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Firik Dede

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Summary

Firik Dede, who lived during the past century in the Ovacık region of Dersim, occupies a place in Kurdish Alevi collective memory both as a sacred figure of folk wisdom and as a mystical bearer of secrets (sır). He was a Raa Haqi saint (pir) affiliated with the Dervişcemal Ocak. As a direct witness and victim of historical ruptures such as the 1938 Dersim genocidal massacre, the military regime of the 1980s, and the upheavals of the 1990s, Firik Dede responded to profound suffering by entering a "vow of silence." This silence became both a language of mourning and a form of resistance. Following the murder of his son Behzat, who was burned alive by soldiers in 1981, he ceased speaking entirely. His life, shaped around this silence, came to be associated among the people with miraculous powers (keramet) and acquired spiritual significance as "a living jiare" (insan-ı kamil).

Firik Dede's life presents a layered narrative that interweaves sacred places, oral memory, and individual mourning within the Kurdish Alevi (Raa Haqi) belief system, resonating with the esoteric tradition of "becoming sır." His silence, the hymns he performed with the tembur, his leadership in cems, his intimate bond with the natural landscape, and the unspeakable weight of truth turned him into not only a historical figure but also a symbol. As such, Firik Dede represents a key example for understanding the multi-layered relationship that Raa Haqi faith establishes with individual practice, sacred geography, and memory.

Historical Background

Firik Dede was born in 1909 in the hamlet of Karaderesi in the Ovacık district of Dersim. Throughout his life, he was situated both geographically in the Munzur Mountains and socially within the heartland of Kurdish Alevism (Raa Haqi). His life, extending from the first half of the twentieth century to the beginning of the twenty-first, directly intersected with the most dramatic historical ruptures of Dersim, embodying these traumas within his own existence (Alevi Haber Ağı 2020; Arslan 2022; Dersim Haber 2021; Hanoğlu 2023; Kete 2021; Umutlu 2022; Tunceli Emek 2023).

Geographically, Karaderesi is one of the high-altitude, forested, and inaccessible areas of Ovacık. This isolation enabled Firik Dede and his family to remain hidden for years during and after the 1938 genocidal massacre, while also forming the basis of his profound bond with nature. Between 1937 and 1941, he lived with his family in a concealed cellar on the banks of the Munzur River, becoming almost “invisible” (*sır*) against the state’s surveillance and persecution system (Alevi Haber Ağı 2020; Arslan 2022; Dersim Haber 2021; Hanoğlu 2023; Kete 2021; Umutlu 2022; Tunceli Emek 2023).

His social position, however, derived not only from spatial isolation but also from his role as a religious leader affiliated with the Dervişcemal Ocak (sacred lineage). From the late 1920s onward, together with his father, he led *cems* in the surrounding villages. Even after the tekkes and zawiya were officially closed and Alevi religious ceremonies were banned, he continued this spiritual practice, serving as a guide for the local community. The *cems* he performed in Erzincan, Beyler, Aslanyurdu, and Ovacık not only ensured religious continuity but also established him as a regional authority (Alevi Haber Ağı 2020; Arslan 2022; Dersim Haber 2021; Hanoğlu 2023; Kete 2021; Umutlu 2022; Tunceli Emek 2023).

He spent the final years of his life in the same region where he had been born and raised, among the ruins of his collapsed house. On 10 July 2007, he passed away in Karaderesi, under the shadow of the long silence in which he had lived. Firik Dede’s life demonstrates how the relationship between physical space and spiritual dwelling acquired a symbolic sacredness within the Raa Haqi tradition (Alevi Haber Ağı 2020; Arslan 2022; Dersim Haber 2021; Hanoğlu 2023; Kete 2021; Umutlu 2022; Tunceli Emek 2023).

The Narrative of Firik Dede

The narrative of Firik Dede is more than an individual life story; it is a multi-layered example of oral heritage in which a people’s traumatic history, belief system, and culture of resistance intertwine. His life is remembered as a silent yet searing example of confronting truth, shaped both by historical events and the deep scars they left on the individual.

