Tree worship: Sacred Trees and Wishing Trees

Prof. Dr. Tessa Hofmann
Tessa.Hofmann@katwastan.de

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Address: Alevi Ansiklopedisi
Körnebachstr. 49-51, 44143 Dortmund

info@aleviansiklopedisi.com

Summary
Tree worship refers to the veneration of trees, groups of trees, and sacred groves. They can be regarded as the embodiment of mythological beings themselves, as their symbol, or as their seat. Tree worship is still widespread among many peoples around the world today. This article examines the origins and manifestations of Alevi tree worship. In Asia Minor, the Armenian Highlands, Dersim, and other Kurdish settlement areas, the worship of trees dates back to the Bronze Age. As the seat of deities, spirits, and demons who, depending on their nature, provided protection, fulfilled wishes, or had to be appeased, the Alevi population of Dersim worshipped mostly oaks and junipers. In popular belief, these also function as wish or votive trees (Kurdish: Dārī Mirāzān). The Dersim Raa Haqi religious community's closeness to nature and their worship of trees made them the target of an aggressive policy of environmental destruction (ecocide), which in turn triggered protests and increased environmental awareness among the inhabitants of Dersim and the Dersim diaspora.

Keywords: Alevi, Alevi Kurds, Dersim;, Ecocide, Environmental Destruction, Environmentalism, Junipers, Kird, Oak Trees;, Raa Haq, Sacred Trees, Tree Of Life, Votiv Trees

Kurdish Tree Cult

Across a wide range of cultures and mythologies worldwide, nature in its various forms-including trees, rivers, and mountains-is regarded as sacred, and it is believed to embody deities, spirits, or even the souls of ancestors. Such belief systems are also found in Kurdish culture and mythology, which attribute spiritual or supernatural qualities to all natural objects, including stones, water, plants, and animals.

(…) In what is today Kurdistan, from Late Antiquity to the modern era, the sacred tree-alongside other recurring elements (such as sacred mountains, healing springs, and natural caves)-formed part of the local religious complex and

its sacred landscape. Popular beliefs and practices associated with sacred trees have survived in this region up to the present day, particularly within indigenous religious traditions (e.g., Yazidism or Yarsanism).[i] T. F. Aristova notes that until relatively recently, many Muslim rites and beliefs among the Kurds coexisted with pre-Islamic cults connected to lakes, stones, graves, trees, fire, and ancestor worship.[ii][iii]

In Kurdish mythology and religious beliefs, three types of sacred trees can be identified. First, there is a tree-god named Yazd, whose worship survived into the early twentieth century, though not necessarily as an organised religion. The tree believed to be inhabited by Yazd was regarded as the king of the forest. Trees or shrubs surrounding the sacred tree were highly venerated, as they were considered the children of Yazd.

The second type of sacred tree is regarded as the dwelling place of spirits that endow it with supernatural qualities. These tree spirits may be ancestral beings, jinn, demons (dēws), or other supernatural entities. They are seen as guardians, protectors, and sources of wisdom and guidance. This is most clearly expressed in rituals associated with tree pīrs and Dārī Mirāzān / Dārā Mirāzā (wish trees). The third type of sacred tree is the Tree of Life.[iv]

Tree Worship among the Zazas and Armenians of Dersim

According to Gevorg Halajian (DAN V: folios 596ff.), an Armenian intellectual and resident of Dersim, “the Zazas generally possessed an overwhelming sense of reverence for every tree and every green plant; they regarded damaging or unjustified felling of trees as a great sin. Consequently, for domestic use-firewood or construction-they cut only dead trees, and only in late autumn. They never burned freshly cut wood, but allowed it to rest for some time, even two or three years, so that the spirit of the tree could finally leave it. Anyone-regardless of gender, age, or religion-who set fire to

the forest was subject to death under strict customary law, since such an act was considered a grave violation of the divine order. The perpetrators were pursued like those who had committed unlawful murder, tantamount to a blood feud.

In the mountainous regions of Dersim, the primary objects of veneration in the plant world were above all the juniper and the oak, with the black oak being the most revered among oaks. Juniper inspired particular veneration as a tree believed to grant luck and prosperity. Spruce and wild poplar were also regarded with awe by the Zazas, the latter symbolising chastity and fidelity.

