

Abstracts of Papers, International Conference THE ZAZA PEOPLE: HISTORY, LANGUAGE, CULTURE, IDENTITY – Yerevan, Armenia, 28-30 October, 2011

Seyfi Cengiz (Germany)

Some introductory remarks on Dersim

The paper is a brief account providing a general view on Dersim – its geography, history, ethnic elements and linguistic mosaic, as well as the peculiarities of local culture, beliefs, etc.

In Dersim's case the identity is not defined by race, blood or language, but by geography, history and culture.

Since early 16th century people of Dersim have been generally known as Qizilbash. The religion practiced in Dersim has specific features, which brand it as a unique phenomenon. Thus, they do not practice "namaz", do not go to mosques, do not undertake the "hajj" pilgrimage to Mecca, do not fast in the month of Ramadan, do not believe in "Quran".

The folklore of the region contains numerous sayings particularly emphasizing the universal human values: e.g. "Whatever it is you desire, look for it within yourself, not in Mecca, nor in Jerusalem", "Our Qible is a human being", etc.

Due to these beliefs Dersimis were considered as heretics (Rafizi or Gulat in Arabic), and were heavily persecuted by the Ottoman rulers. The Dersim question was created by these Qizilbash persecutions. The paper focuses on various periods of the modern and new history of the region, the oppressions and persecutions the Dersimis have had to come through both during the Ottoman age and in the 20th century. By referring to the authentic facts and the analysis of H. Lewis Morgan in his book *Ancient Society*, the paper touches upon the communal characteristics of Dersim society, such as not even being familiar to the ideas of tax, military service and government in the period before the Dersim genocide of 1937-1938, and strongly opposes the Kemalist theses that the Turkish state had then engaged in a fight against feudalism in Dersim.

The paper refers to Dersim as the only location where almost all minority questions of Turkey touches one another and sees this feature of Dersim as an advantage rather than a disadvantage for a democratic solution to the minority questions.

Finally, the paper discusses the demands of the modern Dersimis, which are almost the same with those of the previous generations' striving, although contains some new issues, such as the cancellation of the Munzur dams project and recognition of the 1938 Dersim genocide.

Although the present government touched certain taboo issues, opened them up and by doing so, triggered a wide-spread discussion, yet has not yet showed the necessary determination against the reactions from the status quo.

The real and permanent solution to minority questions in Turkey, the paper concludes, seems to be difficult without a peaceful mass movement.