



Kirvelik (1)

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Summary

Kirvelik, in the context of Dersim Alevism (Raa Haqi), does not merely denote a symbolic form of kinship shaped around the circumcision ritual. Rather, it refers to an institutional structure imbued with sacred meanings, generating strong moral obligations and regulating social relations. This practice, which has maintained continuity across the Balkans, Anatolia, Mesopotamia, and the Caucasus, has long played a decisive role in establishing social and religious contacts, organizing economic solidarity, forming political loyalties, transmitting knowledge, and resolving conflicts. Kirvelik is known to have been widely practiced not only among Kurdish Alevs of Dersim and their Sunni neighbors, but also across this broader geographical context among Êzidîs, Armenians, Greeks and Syriacs (Orthodox Christians), Arabs, Azerbaijanis, Georgians, as well as Shi'i and Sunni Muslim Turkish communities. In the case of Dersim, kirvelik is addressed within the framework of musahiplik, the Ocak-talip relationship, and the sacred vow (ikrar). Particularly under historical conditions in which Alevs often lived in close proximity with local Sunni communities, kirvelik emerges as an existential strategy that establishes a kinship-like moral bond between different ethno-religious groups. In this sense, it both regulates everyday life and enables communities to cope (reciprocally) with unequal power relations—most notably those structured along the lines of Alevi majorities and Sunni minorities. This entry also briefly discusses the transformations kirvelik has undergone in response to the political and social changes that have taken place since the 1970s.

Keywords: Christian, Dersim Aleviliği, Fictive Kinship, Hristiyan, Kirvelik, Muslim, Raa Haqi, Sanal Akrabalk, Sünni

Conceptual and Historical Framework

Although *kirvelik* is a form of relationship encountered in different regions of Anatolia and within various religious and social contexts, it acquires a distinct meaning and function in Dersim and within the belief universe of *Raa Haqi*. In the general anthropological literature, *kirvelik* is often discussed under categories such as “non-consanguineous kinship,” “ritual kinship,” or “fictive kinship” (Kudat 2006). While these definitions point to its formal characteristics, they remain insufficient for explaining the sacred dimension, moral binding force, and capacity for social sanction that

kirvelik carries in the context of Dersim.

Kirvelik is established through ritual participation that involves the *kirve* holding the circumcised child in the prescribed manner during the circumcision and, in many regions, assuming or sharing the associated expenses. Through this act, the *kirve* acquires a position of symbolic fatherhood vis-à-vis the child. In this way, *kirvelik* becomes a relationship that produces first-degree kinship or affinity without relying on biological ties. From this perspective, *kirvelik* is not merely a ceremonial duty but constitutes a lasting moral contract with the child and the child's family (Kudat 2006; Yıldırım and Karataş 2014, 35-56; Güç 2018, 237-264; Tunç 2021, 437-454; Yalçınkaya 2023, 57-72; Başaran 2025, 182-196; Törne 2025, 451-471).

In Dersim Alevism, however, *kirvelik* does not represent a temporary or merely symbolic bond established between individuals. On the contrary, it generates a long-term and irreversible form of binding that encompasses families, lineages, and in some cases different faith communities. This binding quality elevates *kirvelik* beyond the level of everyday interpersonal relations and transforms it into a moral regime of relationships that plays an active role in the establishment and maintenance of social order. The relationship formed through *kirvelik* produces mutual responsibilities and boundaries not only between the two parties directly involved, but also within the broader social networks to which they belong (Gültekin 2010, 173-200).

Historically, *kirvelik* in Dersim has taken shape as an integral component of both inward-oriented mechanisms of solidarity and outward-oriented forms of social engagement. Widely observed in Middle Eastern and Inner Asian societies, this form of relationship functions as a mechanism that expands networks of solidarity through the institution of kinship saying. In the Dersim context, this expansion has reinforced moral supervision and mutual responsibility within Alevi communities, while *kirvelik* ties established between Alevis and Sunnis have often created a space for

negotiation and balancing within asymmetrical power relations. In this sense, *kirvelik* should be understood not only as a cultural tradition but also as a historically developed strategy of social existence and protection under specific conditions (Gültekin 2010, 173-200).

