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Şavak Tribe: Alevi–Sunni Nomadic Community of Dersim

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Summary

The Şavak tribe occupies a distinctive position within the ethno-cultural mosaic of Dersim, both historically and sociologically. As one of the rare cases in which Alevi and Sunni identities coexist within the same community, Şavak has preserved a nomadic and semi-nomadic pastoralist way of life into the present. The name “Şavak” does not solely denote a kinship group bound by fictive descent, as in classical definitions of the tribe; rather, it encompasses a nomadic identity that integrates diverse linguistic, religious, and cultural affiliations. In historical origin narratives, Alevis of Şavak emphasize descent from Horasan, while Sunnis stress Oghuz–Turkmen ancestry. Despite these divergent claims, shared economic practices and cultural boundaries have reinforced a sense of internal cohesion through a unique lifestyle. Traditionally concentrated in the districts of Çemişgezek and Pertek in Tunceli province, the Şavak have historically followed a transhumant cycle extending into Erzincan, Elazığ, and other surrounding provinces; in the modern era, migration has extended to major cities such as Ankara and Istanbul. This entry examines the Şavak tribe through anthropological and historical perspectives, exploring how identity boundaries are constructed, how Alevi–Sunni coexistence functions socially, how nomadic culture has transformed, and how Şavak fits into the multilayered identity landscape of Dersim.

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* *In precious memory of my esteemed teacher, Prof. Dr. M. Muhtar Kutlu (1952 – 2025) (Retired Professor, Department of Ethnology, The Faculty of Language and History-Geography, Ankara University).*

Introduction

Within the intricate ethno-cultural and religious landscape of Dersim (understood here not merely as a past administrative unit, but as a historically and symbolically extended sacred geography shaped by the Raa Haqi cosmology-see Gültekin 2024), the Şavak tribe stands out as a rare and complex case of identity configuration. While many Kurdish Alevi tribes of the region are religiously homogeneous and embedded in the hereditary *Ocak-talip* system, Şavak comprises both Alevi and Sunni groups,

united not by sectarian affiliation but by a shared nomadic-pastoralist mode of life. This dual religious composition makes Şavak an exceptional site for understanding how ethnic, linguistic, and religious boundaries intersect and are negotiated in everyday practice.

In local discourse, being Şavak is closely associated with immigrant-shepherding (göçer çobanlık), an economic and cultural lifeway that has historically been the primary marker of group identity. This is not merely a matter of subsistence but an identity-defining practice that structures seasonal mobility, spatial organisation, and social relations. As such, the term “Şavak” functions less as a narrow genealogical category than as a broader cultural designation, encompassing individuals and families who share the pastoralist cycle, regardless of their precise lineage, language, or sectarian background.

The Şavak case challenges classical anthropological models of “tribe” as a unit defined primarily by common descent and endogamous marriage (Barth 2001; van Bruinessen 1991). Instead, it exemplifies what might be termed a lifestyle-based tribal identity, in which the unifying principle is participation in a particular ecological and economic niche. The fact that Şavak identity transcends sectarian boundaries has allowed the community to maintain internal solidarity in contexts where other Alevi-Sunni relations in Anatolia have been marked by division or conflict.

Geographically, Şavak settlements are concentrated in the southern districts of Tunceli-especially Çemişgezek and Pertek-with extensions into neighbouring Erzincan and Elazığ provinces. Historically, the group followed a transhumant pattern, spending summers on highland pastures (yaylak) and winters in village settlements (kışlak), a cycle embedded in the pastoralist culture of eastern Anatolia. In modern times, the cycle has been disrupted by state-led resettlement policies, armed conflict, rural depopulation, and neoliberal economic transformations, but elements of the pastoralist tradition remain a strong cultural reference point.

