Chapter 1

Gağan: A Living Heritage of Tunceli

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Every year, in the last week of December, something quietly extraordinary takes place in Tunceli. Streets grow hushed before a procession begins. A white-bearded old man moves from house to house, a young bride at his side, a dark-faced helper trailing behind. Children run ahead announcing his arrival. Doors open. Those inside know what his presence means: the old year is ending, a new one is about to be born, and Hizir himself has come to bless the household. What they are participating in is Gağan, one of Anatolia's enduring living seasonal ritual traditions and among its richest expressions of cultural memory, communal renewal, and spiritual continuity.

Gağan (also spelled *Gaxan*) takes its name from the Kirmancki/Zazaca word for December, the final month of the year. Among the Kurdish Alevi communities of Tunceli, principally in Tunceli and in Alevi communities across parts of Erzincan, Bingöl, Muş, Sivas, and the district of Varto, it marks the threshold between the departing year and the one to come.[1] Rather than representing an imported celebration, Gağan is widely understood as an indigenous seasonal tradition rooted in the cultural and spiritual landscape of Tunceli. It is native to this landscape, shaped by the particular cosmology of *Raa Haqi*, the Path of Truth that governs the spiritual life of Tunceli Alevis, and by a relationship with nature so intimate that the seasons themselves carry theological weight.[2]

A Time Outside of Time

Gağan does not begin with festivity. It begins with fasting. On a Tuesday in the third week of December, the community enters a three-day fast, lasting until Thursday evening, a day that in local sacred reckoning is called 'Friday.' This period of abstinence is not merely preparatory; it enacts what might be called a suspension of ordinary time, a held breath between one world and

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the next. The community stands at the threshold, neither in the old year nor yet in the new, until the moment of transformation arrives.

The timing resonates with something far older. The winter solstice, when the sun reaches its southernmost point and appears, for a brief period, to stand still before beginning its northward course, is inscribed in the very structure of the Gağan fast. Comparable midwinter ceremonies are attested across ancient Anatolian, Mesopotamian, and Iranian civilizations, many of them structured around the winter solstice and the symbolic renewal of the year. Gağan belongs to this broader tradition of seasonal renewal while preserving a distinctive ritual form shaped by the cultural and spiritual landscape of Tunceli. What makes it remarkable is not simply its antiquity but its continuity as a living tradition, still performed in villages and urban neighbourhoods alike, and still carrying the force of a ritual that remains deeply embedded in the community's collective life and belief.[3]

The Ritual Sequence

Following the fast, a series of ritual acts unfolds over the final night and first morning of the new year. The women of the household rise before dawn. Boiled wheat, known as *hedik*, is sprinkled in the home, in the stable, and at the water source. Some is threaded on a string and hung from the walls; some is given to the household to eat. Then, spring water is scattered through the rooms and over the animals, purifying the space and driving out whatever harm the old year may have deposited there. In some parts of Tunceli, wood ash is also ceremonially scattered along village paths, a parallel ritual act found in New Year ceremonies across Anatolia and beyond, commonly interpreted as the symbolic removal of accumulated misfortune and impurity.[1]

At dawn on the new year itself, the senior woman of the house takes a broom and sweeps the evil outward through the door, repeating an incantation whose words have not essentially changed in living memory:

Xiravinin tever be — Evil, go out.

Xizir amo zere — Hizir has entered.

Expulsion and invitation, enacted simultaneously through word and gesture: this is the precise grammar of Gağan. Cem ceremonies, the collective devotional gatherings central to Alevi practice, are held during this period as well, and sacred sites near villages, known as *jiares*, are visited in the mornings. Gağan is not a single event but a coordinated ritual calendar: fast, purification, theatrical play, communal feast, and the morning sweeping that closes the cycle.[2]

