

CULTURE OF DERSİM

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By Seyfi Cengiz

(On behalf of the **Berlin' Center for Dersim 38** - Berlin Dersim Zentrum e.V.)

Land

Dersim is the original name of the modern Tunceli province situated in eastern Turkey where it is bordered by Bingöl, Elazığ and Erzincan, the cities with a common historical background and shared values. It covers an area of 7.774 sq km with a population of approximately 84.022 people in 2007. Two main languages, namely Kırmancki (Zazaki) and Kurdish are spoken. Turkish is the only official language imposed by the state power. Despite diversity in the sense of ethnic origins and/or linguistic identities, people of Dersim, known as the Kızılbash (Alevi) or Dersimis, have a strong sense of belonging to the land and its distinctive non-Muslim cultural identity. Nearly 70 % of the Tunceli-born population lives outside their mother land, either in the west of Turkey or in European countries, mostly in Germany. The city Berlin has a sizeable Dersimi population.

History

Dersim was probably a part of the Hittite and Assyrian empires before the rise of the “Kingdom of Urartu” in the mid 9th century BC. Findings all over Dersim and neighboring regions point to Urartian domination which in the early 6th century BC was replaced by the Iranian Orontid dynasty. The most ancient Armenian genealogies and traditions contain a lot of evidence relating Orontids to Gilanians and Daylamits. In his book Anabasis the Greek historian Ksenofon (ca. 430 - 354 BC) mentions a land called Derxene, believed to be a variation of the name Dersim by some scholars. Under different forms it is also recorded by the Roman and Byzantine authors such as Pliny, Strabo and Procopius. It appears as Derjan in Armanian geography. Prof. Nicolas Adontz finds a connection between the name Derjan and that of Tzanians, an alternative term for Mamikonians, whose Mamik-Konak tradition according to my view is the same as that of early Dersimis called Khal Mem-Khal Ferat. To me it is nothing else than a personified reference in the language of the tradition to Mamikonians and Parthians as ancestors of early Dersimis. After 10th and 11th. centuries these early Dersimis were invaded by a new group of tribal people, known as Sheikh Hasanians. The modern population of Dersim is a mixture of both.

Cultural heritage

Dersim has many sites with historical, archaeological and ethnological value as well as an outstanding natural heritage both of which are now under threat because of the dam construction in progress over River Munzur. Turkey has so far ignored the people’s oppsition to this project. The Turkish Suprime Court has up to now turned down all legal initiatives against it. The government İnsistence on building a series of dams over River Munzur is being considered as a deliberate act aimed at displacing the people from their home land.

Literature

İn Dersim as stated above more than one languages are spoken:

Kırmancki (Dımilki, Zazaki), Kurdish and Turkish.

Turkish is the state language.

The other two are not yet legally recognized. This has been the case since the foundation of Turkish Rebuplic. According to a recent report of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), Zazaki (Kırmancki) in particular is one of the languages under threat.

Literature in this language, such as journals, articles, novels, stories and poetry was a wave triggered by the idea of Dersim emerging about twenty years ago.

Old Sayings

The centrality of human beings in this culture are expressed in the following Kızılbaş sayings:

- “We view the 72 nations through the same eyes”
- “Whatever it is you desire, look for it within yourself, not in Mecca, nor in Jerusalem”
- “Our Kible is the human being”
- “The greatest book one can read is a human being”.

Religion

The Dersimis who are also called Kızılbaş:

- 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 “Kuran”.

This cultural identity has been the main reason for the Kızılbaş genocides repeatedly occurring from 1514 to 1938.

Legends

Dersim has a rich oral tradition.

A large part of it consisted of legends.

Mountains, rivers and lakes, many of which are seen as sacred have a legend of their own.

Arts

Music is one of the field that Dersim known for.

One can hear some great voices of Dersim during the “Carnival of Cultures”.

Some examples of literature, painting, craft and traditional clothing will be exhibited.

Our poets and painters will be representing their respective arts.

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