

The Cave as a Ritualistic Place in Turkish Culture

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Abstract: This article discusses the mythological and ritualistic meanings of the cave in Turkish culture. Steppe life formed the basis of the Turks' relationship with nature, and respect for nature has gained a sacred meaning. In the belief of Tengriism, natural sites such as mountains, rivers, trees and caves were regarded as sacred. In Turkish mythology, the cave has been identified with the womb and holds a significant place in creation and origin myths. Figures such as Umay Ana and Ak Ene in Turkish mythology are associated with cave cults. In the Göktürk Origin myth, the cave is regarded as the birthplace of the first ancestors. Additionally, for shamans, caves have served as spaces for spiritual journeys and communication with supernatural beings. The cave is imbued not only with mythological meanings but also with religious and mystical significance. In Islam, the Cave of Hira is considered sacred as the place where Prophet Muhammad received his first revelation. In the Sufi tradition, caves have been used as places of seclusion and spiritual purification. Sufi figures such as Ahmed Yesevi and Hacı Bektaş-ı Veli retreated to caves for solitude, completing their spiritual maturation. The origins of the sanctification of caves trace back to mythical times. This study focuses on the origins of caves as ritual spaces in Turkish culture and the rituals that have developed around them. In Turkish culture, caves are regarded as sacred sites where healing, wish-making and communal rituals are performed. Rituals are conducted in times of crisis or in response to societal needs and manifest in various forms. In healing rituals, practices such as touching cave walls, drinking water and rubbing against stones are performed to cure illnesses. Additionally, rituals such as tying cloth to trees, placing stones, offering sacrifices and casting or drawing bones are particularly noteworthy. These rituals are carried out within specific rules, reinforcing social belonging and contributing to the transmission of cultural heritage.

Keywords: mythology, cave, ritual, sacred place, symbol

INTRODUCTION

In the history of Turkish culture, the steppe life represents the period in which the Turks' relationship with nature was experienced in its deepest form. The nomadic lifestyle played a crucial role in shaping the Turks' way of life, belief

systems and social structures based on nature. This way of life not only led to the sanctification of their respect for nature but also instilled the necessity of living in harmony with it. Particularly in the steppe environment, survival was impossible without understanding and respecting nature. As a result, within steppe culture, nature manifested as a sacred entity for the Turks in a holistic sense. This deep reverence for nature and its sacredness strengthened their connection to natural cycles, leading to the emergence of beliefs and rituals related to seasons, the land and animals.

In the belief system of the Turks, Tengriism regarded the balance between the earth and the sky as sacred. Within this cosmological framework, natural sites such as mountains, rivers, trees and caves became integral components of their spiritual worldview. Among these sacred spaces, caves held particular significance. This article aims to explore the mythological and ritualistic meanings of caves in Turkish culture. Rather than adopting an archaeological or anthropological perspective, the study interprets caves within a folkloric context. The methodology is based on a text-centered analysis, incorporating data from various disciplines, including folklore, sociology, the history of religions and mythology. Initially, the study examines the symbolic role and function of caves in Turkish mythology and culture. Subsequently, rituals associated with caves in folk beliefs are analyzed according to their functions. Although a cave is geologically defined as a hollow space extending into rock formations (TDK Güncel Sözlük 2011: 1602; Ozansoy & Mengi 2006: 1), it has held various meanings and roles in human life since mythical times. From antiquity to the present, caves have served multiple functions, including as homes, shelters, sanctuaries, temples, ceremonial sites and tombs. Due to their protective structure, caves have been shaped as living spaces and can be considered humanity's first dwellings. In prehistoric times, driven by the instinct of survival, humans sought refuge in caves to protect themselves from the threats of natural phenomena they could not yet comprehend and from attacks by wild animals. In the living spaces they established in and around caves, prehistoric humans shaped stones to produce simple tools, discovered fire, and thus developed strategies to cope with nature (Davis 2019: 1). Particularly during the Paleolithic and Mesolithic periods, caves served as the most secure shelters for human communities. Arslantaş (2014: 321) notes that during the Middle Paleolithic Age, the increasingly harsh climatic conditions made life more difficult, and human groups were only able to protect themselves by taking refuge in caves or enclosed spaces. One notable example of this is the use of cave huts near Nice, France, approximately 400,000 years ago, which functioned as dwellings. Caves vividly reflect the daily lives of prehistoric humans. Cave life was typically organized into functional zones: one corner was used for butchering hunted animals, while another corner served as a cooking area where a hearth was established. In this context, a section of the cave clearly functioned as a kitchen. Inside the cave or near its entrance, there was usually

a designated space for fire-making, known as a workshop area (Kökten 1952: 186). Special corners were also created within caves for storing firewood. Surplus food, such as gathered plant materials or excess meat, was stored in the cooler, deeper parts of the cave, which functioned much like a primitive refrigerator. Areas closer to the cave entrance were organized into sections for sleeping, dressing and spaces designated for children (Arslantaş 2014: 321).