Khalkek: The Theatre of Death and Rebirth

The most vivid element of Gağan is the Khalkek, a performative folk play staged on the final evening of the festivities. Three male performers prepare in secret, dressing in roles that have remained essentially unchanged across generations. At one level, these three figures are characters in a comedy; at another, they enact a cosmological drama that the Alevi understanding of time makes fully legible. The first, Khal, takes the part of a white-bearded elderly man, stooped, staff in hand, a sack on his back, and represents the outgoing year in its aged, exhausted form. The second, known as *Fatik* or *Weyvike* (the Bride), is a man dressed as a young woman, face and lips elaborately painted, never speaking; she embodies not merely a bride but the world itself, the permanent *hane*, the dwelling that outlasts every sultan who passes through it.[4] The third, Koçeg, wears festive new clothes but has his face darkened with hearth soot, a mark signifying that his star has only just been born in the unseen world: the new year's sultan, present but not yet fully manifest, who will not appear in visible form until Newroz in March.[4] In the play's dramatic action, Koçeg is also the one who announces the retinue at each door and moves alongside Khal through the village; the cosmological and theatrical functions are carried in a single body.

The retinue moves from house to house through the village, joined by other young men and children who swell it as it goes. At each door, Koçeg announces: *Xiziro Khal amo — Aksakalli Hizir gelmiş.* The white-bearded old man has come. And here lies one of the most distinctive dimensions of the play: Khal is not merely a theatrical character. He embodies Hizir, the immortal figure of Alevi and Islamic tradition who appears in times of need, always in the guise of a poor and aged wanderer. The family who receives him is, in effect, receiving a divine visitor. Whatever they place in his sack (oil, flour, sugar, walnuts, dried fruits) participates in a cycle of redistribution that will end with a communal feast in the poorest household of the village, where the collected provisions are cooked and shared that night; whatever remains is left in that house.[4,2]

The play enacts a drama of death and renewal that evokes patterns of ritual transformation deeply familiar from Anatolian and Near Eastern traditions. The village youth tease Fatik, flirt with her, and eventually 'abduct' her. Khal, unable to retrieve his young bride from the stronger young men, collapses, a theatrical death. Fatik returns, kneels over him, and through a sequence of gestures long understood to carry the symbolic force of water and renewal, revives him. Khal rises. Music begins. The community dances together. The drama's inner logic follows the cosmological script: Khal's fainting and reviving

embody the death and rebirth of the old year, while Fatik, embodying the vitality and promise of the new, is the force that restores him.[2] The ritual structure of Gağan (fast, purification, theatrical enactment of death and rebirth, communal feast) offers structural parallels with ancient Near Eastern and Anatolian ceremonies of seasonal and calendrical renewal, including the Babylonian Akitu festival and Anatolian Hittite spring festivals. The Khalkek's bayılıp-ayılma (fainting and revival) motif likewise resonates with bereket traditions documented across the ancient Near East.[3]

What Bakhtin theorised as the carnivalesque, that is, the temporary inversion of social hierarchies, the licensed transgression of ordinary norms, the communal laughter that both subverts and renews, is precisely what Khalkek stages.[6,7] The young dominate the old, the silent bridal figure becomes the agent of the old man's restoration, and the poorest household becomes the site of the feast. The world is turned upside down so that it can be set right again, ready for the new year.

Carriers of the Tradition

Gağan has never been sustained by institutions alone. It has been carried, generation after generation, by people who considered it their responsibility: dedes, community elders, and in more recent times, performers who recognised that what was disappearing from the villages could not be recovered once it was gone. Among them was Mehmet Yildiz, known throughout Tunceli by the affectionate name Uzun Mehmet, a figure inseparable from the Varvara, the region's distinctive communal circle dance, and a fixture of every Gağan celebration in the city for decades. He played a particularly important role in transmitting cultural values to younger generations, performing at local events, festivals, and cultural displays, and his presence at Gağan festivities was, for many Tunceli residents, one of the ceremony's defining constants, the person through whom the abstract idea of 'living tradition' took a recognisable, beloved human form. He died of a heart attack in June 2025, at the age of 81, and was buried in Hopik village in Tunceli. The Governor of Tunceli, in his public tribute, described him as someone who had dedicated his life to safeguarding cultural heritage and passing it to the future. The loss registered across Tunceli not merely as the death of a beloved individual, but as a reminder of what it means when the last living carriers of a tradition begin to depart.

