

DERSİM/ZAZANA: AN INTERNAL COLONY OF THE TURKISH STATE

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This is an account of the land, people, language, religion and history of Dersim, intended for the people who have a concern in. It is based on a study by myself not yet published. A lengthy summary of this study in Turkish could be found on the Internet under the title of “Kal u Bal’dan Beri (Dersim-Zaza Tarih Tezi)”. For some additional information see article “Tarih Bizi Mansur Kılacaktır!”, also on the Internet.

Land

Dersim is an ancient ethnical and geographical name, which has been mentioned in the historical sources, at least since Xenophon’s book called *Anabasis*, written at the turn of the 5th century BC. The name was recorded under different forms, such as *Derxene/Xerxene* in Xenophon, Pliny and Strabo; *Tzanica* in Procopius and Agathias; and *Derjan* or *Chaniuk* in Armenian geography. The once extensive territory has been reduced to Inner Dersim, that is today a province in the eastern part of Turkey, situated between the two branches of the river Euphrates, known as *Karasu* and *Murat*. It was renamed as “*Tunceli*” during a Turkish military expedition in 1935. Arriving Turkish troops appeared on all sides to complete the occupation, which was eventually succeeded through a genocide in 1938. Thus the land remained to be officially known as “*Tunceli*”, though it was never accepted by the nation itself.

An alternative historical name for Dersim is that of *Zazana*, mentioned in B.C. 521 in the old Persian inscription of Behistun. It has managed to survive over the course of the centuries under different forms such as *Zavzan*, *Gozan/Guzana*, *Zozan*, *Zauzan*, *Zawazan* (*Andzevatsik* in Armenian sources) and *Sason*.

People

The name of the Dersimis is often used synonymously with those of the *Zazas* and *Dailamits* (*Gilanis*), simple because they all are branches of the same race.

Although there are some who regard them as Kurds, this designation neither corresponds with the historical facts, nor with the self-definition of the people itself. Besides none of their many traditions and legends points to a Kurdish connection. Quite the contrary all of them suggest otherwise.

In other words they are a separate people clearly distinguished from the Kurds.

Combining the account given in the oral tradition with that of the historical record and archaeological findings, the above mentioned study comes to the conclusion that the early Dersimis are descendants of *Mamans* (the *Mamikonians* of Armenian sources), who were otherwise known as *Tzanians* to the classical writers. *Sin*, *San* or *Çan* are only different forms for *Tzan*, which can also be seen forming the second half of the name *Der-Sim* in a slightly distinct shape, i.e. *Sim*.

As to the name *Zaza*, it is simply a different pronunciation of that of *Sasan*. The account of their Sasanian origin is also recorded by many writers, the first Kurdish historian *Sharaf Khan* among them.

It is almost impossible not to come to the conclusion that the *Mamans* (*Tzanians*) and *Sasanians* (*Zazas* of modern times) were in fact different sections of one and the same people.

There is also a Parthian element in the ethnical make-up of Dersimis as their traditions suggest.

Briefly; Mamans, Sasanians and Parthians are the ones that formed the early substrata of the people of Dersim/Zazana.

According to the tradition these early Dersimis during their migration were headed by two brothers, Kal Mem and Kal Ferat, who are seen as ancestors. In the study mentioned above this tradition is identified with that of the Mamikonians, in which the Mamik-Konak brothers are mentioned instead. Given the fact that nationalities are personified in legends, the study arrives at the conclusions that the name Kalmem in the Dersimi tradition is a reference to Mamikonians and that of Kalferat to Parthians.

Thomas Artsruni, a 9/10th century historian, mentions an ancient tradition, according to which, or rather his interpretation of it, the name Zaza or Sasan is derived from that of Sanasar, son of the Assyrian king Sennacherib (705-682 B.C), who took refuge in Armenia (Zazana) together with his brother, army and followers, and settled on Mount Sason (Mt. Sin) after being defeated by his half-brother Esarhaddon in 681 B.C.

The tradition spoken of is indeed an historical event, connected with the origin of the Zazas. However it must be added that the House of Angle (Gel, Gilan) and that of Sennacherib are often confused or identified in the then traditions as Toumanoff warns us. For that matter the above statements can hardly refer to the Assyrians proper, though there certainly existed an Assyrian colony among them, whose traces can still be seen in the names of some Dersimi tribes, such as "Asuran" and "Munzur".

The names Sasan and Sanasar seem to me to be related.

The Dersimi legends of their origin also speak of some late migrations into Dersim, headed by Shah Hasan and Sayyid, sons of a certain Shaikh Ahmet. This, again, is also supported by written records almost fully, except that two separate waves of migrations with the same sets of the names be understood instead of a single one as suggested in the legend, which merges the two into one.