Politically and symbolically, Şavak identity also complicates the categories through which Dersim is commonly understood. While the region is widely perceived as a stronghold of Kurdish Alevism (Raa Haqi) with a relatively homogeneous ethno-religious profile (Gültekin 2019, 2024), Şavak represents a hybrid formation that defies the neat alignment of language, religion, and ethnicity. It embodies, in microcosm, the broader pluralism and heterogeneity of Dersim’s cultural history, shaped by centuries of shifting alliances, migrations, and cultural exchanges across the Alevi-Sunni divide.

Understanding Şavak therefore requires an approach that situates the tribe within multiple, overlapping frames:

Anthropological – as a case study in flexible tribal identity formation, where kinship, economy, and religion interact in non-linear ways.

Historical – tracing the impact of Ottoman and Republican-era policies, forced migration, and socio-political conflict on community structure and livelihood.

Cultural-religious – examining how Alevi and Sunni lifeworlds cohabit within a single tribal identity, and how pastoralist practices act as a shared cultural denominator.

By exploring these intersecting dimensions, this entry seeks to illuminate not only the internal dynamics of the Şavak tribe but also its significance for the wider study of Dersim's cultural mosaic, where identity is constantly negotiated at the boundaries between religion, ethnicity, and ways of life.

The Concept of "Tribe" and the Socio-Organisational Model of Şavak

In the social sciences literature on the Middle East, the concept of "tribe" has been a persistent subject of definitional debate, complicated by differences in linguistic usage and cultural context. In Turkish, the terms aşiret and kabile-both of Arabic origin-carry connotations of socio-political hierarchy and often imply a large, composite unit incorporating multiple descent groups. In Anglo-Saxon anthropology, however, "tribe" is generally used in a broader sense, often corresponding to aşiret, while "clan" refers to sub-tribal segments (taife, tire, hoz, bavik, mal) (Aydın and Emiroğlu 2003, 77-78). These terminological discrepancies are not merely semantic; they reflect deeper differences in how kinship, descent, and political organisation are conceptualised across cultural and scholarly traditions.

Prominent anthropologists working among Kurds have underscored the need for culturally specific terminology. Martin van Bruinessen (1991, 71-86) argues that importing models from the ethnography of Arab societies-such as the rigid hierarchy of tribe > clan > lineage > sub-lineage > household-risks imposing a "narrow coat" ill-suited to the lived realities of Kurdish social organisation. Instead, Kurdish terms like hoz, bavik, and mal capture the relational dynamics and situational flexibility of tribal structures more accurately. Edmund Leach's (2001, 34-35) work among the Revanduz Kurds in Iraq identifies the taife as the principal sub-tribal unit, further segmented into tire; Fredrik Barth (2001, 46-49), working in southern Kurdistan, recognises tire as the basic political subunit, further divided into xel and ultimately households. Yet even these models, as Bruinessen notes, require adjustment to account for the multiplicity of local variations and the political fluidity of tribal alliances (Bruinessen 1991, 84-86).

In the case of Dersim, tribal organisation has historically been embedded within the

