Hızır / Xızır

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Summary
In Alevism, Hızır (Xızır) is a meaningful and central figure around which revolve many myths, rituals, hymns, sacred places and lived experiences. It combines many aspects of its spirituality, its history of relations with other groups, and the life of its communities. He is known as the master of the esoteric knowledge provided by God, functioning as a model for the authority of the pîr, but also as a God-sent saviour who comes rescue the people in desperate need for help. In Kurdish Alevism, Xızır plays an even greater role due to its connections to several other defining features of its cosmologies. Known as Hızır in Turkish and as Xızır in Kurdish (Kurmancî, Kirmanckî), his name stems from the Arabic al-Khadir, literally « the Green One », also pronounced Khezr in Persian.

Keywords: Alevi Kurds, Alevi Mysticism, Âşık, Dersim, Ritüel, Sacred Geography, Turkey, Ziyaret

Khidr, the Secret Master of Sufism

The figure of Khidr was born in Islam as an enigma: paradoxically, it emerged from the Qur’an without being mentioned. His basis narrative is found in verses 60-82 of the Sura of the Cave (*al-Kahf*). In the scriptures, he is first referred to by God as “one of Our servants”, endowed with “grace” and “knowledge emanating from Us”. The Qur’anic narrative is organised around the different stages of a journey with the prophet Moses, during which the mysterious servant commits three incomprehensible acts of violence. The link between the nameless character in the

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Sura of the Cave and the name Khidr was established in the post-qur'anic literature : according to the historian Al-Tabari, "he was given the name al-Khadir because one day he was sitting on a stone and when he got up, it turned green underneath him and, by God's command, grass grew on it" (Wensick 2005 [1960], 904).

The Qur'anic narrative also introduced symbols that led to the legend of Khidr, subsequently shared throughout the Muslim world. One can find the theme of the "confluence of the two seas" (*madjma al-bahrain*), the place where the meeting between the two characters takes place. This Qur'anic location is marked by a decisive episode: the resurrection of a fish, brought by Moses' servant. Where the wise and anonymous servant of God lives, the fish falls into the water and comes back to life. This story has thus become associated with another narrative and symbolic theme, that of the Source of Life (*Ab-i hayat*) and the quest for immortality. It is generally accepted that Khidr is immortal because he drank from, or immersed himself in, this miraculous spring. Through this theme of the quest for knowledge and immortality, Khidr's destiny became linked to that of the Islamic figure of Alexander the Great or İskender, also known as the *Dhu l-Qarnayn*.

The Qur'anic text served as a parable of the "spiritual master" (*murshid*) and the disciple. It was later used to differentiate between common knowledge, that of respect for the "apparent" rules of the Law (*zahir*), and higher, esoteric and mystical knowledge (*batin*). In some Islamic traditions also known by Alevi *dede*, Khidr comes to bear the function of the master of prophets – many believe that it is not just Moses, but all the prophets who have been his disciples. He played the role of "superhuman initiator", having initiated some of the great masters of Sufism, such as Ibn al-Arabi, into the mysteries of "Truth". In the mystical traditions of Sufi Islam, the "encounter with Khidr" plays a central role in the transmission of knowledge (Franke 2000).

Following this Sufi legacy, Khidr is a recurrent character in

the Alevi religious sources, be them oral or written. In this complex and plural corpus, Hızır is a recurring figure, sometimes a partner and companion of holy figures, sometimes a model of sanctity and transmission of the miraculous powers (*keramet*) attributed to religious authorities. In the legendary narratives (*menkıbe*) of the Bektashi brotherhood, certain episodes illustrate the mystical dialectic linking the supreme figures of Ali and Mohammad to that of Hızır and Hacı Bektaş (Ocak 2012). A literature known as the "Book of Hızır" (*Hızırname*) emerged between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries and intended to formalise the ethics and rituals (Şahin 2016). In the fifteenth-century version, Hızır is described as the companion of the warrior dervishes responsible for defeating and converting to Islam the enemies of the Ottomans. In later versions, Hızır appears as a moving figure, who is said to "escape understanding", sometimes called a "prophet" (*nebi*), a "sovereign" (*şah*) or a "master" (*pîr*). His existence precedes that of the created world, and he plays a role in the cosmogony of the partition of the world from the divine light to the four archangels, the twelve imams and the assembly of the forty. He has transmitted the secret knowledge to the prophets since Adam. His immortality heralds that of the twelfth imam, Mahdi, and he initiates the fifth, Bakır, into the ritual of the *cem*. In God's name, he leads the angelic assembly of "hidden saints" (*gayb erenleri*), known to gather secretly around the world. The holy month of Hızır in the Alevi calendar, as described below, was usually the moment when *dede* would visit their disciples (*talip*), perform *cem* for their community and when dervishes would come back from their 40 days retreat (*çile*). Besides, numerous religious hymns composed about Hızır since the 16th century have been interpreted during *cem* rituals (Ocak 2012).

"Hızır on the Grey Horse", a God-sent Saviour

The figure of Khidr, beyond the religious domains of theology and mysticism, is also known for his shared, multi-religious and even syncretic character, as a multitude of geographical and historical case studies have highlighted

(Boivin & Pénicaud 2023). Thus emerged the other major representation of “Hızır on the Grey Horse” (*boz atlı Hızır*), a holy being who comes to the rescue of people in danger around the world. Thus, the expression “Hızır keeps watch and is ready” (*Hızır hazır ve nazır*) define this figure of the watchman, vigilant and interventionist. So it is with the expression “to rush to help like Hızır” (*Hızır gibi yetişmek*), or the Turkish proverb that says: “until the servant is cornered, Hızır cannot save him” (*kul sıkışmayınca Hızır yetişmez*). The name Hızır is also likely to be seen in Turkish urban public space to refer to medical or personal aid services. The white and red ambulances of the Red Crescent running through the city are sometimes annotated with the words “Hızır emergencies” (*Hızır acil*) since 1985. This trait also founded his status as a wartime protector, a saviour of the battlefields, including during the wars fought by Alevi conscripts during the 20th century. The representation of Hızır as a horse-riding saviour was made popular by the numerous stories (*hikayê*) told during centuries by the Anatolian bards (*aşık*) among which many were Alevis (Ocak 2012).