Caves, which functioned as natural shelters, became more habitable in the Mesolithic Age in terms of living comfort. This transformation into more comfortable living spaces occurred as a result of long and challenging periods. Over time, new forms of social organization, division of labor and communal living began to emerge within human societies. The primary evidence shedding light on the lives of people from this period includes tools and weapons found in caves, as well as cave paintings (Kinal 1998: 12). As can be observed, during a time when humanity struggled to survive under harsh conditions, the cave consistently held a significant place as a protective and vital refuge.

Since the Paleolithic Age – referred to as the earliest period of human history – caves have served not only as shelters for refuge, dwelling and protection but also as the birthplace of art. People who used caves as homes laid the foundations of what is now known as “cave rock art” by depicting the life they observed in nature onto cave walls. The earliest known information about prehistoric humans is derived from these cave paintings. Thus, they provide valuable insights into the thoughts and emotions of archaic human consciousness that once inhabited caves. These paintings, which predominantly feature animal and human symbolism, reflect traces of the cognitive and spiritual world of people from that era. The reason why most Upper Paleolithic cave paintings depict animals lies in this symbolic orientation. The noticeable absence – or extreme rarity – of human figures in cave art is interpreted as an indication of a worldview shaped not by the self or society, but by nature, or by a life lived in deep connection with natural forces (Quennell 1921: 67, as cited in Arslantaş 2014: 329). In these early depictions, one can observe symbolic reflections of nature as imagined and experienced within the mental and symbolic world of archaic humans.

Prehistoric cave paintings are often interpreted not merely as artistic expressions but also as reflections of ritualistic practices associated with hunting. In this context, hunting activities appear to have been embedded within a broader ceremonial framework that combined practical preparation with symbolic and magical elements. A selected group of hunters within the community would engage in preparations prior to the actual hunting activity, planning the hunt and readying their weapons. The hunt leader would establish a tactical scheme, indicating what each hunter should do and where. A ritual feast was first held around a fire, and the details of the hunt were represented on the cave walls. These ritual depictions were accompanied by dance performances reenacting the hunt, during which ceremonial acts were performed by the participating

individuals. Özdemir evaluates the frequent appearance of hunting scenes in cave paintings from this ritualistic perspective (Özdemir 2021: 832). The act of painting the hunt on cave walls can thus be interpreted as a form of magical ritual intended to ensure the abundance and success of the hunt. At the same time, these paintings served as a means of transmitting hunting experience and knowledge to future generations.

Although caves were primarily used as dwellings during the Paleolithic Age – when humans had not yet adopted a sedentary lifestyle – their significance did not diminish in later periods such as the Neolithic and Chalcolithic Ages, during which people transitioned to settled life. In fact, caves continued to be used even into the Early Bronze Age. While their original function as “homes” gradually transformed, caves began to serve as temples or sacred places – a role that, in some contexts, persists to this day (Taşkiran 2018: 63). Since the Neolithic and Chalcolithic periods, caves have also been used as cultic and ritualistic spaces. Religious ceremonies and rituals began to take place within cave environments. Childe notes that in caves where such ceremonial activities occurred, piles of cave bear bones and skulls arranged in a ritualistic manner were discovered, suggesting that these spaces were intentionally organized for religious purposes (Childe 1998: 36, 41). These cave rituals are reminiscent of contemporary ceremonies still performed by hunting tribes in Siberia, where rituals are carried out to appease the spirit of the bear and ensure the abundance of future hunts (Özbek 2011: 154, as cited in Arslantaş 2014: 330).

Cave rock paintings also provide insights into the rituals and belief systems of people living during the Paleolithic Age. In the Lascaux Cave in France, the earliest traces of Shamanism can be observed. One particularly notable depiction related to hunting portrays a figure often referred to as the “man-bison”, which is believed to represent a shaman or spiritual figure. The figure has human-like feet, while other parts of its body resemble various animals: the torso resembles a large animal, the hindquarters and legs are human-like, the tail is similar to that of a fox or a wolf, the forelimbs resemble human arms, and there is a pair of deer antlers on its head (Campbell 2016: 285–286). Kenneth Lymer, in his study of cave rock art in Central Asia, interprets certain locations as ancient pilgrimage centers. One such site, Terekti-Aulie, is considered a sacred space where individuals from different segments of society encountered spiritual experiences. The images carved or painted onto the rocks are visual representations of shamans and their interactions with the spirit world. Today, the site continues to be visited as a center of religious practice. The rock imagery clearly indicates that Terekti-Aulie in Kazakhstan functioned as an ancient pilgrimage center (Lymer 2000: 311). This deep connection with nature positioned caves as significant elements in humanity’s mythical memory. Consequently, caves have become symbolic spaces in myths of creation, origin and lineage.

