genre, but also a vital medium of cultural and political expression for Kurdish Alevi women.

Nature is one of the most frequent and powerful images found in laments. In these texts-where mountains, streams, highlands, goats, oak trees, and snowmelt weep alongside the mourner-nature is not a backdrop but an active participant. In one example, a mother grieving for her son, described as a "flower of Munzur" and a guerrilla fighter, implies that even the river itself grieves: "They plucked the rose of Munzur… I had entrusted him to Munzur." Here, the Munzur River is re-symbolised not simply as a geographic element but as a witness, a guardian, and a spiritual presence. This form of expression reflects the sacred relationship with natural beings in Kurdish Alevi cosmology. In the Raa Haqi belief system, every being that carries *can* (life-force)-whether a human or a mountain goat-is a bearer of memory. The *şîn* strengthens the faith by forging emotional bonds with these beings and sustains communal unity.

Another significant aspect of *şîn* is its political content. Especially in the 20th century, laments shaped around the figure of the "virtuous bandit" have served to poeticise the people's sense of justice in the face of state repression. *Kılam* (lament-songs) composed for figures such as İsmail Yıldız, a participant in the Koçgiri uprising, narrate not only acts of heroism but also the embodiment of justice in the eyes of the people. One such *kılam* declares: "Ismailê rewşenbîr, ne serserî bû, şêr bû / Serê xwe da ji rêya xwe, serdanê xwe pak kirî." ("Enlightened Ismail was not a vagabond, he was a lion / He gave his head to his path, and purified his pilgrimage.") In this lament, the bandit figure is positioned not merely as a rebel but as a spiritual guide who sacrifices himself to attain sacredness. Such laments transform the *şîn* tradition into a space of political memory.

Most Kurdish Alevi laments have traditionally been composed in the Kurmanji and Kırmancki dialects. However, the linguistic pressures of the modern era-especially the Turkification policies that followed the founding of the Republic-have made it increasingly difficult to transmit these literary expressions in their original languages. As Mehmet Bayrak has noted, many *kılam* have had to be translated into Turkish, since laments performed in Zazaki or Kurmanji were banned in the public sphere due to the state's restrictive language policies. This reveals that the tradition of *şîn* has been subjected not only to oral but also to linguistic assimilation. Today, many lamenters have become individuals who "think in Kurdish but write in Turkish," or even "think and write directly in Turkish." This linguistic rupture has fragmented the memory carried by the laments and weakened the emotional resonance of the original language.

Nevertheless, the *şîn* tradition has found ways to regenerate itself despite such pressures. Today, through social media, digital recordings, and diaspora association events, laments continue to live on-both in their traditional and newly adapted forms. Younger generations of artists sometimes recompose *kılam*, or perform *şîns* in rap or spoken word styles, thereby transforming and sustaining the tradition. This illustrates that *şîn* is not only a living tradition but also one that evolves. The fact that a silenced tradition has found its voice again in the digital age is a testament to the resilience of Kurdish Alevi memory.

Ultimately, the tradition of *şîn* is an ancient narrative form that leads the Kurdish Alevi community from grief to truth, from mourning to resistance. This poetic bridge between oral history, sacred places, and collective memory is not only a way of narrating the past-it is also a mode of making sense of the present and the future. The ethical world of Kurdish Alevism-grounded in nature, sacredness, and justice-takes form in these laments. Each *şîn* is a moral invocation, a call to comprehend a life, a

struggle, and a geography.

Conclusion

The *şîn* tradition has emerged from the centuries-long painful experiences of the Kurdish Alevi community, carried forward not merely as a form of mourning but also as a mode of social resistance and collective memory. Beyond individual losses, this oral tradition is deeply rooted in a community's historical ruptures, sacred sites, and spiritual worldview. It offers a powerful narrative space where linguistic, spatial, and cultural belonging are continually reimagined and renewed. Each *şîn* bears the weight of the past, speaks the truths of the present, and carries a collective consciousness into the future. In this sense, *şîn* is not only a mourning ritual of Kurdish Alevism-it is also a sacred and resilient relationship with memory, voiced through word.

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