The historical role of *kirvelik* demonstrates that it cannot be reduced solely to the circumcision ritual. Although it takes concrete form around this ritual, its core meaning lies beyond the ritual itself, in the enduring moral obligations, marriage prohibitions, mediating roles, and practices of mutual care and protection that it entails (Kudat 2006; Yıldırım and Karataş 2014, 35-56; Yalçınkaya 2023, 57-72). In this respect, *kirvelik* should be considered within the same conceptual universe as fundamental belief-based and social institutions in Dersim Alevism, such as *musahiplik*, *ikrar*, and *yol erkânı*.

Functionally, the institution of *kirvelik* in Muslim societies shows certain parallels with the institution of godparenthood in Christian societies (Dinç 2015; Törne 2025, 451-471). In both cases, a symbolic parenthood established through ritual expands the child's social environment and generates lasting moral responsibilities. Nevertheless, in the context of Dersim and *Raa Haqi*, *kirvelik* goes beyond such comparisons and assumes a distinctive position within the local belief cosmology and moral order.

In sum, *kirvelik* in the context of Dersim and *Raa Haqi* can be defined neither merely as "ritual kinship" nor as a functional social instrument. Rather, it constitutes one of the foundational forms of relationship that is surrounded by sacred meanings, produces strong moral sanctions, and has historically ensured the social continuity of Alevi communities. For this reason, any conceptualization of *kirvelik* requires a holistic approach that situates it within the local belief cosmology, historical experiences, and the wider network of social relations.

Kirvelik in the Context of Dersim Alevism (*Raa Haqi*)

In *Raa Haqi* belief, social relations are not formed solely in response to everyday or worldly needs, but within a *Batın*-centered moral universe. In this universe, interpersonal bonds are not legal or contractual in nature; rather, they are surrounded by sacred meanings and generate irreversible moral obligations. *Kirvelik*, in this sense, is understood not merely as a social agreement but as a sacred bond. The relationship established between the *kirve*, the child, and the child's family constitutes a durable contract whose violation entails moral sanctions (Gültekin 2010, 173-200; Deniz 2019, 45-75).

The constitutive elements of this contract take shape around the notions of blood, body, and sacrifice. The blood shed during the circumcision ritual forms the symbolic and sacred foundation of *kirvelik*. This ritual moment transforms *kirvelik* from a purely symbolic kinship relation into a threshold at which bodily and moral boundaries are redefined. In this respect, *kirvelik* emerges within *Raa Haqi* cosmology as a form of relationship through which privacy, inviolability, and moral prohibitions are instituted.

In Dersim Alevism (*Raa Haqi*), *musahiplik* is regarded as an ideal and normative institution of initiation within the *yol erkânı*. It is not merely a form of spiritual brotherhood between individuals, but a central social bond that encompasses households and families and collectivizes religious and moral responsibilities. Within this framework, it is commonly accepted that a person without a *musahip* cannot fully conduct the *yol erkânı*. Accordingly, *musahiplik* is seen as one of the foundational elements of communal sociality and moral order. Structurally, the institution of *musahiplik* is not open to those outside the community; it can only be established among individuals who belong to the *Raa Haqi* belief universe and share the same moral and cosmological framework (Gültekin 2010, 173-200; Deniz 2019, 45-75).

Raa Haqi sociality operates through a multilayered network of relations woven around this normative core, extending

across the levels of the individual, household, lineage, and *Ocak*. These networks-structured along the lines of *talip-rehber-pir-mürşid*-regulate not only religious practice but also the moral, social, and political organization of everyday life. While *musahiplik* is one of the key institutions that tighten these networks, *kirvelik* does not stand outside this structure. Rather, it intersects with it and, in specific contexts, produces a complementary relational domain that reinforces it. From this perspective, *kirvelik* should not be understood as a substitute for *musahiplik*, but as a form of relationship that functionally expands the latter without replacing its normative core. Unlike *musahiplik*, which is based on the *yol erkânı* and claims an initiation strictly within the community, *kirvelik* enables the establishment of relations both within the community and with the world beyond it. The bonds formed through *kirvelik* are shaped by functions such as economic, social, and political solidarity; shared interests; and mutual security and protection (Gültekin 2010, 173-200). In this sense, *kirvelik* constitutes an intermediary institution that is embedded in the internal moral order of *Raa Haqi* society while simultaneously making contact with the surrounding external world possible.

