



Munzur Gözeleri (The Munzur Springs): Living Sacrality and Spatial Transformation

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Summary

This entry examines the sacred status of the Munzur Springs within Dersim Alevism and the transformations the site has undergone over time. In Raa Haqi belief, the Springs constitute an important sacred site where relationships between human and non-human beings are sustained alongside practices of visitation and ritual. Oral narratives about Munzur and the relationships these narratives establish with water, stone, mountains, and trout reveal how the site's sacrality continues to be maintained in the present. At the same time, from the early Republican period onwards, the Springs have been reshaped through policies concerning transportation, conservation, recreation, and economic use. These interventions have affected not only the site's physical appearance but also the ways in which local people relate to and use this sacred space. Through these transformations, the entry approaches the Munzur Springs as a living sacred site situated at the intersection of belief, everyday life, and spatial intervention.

Keywords: Kültürel Miras, Munzur Gözeleri, Peyzaj, Raa Haqi

Introduction

Known locally as *Çımê Muzîri*, the Munzur Springs are located in the village of Ziyaret (*Jiare*), in the district of Ovacık in Dersim. The area, where the Munzur River rises and which sustains the rich biodiversity of Munzur Valley National Park, has also been the focus of conservation policies developed at different times. Yet the Munzur Springs cannot be defined solely by their natural characteristics or conservation status. They are regarded as

one of the most important sacred sites of Dersim Alevism: a place where water, stone, plants, animals, and humans come together through ritual relationships, where sacrality is experienced through visitation practices, and where it is continually reproduced and transmitted from one generation to the next through collective memory.

While Alevi religious culture understands the site as a place of visitation and healing, its location within the boundaries of the village has also made it part of everyday village life. This ambivalent position of the Springs between sacrality and profane life is significant. It should not, however, be understood simply as the site being situated between communal practices of worship and the rhythms of village life. The Springs are also simultaneously subject to the dynamics of conservation and commodification.

Sacrality and Everyday Life at the Munzur Springs

In *Dersim*, belief is described as *Raa/Re/Yol* and, unlike the prevailing Kızılbaş tradition, is shaped through a powerful relationality with nature (Deniz 2016, 177-198). According to Beşikçi, the proper name of the Alevi faith is *Rêya Heq*, and he characterises *Raa Haq* as a “religion of nature” based on relations of reciprocity with the natural world. He argues that people establish reciprocal relationships with mountains, water, trees, and certain animals believed to protect them by presenting offerings to these beings (Beşikçi 2024, 162). This approach demonstrates that the relationship between human and non-human beings in *Raa Haq* belief is neither merely symbolic nor metaphorical. Rather, it is sustained in everyday life through practices of protection, offering, and reciprocity.

Raa Haq belief encompasses two realms: the visible, or *zahir*, and the unseen, or *batın*. According to Gezik and Çakmak, commitment to the four authorities of *rayber*, *pir*, *musahip*, and *mürşit* in the *zahir* realm enables a person to fulfil the requirements of the stages of *şeriat*, *tarikât*, *marifet*, and *hakikat*. By fulfilling their responsibilities in the

zahir realm, a person becomes qualified to gain access to *batın* knowledge. Even if they do not attain this knowledge during their own lifetime, they may make such access possible for subsequent generations. The preference for the designation Raa Haq rather than Alevism is associated with the understanding that this belief is not confined to an Ali-centred conception, but encompasses various sacred figures, saints, sacred sites, and nature as parts of the divine path (Gezik and Çakmak 2010). In this context, nature, sacred figures, and sacred sites are not merely surrounding elements of the Raa Haq path; they are among the constitutive sources of this religious world.

Gültekin (2024, 120-49) similarly uses the concept of Raa Haqi to refer to Dersim Alevism or Kurdish Alevism. According to Gültekin, reality in Raa Haqi belief is not understood through an anthropocentric and single-layered conception of the world. Within this cosmology, the *zahir* realm-the visible material world experienced by humans in everyday life-is conceived together with the *batın* realm, which is inhabited by non-human beings and remains in continuous interaction with the *zahir* realm. The sacred beings inhabiting the *batın* realm are known as *jiare*. Jiares are not abstract or purely metaphysical entities; they are understood as possessing gender, character, kinship ties, and hierarchical relationships, much like humans. Some jiares hold the status of *wayir* (owner) and are regarded as powerful beings that exercise authority over other jiares. These sacred beings dwell in natural forms such as mountains, lakes, rivers, springs, forests, and trees. In local understandings, natural elements therefore cease to be merely components of an inanimate environment and instead become subjects possessing identity and agency, capable of establishing relationships with humans and embodying sacrality (Gültekin 2024, 120-49).

This ontological framework is essential to understanding the sacrality of the Munzur Springs. Here, water, soil, fish, trees, and mountains are not merely elements of a sacred place; they are beings through which sacrality itself is constituted

and sustained. Mountains, lakes, rivers, springs, trees, and similar places inhabited by sacred beings consequently become sacred sites visited as *jiare*. Visits to *jiare*s function as religious practices that reinforce relationships with these sacred beings. Water, soil, pieces of cloth, and similar substances taken from these sites are known as *teberik*, allowing sacrality to be carried into everyday life.