The story begins with the *cems* he conducted together with his father in the 1930s. Despite the suppressive environment, the father and son continued to lead rituals across dozens of villages between Erzincan and Ovacık. In one such gathering, a *Hızır Cem* was raided after being reported to the authorities. The participants negotiated with the soldiers to protect their *pir*, allowing those present to go free, but Firik Dede was declared a fugitive. In oral accounts, this episode marks the beginning of his life

“in hiding,” or in mystical terms, “becoming secret” (*sır olma*) (Alevi Haber Ağı 2020; Arslan 2022; Dersim Haber 2021; Hanoğlu 2023; Kete 2021; Umutlu 2022; Tunceli Emek 2023).

By 1938, Firik Dede was living with his family in a concealed cellar by the Munzur River, known only to close kin. During this period, a tragic turning point occurred when his uncle Çıla was executed by soldiers for refusing to hand him over. According to oral tradition, Firik Dede wept through the night in his uncle’s mansion, a scene remembered in Alevi narrative culture as a symbol of sacrifice and loyalty. From this time onward, his life unfolded along the axis of withdrawal and secrecy. When detained, he was found to be carrying a letter from Pir Seyit Rıza, which led to torture; yet it is said that he never revealed a secret. This stance is represented in oral memory as the embodiment of the Alevi principle of “giving one’s head but not one’s secret” (*ser verir sır vermez*) (Alevi Haber Ağı 2020; Arslan 2022; Dersim Haber 2021; Hanoğlu 2023; Kete 2021; Umutlu 2022; Tunceli Emek 2023).

The most striking and central episode occurred in 1981. During the military regime, his son Behzat was detained in Tunceli, tortured, and burned alive. This was the final breaking point for Firik Dede. From that day onward, he never spoke again. Among the people, his silence was interpreted not only as mourning but also as a vow of truth, a ritualised abstinence from speech—a “rite of not speaking” (*konuşmama erkani*) (Alevi Haber Ağı 2020; Arslan 2022; Dersim Haber 2021; Hanoğlu 2023; Kete 2021; Umutlu 2022; Tunceli Emek 2023).

For those who recount his story, Firik Dede’s silence was not merely the outcome of trauma but also a source of wisdom. Within this silence, he spoke through his *tembur*, addressing his community not with words but through melodies, hymns, and the language of muteness itself. Listeners understood his silence as a “veil of secrecy” (*sır perdesi*): truth is not entirely spoken, but lived and preserved. In this respect, the narrative of Firik Dede is not only the life story of a historical figure, but also a sacred tale of secrecy resonating in Alevi collective memory—a silent rebellion and a metaphor of resistance.

Protective and Judging Functions

Firik Dede was not only a religious guide or a tragic historical figure; he was also regarded by the people as a symbol of moral measure, the balance of truth, and protective spirituality. The symbolic roles he assumed during his lifetime and after his death reflect a duality similar to the classical figure of the *evliya*: on the one hand, a compassionate and protective dervish; on the other, a punishing authority guarding justice and truth. Especially after the torture and killing of his son Behzat, the silence

into which he withdrew was interpreted in two ways. It was, on the one hand, a sign of deep inner mourning and dignity in the face of immense oppression; on the other, a message that “those who lack the capacity to speak before truth must remain silent.” In this sense, Firik Dede became not only the bearer of his own suffering but also the carrier of his people’s historical traumas, a spiritual guide silently warning through the burden he carried (Alevi Haber Ağı 2020; Arslan 2022; Dersim Haber 2021; Hanoğlu 2023; Kete 2021; Umutlu 2022; Tunceli Emek 2023).

In Alevi oral culture, “those who become secret” sometimes disappear, sometimes fall mute, or otherwise withdraw from the people, yet remain “present” at the same time. After Firik Dede’s death, the space he inhabited-his house and its surroundings-continued to be revered. People still visit, to make wishes, to sit silently, or to pray, turning him into a kind of “living *jiare*.” Particularly in stories concerning children, Firik Dede appears as a protective spirit: he is said to warn children in dreams, guide the lost, or invisibly intervene against those who commit injustice. Such accounts suggest that his functions continued on a spiritual plane even posthumously.