The relationship between *kirvelik* and the *Ocak* system is not based on a direct hierarchical linkage. *Kirvelik* operates outside the lineage-based transmission of authority and ritual centered on the *Ocak*, yet it produces a legitimate moral and relational sphere of authority within the *yol erkânı*. Particularly in periods when *Ocak-talip* relations have weakened-due to forced migration, political ruptures, and transformations in everyday life that have reduced the accessibility of *Ocaks-kirvelik* has contributed to the maintenance of moral order and social regulation. In this regard, *kirvelik* does not replace *musahiplik* but extends the moral core it generates into everyday and often community-external relations (Gültekin 2010, 173-200).

For Alevi communities in Dersim living in close proximity to Sunni or (in the past) Christian neighbors, *kirvelik* has

functioned as a means of reducing conflict, enabling cooperation, and establishing mutual trust with these external groups. In many cases, *kirvelik* was deliberately formed with members of neighboring communities and operated as a strategy of balancing and protection within asymmetrical power relations. Thus, *kirvelik* should not be regarded as a secondary or marginal institution within Alevi social structure. Rather, when considered together with *musahiplik* and the *Ocak* system, it emerges as a reinforcing relational domain that reproduces moral continuity across different social levels (Gültekin 2010, 173-200).

Kirvelik with *Batınî* Beings (Fictive Kinship with *Jiares*)

In Dersim Alevism (*Raa Haqi*), *kirvelik* is not limited to a form of fictive kinship established solely among humans. A distinctive and original dimension of this belief universe emerges in the patterns of *kirvelik* (fictive kinship) that Dersim Alevis establish with *Batınî* beings—most commonly with *jiares*. In this context, *kirvelik* operates not only within the sphere of social relations but also as a sacred and moral regime of relationships formed between humans and non-human beings. From an anthropological perspective, this indicates that in *Raa Haqi* cosmology, relations of kinship and protection can be constituted not only with biological or social actors, but also with beings endowed with sacred qualities.

In such forms of *kirvelik*, an individual establishes a symbolic and moral bond with a particular *jiare*. This *jiare* may take the form of mountains, lakes, trees, rocks, or specific sacred sites, as well as living beings such as snakes, wolves, eagles, mountain goats, or trout (Gültekin 2025). Within *Raa Haqi* cosmology, these beings are not understood merely as elements of nature, but as *Batınî* subjectivities endowed with will, memory, and moral power. Consequently, the *kirvelik* relationship established between an individual and a *jiare* is not metaphorical or merely representational in the conventional sense; rather, it constitutes a genuine moral

contract involving mutual responsibility, loyalty, and expectations of protection.

Human-*jiare kirvelik* provides the individual with a form of protection that is perceived as more “sacred,” both within and beyond the community. This protection is not confined to producing a metaphysical or belief-based sense of security. It also strengthens the individual’s social position, moral legitimacy, and likelihood of being supported in moments of vulnerability. In this respect, *kirvelik* with a *jiare* generates an additional layer of sacredness that consolidates the individual’s place within social networks, rendering them visible and inviolable. Particularly in moments of crisis, illness, travel, conflict, or uncertainty, such *kirvelik* relationships are activated as protective points of reference by both the individual and their close social environment. This pattern demonstrates that *kirvelik* in the *Raa Haqi* context is not a purely human-centered institution of solidarity. Rather, it forms part of a multilayered regime of relations that connects humans, community, and sacred nature. Human-*jiare kirvelik* belongs to the same moral universe as *musahiplik* and human-to-human *kirvelik*, yet it functionally complements and deepens these relations while intensifying their level of sacredness. In this sense, *kirvelik* in Dersim Alevism reveals that moral order is sustained not only through social institutions, but also through relationships established with *Batınî* beings.