Within this cosmological framework, Munzur is a figure who passes from the *zahir* realm into the *batin* realm—that is, one who becomes hidden in mystery (*sır olur*). In *Raa Haq* belief, this transition is not death but a cyclical passage known as *devriye*. Munzur does not die; he continues to exist by concealing his body within water, stone, and mountain. Sacrality is thus borne not so much by Munzur's individual person as by the water, trout, stone, and mountain with which he becomes one. The fact that the region's most important river and mountain bear his name makes Munzur's sacrality visible not only in narratives but also in the geography itself. Narratives concerning Munzur continue to circulate in different variants, both in written sources and in the language, prayers, and everyday practices of the local population. Teberiks such as water and soil taken from the site for healing purposes also carry contemporary traces of this sacrality. The story of Munzur, a poor shepherd whose miraculous powers gave his name to the river and mountain, is therefore not simply a legend belonging to the past but a living narrative that continues to exist in the landscape and in everyday life. Munzur's meaning emerges not only from his legendary past but also from the various ways in which his sacrality continues to find expression in the landscape and in everyday practices.

The sacrality of the Munzur Springs is grounded largely in oral narratives centred on the miraculous powers of Munzur Baba. Although the data I collected contain several variants of the legend, the most widespread version recounts that Munzur worked as a shepherd for his master. While his master was on the pilgrimage to Mecca, he developed a desire for helva, and Munzur miraculously became aware of

this. Munzur had helva prepared and, through a miracle, delivered it to his master during the pilgrimage. When his master returned and told the villagers about this miracle, Munzur's secret was revealed. Munzur then set off towards the mountain carrying a copper pail filled with milk. Following the trail of the spilt milk, he became hidden in mystery at his fortieth step, and water burst forth from forty springs at the place where he disappeared.

In local belief, the trout believed to perform the *semah* on Thursday nights, the waters of the Munzur River, and other sacred beings are regarded as carriers of this relationship. Sacrality, in short, is continually reproduced through relationships and rituals involving human and non-human beings. Within the cosmology of Dersim Alevism, the Munzur Springs constitute a relational sacred site in which humans, water, fish, trees, and other non-human beings are understood as parts of the same cosmological order. This ontology does not establish a hierarchical separation between human and non-human beings. On the contrary, all beings relate to one another as members of the same moral community, on the basis of reciprocity. Trout are therefore not simply a natural species but beings that participate in ritual practices and carry sacrality. The Munzur Springs are consequently not merely a water source, a natural resource, or a site of economic value. Rather, they are a living sacred site that renders Munzur Baba's mystery visible in the *zahir* realm, where continuity between the *batin* and *zahir* realms is experienced through sacred stones, waters, and other beings, and where sacrality is continually reproduced through relationships between human and non-human beings.

Within the Munzur Springs are focal points where sacrality is concentrated and experienced according to particular rules. The area described in local narratives as "the place where Munzur became hidden in mystery", together with the oak tree and the pool believed to possess healing powers, constitute the principal elements at the centre of this sacred site. These elements are not independent of one another;

they acquire meaning within an integrated spatial configuration. Water, stone, tree, pool, and fish, as elements of the sacred, are not actors that carry sacrality in isolation. What renders them sacred is the relationality they establish with one another and with humans within the local belief system.

The Munzur Springs offer a distinctive example of a sacred site jointly produced through space as experienced in everyday life and space as lived through symbolic meanings. For local people, there are no absolute boundaries between the sacred and the everyday. Everyday life is instead shaped through continuous relationships with sacred beings and places. Sacrality therefore persists within the ordinary flow of life rather than being confined to particular times or rituals. Visiting Munzur to distribute *lokma* following a dream or to “awaken” the ritual lamp (*çerağ*), catching the trout living in the Munzur waters only when necessary and for healing purposes, and expressing one’s wishes at the sacred site are among the everyday manifestations of this relationship.

Conservation, Planning, and Secularisation at Munzur

The transformation of the Munzur Springs from a site defined by natural and religious qualities into an area organised for leisure and recreation is not a recent development. Traces of this spatial vision can be followed back to the early Republican period. Following his visit to the village of Ziyaret in 1939, Naşit Hakkı Uluğ recorded a conversation with General Alpdoğan, who represented the military and administrative authority of the period, concerning plans for Ziyaret’s future. Alpdoğan envisaged the construction of roads connecting Erzincan with Ovacık, easier access to Ziyaret, the building of a hotel near the springs, and the transformation of the area into a “civilised corner” where people could come to rest (Uluğ 2009, 102). This vision demonstrates that, even at this early date, Ziyaret was being reimagined not only as a sacred visitation site endowed with meaning through religious practices, but

also as an organised landscape offering transport, accommodation, and leisure facilities. This approach subsequently assumed a new form through different conservation policies.

