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Zazaki in the context of Alevism

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Summary

This entry examines the function of Zazaki within the Alevi religious world, particularly centred on Dersim. Zazaki plays an important role in Alevism not only as the language of an ethnic identity, but also as the medium of ritual and symbolic elements such as cem ceremonies, gülbenks, narratives of sacred places, and conceptions of nature. Historically related to Parthian and other Northwestern Iranian languages, Zazaki holds a key position in the transmission of belief and the preservation of collective memory. In recent decades, however, this role has been endangered by increasing assimilation and Turkification.

[1] [2]

The Physical, Social and Historical Geography of Zazaki

Zazaki is a language spoken by an estimated 4 to 6 million people in the upper Euphrates and Tigris basin of Eastern Anatolia, although the exact number of speakers remains uncertain. Among the languages of Anatolia, it may be regarded as the only one not spoken as a native tongue outside the borders of Turkey. Statistically, it constitutes the third most widely spoken language in the country, following Turkish and Kurdish. In the past fifty years, a considerable number of Zazaki speakers or individuals of Zaza origin have migrated to metropolitan centers of Turkey and, in the past forty years, to various European countries – primarily Germany, but also the Netherlands, Austria, France, Switzerland, and Sweden – due to economic and political factors.

Zazaki is geographically concentrated in a relatively continuous zone, with the densest distribution found in the regions of Inner Dersim (Tunceli), Bingöl, Elazığ, eastern Erzincan, and northern Diyarbakır. It is also spoken in districts such as Koçgiri and Karabel in eastern Sivas (Kangal, Zara, Ulaş, İmranlı, Divriği, Hafik), as well as in Tokat's Almus, Gümüşhane's Kelkit and Şiran, Muş's Varto, Erzurum's Hınıs, Tekman, Çat, Aşkale, Adıyaman's Gerger, Urfa's Siverek, Malatya's Pötürge and Arapkir, Siirt's Baykan, Bitlis's Mutki, Batman's Kozluk, Kayseri's Sarız, Aksaray, Konya's Ereğli, Mardin's Derik, Kars's Selim, and Ardahan's Göle. The neighboring languages in these

settlement areas are predominantly Kurdish[3] (Kurmancî) and Turkish. Historically, Armenian and, to a lesser extent, Syriac (Neo- Aramaic) were also widely spoken across nearly all of these regions.

Belief Systems

In terms of religious affiliation, the Zaza population residing in regions such as Karabel (Sivas), Dersim, Erzincan, Northern Bingöl, Varto, Hınıs, Tekman, Çat, Sarız, Göle, and Selim predominantly adhere to the Alevi faith. By contrast, the remaining regions are largely inhabited by Sunni Muslim Zazas. Among the Sunni population, those residing in urban centers such as Elazığ, central Bingöl, Genç, Solhan, Hani, Kulp, Lice, Ergani, Dicle, Eğil, Silvan, Hazro, Mutki, and Baykan predominantly follow the Shafî'i school, while in parts of Maden, Çermik, Çüngüş, Siverek, Gerger, and Aksaray, adherence to the Hanafi school prevails.

Among the Alevi Zazas, numerous elements of pre-Islamic belief systems – such as customs, traditions, sacred shrines, saints, and cult of angels – have been preserved and interwoven with the later Alevi faith. The influence of Shia is likewise discernible. Although the tribal system has somewhat diminished in significance today, it nonetheless continues to exist among the Zazas.

Additionally, there are villages in Gerger inhabited by Zazaki-speaking Syriacs and Armenians, as well as Armenian families still residing in certain parts of the Alevi Zaza region. In recent years, some Alevi and Sunni Zazas have converted to Shia.[4]

Ethnicity and Endonyms

Although significant progress has been made in linguistic research on the Zaza language, the same cannot be said of ethnological studies. In his influential work *Ethnic Groups in the Republic of Turkey* (1989), ethnologist Peter Alford Andrews distinguishes between Alevi and Sunni Zazas, considering them as an ethnic group separate from the Kurds.

