

SEVERAL ARTICLES ON DERSIM

DERSIM/ZAANA - AN INTERNAL COLONY OF THE TURKISH STATE

By Seyfi Cengiz

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 which could be found on the Internet under the title of "Dersim ve Zaza Tarihi-Sözlü Gelenek ve Tarihsel Gerçek". For some additional information see articles "Kal u Bal`dan Beri (Dersim-Zaza Tarih Tezi)" and "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 Chemishgezok

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 'Kıncısür' (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 Kızıl-

Bash (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 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 millennium, 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 Saljukid 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 sustained 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 dates in the nation's calendar 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 nation'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 begun. 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.

II

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE LAND, LANGUAGE, RELIGION AND HISTORY OF DERSİM by Seyfi Cengiz

LAND

Dersim is an ethnical and geographical name that 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 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.

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.

LANGUAGE

The People of Dersim speak an Iranian language called Zaza (Kırmancki, Dımilki, Zazaki). Although some reject the non-Kurdish identity of Dersimis (Zazas) and thereby regard their language as a dialect of Kurdish, it is in fact a distinct and separate language, more ancient than Kurdish. This is also the view widely shared among the linguists. Zazaki, if we search back, is the surviving representative of Parthian (Pahlavi) and Sasanian languages, both of which were the same.

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 after 9/10th century A.D. From late 15th century onward they adopted a new religion, called Kızıl-Baş (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. Due to their new religion, considered as heretical, 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.

ORIGINS AND HISTORY OF THE PEOPLE

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.

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

The Dersimi traditions also speak some late migrations into the country. These late migrations took place between the 11th and 15/16th centuries A.D., and the new comers referred to are identified 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.

The Dersimis/Zazas of modern times are descendants of the country`s early and late inhabitants mentioned above.

As is known from historical sources during the centuries-long war between Safavids and Ottomans, Dersimis had sided with the former. After the collapse of the Ottomans, Turkish nationalists waged a bloody campaign against Armenians, Dersimis/Zazas and Assyrians, the non-Turkish elements of the land. It was a deliberate and sustain war in the course of which the national resistance of the Dersimis/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.

In 1937-38, 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, which has never been forgotten.

III

LET THE RIVER RUN!

By Seyfi Cengiz

The dam construction over River Munzur is in progress under tight security. Munzur, which is our life-blood, is being barricaded. A legal initiative to stop the construction has turned down by the Turkish Suprim Court. There has also been a series of peaceful protests across Dersim. Thousands of people took streets chanting "Let the river run

(flow)”.

Fighting is not yet died down. Anger is growing stronger.

Turkey has so far ignored this oppsition to the project. This is still the case.

Her insistance on the project seems to be a decleration of another war against Dersim.

She is interested not so much prooducing energy, but destroying the country and dispersing its people. By building eight dams over River Munzur means to employ different methods beside military force to this end. The real aim is to evict the innermost part and hart of Dersim which has always been the stronghold of the national resistance up until now.

In short not only the River Munzur but Dersim as a whole is under threat.

The River Munzur is sacred in our country’s religion. Some holiest sites of the land are on or along this river. The religious life of the country is already disrapted by the construction work.

If not abundant, people might lose faith in peacfull means and the anger could well turn into a bitter struggle including perhaps a guerilla warfare, though no one would normally prefer it.

One thing is certain. We shall defend our homeland. People of Dersim do not let the occupiers get on with this project for long. It is a national issue and the struggle to save the river would be a part of the struggle for national freedom.

Let me tell you how the River Munzur emerged in our country before I finish.

This is the legend:

“Once upon a time in Dersim there was a king called Cemşit. Munzur was his sheperd. One day this king went away with his army to fight wars. When on front he wished some ‘helva’ to eat. Munzur knew what his master wished for. He told this to his master’s wife and asked her to make the ‘helva’ to take to his master. She thought it is Munzur himself who wishes some and did what he asked for. He took the helva and disappeared. Coming back a few minutes later he said to her that the plate would be brought back by his master.