Alevi-Sunni *Kirvelik* and Asymmetrical Relations in Dersim

In the context of Dersim, Alevi-Sunni relations have historically developed not as encounters between equals, but within an asymmetrical field shaped by demographic, spatial, and moral hierarchies. This asymmetry is not limited to population distribution or political power relations; it also manifests in areas such as access to sacred spaces, moral legitimacy, and the authority of local norms. *Kirvelik* emerges precisely within this asymmetrical structure as an intermediary institution that makes the sustainability of

Alevi-Sunni relations possible-not by eliminating inequality, but by limiting open conflict (Gültekin 2010, 173-200).

In Dersim, Sunni communities have largely lived within a belief and moral universe dominated by the Alevi population. Particularly in rural areas, this has meant that Alevi customary law (*yol erkânı*) has played a decisive role in the regulation of everyday life. Within this framework, *kirvelik* functions as one of the strongest and most legitimate bonds through which Sunni families establish relations with the Alevi majority. Through *kirvelik*, Sunni families become integrated into the Alevi social fabric not only at the individual level, but also at the levels of tribe, lineage, and extended kinship networks (Gültekin 2010, 173-200).

This integration, however, is not symmetrical. While for the Alevi side *kirvelik* signifies a sacred bond and a moral obligation, for the Sunni side it often acquires meaning as a means of maintaining a foothold, securing protection, and gaining acceptance within the local social order shaped by Alevi dominance. For this reason, Alevi-Sunni *kirvelik* does not fully share the sacred threshold logic of *Raa Haqi* cosmology. Instead, it carries a pragmatic dimension closely intertwined with political, economic, and social security needs.

This practice is not confined solely to relations between Alevis and Sunnis in Dersim. Historically, similar *kirvelik* practices have been observed among different ethnic and religious groups speaking Kurmanci and Kirmancki. In particular, until the pre-Ottoman period and the early decades of the Republic, *kirvelik* between Kurdish and Armenian communities appears to have functioned as an important social mechanism reinforcing mutual trust and solidarity. Documentary sources and oral narratives indicate that some Kurdish communities historically selected Armenians as *kirves*, and that such choices were reinforced by strong moral codes such as marriage prohibitions. This demonstrates that *kirvelik* functioned not only as a religious bond, but also as a cross-group mechanism of social

coordination. Rather than producing direct theological rapprochement between different faith and ethnic groups, such relations generated a complex moral regime grounded in mutual trust, solidarity, and the maintenance of social cohesion (Dinç 2015; Güç 2018, 237-264; Törne 2025, 451-471).

In the Dersim context, *kirvelik* neither represents assimilation nor a discourse of pure tolerance. Instead, it appears as a form of social contract operating within asymmetrical power relations, while simultaneously limiting open conflict through powerful taboos structured around the body, blood, and notions of intimacy. The incest prohibition, marriage taboos, and mutual responsibilities established through *kirvelik* do not dissolve the Alevi-Sunni boundary. Rather, by rendering this boundary permeable and manageable, they make it possible for relations between different religious and ethnic identities to be organized not solely around conflict or separation, but also around mutual attachment and trust (Dinç 2015; Güç 2018, 237-264; Törne 2025, 451-471; Başaran 2025, 182-196).

In sum, Alevi-Sunni *kirvelik* in Dersim constitutes a specific form of relationship that does not fully share the sacred logic of the *Raa Haqi* belief universe, yet gains legitimacy within its moral and social codes. This illustrates both the functional flexibility of the institution of *kirvelik* and its capacity to generate social cohesion in a historical geography characterized by the coexistence of diverse cultural and religious codes.

Moral Obligations, Social Sanctions, and Historical Transformation

In the Dersim context, the *kirvelik* relationship generates strong moral taboos, foremost among them a strict prohibition on marriage. Marriage between *kirve* families is categorically forbidden, and this prohibition is not limited to the individuals directly involved but establishes a lasting boundary that extends to subsequent generations. This

demonstrates that *kirvelik* produces a moral status equivalent to biological kinship rather than a simple form of social proximity. The bond established through *kirvelik* redefines bodily, spatial, and social domains of intimacy, instituting a regime of inviolability and mutual responsibility between the parties (Gültekin 2010, 173-200).