Although Munzur Valley National Park, designated in 1971, is one of Turkey's most important conservation areas, the Munzur Springs do not lie within its boundaries. Nevertheless, because of their natural, ecological, and religious significance, the Springs have been subject to various conservation policies. By Decision No. 1409 of the Erzurum Regional Council for the Conservation of Cultural and Natural Assets, dated 17 July 2003, the area was registered as a First-Degree Natural Protected Area. This classification defined it as an area that had to be preserved in its existing form, except for scientific research, and granted it a high level of protection in the public interest (TMMOB 2025).

Following the adoption of the Principle Decisions of the Central Commission for the Conservation of Natural Assets in 2013, work began to reclassify natural protected areas as Strictly Protected Sensitive Areas, Qualified Natural Conservation Areas, or Sustainable Conservation and Controlled Use Areas. In 2023, a decision by the Ministry of Environment, Urbanisation and Climate Change changed the site's status, which it had held since 2003, from a First-Degree Natural Protected Area to a "Qualified Natural Conservation Area".

This change in conservation status should not be understood merely as a legal and administrative revision. It was accompanied by various interventions that directly affected the physical, cultural, and religious meanings of the Munzur Springs. Measures introduced at the site in recent years have reshaped patterns of use and the experience of visitation, prompting renewed debate over the relationship between conservation, development, and religious practice. In this process, the Munzur Springs have become a dynamic landscape in which different actors' understandings of

sacrality, conservation, use, and development intersect. The most visible manifestations of this transformation include spatial arrangements oriented towards tourism and recreation, the activities of the Munzur Water Factory, and changes in everyday practices resulting from increased visitor numbers.

The first step in establishing the Munzur Water Factory, located within the Sustainable Conservation and Controlled Use Area, was taken on 28 December 1999, when numerous partners from Dersim came together; production began in 2014. According to Güneş and Tuna, the factory's establishment was framed through claims that it would contribute to "normalisation" and provide "social benefit" in Dersim (Güneş and Tuna 2012, 100). The authors also argue that the investors' decision to enter the bottled-water sector was influenced by the substantial market potential generated by the strong association between the name "Munzur" and Dersim identity. From this perspective, the use of the Munzur name may be understood not only as an attempt to generate social benefit but also as a deliberate marketing strategy based on the relationship between Dersim identity and economic value. Munzur water has thus become an economic commodity circulating within the market while remaining inseparable from its sacred and local meanings.

A similar transformation can be observed in the reorganisation of the Munzur Springs for recreational purposes. As part of the Munzur Springs Recreation Project, implemented by the Fırat Development Agency with funding from the Ministry of Environment, Urbanisation and Climate Change, footpaths were constructed and bridges redesigned within the sacred site, while basalt stones were laid at its entrance. Outside the protected area, a car park, market stalls, a gendarmerie post, and surveillance systems were established. Physical boundaries introduced in places where people had previously engaged in practices such as touching the water directly, collecting *teberik*, or using the pools for healing have determined how the sacred site may be

accessed and the forms of contact permitted within it. A visitation site experienced through ritual practices and imbued with meaning through everyday use has consequently been transformed into a recreational area in which movement and use are regulated to a certain extent. The closure of the healing pools to public access demonstrates in particular that physical interventions undertaken for conservation purposes do not always correspond with the continuity of local religious practices. Such interventions reveal the tension between a space designed according to conservation priorities and a space experienced and endowed with meaning by local people.

The transformation of the Munzur Springs is not limited to the physical reorganisation of the site. The Legend of Munzur, one of the narratives through which the site acquires meaning, is also being reinterpreted within changing social and political contexts. These examples indicate that the transformation occurring at the Munzur Springs involves more than the physical reorganisation of a sacred site. It represents a broader process in which patterns of spatial use, the meanings attributed to the beings inhabiting the site, and the stories told about it are changing together.

Conclusion

The Munzur Springs are not a place where sacrality survives only in particular rituals or narratives inherited from the past. They constitute a sacred site where sacrality is continually reconstituted through relationships between human and non-human beings. The meaning of the Springs therefore emerges through a network of relationships in which the natural and the sacred cannot be separated. Munzur's continued presence in narratives and the material environment is one of the principal elements sustaining this continuity.

The contemporary transformation of the Springs may be understood not as the disappearance of these relationships

but as their reconfiguration through encounters with different actors and conceptions of space. Interventions undertaken in the name of conservation, recreation, tourism, and economic use reorganise how the site is used and experienced, while local religious practices continue under these changing conditions. The result is a multilayered spatial relationship in which there are no absolute boundaries between sacrality and conservation, everyday life and tourism, or local meanings and economic value.

From this perspective, the Munzur Springs should be understood not merely as a natural area requiring protection or as a sacred site that people visit, but as a meeting place for different beings, memories, and forms of use. Their contemporary meaning is shaped by the continuities and transformations generated through these encounters.

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