At the same time, the few words attributed to him in life are remembered as a kind of “truthful utterance” or *nazar*. When his sayings or verses pointed to what was wrong, they were believed to take effect-warning the community in moments of transgression or deviation. In this respect, his silence itself functioned as a form of judgment: “His not speaking is truth itself looking at us in silence,” elders would say. Thus, Firik Dede is remembered not only as a victim but also as a warning voice intertwined with truth. In short, in individual memory he is more than a sufferer; in collective consciousness, he is the bearer of the balance of justice and truth, the inner voice and conscience of the people-protecting and sheltering, but also judging without words when necessary (Alevi Haber Ağı 2020; Arslan 2022; Dersim Haber 2021; Hanoğlu 2023; Kete 2021; Umutlu 2022; Tunceli Emek 2023).

Ritual Practices

The life of Firik Dede presents not so much a mastery of ritual in the classical sense, but rather a pattern in which ritual is interwoven with silence, pain, and resistance. The *cems* he conducted, the hymns he performed, and his later state of muteness together form both a traditional and a unique dimension within the Alevi ritual repertoire. In his youth, the *Xızır cems* he carried out with his father were not only acts of faith but also of political resistance. During the late 1920s and early 1930s, they continued to perform *cems* from village to village despite religious prohibitions. These rituals-consisting of recited hymns (*nefes*), performed *semahs*, shared offerings (*niyaz*), and the distribution of food (*lokma*)-functioned not only as religious practices

but also as acts of reproducing collective memory. Yet Firik Dede's true ritual power emerged after 1981, in the form of silence. Following the killing of his son Behzat, he never spoke again. Among the people, this silence came to be described as a "mute offering," a "fast of speech," or even a "secret *cem*." His muteness was not perceived as a protest but as worship: where language ceased, the heart was believed to speak. This understanding resonates with the esoteric tradition that "between speech and secret there is a veil." Thus, his silence became a ritual in itself; those who witnessed it internalised it as a teaching of truth (Alevi Haber Ağı 2020; Arslan 2022; Dersim Haber 2021; Hanoğlu 2023; Kete 2021; Umutlu 2022; Tunceli Emek 2023).

A central instrument in his ritual life was the *tembur*, which he never set aside. Even after abandoning speech, he continued to play hymns on it, thereby sustaining the symbolism known in Alevi tradition as "the language of the *saz*." For Firik Dede, the *tembur* was a means of prayer and the voice of unspeakable truth (the horrors of the time). Every melody played by his hand was interpreted among the people as a "silent blessing" (*gülbang*). After his death, the place where he lived-his ruined house and its surroundings in Karaderesi-became a *jiare* (sacred site). Visitors still come to pray, leave offerings, sit in silence, listen to the sound of the *tembur*, or simply wait in contemplation. In this way, his relationship with place was itself ritualised, transforming him into a kind of "living *jiare*." In sum, the ritual practices of Firik Dede combine his guiding role in classical *cem* ceremonies with the new form of worship he created through silence in his later life, making him a rare and unique example within the Raa Haqi religious tradition.

Reflections in Local Memory

Firik Dede left deep marks not only on the period in which he lived but also in the memory of subsequent generations. His life story is recounted less as an individual tragedy than as the bearer of a collective consciousness. Within the memory of Raa Haqi communities-shaped more by oral culture than by written history-these narratives function in a manner similar to mythological figures. His name does not signify only a person but also a period, a condition, a silence, and a form of wisdom.