This moral framework reveals the strong sanctioning capacity of *kirvelik*. The violation of a *kirvelik* bond is not regarded merely as an individual mistake or an unethical act, but as a breach of a sacred vow and a moral obligation (Dinç 2015; Güç 2018, 237-264; Törne 2025, 451-471; Başaran 2025, 182-196). Such a violation exposes the parties to social condemnation, loss of trust, and the risk of exclusion. In this respect, *kirvelik* has functioned as an effective mechanism of moral control and regulation in rural social formations where written legal systems were limited or did not directly govern everyday life.

However, this strong moral and sanctioning dimension of *kirvelik* has not remained historically static. In Dersim, the function and social weight of *kirvelik* have undergone marked transformations, particularly since the second half of the twentieth century. The rise of political polarization after the 1970s, forced migrations, processes of urbanization, and generational ruptures have weakened the binding force of *kirvelik* in everyday life. These processes have affected not only *kirvelik* but also other moral institutions such as the *Ocak* system and *musahiplik* in indirect yet significant ways (Gültekin 2010, 173-200).

Alongside this historical transformation, *kirvelik* has increasingly come to be perceived-especially among younger generations-as a “traditional,” “outdated,” or even “to-be-overcome” practice. Nevertheless, *kirvelik* has not disappeared altogether. Instead, it has continued to exist in more limited, selective, and symbolic forms. In some contexts, rather than operating as a moral regime producing strong sanctions, *kirvelik* has been reinterpreted as a reference point embedded in cultural memory or as a moral

ideal associated with the past (Gültekin 2010, 173-200).

This indicates not the dissolution of *kirvelik*, but its reconfiguration through transformation. The changes experienced by the institution of *kirvelik* demonstrate that moral order in Dersim Alevism is not reproduced through a single institutional structure, but rather through multiple forms that are continually reshaped in response to historical conditions. Accordingly, although *kirvelik* has largely lost its former binding force today, it continues to exist as a relational form that produces meaning within Alevi social memory and moral universe.

Conclusion

In the context of Dersim Alevism (*Raa Haqi*), *kirvelik* cannot be understood merely as a kinship practice accompanying the circumcision ritual, nor as a folkloric social tradition. Rather, it constitutes a distinct form of relationship surrounded by sacred meanings, generating strong moral obligations and sanctions. While intersecting with *musahiplik* and the *Ocak* system, *kirvelik* cannot be reduced to either of them. In anthropological literature, such relationships are commonly described as fictive kinship-forms of kinship that are socially constructed, morally binding, and productive of reciprocal obligations without being based on biological descent (consanguinity) or marriage (affinity). From this perspective, *kirvelik* transcends the dichotomy between “real” and “fictive” kinship, offering a revealing example of how kinship is culturally produced and legitimized.

Within Dersim’s historically multi-faith and asymmetrical social structure, *kirvelik* has functioned as an intermediary institution that limited conflict, rendered boundaries manageable, and sustained the moral order of everyday life—particularly in relations among Alevis, Sunnis, and Christians, as well as among Kurdish, Armenian, and Turkish communities. In this sense, *kirvelik* has produced a relational regime that goes beyond blood-based kinship,

grounded instead in practices of cohabitation, mutual protection, and economic and political solidarity. In line with anthropological debates emphasizing that kinship cannot be universally reduced to biology, *kirvelik* demonstrates that kinship is fundamentally constituted through shared sacredness, moral obligation, and social recognition.

Although the political, social, and spatial transformations since the second half of the twentieth century have weakened the binding force of *kirvelik*, the institution has not disappeared. Instead, it has persisted through transformation within Alevi social memory and moral universe. This continuity indicates that *kirvelik* is not a fixed or static tradition, but a flexible form of fictive kinship that is continually reshaped by historical conditions. In this respect, *kirvelik* can be understood as a constitutive example illustrating that moral order in Dersim Alevism is produced not through singular and immutable institutions, but through multilayered and historically variable networks formed at the intersection of sacredness, kinship, and social relations.

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