Thus, the name Shaikh Ahmet actually refers to two separate person of the same name:

The first of whom is Ahmet Basri (Ahmet Rifai, 1118-1182), founder of the Rifai order of Darvishes, who is frequently replaced with one of his descendents and namesake Ahmet Kucheki Rifai (d. 1251/52), otherwise known as Karaja Ahmet and occasionally as Hajji Bektash, the elder brother of Shaikh Mahmut Harrani (Mahmut El Rifai, d. 1268/69); and the other, named as Ahmet Yesevi, is none other than one of the Safawi leaders, most probable Shah Haydar the Safawi (d. 1488).

The rest of the names that still remains to be identified are those of Shah Hasan and Sayyid. Shah Hasan represents at least three separate people of that name. Of the three, the two are being identified in the study with the Emirs of Chemishgezek Principality, namely Shah Hasan the First (d. c. 1473) and Shah Hasan the Second (d. 1543/44), Saltuqids by descent; and the other with the famous Uzun Hasan the Akkoyunlu (d. 1478), who married his daughter Alemshah Begum to Shah Haydar the Safawi. Alemshah Begum is called by her nisba 'Kincisur' (the one dressed in red) in Dersimi tradition.

Finally, by the name Sayyid in the tradition, the following two persons are meant: Seyit Ali (Darvish Gewr) and Shah Haydar the Safawi.

These late migrations took place between the 11th and 15/16th centuries A.D and the new comers referred to in the tradition are identified in the study with the Saltuqids, Rifais (Goranis), Aqqoyunlus and Safawids, who were mostly from the same stock as that of early Dersimis, so far as their origins and nationality are concerned.

To sum up, the Dersimis/Zazas of modern times are descendants of the country's early and late inhabitants mentioned above.

The above conclusions are reached through a detailed examination of the

tradition as well as a comprehensive study of the written history. The identity of Dersimis/Zazas being thus established, one can proceed further to discuss the rest which becomes easier to deal with.

Language

The People of Dersim speak an Iranian language called Zaza (Zazaki). Although some as pointed above reject the non-Kurdish identity of Zazas and thereby regard their language as a dialect of Kurdish, the speakers of both languages cannot communicate with one another unless Turkish, the language of the colonial power, is used.

What this simple fact indicates is that the two languages have nothing much to do with one another except that they both are Iranian languages and therefore have some similarities further strengthened by mutual contacts between the two peoples as neighbours.

Zazaki, if we search back, is the surviving representative of Parthian (Pahlavi) and Sasanian languages, both of which to my knowledge were the same.

It is not yet quite certain whether or not the language of the sacred book of the Zoroastrian religion related to Zazaki, though the two seem to be akin.

Religion

The religious ideas of the Dersimis/Zazas have always been of great interest to the outside world.

They were at first among the adherents of an Iranian religion called Mazdaism, founded by Zoroaster (Zarathustra), the Prophet of ancient Iran, who is thought to have lived in the 6th century BC. From 4th century on, some sections of them converted to Christianity mainly through the Gregorian and Paulician sects. The Magian (Mazdaic) and Christian traces are still easily detectable in the land and beliefs of Dersim/Zazana.

The religion of Islam among Dersimis spread in the form of the Sufi ideas, introduced by the orders like Kadiris, Rifais (Babais, Bektashis), Ismailis of Alamut, Ehl-i Haks and Safawids. From late 15th century onward they adopted a new religion, called Kızılbash (Turkish word for the Iranian Surh-i Ser, having reference especially to the red head-dress worn by its adherents), founded by Shah Haydar Safawi of Ardabil, who in Dersimi and Kızılbash traditions is referred to under numerous names or 'nisbas', such as Father Mansur, Kalemamsor or Kalman Sar (this title slightly differing in spelling and pronunciation denoted "the one dressed in red", "Surkhalaman" or "Surkhjamagan" in its original form), Sayyid, Pir Sultan (Kodja Haydar), Sultan Baba, Father Düzgün (Shah Haydar), and sometimes also as Ahmet Yesevi and Hajji Bektash.

In his time millions took him to be a universal god.

The term "Yesevi" is in fact a distorted form of that of Safawi. Therefore the religio-political movement that labeled as "Yesevism" in later periods cannot be anything else other than Safawism.

Shah Haydar the Safawi is regarded as the founder of their religion by Dersimis.