The cave has been identified with the womb of Mother Earth in many cultures worldwide. In this context, due to its dark, warm and humid atmosphere, the cave is likened to the uterus and is regarded in mythologies as a birthplace for gods and goddesses. The association of caves with Mother Earth or the womb is a common perspective in various mythologies and belief systems. Eliade interprets the symbolic representation of caves as the womb as a reenactment of creation (2018). In the context of fertility and rebirth, rituals associated with birth and renewal have been performed within caves, often dedicated to Mother Earth or other nature goddesses. Similarly, in Turkish mythology, the cave is symbolized as the womb. As one of the most archaic symbols in Turkish mythology, the cave represents fertility, akin to the 'maternal womb' and serves as a sanctuary, akin to a 'protective spirit'. In Turkish mythology, Ak Ene and later Umay Ana¹ are associated with the cave cult. Among the Altai people, Umay is characterized by her connection to sacred caves. It is believed that Umay appeared in a cave located in the Char Mountains near Narina in the Altai region, a place inaccessible to ordinary humans (Sagalayev 1991: 58–59).

The cave, which holds a special place within the mythological Mother complex, gradually became integrated with the Tengriist belief system and was endowed with the ancestor cult. The sacralization of the womb – a metonym of the mythological Mother – under the concept of the cave is rooted in its function as one of the earliest human dwellings. Consequently, over time, the cave came to be envisioned as the dwelling and shelter of the first ancestors. The sacrifices offered in honor of ancestors within caves are linked to the belief that the first ancestors once lived in these spaces and that their spirits continue to reside there (Bayat 2012: 32–33). In Turkish mythology, the creation of the first ancestor and the first human takes place within a cave, symbolizing the fertility function of the Mythological Mother. The foundation of this belief is rooted in the Göktürk origin myth. According to this legend, the Göktürk state traces its lineage to ten sons born in a cave. Another origin myth of the Turks narrates that their first ancestor, Ay-Ata, was born in a cave. As seen in these accounts, the cave, representing the function of the maternal womb, is closely intertwined with the ancestor cult. Due to the reverence for both the cave that gave birth to Ay-Ata and the ancestors, the Göktürks held an annual sacrificial ritual in a cave on the seventh day of the seventh month. This sacrificial ritual took place in a cave known as the Ancestors' Cave as a form of worship dedicated to an ancestor represented by a male and a female wolf (Çoruhlu 2006: 58). The Ancestors' Cave was not only revered by shamans and individuals but also by the entire state apparatus. The crucial aspect of this ceremony was the ruler's leadership of the ritual (Ögel 2014: 25). In *The Poetics of Space* (2020), Gaston Bachelard underscores the human longing for dwelling, protection and inward retreat, particularly through his reflections on the cellar, the cupboard and the hidden corners of the house. Likewise, within historical and mythological frameworks, the motif of the cave serves as a symbolic locus

for existential processes such as turning inward, reconnecting with ancestral roots and undergoing a metaphorical rebirth. The belief in the “ancestors’ cave” found in Turkish mythology resonates with Bachelard’s conception of “the deep layers of space that safeguard the past” (2020: 60–80).

The cave cult, shaped within the framework of the mountain cult, has played a significant role in the formation of various traditions and beliefs. In the Turkish mythological thought system, mountains are envisioned as the dwelling place of the God. For this reason, mountains are considered sacred spaces. Mountains endowed with divine blessing symbolize vertical ascent, representing a connection to the sky. Cosmic mountains serve as the center of the world, establishing a link between the earth and the heavens (Eliade 2018: 333). In the sacred mountains at the center of the world lie caves the dwelling place of the mythological Mother. In this context, mountains are characterized as masculine spaces, while caves possess a feminine nature. As God and sacred spirits descended to the earth, they used mountain caves as passageways. In Turkish mythology, caves have also been perceived as gateways leading to the underworld. In Turkish mythology, caves serve as the connecting points between the three realms: the underworld, the earth and the sky. The most significant passageway between these worlds is often a cave. Functioning as thresholds and gateways, caves facilitate transitions between different cosmic planes. Ögel states that caves are the doors through which deities descend to the earth and shamans journey into the underworld (Ögel 2014: 285).

