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Gağan (1)

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Summary

Gağan (Khal / Kalo Gaxan, Gaxand, Gaxan) is a religious-magical transition ritual unique to Kurdish Alevi communities in Dersim, symbolically marking the end of the old year and the arrival of the new. Taking place from late December to early January, it includes fasting, cem ceremonies, visits to sacred places (jiare), and a performative folk play known as Khal u Fatık, which stages the symbolic death of the old year and the birth of the new one. Shaped around themes of fertility, purification, communion, and solidarity, Gağan -though having lost much of its traditional form- has in recent years been reinterpreted, particularly within the European diaspora and in Dersim, as a symbolic expression of the new Dersim identity.

Overview

Gağan is a calendrical and religious process comprising various rituals -folk plays, sacred gatherings, and magical-religious acts- that reflect themes such as death and rebirth, abundance, purification, communion, and solidarity. It is commonly found in agrarian and pastoralist cultures that align their ritual life with seasonal transitions, and in Turkey it is specific to the Kurdish Alevi communities of Dersim. Until the early 2000s, Gağan was still observed in rural settlements not only in the Dersim cultural geography (spanning through Sivas, Kayseri, Erzincan, Erzurum, Kars, Gümüşhane, Muş, Bingöl, Elazığ, Malatya, Maraş, Adıyaman, Hatay) but also in resettlement regions such as Çorum, Yozgat, Tokat, and Amasya where Kurdish Alevis were forcefully relocated due to 20th-century state policies (Gültekin 2019b).

Today, Gağan has lost many of its traditional elements. However, in the context of increasingly politicised Alevi and Kurdish identities in the last half-century, it has been reinterpreted as a symbolic ritual of a micro ethno-cultural identity: Dersimlilik. Particularly in the European diaspora and in the province of Tunceli (Dersim), Gağan - especially its theatrical components- has re-emerged in public spaces as a cultural performance laden with political meaning (Gültekin 2019b).

The communities in question speak Kırmancki (often called Zazaki) and Kurmanci (also

known as Kurdish). Whether Kirmancki is a dialect of Kurdish or a distinct language is not merely a linguistic debate but also a political one, with nationalist and micro-nationalist movements taking opposing stances. Most linguists tend to classify it as a separate language within the Indo-European family (Gültekin 2019a).

The ritual is referred to in local vernaculars as *Khal / Kalo Gaxan, Gaxand*, or simply *Gaxan*. In Dersim, the most common term is *Khal Gağan*. “Khal” can be translated into Turkish as “aged-wise” or “perfect (person).” According to the Gregorian calendar, Gağan rituals take place around January 8, but in the local calendar, it begins around December 25. The term *Gağan* in Kirmancki encompasses meanings of both “time” and “old,” implying “old time” or “fading time,” and it carries distinct religious-magical implications. It refers directly to the fasting period, the *jîare* visits, *cem* ceremonies, and other religious-magical practices (Gültekin 2019b).

The Gağan period spans roughly from the last two weeks of December to the first two weeks of January. Within the cyclical cosmology of Kurdish Alevis in Dersim -referred to as *Raa Haqi* (The Path of Truth)- Gağan represents a sanctified recurrence of the year’s end and renewal. The old year is ritually bid farewell, and the new year is welcomed through ceremonies invoking fertility and collective belonging (Gültekin 2019b).

Major components of Gağan rituals include fasting, *cem* ceremonies, symbolic acts of purification and revival, the theatrical *Khal u Fatık / Khalkek* play, food collection and sharing (communion), and gift-giving-particularly visits to married women who have left the household.

Rituals

Gağan begins with a three-day fast starting on Tuesday and ending on Thursday evening, which is considered sacred by Kurdish Alevis and is often referred to as “Friday.” On that day, *jîares* near villages are visited. Offerings (*niyaz*) are made, candles are lit, fires are kindled, and animal or symbolic sacrifices may be performed. The evening concludes with a *cem* ceremony in which prayers and good wishes for the new year are shared (Kul 2015).

Some sacred sites in Dersim are also ritually venerated by local Sunni and Armenian Christian communities during the same period. Sunni populations in Çemişgezek, Pertek, and Mazgirt -along the southern edge of Tunceli province- share similar practices. Though the Armenian Christian population is now minimal, their growing visibility since the 2010s through civil society organisations and the reactivation of Christian ritual identity -particularly through Gağan(t)- has led to vibrant debates

about historical and theological intersections between local Christianity and Dersim Alevism (Gültekin 2020).