It was a religion separate from both the Christianity and Islam though influenced by both to a certain extent. Due to their new religion, considered as heretical (Rafizi or Gulat in Arabic), Dersimis/Zazas were heavily persecuted by the Ottoman and Turkish rulers time and again. These persecutions occasionally turned into the massacres of the worst kind.

Eventually a section of the Zazas living outside Inner Dersim, that is, under ottoman occupation, converted to mainstream Sunni Islam, which has caused an internal division within the nation.

History

The Kingdom of Urartu (880/850-590 B.C) could be taken as a reference point to start with, as it was the first political entity which had unified almost all the lands populated by Zazas.

At present it is difficult to determine for certain whether or not the Kingdom of Urartu was a Zaza monarchy.

After the collapse of Urartu, its territory was first conquered by the Medes and at a later period by the Akamenids, i.e. Old Persians, who replaced them in Iran.

By this time the former land of Urartu, at least a great portion of it, received a number of other names. Of them the commonest were those of Armenia and Dersim/Zazana.

Under Akamenids, perhaps since the time of the Medes, Dersim/Zazana had nominally been governed by the Dynasty of Orontids (401-200 B.C), and then, at the time of Macedonians, by two other dynasties related to them, Sophene (Tsophk) and Artaxiad (200-1 B.C). In ethnical sense both Orontids and the ruler of the latter were Gilanians, which is another name for modern Zazas as mentioned before.

Parthians (247 B.C-224 A.D) and Romans, who defeated the Macedonians, were next to rule. Thereafter we find Byzantines and Sasanians (224-651 AD) in the possession of the land.

The Sasanian rule came to an end with the Arab invasion of the 7th century A.D.

The tradition refers to the Parthians and Sasanians as the ancestors of Dersimi/Zaza people alongside with the Mamikonians.

In the 11th century the country was invaded by the late Dailamits (Gilanis) and Seldjuq Turks. After the periods of Mongols and Timurids the land fell into the hands of the tribal confederations known as the Karakoyunlu and Akkoyunlu, who were mainly Mamakonians in origin, but mixed and partly Turkicized in later times. Eventually, the Akkoyunlu, who gained a decisive victory over the Karakoyunlu exercised the supremacy until they were replaced by the Safawids, their successors.

The brief rule of the Safawids was followed by that of the Ottomans.

As is known from historical sources during the centuries-long war between Safavids and Ottomans, Dersimis had sided with the former against the latter.

When all combined together these facts clearly show that despite foreign interventions, frequent interruptions and fragmentation of the country, the Zazas, under different names, have been repeatedly spoken of during the historical times. At least since the Persian domination we find them governing some parts of the country here and there though not always independently.

Nevertheless it is important to note that they are most easily recognisable during the times of the Parthians and Sasanians, who are referred to as ancestors. It was their golden millenium, the end of which marked by the Arab invasion. They returned to power in the person of Dailamits and managed to maintain it for a century (945-1055) until the coming of the Saldjukid Turks. The Arab and Turkish invasions were obviously the most unfortunate for the Zazas. They rose to power once more with the early Safawids and continued to share their fate ever after.

Search for justice

The collapse of the Ottomans had left a power vacuum, filled by the Turkish nationalists, called Kemalists at a later time. In order to create a Turkish nation from above, they waged a bloody campaign against Armenians, Zazas and Assyrians, the non-Turkish elements of the empire. It was a deliberate and sustain war, in the course of which the national resistance of the Zazas with the sole purpose of self-defence in 1920 (Kochgiri), 1925 (Shaikh Sait) and 1937-1938 (Inner Dersim) had been ruthlessly suppressed one after another and thousands were forced into exile.

That's how the previously independent part of the country, known as Inner Dersim, has also been subdued and colonised by Turks.

In 1937-38, i.e., at a time when world attention was focused on the Second World War, Turkey committed a genocide, by killing approximately 70.000 people in the process.

Especially the year 1938 became one of the most important date in the nation's calender commemorated every year, in particular by its Kızılbaş section. Hence the people speak of "before and after the year 1938" whenever the recent history is concerned.

What happened back then has been handed down to the later generations by their parents and grand-parents, who witnessed the onslaught, and of whom some are still alive. Furthermore the sites of the mass graves all over Dersim are well known and can easily be located if and when need be. The ruins of the country's cultural heritage including churches belonged to the nations's Christian section are still visible.

Let there be no doubt that a legal action against Turkey will at long last be taken at some time in the future. A search for justice has already began. People wish to see the justice served.

Despite a long interval the Zaza aspirations for a free homeland has never died out. The turning point arrived in the late-1980s, when a new patriotic movement began to emerge. This movement has continued to gather momentum up until now.

The struggle for a democratic self-rule is still on.

It is a struggle for survival.