While many sources[5] categorize the Zazas as Kurds, others assert that they are of Turkish origin. However, in addition to several doctoral dissertations that define the Zazas as an independent ethnic group, numerous master's theses and peer-reviewed scholarly articles support this position. These include studies by:[6] Hüseyin Çağlayan (1995, 2020), Kahraman Gündüzkanat (1997), Krisztina Kehl-Bodrogi (1998), Kazım Aktaş (1999), Victoria Arakelova (1999), Selahattin Tahta (2002), Hülya Taşçı (2006), Gülsün Fırat (2010:139), Yaşar Aratemür (2011, 2014), Eberhard Werner (2012, 2015, 2017, 2021), Esther Schulz-Goldstein (2013), Garry Trompf (2013), Zeynep Arslan (2016), Gohar Hakobyan (2017), Maria Philipp (2017), Rasim Bozbuğa (2019), Annika Törne (2020) and Mesut Keskin (2025).

Self-identification among Zazas and their terminology for their language vary regionally. These designations are primarily ethnic or religious in nature, rather than national. For instance, in the Karabel region, inhabitants generally refer to themselves as *Zaza* and to their language as *Zazaki*. Among the older generation, expressions such as */Ma/* (“we”) and *Zonē Ma* (“our language”) are also found. In today’s terms, the Alevi Zazas of Dersim (Mamekiye/Tunceli), Erzincan, Çat (Erzurum), and the Yayladere and Yedisu districts of Bingöl refer to themselves as *Kırmanj* and their language as *Kırmancki*. In older generations, the term *Dimilki* was also in use. Sunni Zazas from neighboring regions are referred to simply as *Zaza*, while Sunni Kurds are called *Kuṛ*, and Alevi Kurds *Kirdas*.^[7] Kurdish is referred to as *Kirdaski* or *Hēre-wēre* (Northern Krd.: “go-come”). Alevi Kurds in Dersim often refer to Alevi Zazas as *Lacek* (“boy”) or *Dêzman* (“people of Dersim”), and to their language as *Dêsimkî*, *Şo-bê* (Zazaki: “go-come”), or *Dimilî*. Alevi Zazas from regions such as Kiğı, Adaklı, and Karlıova (in Bingöl), as well as Varto, Hınıs, and Tekman, use expressions such as *Şarē Ma* (“our people”) or *Elewi* for themselves and *Zonē Ma* (“our language”) for their speech. They call their Sunni Kurdish neighbors *Qurmanj*, and Sunni Zazas *Zaza* or *Dilmi*. Sunni Zazas in Bingöl refer to Alevi Zazas as *Doman* (“child” in Northern Zazaki). In Varto and Hınıs, Kurdish neighbors call Zazaki *Lolî* or *Çarekî*, naming it after Zaza tribes. The terms used by Alevi Zazas can be rendered in Turkish as “Alevi Zaza” or, more generally, simply “Alevi.” Among the elderly in Alevi Zaza communities, “Alevi” is also used as a national designation in Turkish. Among the younger generation, particularly those influenced by political developments, definitions such as *Zaza*, *Kurd*, *Turk*, *Alevi*, and *Dersimli* form different poles of identity. In the regions of Dersim and Erzincan, the word *Türk* refers primarily to Sunni Turks and, in some cases, to Sunnis in general.

Among Zazas belonging to the Şāfiʿī school, nearly all refer to themselves as *Zaza* and their language as *Zazaki*. In places like Palu, Bingöl, or Dicle (Piran), the term *Kird* appears occasionally alongside *Zaza*. In Mutki and Baykan, *Dimilî* is the common self-designation. These groups refer to Kurdish neighbors as *Kurmanj*, *Kurmonj*, or *Kirdasî*. Zazas of the Ḥanafī school tend to identify themselves predominantly as *Dimlî*, and occasionally as *Zaza*, referring to their Kurdish neighbors as *Kirdasî*. Hanafi Zazas in Aksaray call themselves and their language *Kurdasî* or *Zaza*, and call Kurds *Qilorî*. Conversely, Kurds refer to them as <Caʿnî> /ĵaʿnî/. Among Sunni groups, especially those under the age of 60-70, terms such as *Zaza* or *Dimili* are used with a national or ethnic connotation to refer to all Zazas.