Widely venerated and feared among both the Zazas and the local Armenians were the so-called 'Junipers of Sıbohan', a grove located between the villages of Chndzorek and Puta, in the rocky area near the Armenian monastery of Surb Ohan / Hovhannes (St John). It consisted mainly of dead and dried-out juniper trees; the number of green trees hardly exceeded one hundred. This grove was believed to possess the power to bring rain. In dry years, people-Zazas and Armenians alike-made pilgrimages to the grove, sacrificing animals in the belief that rain would soon follow. Dry firewood from the grove could only be burned at the place where the meat of the sacrificed animals was cooked. It was strictly forbidden to take wood from the grove home, an act considered a transgression punishable by divine retribution."[v]

"Another sacred wooded site in the same area was the 'Sıbminas Grove', consisting exclusively of ancient and very large oaks, located near an Armenian sanctuary called Surb Minas (St Minas) and revered equally by Zazas and Armenians. They believed these trees could protect people from hurricanes and unexpected natural disasters. The grove had clearly defined boundaries that guaranteed protection from pursuit, even for those who had abducted a girl: no killing or violence was permitted within the boundaries of these sacred trees. Pilgrimage to the grove usually took place annually after the harvest. The grove was believed to possess inherent power to protect against various

misfortunes.

Finally, according to Halajian (ibid.: 598), before 1914 there were two large and tall spruce trees near the village of Haydaran, believed to protect the area from enemies-especially Turkish and Kurdish bandits. This site also functioned as a place of pilgrimage (…).”[vi]

Armenian Tree Cult

Tree worship constitutes one of the oldest cults in the Armenian Highlands. In the Kingdom of Urartu (9th-6th centuries BCE), the Tree of Life (Armenian: Կենաց Ծառ, Kenats tsar) was a religious symbol, painted on fortress walls and carved into warriors’ armour. The branches of the tree were evenly distributed to the right and left of the trunk, each branch bearing a leaf, with a leaf also crowning the top. Attendants stood on either side of the tree with one hand raised, as if tending to it.

The storm and weather god Teysheba (also Teysheb), adopted by Urartu from the Hurrians of Asia Minor, is iconographically depicted standing on a bull next to the Tree of Life, holding a leaf in one hand and a bowl in the other.[vii]

The Armenian successors of the Urartians continued this tree veneration. “Certain forests were dedicated to this cult and regarded as sacred sites. Moses of Khorene (I, ch. 20) reports that Anushawan, the grandson of the [mythical king] Ara the Beautiful, bore the epithet Sos (poplar) because he was consecrated to the poplars planted by his great-grandfather in Armavir.”[viii] The Armenian scholar Adontz associates Armenian tree worship with the cult of Attis, “since Attis was represented in the Armenian pantheon by Ara. According to Adontz, Anushawan would be the Armenianised form of the Persian Anusherwan (‘immortal soul’).”[ix]

Among the “Children of the Sun” (Arewordik), Armenian followers of Zoroastrianism who survived until the 1920s,[x]

the poplar was considered a sacred tree,[xi] whereas Iranian Zoroastrians revered the cypress as the holiest tree.

The swaying of poplar branches and leaves-and those of other species-caused by wind led in certain regions of the Caucasus and the Turkish Black Sea area to the belief that trees are capable of prayer; the whispering of poplar leaves also served as an oracle. Trees with predominantly rigid branches-such as the oak-were regarded as non-praying. The belief in sacred praying trees likely originated in the Caucasus. In Hamshen (Turkish: Hemşin), a region of Rize province inhabited by Islamised Armenians, the tradition partially survives that three days before and during religious festivals no branches may be cut, as the branches are believed to be praying.[xii]

Wish Trees

A wish tree, also known as a votive tree, is a solitary tree-often located at a sacred site-believed to possess supernatural powers. By tying a strip of cloth or another personal object to the tree, individuals hope for the fulfilment of a wish. Such offerings may also be given in gratitude for a miracle already received. Depending on local belief systems-found in principle in all religions-the wish-granting power may be attributed to spirits, fairies, saints, or deities.