In Dersim, when the name Firik Dede is mentioned, most recall him as the "silent dede." This silence was not perceived as ordinary muteness but as an inner bond with truth. At the centre of oral accounts lies the message: "Where speech ceases, truth begins." This phrase is still frequently repeated among older generations, serving as a moral compass. Firik Dede also figures prominently in stories about children: he is remembered as offering blessings without touching them, appearing in dreams to give counsel, guiding the lost, or healing the sick. Through such accounts, he becomes in

local memory a protective saintly figure, a spiritual being who “gave his life quietly but never lost his voice.” In particular, around Karaderesi there is a strong belief that wishes made in his name are fulfilled. His silence is also regarded by the people as a form of “inner tribunal.” Sayings such as “Even if Firik Dede does not see, he knows; even if he does not hear, he feels” reflect the conviction that he was endowed with an intuitive sense of justice. In memory, he lives on as a bearer of *batın* wisdom—disturbing the conscience of the unjust while opening the path for those who walk in truth (Alevi Haber Ağı 2020; Arslan 2022; Dersim Haber 2021; Hanoğlu 2023; Kete 2021; Umutlu 2022; Tunceli Emek 2023).

Over time, stories about him in local memory have become anonymized and multiplied through transformation. In some tales, he is a dervish wandering the mountains; in others, he is a light emerging from the springs of the Munzur. This process elevated him beyond an ordinary historical figure, becoming a sanctified, *jiare*-like collective symbol. Moreover, the annual commemorations held on the anniversary of his death have become more than remembrances of a single life; they function as acts of renewing the collective memory of the Dersim community. For local people, these commemorations resemble a “silent *cem*”: in the silence of Firik Dede, participants rediscover their own stories. In conclusion, in local memory, the figure of Firik Dede transcends individuality, becoming a symbolic totality woven with notions of truth, dignity, silence, resistance, and compassion (Alevi Haber Ağı 2020; Arslan 2022; Dersim Haber 2021; Hanoğlu 2023; Kete 2021; Umutlu 2022; Tunceli Emek 2023).

The Relationship between Jiare and Becoming Secret

In the Raa Haqi belief system, a *jiare* is not only a sacred place but also a realm where esoteric truth takes form, where the visible and the invisible intersect, and where the worldly and the transcendent merge. Narratives about the life and death of Firik Dede clearly illustrate his transformation from a human figure into a *jiare*—a process of “becoming secret” (*sır olma*) (Gültekin 2025a; 2025b).

In Alevi cosmology, “to become secret” means that the bodily self unites with nature and passes into a new spiritual dimension. This does not occur only through death; sometimes it happens through silence and invisibility, when the bond with the community is redefined in such terms. In this sense, Firik Dede’s life represents a complete example of *don deđiřtirme* (changing of form): he withdrew his body into silence, leaving his worldly image behind, while continuing to exist at the level of meaning in another form. Two stages are especially significant in this process of becoming a *jiare*: first, the period of concealment after 1938, when he lived hidden for years in a cave by the Munzur River; and second, the silence he entered after the

burning of his son in 1980, when he completed his speech to the world. In both periods, even those who did not see him claimed to feel his presence-encountering him in dreams, in the wind, or in the sound of the *tembur* (Alevi Haber Ağı 2020; Arslan 2022; Dersim Haber 2021; Hanoğlu 2023; Kete 2021; Umutlu 2022; Tunceli Emek 2023).

In this context, the figure of Firik Dede becomes a *jiare* not confined to one physical location but expanded through meaning. The ruins of his house, the Karaderesi landscape, the stone on which he sat, the room where he remained silent, the corner where he played the *tembur*-all of these have become, in the eyes of the people, places of visitation, prayer, and offering. They are no longer mere sites but spiritual thresholds through which contact with him is established.

The state of becoming secret also carries, in the Alevi-esoteric tradition, the sense that “truth is revealed where words fall silent.” Firik Dede’s refusal to speak was itself a teaching of the *Batın* path: truth is not always spoken, sometimes it is transmitted through silence. In this way, his silence became a mode of instruction, a field of testing, a depth of meaning. In oral culture, the wisdom he “expressed silently” was often regarded as more powerful than the words of those who spoke. Today, the places associated with Firik Dede and the rituals of remembrance performed in his name have become not visits to a person, but to a secret. That secret has merged with nature, absorbed into water, soil, and wind-living on not in spoken words, but in the inner voice of the people. For this reason, Firik Dede occupies a place in Raa Haqi belief as one of the figures who “became secret and turned into a *jiare*,” inscribed both in history and in cosmology.