religiously structured Ocak-talip system characteristic of Raa Haqi Alevism, where sacred lineages (ocakzade) hold hereditary religious authority over networks of talip tribes (Gültekin 2019). This system overlays, and sometimes intersects with, segmentary tribal organisation based on descent and alliance. The general model observed in ethnographies of Kurdish tribes can be summarised as family (geniş aile) < household (hane) < mal < babik < tribe (Özer 1992, 504; Yalçın-Heckmann 2002). In this model, mal refers to a residential and economic unit that may encompass one or several households, sometimes corresponding to a lineage segment. Babik can denote a coalition of households linked by common ancestry, ritual obligations, or political alliance, and is highly variable depending on current economic and political conditions. The tribe is the largest alliance unit, comprising multiple babik groups unified under the leadership of an ağa, şeyh, or sacred lineage (Gültekin 2013a). The Şavak tribe both fits and departs from this general model. On one hand, Şavak is recognised locally and in academic literature as a aşiret, with an internal organisation that includes kin-based segments and shared origin narratives. On the other hand, its membership criteria extend beyond genealogical descent to encompass individuals and families sharing a common livelihood-nomadic or semi-nomadic sheep herding-and a distinctive seasonal mobility pattern. This pastoralist mode of life functions as a unifying principle that can bridge linguistic and religious differences, producing a lifestyle-based tribal identity that is less rigid than descent-based models would predict. The flexibility of Şavak's socio-organisational model is also evident in its capacity to incorporate both Alevi and Sunni segments within the same tribal identity without erasing the salience of religious affiliation. In everyday practice, Alevi and Sunni Şavaks may distinguish themselves by family names, ritual observances, and lineage claims, yet in certain economic and political contexts-such as negotiating grazing rights, bidding for pasture leases, or marketing animal products-they act collectively as Şavak. This duality-sectarian differentiation combined with situational unity-complicates conventional typologies of tribal organisation and underscores the need for an analytical approach sensitive to the interplay between descent, livelihood, and identity in the pastoralist societies of eastern Anatolia. **Dersim’s Cultural and Historical Context**

Dersim, known officially since 1935 as Tunceli, occupies a singular place in the cultural geography of Anatolia, both for its ethno-religious composition and for the symbolic weight it carries in Kurdish Alevi identity politics. The majority population consists of Alevi Kurds speaking either Kırmancki (Zaza) or Kurmanci (Kurdish) dialects, organised historically in tribal formations tied into the hereditary Ocak-talip system of Raa Haqi belief (Gültekin 2019). In this religious hierarchy, sacred lineages (ocakzade) exercise spiritual authority over networks of talip tribes, mediating both ritual life and dispute resolution. This structure is expressed in the tripartite hierarchy of mürşid-pir-rayber,

with talips at the base, visited annually by their pir in a ritualised seasonal cycle (Gültekin 2010, 125-135; Gültekin 2019). In the pre-modern period, this system coexisted with a high degree of political autonomy, reinforced by the mountainous geography that impeded state control and enabled the persistence of segmentary tribal organisation. Over centuries, this autonomy was periodically challenged by Ottoman and, later, Republican military interventions, culminating in the devastating 1937-38 operations known locally as Tertele (a genocidal massacre), which resulted in mass killings, deportations, and the dismantling of tribal authority structures (Gezik and Gültekin 2019). The resulting trauma has deeply marked the collective memory of Dersim's inhabitants, shaping both local historical consciousness and contemporary identity discourses (Deniz 2020; Kieser 2000).

Today, "being from Dersim" (Dersimli olmak) is more than a geographical designation; it is a cultural-political identity that blends religious, linguistic, and historical elements into a distinctive form of belonging. The region is imagined by Kurdish Alevis as a sacred land where belief, memory, and landscape are inseparable (Gültekin 2024; Gültekin 2021). This sacralised geography extends beyond Tunceli's administrative borders, encompassing Kurdish Alevi communities in parts of Erzincan, Bingöl, Elazığ, Malatya, Maraş, Muş, Sivas, and further afield, as well as a significant transnational diaspora in Western Europe (especially Germany). Yet this shared cultural frame has always been internally diverse. Alongside the dominant Alevi Kurdish population, Dersim has long been home to smaller groups of Sunni Kurds and Turks, as well as remnants of the Armenian Christian population. These "internal others" of Dersim have historically maintained distinct religious and cultural identities, while engaging in complex relations of coexistence, exchange, and, at times, conflict with the Alevi majority (Gültekin 2010, 2013b). In contemporary political discourse, Kurdishness and Alevism are the two principal identity movements challenging the homogenising model of the Turkish nation-state (Aydın and Emiroğlu 2003; van Bruinessen 1991). Within this contested terrain, the Şavak tribe-comprising both Alevi and Sunni segments-embodies a microcosm of Dersim's pluralism, complicating any simplistic narrative of ethno-religious homogeneity and offering a lens through which to explore the intersections of livelihood, belief, and identity in the region.