Across the Mediterranean world, this God-sent saviour is made of a mythological triptych alongside Saint George (Aziz Yorgi) and Elijah (İlyas) – a characteristic very much in evidence among the Alawites of Turkey and Syria, where numerous sacred sites can be devoted to two characters at once and are shared with Rum Arabic Christians neighbours. In regions where Alevis lived in contact with Armenians, this syncretism occurred with another Christian military saint: Surp Sarkis, or Saint Sergius. In Dersim, some holy places were known to be linked to these two figures, also known in *kirmanckî* as the Old Man (*Khalo*). At the end of the 19th century, one place was the epicentre of this cult shared between Xızır and Surp Sarkis: the monastery of Surp Garabet in Dersim (Antranik 2012 [1900]). In 1915, it was the last active Armenian monastery in the region, until its destruction in 1938 during the murderous bombing campaign carried out by the Turkish State.

The multi-religious features of Hızır can also be observed in the calendar and the celebrations associated with him. For Alevis in Western Turkey and the Balkans, the feast of Hıdrellez, celebrated on the night of the 5th to the 6th of May, marks the fusion of these three figures every year. The name of this feast is a contraction of the names of Hızır and İlyas – two prophets considered as brothers, friends or even lovers – who are said to meet up every year to celebrate the return of the beautiful season. These meetings are said to occur in the sea, near springs, on mountain tops or in rose bushes, where people knot clothes and make wishes. In Central and Eastern Turkey, the most important time for Alevi religious practices was known as Hızır's month, in between January and February. According to the traditional calendar, each tribe was fasting one after the other, while the holy lineages (*ocak*) were fasting one the fourth week. Some *pîr* were then traveling from village to village to pay a visit to their disciples and lead *cem* rituals. Some practices accomplished during this time bear witness to the shared cultural patrimony of Alevis and Armenians: at the end of the three days fast, cakes made of flour (*qavut*) grounded on this occasion are left outside the door, or on the roof, in the hope of discovering a hoof print in the morning, a sign left by the Hızır's passage. During the same night, unmarried girls and boys can eat salted cakes and refrain from drinking in order to see in their dreams their future husband or wife offering them a glass of water. Similar practices can be found among the Yazidis of Northern Iraq.

Xızır in Kurdish Alevi Cosmologies

In Kurdish Alevi regions, the figure of Xızır occupies an even more central place in the cosmologies and the lived religion. This can be explained by the many links between this figure and other characters, places and events in the local oral traditions. Xızır is a living figure, close at hand and likely to be encountered: he is said to circulate throughout the land, as evidenced by the many holy places (*jiara*) in his name. A footprint or hoofprint, a sign of his passing, can usually be found on these holy grounds and rocks. There are many

accounts of his appearances on roadsides, in forests, on the top of mountains, in the form of a horse rider or a wounded old man. As elsewhere in Anatolia, these encounters should be treated with caution: crossing Xızır's path often takes the form of a moral test, which can end in reward or punishment. Xızır's ordeal consists of coming to the aid of this wounded being, usually by feeding him, at the risk of being terribly punished if not behaving properly. According to this ordeal, the world is divided between the innocent ones (*mazlum*) and the tyrants (*zalim*), with Xızır siding with the former against the latter. Meetings with Xızır also take place in dreams, when he appears to deliver messages or even threats to the people he has caught sinning.

In Kurdish-spoken Alevi traditions, Xızır is regarded as a *wayîr*, a guardian and protector, the owner of certain places and living beings. Mountain goats are called "Xızır's herds" (*malê Xizirî*), and hunters who attack them are said to be punished directly by the holy being. These punishments are embedded in the natural rhythm of these mountainous regions, taking the form of a natural disaster such as an avalanche. In traditional Dersim medicine, the figure of Xızır played a central role in determining the chances of recovery according to the moral quality of the patient (Yürür 2019). In the Kurdish Alevi oral traditions, Xızır is both a superior and holy being, and a worldly entity people can feel emotionally connected to. These interactions were said to occur with an entity living a familiar lifestyle, as he was sometimes said to be a shepherd, married to the lake *Golê Buyerê*, the sister of Bava Duzgi, and to be bounded to a spiritual brother (*müsahip*) called Derviş Miliz. The bard Sey Qaji even wrote in one of his poetries about the *kirmancki* language: "Our language is the language of Xızır" (*zonê ma zonê Xizirî*) (Cengiz 2020). In the daily life, it is still common to hear people swear on Xızır's name as a mean of proving the sincerity of their vows. Like all major supernatural characters, calling his name is usually followed by the gesture of kissing his invisible hand.

Conclusion

Hızır is a central figure of the Alevi culture and religion. It combines many aspects of its spirituality, its history of relations with other groups, and the life of its communities. Because of its strong links with the Alevis' homelands, many of its characteristics have lost their raison d'être in migration and life in the metropolis. Nevertheless, this figure has also found a new lease of life in the plans to rebuild Alevism as part of a collective memory and identity. Nowadays, organised Alevi communities in Turkey and Europe often refer to Hızır when advocating for an ethics of solidarity and mutual assistance during times of great difficulties, like the Covid-19 global pandemic. Some Alevi intellectuals and activists have also made use of this figure in a way to oppose those of Ali and Muhammad and to affirm the "outside Islam" approach.

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