The Position of Zazaki among the Iranian Languages

Linguistically, Zazaki is classified as a Northwestern Iranian language within the Iranian branch of the Indo-Iranian subgroup of the Indo-European language family.

According to classifications proposed by LeCoq and Gippert, the structure is as follows:[8]

Northwestern Iranian Languages:

- *Hyrcanian (Gorgan/Gorgan) Group*: Balōčī, Sangesarī, Gōrānī, Zazaki
- *Kermani Group*: Kurdish, Sivandī
- *Medean-Caspian Group*: Gīlakī, Māzandarānī, Sorxeī, Semnānī, Tališī, Āzarī[9]

Southwestern Iranian Languages:

- Persian (Fārsī), Tāġikī, Tātī, dialects of the Fārs region

Research conducted particularly in Germany has made it possible to determine Zazaki's position among the approximately forty modern Iranian languages and to formulate certain conclusions regarding its historical development. In addition to Old Indic, which has been preserved in written form, the availability of a rich corpus of ancient Iranian languages such as Avestan and Old Persian (belonging to the Old Iranian period), as well as Middle Iranian languages such as Parthian, Pahlavi (Middle Persian), and Sogdian, has contributed to this process.

It has been established that Zazaki possesses several archaisms and shows particular historical proximity to Parthian (3rd century BCE – 3rd century CE).[10] However, despite certain conservative features, it would be incorrect to posit a direct connection between Zazaki and Avestan. In brief, today's Iranian languages were, approximately four thousand years ago, likely mutually intelligible dialects. The grammatical structure of Old Indic languages such as Vedic and Sanskrit and that of Avestan demonstrates over 80% similarity.

From a genetic linguistic perspective, the modern Iranian languages most closely related to Zazaki include Balōčī, Gōrānī, and Sangesarī from the same subgroup, as well as Caspian languages such as Māzandarānī, Āzarī (Harzanī), Semnānī, Tālišī, and Gīlakī. Phonological and morphological correspondences to these languages also lend support the so-called *Dailam hypothesis*, which posits a northern Iranian origin for Zazaki.[11]

Languages in Contact with Zazaki

Among the closely related languages that have influenced Zazaki in terms of vocabulary and lexical exchange, Kurdish and Persian are most prominent. Due to their common origin, Zazaki has absorbed – albeit to a limited extent – by these languages both grammatically and lexically. After the advent of Islam, Arabic had an impact, and due to geographic proximity and social interaction, Armenian[12] and, to a lesser extent, Syriac – which themselves have been influenced by Iranian languages

- also show signs of lexical transfer with Zazaki. Additionally, Zazaki contains a limited number of loanwords from Turkish, Greek, Latin, Georgian, and Laz.[13]

Linguistic Research on the Zaza Language

Although the use of Zazaki as a written language does not go back far in history, research shows that the language has made significant progress over the past century. The first written record of Zazaki dates back to 1857-1858. The Iranologist Peter I. Lerch published records of his linguistic interaction with a Zaza individual from Bingöl, who had been taken prisoner during the Russo-Ottoman Crimean War. Lerch published these materials in Russian and German in 1858, even before conducting a grammatical analysis.

This research was followed by Friedrich Müller's comparative study in 1864, based on Lerch's 18-page texts. The archaeologist and linguist Albert von LeCoq also published five pages of linguistic material in Zazaki in 1901, although without grammatical analysis. [14]

In 1906, Oskar Mann was commissioned to document and analyze Western Iranian languages and, during his travels in the Middle East, compiled what was then the most extensive collection of Zazaki linguistic data, especially from the Siverek and Kor (Bingöl) regions. This material - amounting to 91 pages, covering five dialects and translated into German - was published posthumously in 1932 by the Iranologist Karl Hadank, who also contributed a grammatical analysis of the dialects.

Mann and Hadank were the first to argue - based on comparative linguistic evidence - that Zazaki and Gorani were not dialects of Kurdish, as previously mistakenly assumed, but rather independent Iranian languages.

After a hiatus of more than fifty years, the American linguist Terry Lynn Todd published a modern linguistic grammar of the Çermik dialect of Zazaki in 1985, using contemporary methods.