Gağan in Global Perspective

What makes Gağan remarkable is not its uniqueness in isolation but its participation in a vast, cross-cultural pattern of midwinter renewal. The structural resemblance to the Babylonian Akitu festival, with its ritualised

renewal of cosmic and political order, temporary destabilisation of royal authority, and subsequent reaffirmation of the relationship between the king, the deity, and the community, has been noted by Gezik.[3] Across the ancient Near East, the solar turning point generated analogous ceremonial responses: the Persian Yalda, still observed across Iran and Central Asia on the winter solstice, gathers families through the longest night to recite poetry and eat pomegranates, waiting for the sun's return; the Roman Saturnalia suspended social hierarchies for days, redistributing roles between masters and slaves in a logic structurally close to the Khalkek's inversion of age and status. Further north, the Scottish Hogmanay carries a tradition of first-footing, the first visitor of the new year crossing a threshold bearing gifts for luck, that echoes, however distantly, the same grammar of threshold, gift, and renewal that governs Khal's retinue through the village.[8] In the Caribbean, Jonkonnu traditions similarly feature masked and costumed processions associated with the Christmas and New Year season, in which performers move through towns and villages, historically receiving food, money, and other offerings in return for their performances. In some Jamaican communities, these public masquerades have also retained explicitly spiritual dimensions connected with ancestors and the ritual suspension of ordinary identity.[10] The comparison with Koçeg is necessarily structural rather than genealogical: in both traditions, altered appearance temporarily displaces ordinary social identity and marks the performer as belonging to the exceptional ritual space of the year's transition. What varies enormously across these traditions is the theological frame, the specific symbolic vocabulary, the social organisation of participation. What persists, across millennia and continents, is the underlying conviction that the end of the year requires a human response: that the world must be ceremonially dismantled and reassembled, that a stranger must cross your threshold, that the poorest house must become the site of the feast.

Two traditions familiar to contemporary audiences invite a more direct comparison. The figure of Santa Claus, descended from Saint Nicholas of Myra, a city in what is today southern Turkey, shares with Khal a striking set of surface features: the white beard, the house-to-house movement at the winter threshold, the sack carried on the back, the children who wait in anticipation and run to announce his arrival. The resemblance invites comparison, although it should not be taken as evidence of direct historical transmission. Both figures belong to broader traditions in which the arrival of a winter visitor at the household threshold carries ritual or supernatural significance. Yet the structural logic that governs each is precisely inverted. Santa arrives as a donor: he gives, the household receives. Khal arrives as a guest: the household gives, and what is collected flows toward the poorest. The

redistribution of Gağan is communitarian and directed at social need; the gift economy of Christmas is individualised and directed at domestic abundance. What looks like a parallel is, on closer inspection, a mirror, the same archetype refracted through radically different social imaginaries. Halloween, meanwhile, offers a different kind of comparison. The costumed figures moving from door to door, the masked anonymity that licenses transgression, the small toll extracted at each threshold: all of this resonates structurally with the Khalkek. Koçeg's darkened face and the Halloween mask serve cognate functions: both suspend ordinary identity and mark the wearer as a temporary emissary from elsewhere. The difference lies in what that elsewhere is. Halloween's masked figures arrive from the world of the dead, and the householder's offering is essentially apotropaic, a payment to ward off harm. Khal's retinue arrives from the sacred world of the living year's renewal, and the offering is a willing act of participation in a cycle of blessing. One tradition manages the threat of the threshold; the other celebrates it.

A Living Tradition Under Pressure

The generational transmission of Gağan has never been without its pressures. Urbanisation drew communities away from the village settings in which the ceremony's full ritual calendar, the retinue moving between houses, the communal feast in the poorest home, the morning sweeping that closes the cycle, depended on proximity, shared space, and collective participation. The older practitioners who still remembered how the ceremony was performed were often reluctant even to describe certain elements of the Khalkek, for they seemed, when viewed through a contemporary lens and at a distance from the ritual context that gave them meaning, at odds with the dignity the ceremony had always carried.[5] The chain connecting one generation to the next grew thin. Metin Kahraman, who has dedicated decades to documenting and reviving Gağan, described the predicament plainly: 'It is a very old cultural tradition for Alevis. It was on the verge of being forgotten. We are struggling to keep it alive.'[4]