Settlement Areas and Demographic Profile

The settlement geography of the Şavak tribe reflects both the ecological logic of transhumant pastoralism and the complex ethno-religious topography of southern Dersim. Concentrated historically in the districts of Çemişgezek and Pertek, Şavak communities have maintained a presence in villages that serve as winter bases (kışlak) from which they ascend to highland pastures (yaylak) in summer. Oral

tradition and ethnographic observation indicate additional pockets of Şavak settlement in Mazgirt and Hozat, as well as in neighbouring Erzincan and Elazığ provinces, with seasonal migrations sometimes extending to Diyarbakır, Urfa, and Bingöl (Kutlu 1987, 49-50; Gültekin 2013b). The distribution of Alevi and Sunni populations within these districts is uneven but patterned: in Çemişgezek, Sunnis-among them a significant segment of Şavak-form the majority in the town and southern villages, while Alevis occupy the rugged northeastern uplands, speaking Kırmancki and maintaining strong cultural ties with the Alevi heartland of central Dersim. In Pertek, Alevis predominate overall, but Sunnis cluster in western, southern, and eastern peripheries, often in mixed villages where sectarian coexistence is mediated by shared economic activity, including herding (Gültekin 2010, 125-135). In Mazgirt, Alevi dominance is only marginally interrupted by small Sunni pockets near Akpazar; in Hozat, Sunni presence is minimal, represented mainly by the village of İnciga (Altınçevre). Despite this spatial dispersal, district centres such as Çemişgezek, Pertek, and Mazgirt have historically served as commercial and political hubs for Şavak pastoralists, functioning as nodes in the exchange networks that sustain livestock-based economies. Today, these local geographies have been reshaped by rural depopulation, state-led resettlement, and labour migration: neoliberal agricultural decline and decades of armed conflict have pushed many Şavak households into permanent or semi-permanent residence in provincial towns or in major urban centres such as Ankara, Istanbul, and Mersin, while still maintaining ties to ancestral villages and seasonal grazing lands. This pattern of dispersion-anchored in rural origins but extended through urban migration-mirrors broader trends in Dersim's demographic history, yet in the Şavak case, the persistence of pastoral mobility, however reduced, remains central to the reproduction of tribal identity.

Historical Origins and Origin Narratives

There is no reliable written record of the Şavak tribe's early history, and reconstructions rely largely on oral traditions shaped by the group's internal religious diversity. These narratives are bifurcated along sectarian lines: among the Alevi majority, Şavak origins are traced to Horasan, a locus classicus in Anatolian Alevi theology associated with the spiritual migration of sacred lineages (ocakzade) from Central Asia and Persia into Anatolia. This claim aligns Şavak Alevis symbolically with the broader mythic-historical framework of Raa Haqi belief, where Horasan functions as a sacred point of departure for the Prophet's family's esoteric heirs. In contrast, Sunni Şavaks often describe their ancestors as part of the Oğuz tribal confederations, identifying themselves as archaic Türkmen (Turcoman) migrants who settled in eastern and southeastern Anatolia. While these narratives diverge sharply in religious-symbolic content, they converge in affirming a shared nomadic heritage, with pastoral