From the 1990s onward, linguistic studies on Zazaki deepened. Scholarly articles have covered various topics, such as:[15] Phonology (Cabolov 1985, Maurais 1978, Aratemür 2016), Negation (Sandonato 1994), Ezafe constructions (MacKenzie 1995), General linguistic perspectives (Asatrian 1996, Asatrian/Gevorgian 1988, Asatrian/Vahman 1990, Blau 1989, Pirejko 1999, Kausen 2006 and 2012), The position of Zazaki among Western Iranian languages (Paul 1998b), Literary and historical development (Selcan 1998b; Gippert 1996 and 2008), Etymology (Bläsing 1995, 1997; Schwartz 2008; Aratemür 2012, 2013), Minorities (Aratemür 2014), Orthography (Jacobson 1993), literacy manuals (Jacobson 1997), Bilingualism (Temizbaş 1999; B.

Werner 2006), Adaptation of foreign words (Malottke 2007), Prepositions (Arslan 2007), Dialectology (Keskin 2008), Text analysis (E. Werner 2013), Language loss (Azbak 2013), Verb functionality (Arslan 2016), Gender (Schirru 2017), Syntax and semantics (2022), Ezafe constructions (B. Werner 2018; Çelik Dincer 2021), The classification problem (Gholami 2022).

Additionally, two doctoral dissertations published as books are of importance: Paul (1998a), which focuses on grammar and dialectology, and Selcan (1998a), which presents a grammatical overview. Arslan's more recent dissertation (2016) offers a detailed analysis of verb structures, their functional aspects, and ergativity in Zazaki. The first two volumes of Aratemür's dissertation (2025) constitute the most comprehensive study to date on Zazaki dialects and varieties.

Although the linguistic classification of Zazaki is well established, in Turkish-language sources, media, and political discourse, there continues to be – albeit less than in the past – a persistent status quo regarding the Zaza language. Due to prejudice, lack of information or resources, or political motivations, Zazaki has been portrayed as a dialect or language of Kurdish. However, there is no scientific study or source that proves that Zazaki belongs to Kurdish or has Kurdish features. The proximity between Zazaki, Persian, and Kurdish is not due to one being a dialect or sub-language of another, but rather because they are all related languages. The same applies to the view that Kurdish is a dialect of Persian. These languages share numerous linguistic features and stem from a common root because they belong to the same language group.

As Karl Hadank (1938: 5) aptly remarked, “Persian is just one of many existing Iranian languages; it is not the mother of them all.” It is also worth noting that prominent scholars of Zazaki – O. Mann, K. Hadank, D.N. MacKenzie, and L. Paul – have each produced significant works on Kurdish as well.

The Position and Significance of the Zaza Language in Alevism

Zazaki, particularly within the context of Dersim-centered Alevism, emerges not only as a language of ethnic affiliation but also as a linguistic vessel of a belief system. Rituals, *cem* ceremonies, sacred hymns (*nefes*), prayers and imprecations, narratives associated with sacred places, pilgrimage culture, and conceptions of nature have largely been transmitted and acquired meaning through this language.

On the one hand, Zazaki has striven to maintain its identity as a language historically subjected to pressure and often excluded from written culture. On the other hand, it has served as the bearer of ritual practices and collective memory as a living language of faith. Self-definitions such as “*Řáa ma*” (our path) and “*İtiqatē ma*” (our belief)

illustrate that Zaza is not merely a means of communication but also constitutes the linguistic embodiment of a faith-based identity.

Alevism holds particular significance in the Dersim region due to its inclusion of numerous spiritual lineages (*ocak*) such as Babamansur (Zz. *Bamasur*), Kureys (*Qurēš*), Dervişcemal (*Dewrēš Ĵemal*), Derviş Beyaz (*Dewrēš Gewr*), Ağučan (*Ayučan*), and Sarısaltık (*Sarısaltıγ*). While Alevis constitute a minority among various ethnic groups – Turkmens, Kurds, Arabs, Romas, (Alevized) Armenians, and Bektashi Albanians – they do not constitute a minority within the Zaza population. This is because half of the Zaza-speaking community identifies as Alevi, while the other half is Sunni Muslim. It is assumed that a significant portion of Sunni Zazas, particularly after the Battle of Çaldıran, were compelled to convert from Alevism to Sunnism. The fact that Zazas predominantly live in mountainous regions has led to religious distinctions becoming defining criteria in dialectological classifications. Indeed, the Northern Zazaki dialect spoken by Alevis differs from other main dialects while maintaining internal consistency.