In popular Islam, wish trees can be found from Morocco through Turkey (dilek ağaçları) and Pakistan to Indonesia. They are often located at special sites such as sacred springs, churches or chapels, or Islamic shrines.

Dārī Mirāzān: The Wish Tree

Wish trees are a universal belief known to all cultures of Dersim (Armenians, Zazas, Kurds). They are often situated near sacred springs or rivers and are associated with water and fertility cults.

One manifestation of tree worship in Kurdish culture is the

Dārī Mirāzān or Dārā Mirāzā, the “Tree of Wishes.”[xiii] Women visited these trees believing that such visits would bless infertile women and help them conceive. Others believed the trees possessed spiritual or physical healing powers. Anyone seeking the fulfilment of a wish could turn to the wish tree. A piece of cloth was tied to the tree, symbolising the binding of a part of oneself to the tree in order to obtain blessing or healing. Those suffering from illness tied a rag to the tree in the belief that their pain was thereby transferred to it. At the same time, they formulated a request and vowed to perform a good deed should it be granted.[xiv]

The wish tree is considered the dwelling place of spirits, jinn, or dēws (demons), associated with fertility, guidance, power, and protection-but also with misfortune and bad luck. Tree veneration is therefore often accompanied by offerings to the spirits beneath the trees, presented as votive gifts or to ward off evil forces and calamities. Such trees may stand alone or in groves; their sanctity depends more on location (sacred sites), size, and age than on tree species.

Henry Harald Hansen describes a type of wish tree decorated not only with rags but also with a ram’s horn, beside which a sacred wooden hand was erected. The tree stood within the fence protecting a sacred grave.[xv] This sacred hand was likely the Ḥamsa (Arabic for “five”), a symbolic hand representing protection in both Jewish and Islamic cultures. In Islamic tradition it symbolises the “Hand of Fāṭimah,” the daughter of the Prophet Muḥammad.

In some regions, nails are driven into sacred trees to transfer pain or illness to the tree. Such wish trees are called Dāra Bizmār (“nail tree”) in Kurdish. Hammering nails or hanging garments are “binding rituals” through which individuals seek healing or solutions by transferring illness or problems to the tree.[xvi]

Rain rituals are also often performed around wish trees. Thomas Bois describes an example from Silemani and

Kirkuk, where Kurds attempted to bring rain-or make it stop-through magical rites:

“The women dress in their finest clothes and go together as a group into the countryside to an old, venerable tree, under whose shade they sit down. They bring the necessary kitchen utensils and provisions and dance around the pot until the food is cooked. After the meal, they pour water over the most beautiful dress among them and wait for rain. If it does not rain by the time they return, they pour water over each other’s clothes and return home completely soaked.”[xvii]

World Tree and Tree of Life

The World Tree is a universal mythological symbol of the world axis (axis mundi), the centre of the world, or the biblical Tree of Life in Paradise.

In the creation narrative of Genesis, the Tree of Life stands at the centre of Paradise and grants eternal life to those who eat its fruit. Adam and Eve are expelled to prevent them from eating from the Tree of Life after already having eaten from the Tree of Knowledge, their punishment being the loss of immortality.

In Jewish mythology, the Tree of Life (etz chaim) or “Tree of Souls” stands in the Garden of Eden, blooming and producing new souls that fall into the Guf, the treasury of souls. The angel Gabriel takes the first soul that comes to his hand, while the fertility angel Leila watches over the embryo until birth.

The Tree of Life is a common motif in Jewish, Islamic, and Christian art. In stylised form it appears frequently in Armenian and Kurdish carpet weaving. In Jewish and Islamic art it often bears seven branches, corresponding to the seven arms of the Jewish menorah, symbolising the seven days of creation.

In Islam, the mythical Ṭūbā tree (“blessedness”) is known-not mentioned in the Qurʾān but described in the Hadith

literature as growing in the heavenly Paradise: “Blessed are those who believe and do righteous deeds” (ṭūbā lahum).[xviii] Tradition holds that its branches are made of emeralds and pearls, its crown so vast that a rider could travel a hundred years without leaving its shade. Its trunk stands in the Prophet’s palace, while its branches extend into the houses of the faithful, who partake of its fruits.

