Mountains and Fire Worship: Sacred Peaks and Fiery Rituals: Tracing the Pre-Christian Roots of Dersim’s Alevi Beliefs

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Summary
The entry informs about the continuity of pre-Christian/pre-Islamic veneration of high, usually volcanic mountains in the antic Armenian Highlands, including Dersim. These venerated mountains were dedicated to Mazdaist and even pre-Iranian deities, such as the sun god Mithras/Armenian: Mihr, the Armenian pre-Iranian god of hunting and victory, Va(r)hagn, and the creator and supreme Mazdaist deity Ahuramazda (Middle Persian: Ohrmazd), who was worshipped in Armenia under his Parthian name Aramazd. Toponyms and religious rituals in Dersim confirm that Alevite sanctities such as Mountain Düzgün Baba, Tujik (Mount Baba Sultan), Tendürek etc. stand in the continuity of deities and religious practices dating back to antiquities when Armenian immigrants, trying to avoid Christianization, escaped to the Dersim mountains.

Keywords: Dağ Kültü, Dersim, Raa Haqi

Mountain and Fire Worship

The religious worship of high mountains is widespread in many cultures throughout the world, including among Indo-European peoples such as the Armenians, Kurds, Zazas, and Dersimlis. Cone-shaped volcanic mountains are particularly revered, as their eruptions cause terror and destruction, but

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their lava also promotes fertility and prosperity. This is especially true of the highest mountain in the Armenian Highlands and in Turkey, the Great → Ararat (Armenian: Masis; Kurdish: Çiyayê Agirî / Shaxi – "Fire Mountain," Turkish: Ağrı Dağı – "Mountain of (Labor) Pains"; 5,165 m), but also for the mountains Aragats (4,090 m), K'ark'e (near Ashtishat, Muş Province), Parkhar, Grgur, Korduk' (Greek: Kordyene), Npat, and Varag (on Lake Van). In pre-Christian and folk beliefs, they are inhabited by gods and spirits, including the Vishapner (Vishap – "dragon") and K'aǰk' ("brave"). Living in the mountains, caves and gorges, the latter have the task of carrying out punishments. "Armenian mythology, for example, knows the K'aǰk' of Mount Masis, who chained Artavazd, cursed by his father, in a cave."[1] The Vishapner, on the other hand, appear in Armenian fairy tales and legends as evil spirits in various forms; their oldest incarnation seems to have been the snake, their most common one that of a giant (whale) fish. Tall steles, the Vishapakarner ("dragon stones"), have been erected in connection with spring and fertility cults in the Armenian highlands since the Bronze Age (c. 4000-2200 BC).

Picture1 (Vishap in Nor Nork/Yerevan; photo: Armen Manukov; https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/5a/Vishapakar_(Dragonstone)2,_Nor_Nork.JPG)

Picture2 Vishapakar with ram-like "face" in Yegheknadzor (Vayots Dzor province; by Vahe Martirosyan – https://www.flickr.com/photos/129665369@N02/29357166671/, CC BY 2.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=99390186

Picture3 © Hıdır Yanmaz (https://www.facebook.com/TunceliDagcilikVeKampSporlariKulubu/posts/düzgün-baba-dağı-ve-cemevi-ziyaretitunceli-dağcilik-kulübü-tudak-ve-tumayig-turi/2348106025283778/)

In Dersim, the mountain near the village of Kıl outside

Nazımiye, which is attributed to the mythological ancestor of the Kuraşan Ocağ or Kurashan community, is considered a locus sanctum (ziyaret, jiar). According to local belief, Seyyid Kureş/Kuresin (Sah Haydar), who is known primarily as Düzgün Baba (Kırmancki: Bava Duzgı, Kurdish: Dızgun / Duzgi Bava), disappeared from its summit, which the locals call Kemerê Duzgıni (Duzgı Rock), Kemerê Bımbareki (Zazaki; "Holy Rock"; Mubarak) or Kemerê Seyyid Kureş/Kuresin. The motif of ascension is also found in both Christianity and Islam, whose founder and prophet Mohammad ascended to heaven from the Temple Mount (Mount Zion) in Jerusalem.

The Alevi Düzgün Baba was a descendant of Sayyid Mahmudu'l-Kebir-Seyyid Hacı Kures'e Qûr, who moved to Dersim with twelve Talip tribes in the 1220s. According to tradition, his ancestors came from Kermanshah and spoke Kırmancki (Kirmanşah). Duzgı/Dızgun or Düzgün means "perfect, regular, correct, and smooth" in Kırmancki as well as in Turkish. In Dersim Kırmancki, it means "holy." Duzgı/Dızgun is thought to be derived from the term Tuzik/Tujik (Kurdish for 'sharp,' 'pointed'). Like Duzgı, Tujik relates also to a mountain (Turkish: Sultan Baba Dağı) in Dersim and is identified with the Herculean, presumably pre-Iranian Armenian god of hunting and victory, Va(r)hagn[2]. Within the framework of this continuity thesis, it has been argued that the place name Tujik derives from duzakh, which meant "hell" among the Mazdaist Armenians.