Zazaki plays a central role in *gölbenks* recited during *cem* ceremonies, in hagiographic narratives about sacred figures, in legends related to pilgrimage sites, and in belief systems surrounding nature and angelic beings. As evidenced in M. Comerd's compilations, a significant portion of the narratives and religious expressions related to sacred places are conveyed in Zazaki. In regions such as Erzincan, Hınıs, Tekman, and Varto, the terms "Alevice" ('Alevish', Alevi-Language) in Turkish and "Xızır's (< Ar. *Ḥıdr*) Language (Trk. *Hızır Dili*)" (and similarly, as transmitted from Sey Qaži in Zazaki, "*Zonē Ma Zonē Xızırîo*" – 'our language is the language of *Ḥıdr*') and "Qizilbaşkî" in Kurdish from the Muş region have all been used to define Zazaki. This indicates that the language has been internalized within Alevism and holds an esteemed position for Alevis who speak it.

Zazaki is employed in invocations directed to the Divine (*véng-a Héqi daéne*), in *gölbenks*, prayers to the sun (*roj, tîji*), the moon (*ášme ~ ásme*), and pilgrimage sites (*zíyari ~ žíyari; ziyar u diyári*). These prayers differ in content from those commonly known in Turkish, including in the concepts of ecstasy during *cem* (*tewt*), benevolent and malevolent angels (*milaketē xéri, milaketē xirabíni*), and the guardians and soldiers of pilgrimage sites. The core motifs of Zaza prayers frequently revolve around local saints and shrines, above all Duzgín, the miraculous deeds of the spiritually gifted, and the figure of Xızır. In the oldest Zazaki prayers, Shia influences and Turkish Alevi motifs such as the Twelve Imams and Prophet Muhammad are scarcely found.[16] Due to the esoteric nature of Sufism, concepts such as *Heq ~ Haq* (Truth, God), *Elí ~ Alí ~ Olí* (God, Ali), *Mehemed* (sun), and *Róstia Aná Fatmá* (light of Mother

Fatma) have been deeply integrated into the spiritual imagination. However, the external, historical aspects of these figures – their lifestyles, beliefs, and worldviews – often remain unknown or disconnected.

In recent decades, due to the increasing influence of Turkish on Alevi religious practices and greater interaction between Zaza Alevi and the wider society, it has been observed that Turkish-language prayers – such as those for sweeping, setting the ritual table (*sofra*), and sleeping, as well as those used in the *musahiplik* (spiritual brotherhood) ceremonies (*ja vaténe*) – have been added to traditional Zazaki prayers, and that the original Zazaki prayers are gradually being forgotten.

The Alevi faith in Dersim is deeply tied to the Zaza language, both symbolically and ritually; the language functions as the carrier and interpreter of belief. Figures such as Duzgîn, Xîzir, and the snake, sacred place narratives, and folk stories all solidify the role of Zazaki within the Alevi belief and cultural system. Each of these figures demonstrates that Zazaki is not merely a communicative tool but a cornerstone of faith preservation, identity formation, and ritual continuity.

Following 80 years of assimilation policies, and especially after the 1990s when Alevi associations began operating almost entirely in Turkish, later generations – primarily those who use Turkish dominantly – have increasingly distanced themselves from Zazaki as the language of belief.

Conclusion

Zazaki is not only the language of an ethnic identity but also a bearer of the Alevi spiritual world. Despite historical oppression and assimilation processes, it has survived, especially within Dersim-centered Alevi communities, as the language of religious rituals. From *gûlbenks* to pilgrimage culture, many practices gain meaning through Zazaki, thereby rendering it a sacred vehicle of collective memory. However, recent decades of language loss have threatened Zazaki's function within Alevism. This situation necessitates new efforts of preservation and revitalization for both religious and cultural continuity. According to a 2008 UNESCO report, Zazaki has been classified as a vulnerable language. The Northern Zazaki dialect spoken by Alevi is even more endangered than the dialects spoken by Sunni communities. Except for regions such as Varto, Hınıs, and Tekman, observations indicate that Zazaki is no longer being transmitted to children in regions like Dersim, Erzincan, and Karabel.