The Tree of Life symbolises all that is good and beneficial, in contrast to the cursed Zaqqūm tree, the tree of Hell, explicitly mentioned in the Qurʾān as the food of sinners. While Ṭūbā symbolises Paradise, the Sidra tree marks the limits of the universe, and the lotus tree represents the boundaries of all that can be imagined.

In Sufism, the tree symbolises proximity to God and appears prominently, for example, in the work of the Iranian philosopher and mystic Suhrawardī, who equates it with the Simorgh (Simurgh) tree of Iranian mythology.[xix]

Ṭūbā (Persian: □□□□), in the form Tuğba, is also a common female given name in Turkey.

Endangered Belief

Alevis have traditionally maintained a strong faith rooted in the veneration of nature, recognising divine or semi-divine figures associated with natural objects and places. In Kurdish-Alevi belief (Rêya Heqî), trees are often regarded as sacred natural beings and shrines known as jiare, venerated alongside other natural elements such as mountains and rivers. While certain tree-related rituals may be declining due to cultural change, repression, migration, and assimilation, historical accounts show that Kurds tied offerings to sacred trees, sought healing from their leaves, and even celebrated festivals beneath them. These practices reflect a broader tradition of nature veneration, in which divinity is believed to dwell in or be connected to specific natural sites and objects.

Historical sources suggest that non-Alevi groups-such as

Turkish authorities-viewed these practices of tree worship with suspicion and described them as acts of idolatry, as noted by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and nlka.ne.

Wish trees are highly revered in Kurdish culture. In Northern Kurdistan, the Turkish regime has often cut down sacred trees as a form of psychological warfare against the Kurds. Similarly, since the Turkish occupation of Afrin in Rojava in 2018, Turkish-backed Syrian mercenaries have felled more than 1.5 million trees, including over one hundred-year-old wish trees, as part of ethnic cleansing campaigns.[xx][xxi]

“For decades, the Turkish and Iranian regimes have destroyed the natural environment of Kurdish settlement areas-including many sacred trees, rivers, and springs-through dam construction, river diversion, and deforestation, in order to erase Kurdish cultural memory and their deep connection to the land.

In response to these attempts, we find within the Kurdish freedom movement a creative, revolutionary dialectic in which ancient nature-affirming values are endowed with new meaning through contemporary social and ecological struggles. [Ahmet Kerim] Gültekin cites Bilgin’s observation that ‘in the struggles of Kurdish Alevis against interventions such as dam projects, mining companies, tourism policies, and other threats, a new understanding of nature emerges.’ As Gültekin notes, in these struggles the Kurdish confrontation with the long-standing danger of genocide expands into a profound socio-ecological understanding of the threat posed by ecocide to both land and people.”[xxii]

Other scholars confirm the accusation of ecocide:

“The neoliberal ecological destruction taking place in Dersim and other parts of Turkish Kurdistan can be defined as deliberate and systematic environmental destruction, also described as (neo-colonial) ecocide. The genocide and development policies of the past appear to have condensed

into ecological plunder accompanied by the destruction of people's lifeworlds."[xxiii]

Conclusion

The deep connection to nature among Dersim Alevis shaped tree worship in this region with particular intensity. In their religious practices, sacred trees-whether as wish or votive trees, or as the Tree of Life-occupy a central role. The beliefs and rituals associated with them are shared by Raa Haqis with Armenians, Yazidis, and Yarsanis (Ahl-e Haqq belief).

The Turkish state's struggle against the Kurdish independence movement in Dersim also assumed religious dimensions by targeting local tree worship. The frequent destruction of forests, sacred groves, and trees-along with the illegal hunting of sacred bezoar goats-took on the character of ecocide, understood as the destruction of the indigenous population's lifeworlds and belief systems. As a consequence of displacement, migration, and assimilation, scholars observed a decline in tree worship. At the same time, ecocide revitalised local resistance against these measures and strengthened the environmental movement in Dersim and its diaspora.

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