Mount Tujik is also an ancient but active volcano. Another example can be found in the toponym Tendürek (Armenian: T'andurek, T'ondrak – Թանդուրեկ, Թոնդրակ; 3,452 m), known to Turks as Cehennem dağı ("Hell Mountain"). The Armenian place name is derived from *tandur* ("baking oven"), which is popularly regarded as a kind of small hell. Its cup-shaped crater is 320 m deep.[3]

Picture4 Mount Tujik (Sultan Baba); © HıdırYanmaz; https://www.facebook.com/dersimliolmakbirayricaliktir/posts/tujik-dağı/1640188622798514/

There is much to suggest that the cult surrounding Düzgün Baba (Bava Duzgı, Dızgun Bava) is part of the tradition of the cult surrounding the Armenian sun god Mihr (Persian: Mithras)[4], whose earthly manifestation is fire. The mountains of Dersim were probably a place of refuge for Mazdean Armenians who had rejected Christianization. The cult sites of several Mazdaist deities in the belt around ancient Dersim are particularly evidence of this continuity. Bagayarič (Pekeric, since 1963 Çadırkaya in the province of Erzincan) was, for example, a cult center of Mihr, Ani-Kamakh (Kurdish: Kemax; Turkish: Kemah) the most important cult center of the creator and supreme Mazdaist deity Ahuramazda (Middle Persian: Ohrmazd), who was worshipped in Armenia under his Parthian name Aramazd. In addition, traces of the continuity between Mazdaism and the Kurdish Alevism of Dersim can still be seen today in some place Dersim names. The most obvious example is that the name of the Mercan Mountains (Munzur Dağları, also Munzur Sıradağları or Mercan Sıradağları) is etymologically related to the name Mithras.

Some mythological elements illustrate this continuity, too. First of all, Mithras/Mihr was a god of contracts and friendship, as well as the protector of truth. Düzgün Baba is also considered by the Alevis of Dersim to be the protector of truth and honesty. He is the epitome of trustworthiness. As the protector of truth, Duzgi resolves individual conflicts among Alevi Zazas, Kurds, and the Alevized Armenians of Dersim. If someone has a problem (dava) with someone else and cannot resolve it himself, he climbs to the summit of Duzgın Mountain and asks for help with the words: “I have left my case to Düzgün Baba.”

The belief also states that a married man in Dersim who does not yet have a son visits Düzgün Baba, makes a sacrifice, takes a vow, and begs him to give him a son. If his wish is fulfilled, he names his son Düzgün. For this reason, the name Düzgün is widespread in Dersim. This characteristic is also found in Mithras. In the Avesta, he bears the epithet “the giver of sons” (putro-da). The fact that the Alevis of Dersim

pray to Duzgı at the first rays of the morning sun-as did the followers of Mihr/Mithras-is another clear similarity.

Mithras and Duzgı are both shepherds. Both are symbolized by eagles, which is called Heliye Çhal (Heliyo Duzgıni) in the case of Duzgı. Both are horsemen and wear red robes. For this reason, Duzgı also bears the epithet Surela (<sur; red). This Mihr tradition also includes one of Armenia's most popular saints, the Greek martyr General (Stratelatos) Sergios (Armenian: Surb Sargis Zoravar - Unıրp Uարqիu qnրավարp; 285-337), patron of the youth and love. He and his son Martiros ("martyr") are also depicted as riders on horseback and in a fire-red cloak. **Picture5** Byzantine general and martyr Sergios/Sargis and his son Martiros (source: Diocese of the Armenian Church of America (Eastern) – https://armenianchurch.us/way-of-a-warrior-st-sarkis-4/)

In addition, like Mithras (Anahita), Düzgün Baba had a sister (Xaskar). While Anahita is the goddess of water and symbolizes purity, Duzgı's sister Xaskar is associated with a sacred water source on Mount Duzgı. This natural sanctuary is known by her name as Henia (kaniya) Xaskarê. It is believed that the spring will not dry up if visitors have a good heart and drink from it. This belief is consistent with the cult of the Indo-Iranian goddess Anahita (Armenian: Ani), the daughter of Aramazd, who is considered pure and immaculate. In the Avesta, an-ahita means "immaculate." Furthermore, the name Xaskar probably derives from the Armenian *voskuts* (Western Armenian: voskeen), which means "made of gold." In fact, Anahita is often described as wearing golden robes. Consequently, according to the prevailing view, Xaskar and Duzgi/Dızgun emerged as a continuation of the Anahita and Mithras cults of the Mazdaist Armenians who lived in the Munzur Mountains in ancient times.[5]