mobility as the central marker of identity. In both versions, being Şavak is synonymous with a semi-settled, migratory pastoralist lifestyle – a livelihood that historically involved seasonal movement between lowland winter quarters in Çemişgezek and Pertek and upland pastures across Dersim and beyond. This immigrant-shepherding identity has remained salient into the present, such that in local perception “Şavak” refers as much to a way of life as to a descent group. Disagreements also extend to the mapping of Şavak settlement origins: Kutlu’s (1987, 49-50) important ethnographic survey identifies a wide spread of Şavak villages in Çemişgezek and Pertek, while contemporary accounts from Şavak associations list fewer core settlements, suggesting contraction through migration and socio-economic change (Gültekin 2013b). In earlier decades, some Şavak families pursued transregional herding cycles linking Dersim to Diyarbakır, Urfa, Bingöl, and Elazığ, indicating a flexible and expansive spatial footprint. This pastoralist mobility, embedded in both Alevi and Sunni historical narratives, functions as the connective tissue of Şavak identity, overriding the otherwise deep symbolic division between sectarian origin myths. The result is a historically grounded yet continually reinterpreted sense of collective belonging, anchored not in a single genealogical narrative but in the shared economic ecology and cultural capital of nomadic herding – a mode of life that both shapes and transcends the tribe’s internal religious boundaries.

Alevi-Sunni Coexistence and Identity Dynamics

The coexistence of Alevi and Sunni segments within the Şavak tribe is a distinctive feature that sets it apart from most other tribal formations in Dersim, where religious affiliation generally coincides with tribal boundaries. Among Şavaks, these two communities maintain clear sectarian self-identifications-expressed in divergent ritual repertoires, religious authority structures, and historical narratives-yet they simultaneously inhabit a shared cultural space structured by the pastoralist economy. Religious difference is thus a central element of self-definition, but it does not dissolve the overarching sense of Şavak-ness. This duality plays out in complex ways: internally, Alevis and Sunnis tend to mark difference through family names, lineage claims, and adherence to distinct belief systems-Alevis following the Raa Haqi tradition with its Ocak-talip hierarchy, and Sunnis aligning with mosque-based religious structures-yet externally, when facing “outsiders” (yabancılar), they close ranks as a single social body. This situational unity is most visible in the economic domain, particularly in collective action around shared pastoral resources. For example, the leasing of highland pastures (yaylak) from the state-often mediated through local powerholders or usurers-requires pooled resources and coordinated negotiation strategies that transcend sectarian divisions, as no single household can shoulder the financial burden alone (Gültekin 2010, 163-172). Such pragmatic cooperation

produces a repertoire of shared practices, norms, and narratives that reinforce the tribal frame even as religious differences remain salient. Significantly, these interactions have not historically escalated into sectarian conflict; instead, disputes tend to centre on economic or political issues, and even these are resolved within a framework of mutual recognition of shared Şavak identity. From the perspective of other local communities in Dersim, this configuration is unusual: no other Sunni group in the province defines itself explicitly as a tribe, nor do other Alevi-Sunni interfaces display the same degree of embeddedness in a common pastoralist tradition. In this sense, Şavak offers a microcosm of the broader possibility-rarely realised in practice-of cross-sectarian tribal solidarity grounded in shared livelihood and cultural ecology, illustrating how identity boundaries in Dersim can be both sharply drawn and strategically permeable.

Language and Cultural Codes

Language plays a central role in defining and communicating Şavak identity, functioning both as an internal marker of belonging and as an external emblem in regional perceptions. Both Alevi and Sunni Şavaks speak a local variant of Kurmanci known colloquially as “Şavakça” (Şavakish), which is mutually intelligible with other Kurmanci dialects but carries distinct phonological and lexical features shaped by the pastoralist milieu and long-standing contact with Turkish. Within the community, Şavakça serves as the primary medium for everyday interaction, oral tradition, and the transmission of pastoral knowledge, thereby reinforcing intra-tribal cohesion across sectarian lines. In the wider socio-political context of Dersim, however, the linguistic identity of Şavaks has been subject to competing interpretations. Since the 1970s, under the influence of Turkish nationalist discourse among some Sunni segments, Şavakça has sometimes been rebranded as a “village language” (köy dili) and even posited as an authentic remnant of Turkishness-a claim strategically mobilised in opposition to Kurdish nationalist narratives, despite the dialect’s clear structural affiliation with Kurdish (Gültekin 2010, 163-172). This re-framing reflects the political salience of language in identity politics and illustrates how linguistic practice can be ideologically refracted to support divergent ethnopolitical claims. At the same time, the very use of Şavakça in daily life affirms a shared tribal identity that transcends religious boundaries; the fact that both Alevi and Sunni members speak the same dialect-despite their different sacred idioms and ritual languages-anchors the perception of Şavak-ness in the sphere of lived culture. Externally, “Şavak” is often conflated with labels such as Yörük, Koçer or Türkmen, reflecting a regional tendency to associate semi-nomadic livestock herders with Turkmen identity regardless of their actual linguistic or genealogical background. This conflation, while sometimes accepted by Sunni Şavaks as consonant with their own origin narratives, is more