Modern Times and Continuity of Tradition

The figure of Firik Dede is not only meaningful as a saintly person of the past but also as a source of belief and memory that continues to resonate under modern conditions. His stance throughout his life-his silence, his wordless communication through the *tembur*-left strong traces not only within the traditional Alevi social order but also in contemporary understandings of Alevism. Particularly within the Kurdish Alevi diaspora in Europe, narratives shaped with reference to Firik Dede form a central part of discourses that emphasize the distinctiveness of Dersim identity and the Raa Haqi faith. Shaped around concepts such as silence, trauma, exile, and memory, his figure functions as both an identity symbol and an ethical guide for communities in the diaspora. He is remembered not merely as a religious leader but also as the “silent witness of truth,” embedded in the memory of political and cultural struggles.

In the modern period, narratives about Firik Dede have been reinforced through

documentary films, photographic archives, and digital interviews and commemorative writings. These materials not only strengthen the visual memory of his life but also enhance its transmission to younger generations. In this way, Alevi religious leaders come to be understood not only in relation to the *ocak* system but also within new narrative worlds framed by social resistance, collective memory, and cultural sustainability (Alevi Haber Ağı 2020; Arslan 2022; Dersim Haber 2021; Hanoğlu 2023; Kete 2021; Umutlu 2022; Tunceli Emek 2023).

The site still known locally as “the house of Firik Dede” continues to be visited, showing that his presence carries meaning far beyond the physical. Such visits serve as modern “memory practices”: people come to pray, to make offerings, or simply to sit silently (Alevi Haber Ağı 2020; Arslan 2022; Dersim Haber 2021; Hanoğlu 2023; Kete 2021; Umutlu 2022; Tunceli Emek 2023). These acts show how traditional ritual is reproduced and sustained, even transformed, within a modern secular lifestyle. Moreover, the narratives surrounding Firik Dede inspire younger generations in particular to interpret silence as a form of resistance. His muteness is transmitted not as submission to oppression but as dignity and steadfastness in the face of truth. This interpretation produces an ethical model that continues to inspire Alevi youth engaged in struggles over trauma and justice. The figure of Firik Dede is thus not a relic of the past but a living, transmitted, and transformative form of identity that continues to inspire. His life, ritual practices, silence, and symbolic legacy constitute one of the most powerful narrative threads sustaining the continuity of Dersim Alevism in modern times.

Conclusion

The figure of Firik Dede offers a unique example of how the Raa Haqi faith is embodied through the life of an individual shaped by the deep historical wounds of Dersim. His life, rituals, silence, suffering, and relationship with the people together form a field of truth in which individual destiny and collective memory, bodily existence and spiritual representation, the ordinary and the sacred intertwine.

Firik Dede was more than a “dede,” *pir*, or *ocakzade* in the classical sense. He was both one of the last representatives of the *cems* conducted in his own time and a silent resister of the modern era. His refusal to speak was not merely an act of mourning but a form of carrying truth that could not be contained by words. In this sense, Firik Dede was a being who became “secret” in a manner consistent with the spirit of the *Batın* tradition, where meaning deepens as speech ceases.

The visits made in his name, the stories told, the documentaries filmed, and the writings produced all show that even though his physical existence has ended, his

symbolic presence and spiritual influence endure. He is not only a figure of the past but also of the present and the future. In this respect, Firik Dede stands as a bearer of memory, a guide of conscience, and an ethical stance shaped by faith for the Alevi community. His life serves as a key to understanding the multi-layered relationship Raa Haqi belief establishes with nature, secrecy, silence, and resistance. The truth reflected through him represents not only an individual but also a collective memory and the unbroken continuity of faith.

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