Endnotes

[1] This article is largely based on the study initially published under the title "Zazaca

üzerine notlar" in: Herkesin Bildiği Sır: Dersim - History, Society, Economy, Language and Culture (May 2010, Istanbul, İletişim Publishing, edited by Şükrü Aslan). It has been adapted to focus on the topic of Alevism, with new expressions added and several corrections and additions made.

[2] Magister Artium (M.A.), Research Assistant at the Department of Comparative Indo-European Linguistics, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe University, Frankfurt.

[3] The term "Kurdish" as used in this article corresponds, as in Iranian studies (cf. <https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/kurdish-language-i/>), to Kurmanji, Sorani, and Kelhuri/Kermanshahi.

[4] Cf.: <https://youtu.be/gEpSMcwBuvU> (January 2022).

One study originating from Shi'ite Zaza circles involves the translation of 360 hadiths into Zazaki: Vatey Hikmetin. Çaryes Mahsumon ra Hedisi (Zazaki u Tırki) [Words of Wisdom. The Hadiths of the Fourteen Innocents (Zazaki and Turkish)]. Hamburg, 2017. Islamic Academy of Germany.

[5] This perception is strongly shaped by Ottoman and Turkish officials, as well as those unfamiliar with the Zazas who traditionally inhabit mountainous and hard-to-reach regions. As an Iranian people, Zazas are ethnically and linguistically related to the Kurds, yet due to their smaller population, lack of a standardized literary language, and absence of political power, they have often been classified under the Kurdish category. Similar situations are seen in the case of the Laz and Circassian peoples, where the Laz are often confused with the broader Black Sea populations, or Circassians with other Caucasian groups, despite clear ethnic distinctions.

[6] Due to issues regarding academic rigor and objectivity in many Turkish academic theses, such works have not been included here.

[7] Cf. Cemal Taş (2007: 10): Roê Kirmanciye (from the oral tradition of Hesên Aliyê Sey Kemali).

[8] <https://www.zazaki.de/index.php/tr/dil/dilimiz/irani-diller> (Accessed: 25.04.2025). Other classifications also exist. While they are often informative in terms of inherited

vocabulary, they lack detailed sub-group analyses. See also Paul (1998b), Korn (2003, 2019), Gippert (2007/08).

[9] By Āzarī (Harzanī, Southern Tātī) the reference is not to the Turkic Azerbaijani language, but to a distinct Iranian language which is genealogically related to Zazaki. Its dialects include Kaḡalī, Hazārrudī, Tākestānī, Čālī, Sagzābādī, Eštehārdī, and Vafsī.

[10] Gippert (1996: 153).

[11] In his article on Zazaki (2007/2008: 103, footnote 87), Gippert emphasizes that the Dailam theory should be thoroughly reexamined. He notes that the region where Zazaki is spoken today corresponds precisely with the western border of the former Parthian Empire - this geographic overlap suggests the possibility of a continuous settlement of northwestern Iranian tribes from that area to northern Iran.

[12] It is worth noting the significant presence of Parthian and Middle Persian loanwords in Armenian.

[13] Cf. Keskin (2007: 2).

[14] Iranologist F.C. Andreas, in a letter dated 7 July 1909 (likely to his colleague Emil Sieg), states - based on Lecoq's records - that Zazaki does not belong to Kurdish. See: <http://titus.uni-frankfurt.de/personal/galeria/andreas.htm> (February 2011).

[15] While non-academic works do exist, they are not cited here due to their lack of peer review and limited scholarly quality. Nonetheless, many of them are valuable contributions to the Zaza language and deserve recognition.

[16] For instance, it may suffice to compare, in terms of content, the dozens of Turkish couplets (beyit) performed by Davut Sulari - an Alevi âşık (minstrel) and pir/dede (spiritual elder) from Erzincan, Çayırılı - with the few Zazaki couplets of his own composition. In recent years, it is a new development that some young pirs (dedes) have composed their own couplets devoted to the Karbalā event or the Twelve Imams.

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