ambiguous for Alevi members, who navigate between affirming tribal unity and maintaining distinct religious and cultural affiliations. In all cases, language operates as a flexible but potent boundary marker, capable of articulating solidarity within the tribe while simultaneously mediating its relationship to broader identity discourses in Dersim and beyond.

Pastoral Nomadism and Economic Life

Pastoral nomadism is the economic backbone of Şavak identity, historically shaping its spatial organisation, seasonal mobility, and social cohesion. The tribe's livelihood has centred on transhumant sheep herding, with summer months spent on highland pastures (yaylak) leased-often collectively-from state authorities or local intermediaries, and winters in village bases in Çemişgezek and Pertek. Agriculture plays only a supplementary role, providing fodder and subsistence crops, while market-oriented production focuses on milk, cheese, and meat. Collective organisation is critical in securing grazing rights and negotiating lease prices, fostering cooperation across Alevi-Sunni lines (Gültekin 2010, 163-172). Although the neoliberal restructuring of rural economies, armed conflict in the 1990s, and state-led depopulation have eroded the scale of nomadic practice, pastoralism remains a potent cultural marker, with even urban-based Şavaks maintaining symbolic and often practical ties to herding. This persistence of a pastoralist identity under changing socio-economic conditions underscores the centrality of mobility, livestock economy, and seasonal rhythms to the maintenance of Şavak's cultural boundaries.

Modernisation, Migration, and Transformation

The 20th and early 21st centuries have brought profound changes to the Şavak tribe's social and economic fabric. State-led modernisation policies-roads, electrification, schooling-combined with the disruptions of armed conflict and forced migration in the 1990s, dismantled much of the traditional pastoral cycle and accelerated rural depopulation. Many Şavak households relocated permanently or semi-permanently to provincial centres or major cities such as Ankara, Istanbul, and Mersin, seeking wage labour while retaining seasonal or symbolic links to village life. This migration has altered household economies, diversified livelihoods, and exposed younger generations to urban lifestyles, challenging the continuity of pastoral knowledge and practices. Yet, as with many rural Dersim communities, the urban diaspora often maintains strong affective ties to ancestral lands, visiting during summer grazing season or for communal rituals. In this sense, migration has not dissolved Şavak identity but reconfigured it, producing a translocal social field that connects dispersed urban communities to their rural base (Gültekin 2013b).

Conclusion

The Şavak tribe occupies a distinctive place in Dersim's cultural and historical landscape, embodying an uncommon synthesis of Alevi-Sunni coexistence within a shared pastoralist tradition. Its identity is rooted less in rigid genealogical descent than in the economic and cultural ecology of transhumant herding, a way of life that has historically united its members across religious boundaries. While sectarian affiliations remain salient markers of internal differentiation, they have not produced enduring conflict, and economic cooperation in securing and managing pastoral resources continues to reinforce a shared Şavak-ness. Modernisation, migration, and state interventions have reshaped the material conditions of tribal life, dispersing the community geographically and diversifying its livelihoods, yet the symbolic and, in many cases, practical centrality of pastoralism endures. In this way, Şavak illustrates the adaptability of tribal identities in contemporary Dersim, showing how cultural cohesion can persist through shifting political, economic, and demographic realities.

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