This is what happened afterwards:

People went to welcome and kiss his hands when King Cemşit came back. He told them about what happened and showed them the plate. Then asked them to kiss Munzur’s hands instead. By hearing this Munzur run away. People went after him. As he was running with a cup full of milk in his hands, the milk was pouring down. In each place where the milk dropped a spring was emerging and of which the River Munzur”.

IV

THE DERSIM QUESTION

by Seyfi Cengiz

The region named as ‘Tunceli’ by Turkish occupiers is the inner and central part of the historical Dersim.

It is the homeland of a non-Turkish people known as the Dersimis or Klzılbaş, who suffer from both religious and national oppression at the hands of the Turkish invaders. The country's language, identity, beliefs, in short its whole culture and whole future as a people is under immediate threat.

THE YEAR 1938 AND THE GENOCIDE

Dersim used to be an autonomous (self-governed) region for centuries up until 1938, the very date that became a reference point in our people's recent history due to the genocide and mass exile planned and executed by the Turkish state at the time. The then Turkish strategy was to settle "The Dersim Question" once and for all by using military force. Opposed by a strong and desperate resistance, the invaders couldn't achieve this. But our homeland has become an internal colony of the Turkish state and remained as a 'forbidden land' ever since.

EVIL DEEDS OF THE COLONIAL GOVERNMENT FROM 1994 TO 1997

Insisting upon the policy to destroy the land and disperse its inhabitants, Turkish occupiers tried time and again to realise their aim whenever the opportunity arrived. The most recent example of this had been witnessed over the period between 1994 and 1997. Under the pretext of "PKK terrorism" hundreds of villages were destroyed and thousands of people forced to emigrate over those three years. In 1994 sixteen people disappeared during military operations and it is still not allowed to investigate what happened to them.

THE TURKISH SECRET PLAN BEHIND THE DAM PROJECT

After 1999 there has been no "PKK terrorism" for five years and people have expected to be helped in order to recover from mass unemployment and poverty, hoped at least some freedom for their language, religion and culture. Let alone these expectations being fulfilled, people were surprised to hear of a project which envisaged the construction of eight dams on River Munzur high on the agenda.

The issue of the dam once again reminded us all the tragic events of the year 1938, simply because this project, which is already in progress and about to reach a vital stage, will eventually,

- 1) displace hundreds of families living in the villages around the dam site,
- 2) damage the region's ecology,
- 3) endanger the existing plants and creatures in the valley,
- 4) ruin the countryside life,
- 5) destroy the holy places on and along the river.

In short this project poses a major threat to the fabric of our society.

That's why we are against it.

People of Dersim believe it to be a politically-motivated initiative, aimed to dislocate and disperse themselves by flooding the country. It is something that makes people think of 1938, when the Turkish military committed a genocide by killing approximately fifty-thousand people. This project openly aims to finish whatever remained of Dersim.

Six-years long people's protest across Dersim and in some European countries is being ignored. Despite local opposition and countless legal initiatives the Turkish Government

seems to be quite determined to go ahead with the project.

The Munzur River is the life-blood of the country. There can be no life in Dersim without Father Munzur and ist valley. The dam project imposed on our country must be stopped.

We would like to make it known to the whole world that we won't permit the River Munzur to be treated in this way. This River is sacred in our country's tradition. We are determined to act in defense of our homeland in case we have to.

DERSIM NEEDS HELP

We call upon the Hüman Rights Organisations, environmental and ecological groups and all the other people and bodies concerned to put pressure on Turkish Goverment, -to stop obstructing investigations into disappearances and many other hüman rights abuses in Dersim,

-not to go ahead with the dam project over River Munzur,

-to acknowledge the genocide committed in 1938

-to remove the restrictions imposed on the local language, religion and culture.