The tradition has, however, proven resilient. Since the early 2000s, municipalities in Tunceli and surrounding districts have organised public Gağan celebrations. Munzur University has hosted the festivities on its campus in recent years. Diaspora communities across Europe have revived the ceremony as a marker of the region's identity. The Munzur journal, published since 2000, has served as a forum for essays on Tunceli folklore, belief, and material culture, a space where local knowledge speaks in its own voice. Scholars including Erdal Gezik, Ahmet Kerim Gültekin, Ali Ekber Kul, and Yilmaz Kaval have

now produced sustained academic work that gives the tradition the critical attention it deserves.

Kaval situates Gağan explicitly within the framework of UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage Convention, arguing that Tunceli's seasonal transition practices constitute a living archive of cultural memory, one encoding not merely religious belief but an entire cosmological relationship between a community and its natural environment.[1] The wheat scattered at the spring, the incantation at the door, the theatrical collapse and revival, the communal feast in the poorest house: each carries knowledge accumulated over centuries of life in these mountains, knowledge about solidarity, about the relationship between the living and the earth, about what it means to begin again.

Gağan and Sustainability

Beyond its historical and spiritual significance, Gağan also speaks to contemporary discussions of sustainability. Not because it was conceived as an environmental movement in the modern sense, but because it embodies forms of knowledge and practice that enabled communities to live in long-term balance with one another and with their surroundings.

The rituals of Gağan reflect a worldview in which human life unfolds within, rather than apart from, the rhythms of the natural world. The timing of the festival follows the winter solstice and the seasonal turning of the year; water, fire, ash, grain, and livestock are not merely ritual objects but integral elements of everyday life transformed into symbols of renewal. Even practices such as scattering boiled wheat around the household, sprinkling spring water for purification, or ceremonially returning wood ash to the earth express an understanding that nothing exists in isolation and that renewal depends upon maintaining reciprocal relationships between people, place, and nature.

Equally significant is the festival's social dimension. The house-to-house procession, the communal redistribution of food, the central role given to the poorest household, and the transmission of ritual knowledge across generations all strengthen the social bonds upon which resilient communities depend. In this respect, Gağan illustrates a form of cultural sustainability in which traditions survive not through preservation alone, but through continuous participation and shared responsibility.[1]

Recent scholarship has increasingly recognised that traditional ecological knowledge and intangible cultural heritage contribute to sustainable development by preserving locally accumulated knowledge about landscapes, seasonal cycles, and community life.[11,12] Gağan offers a particularly illuminating example of how intangible cultural heritage and traditional ecological

knowledge reinforce one another in sustaining both community identity and environmental awareness. It preserves not only ritual practices but also an ecological memory of Tunceli's mountains, waters, seasons, and rural lifeways. Its continued practice demonstrates that resilient futures depend not only upon scientific innovation and environmental policy but also upon cultural memory, collective responsibility, and the enduring dialogue between communities and the environments they inhabit.[11,12]

Gağan and Munzur University

Munzur University stands at the heart of this tradition's landscape. The Munzur valley, whose river in local mythology is itself a sacred presence, a protector who withdrew from the world without ever fully revealing himself, has shaped the cultural imagination that gave rise to Gağan. For a university committed to understanding and preserving the heritage of this region, Gağan is not a peripheral concern. The folk narratives that researchers here collect, the fairy tales that carry echoes of the same cosmology, the work done with the children of the region to keep these traditions alive and forward-looking, all of it belongs to the same effort to honour what Assmann calls cultural memory: the accumulated symbols, rituals, and practices through which a people knows itself across time.[9]

Viewed from this perspective, Gağan is not simply a tradition to be documented but a living source of interdisciplinary inquiry. It provides a rich framework for scholarly research at the intersection of cultural memory, traditional ecological knowledge, sustainability, folklore, literature, and the environmental humanities. By documenting, interpreting, and revitalising traditions such as Gağan, Munzur University contributes not only to safeguarding the cultural heritage of Tunceli but also to international scholarship on cultural sustainability, environmental humanities, and community resilience.

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