"The Old Armenian forms Mdnjur and Mzur = Mazur probably go back to an even older *Munjur. But Munjur had to become Muzur in the dialect of Aken (= Egin on the

Euphrates west of our canton) (…). (…) Because of the cult of Anahita that flourished in this canton (Strabo c. 532), it was also called η Αναχίτα Χώρα [the land of Anahita] (…). Presumably, the great mountain with 'the place of the gods, which is called the throne of Anahit' (…) was located in this canton. Certainly, however, the following places were located here: Erêz (Gen. Erizay) with the temple of Anahita (…), Erizay (…), later Erznga (…), Erzngan, Ezngan (…), today's Erzingian or Erzinjan [Erzincan]; the village of Til with the temple of Nanè (…), east of the river Gail [Armenian 'wolf'], now Til or Thil on the right bank of a tributary of the Euphrates, at the eastern foot of Kohanam Dagh; the village of Khakh (Xax) northwest of Thil."[6]

Picture6

https://www.progressuniversity.am/events/trndez-in-armenia

Even among the Christianized Armenians, the worship of the sun god Mihr remained so powerful that Christian priests had to incorporate his sun and fire cult into their faith (→ interpretatio christiana): On the feast day of Christ's presentation in the temple (Armenian: տեառնընդառաջ, Տյառնընդառաջ – Teaṙnəndaraǰ; originally: Տերընդեզ – T(e)rndez – "The Lord is with you"), which is celebrated on 14 February, ancient pre-Christian purification rituals, especially fire worship, have been preserved. On this day, bonfires are lit in the courtyards of churches and houses, on rooftops and in the streets, and people gather around them singing and praying. Newlyweds jump over the flames, believing that if touched, they will soon be blessed with children. Barren women burn the hems of their clothes with "holy" fire in the hope of healing. The ashes from the bonfires are scattered from pots into houses and barns and onto the land near the houses to bring abundance, fertility, and good health.[7] On this day, people eat roasted wheat, raisins, fruits, and various sweets. People also keep some of the ashes in their homes to protect themselves from illness and misfortune. If the smoke and flames from the wood pile drift eastward, toward the sunrise, it is a sign that the year will be a good one.

Christ is still worshipped today as the “Sun of Justice” (Prophet Maleachi 3,2), and a hymn of the same name is sung in Armenian churches on 14 February.[8]

Conclusion

The veneration of mountains, particularly volcanoes, constitutes one of the oldest and most universal components of nature-based religious belief systems. The inhabitants of the volcanic landscape of Dersim also preserve this pre-Abrahamic belief, which they have firmly integrated into their respective religions-Mazdaism, Christianity, and *Raa Haq*. The reverence for active or extinct volcanoes is furthermore closely connected to fire cults, in which fire represents an ambivalent element: it destroys, yet also provides warmth and light. Fire embodies deities and saints, most notably the Mazdaist sun god Mithras, *Wa(r)hagn*, the Armenian god of hunting and victory venerated since pre-Iranian times, as well as the supreme Mazdaist deity *Ahuramazda* (Middle Persian: *Ohrmazd*; Parthian and Armenian: *Aramazd*). Within the Alevi saint *Duzgi Bava (Baba)* of the *Raa Haq* community, essential elements of Mithraic veneration continue to endure.

Endnotes

[1]: Ishkol-Kerovpian, K.: Mythology of the Pre-Christian Armenians. p. 119
[2]: Aksoy, Gürdal: Dersim. Alevilik, Ermenilik, Kürtlük. Ankara: Dipnot Yayınları, 2012, pp. 99-115
[3]: Թոնդրակ (հրաբուխ) [T'ondrak (volcano)], https://hy.wikipedia.org/wiki/_()
[4]: Aksoy, Gürdal: Dersim Alevi Kürt Mitolojisi, Raa Haq'da Dinsel Figürler, Istanbul: Komal, 2006, pp. 37-122
[5]: Ibid.
[6] Hübschmann, Heinrich: Die altarmenischen Ortsnamen. Amsterdam: Oriental Press, 1969, p. 285f.
[7] "Տյառնընդառաջ," "Wik'ipedia," https://hy.wikipedia.org/wiki/
[8] Ishkol-Kerovpian, op.cit., p. 128

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