Purification through wheat and water is central to Gağan. On the last day of the year, boiled wheat is sprinkled in homes, stables, and at water sources. It is hung in bunches on walls and given to household members to eat. On the first day of the new year, spring water is sprinkled around homes and animal shelters (Kul 2015).

The most captivating element of the ritual is the performative play *Khal u Fatık* (also called *Khalkek*), traditionally performed after sunset by three male characters and a musician. The first is Khal, an old, white-bearded man with a staff, who sometimes represents the figure of Khidr (*Xızır*), understood in Raa Haqi cosmology as a mystical earthly projection of the divine. His presence suggests deep religious symbolism. Khal carries a bundle and collects offerings from households he visits (Kul 2015).

The second character is Fatık (Fatma), Khal's young and beautiful bride, played by a man in disguise, whose body is mostly covered except for her eyes. In some versions, she carries wool and a spindle. The third is Arab or Koçeg, often portrayed with blackened hands and face, possibly evoking racial caricatures, but more accurately represents a known local figure -a young, dependent companion traditionally brought along by *pir* or *dede* on village visits (Kul 2015).

The plot revolves around this trio visiting village homes. Khal is invited in, receives offerings, and a ritualized script unfolds where Fatık attempts to seduce the village youth through gestures and expressions. The young men try to abduct her, sometimes succeeding briefly. Khal and Koçeg intervene. If repeated, Khal dramatically "faints," prompting Fatık to perform exaggerated revival gestures -such as squatting and symbolically urinating or fluttering her skirt over his face. Occasionally, Khal responds by striking Fatık or lying on her, actions interpreted as representing symbolic union or fertility. Khal's fainting and reviving symbolise the death and rebirth of the old year, while Fatık embodies the vitality and promise of the new one (Gültekin 2019b).

As the play proceeds from house to house, the trio collects nuts, raisins, flour, and other goods. At each door, they say: *Gağanê Sîma Bîmbarek Bo!* In Kirmancki ("May your Gağan be blessed!"). The items collected are often prepared in a communal meal, sometimes cooked in the poorest household or at a *jiare* and shared with the entire village -especially the poor. This communal meal has the structure of a ritual communion.

Dishes such as *zerefet* (a local yogurt-garlic-butter dish), *pesare* (a type of bread), and *dane / dani* (boiled wheat) are cooked. Sometimes, small sticks symbolising luck and

prosperity are hidden in the food for participants to find. Leftovers are offered to livestock or placed near water sources to be later scattered over homes and animals as blessings (Kul 2015).

In some regions, *Gağan gifts* are exchanged -especially among children and neighbours. Women who have married and left the household are visited and presented with *Bara Zeyiu* -gifts considered their rightful share (Kul 2015).

The timing of *Gağan* -coinciding with the winter solstice around December 21- emphasises its function as a ritual of survival, renewal, and solidarity during the harshest part of the year. It serves as a rich and layered religious-social ritual that bids farewell to the old and welcomes the new through acts of community, symbolism, and sacred storytelling (Gültekin 2019b).

Anthropological Perspective

Since Arnold van Gennep's classic work *Les Rites de Passage* (1909), anthropologists - especially those studying small-scale societies- have emphasized the structure of transition rituals. Gennep identified three core phases: separation, liminality, and reintegration.

In the separation phase, the individual or community is stripped of prior statuses through symbolic acts. The liminal phase represents a state of in-betweenness - marked by ambiguity, taboos, and symbolic death. Kurdish Alevi *musahiplik cem* rituals exemplify this: individuals go through symbolic death and rebirth, take sacred oaths of brotherhood, and emerge with new identities and cultural responsibilities (Gültekin 2019b).

Victor Turner built on Gennep's ideas in *The Ritual Process* (1969), emphasizing *communitas* -a feeling of egalitarian solidarity that emerges during liminality. Rituals like *Gağan* dissolve hierarchies, affirm belonging, and renew collective consciousness through symbolic acts and shared experience. In the final phase -reintegration- the individual or group re-enters society with new roles and cultural status.

Conclusion

Gağan is not merely a local New Year tradition -it is a cultural vessel that binds past and present, human and non-human, old and new, death and rebirth. Through acts of purification, play, and sacred performance, it transcends folklore to function as a dynamic rite of passage. Anthropologically, *Gağan* both exemplifies classical theories of ritual and embodies the contemporary reconstruction of Kurdish Alevi identity - especially in the diaspora. It is thus not only a farewell to the past year but also a

ceremonial reaffirmation of collective memory and identity.

References & Further Readings

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