The earliest traces of Shamanism can be found in caves. Shamans would descend into the underground through passages located in mountain caves. The role of shamans in conducting fertility rituals related to hunting significantly contributed to the perception of caves as sacred spaces. By performing these rituals in caves, shamans were believed to facilitate abundant hunts. Caves were considered sacred places due to their connection with creation. Various rituals were conducted in caves for purposes such as preparing for hunting, ensuring agricultural fertility, healing illnesses, showing reverence to the gods, receiving blessings, avoiding divine punishment and communicating with supernatural beings.

Caves have been significant religious and spiritual sites in many cultures. Several factors contribute to their function as sacred spaces. Due to their natural characteristics and unique atmosphere, caves possess a mystical aura. People experience the power of nature and the divine more intensely within caves. For this reason, since prehistoric times, humans have visited caves to pray, worship and perform various rituals. Another reason for the sacredness of caves lies in their natural structure. A cave is a quiet and dark place. This tranquility creates a suitable environment for retreat. Caves have played a significant role in individuals’ spiritual journeys, their search for meaning in existence, and their processes of transformation. According to monotheistic religions and various mystical traditions, these sacred spaces symbolize

inner enlightenment and spiritual refuge. Therefore, monks, religious figures, prophets and others have sought solace in caves to embark on their inner journeys and fulfill their acts of worship. In the context of the Turkish-Islamic tradition, caves hold significance both as historical and religious symbols. Caves, regarded as sacred in many religions, are also considered holy in Islam due to their connection with its origins. The Cave of Hira, where Prophet Muhammad sought solitude, served as the birthplace of Islam, as it was in this cave that he received the first revelation. The Cave of Hira symbolizes the Prophet Muhammad's spiritual experiences and marks the beginning of his prophetic journey in Islam.

In the Sufi tradition, caves hold significant importance as spaces for spiritual purification, inner renewal and closeness to God. Inspired by the lives of prophets, caves have gained deep symbolic meaning for Turkish Sufis. In Sufism, during a state of seclusion (*halvet*), a Sufi retreats to a cave or a similar structure known as a *çilehane* (a place of ascetic retreat). Çetindağ (2007: 446) states that due to their structure, *çilehane* resemble graves and symbolically represent a place of rebirth. A person entering a *çilehane* emerges renewed, at peace, purified from worldly attachments and cleansed of their ego. In this context, *çilehaneler* are constructed within caves. These places serve as retreats where individuals isolate themselves to cleanse their worldly desires and advance on the spiritual path. Prolonged seclusion in caves provides individuals with an opportunity for purification from sins and the attainment of spiritual purity. The silent and serene environment of the cave allows for the deepening of one's spiritual experiences. In Turkish culture, prominent Sufi figures such as Hoca Ahmet Yesevî and Hacı Bektaşî Veli secluded themselves in caves to complete their personal transformation and spiritual ascension. Therefore, in the Sufi tradition, seclusion in caves plays a crucial role in the mystic's process of spiritual purification and deep contemplation. It serves as an ancient method for attaining spiritual maturity.

1. THE CAVE AS A RITUAL AND SANCTUARY PLACE

Caves, among the most ancient and enigmatic sites in human history, have served not only as physical shelters but also as mystical spaces imbued with profound symbolic and spiritual significance. Since prehistoric times, caves have played a central role in human belief systems, mystical practices, rituals and collective memory. It is through these rituals that caves have become embedded in societal memory. Various rituals have been performed in caves for purposes such as preparation before hunting, ensuring agricultural fertility, healing diseases, showing reverence to deities, seeking blessings, avoiding divine punishment, and communicating with supernatural beings. This supports Alver's perspective on the relationship between rituals, culture and society. By bringing people together in caves for a common purpose, these rituals

have facilitated the formation of a collective consciousness. At this point, rituals – determined by society and traditions – are conscious acts of the mind (Alver 2011: 73–75). Rituals, which play a significant role in attributing symbolic value to spaces, also possess a unifying and cohesive power in the context of caves.

Rituals contribute to the attribution of symbolic value to spaces. Assmann emphasizes the role of rituals in the process of remembrance, highlighting their symbolic significance in shaping cultural memory. Spaces create a world of symbolic meaning, fostering a sense of unity and connection while providing a sense of security, thereby strengthening the feeling of belonging among individuals. Consequently, through various practices and activities performed within a space, significant memories and experiences are preserved, forming recollections of different times and linking the past with the present. The normative, narrative, guiding, and transmissive aspects of culture establish the foundations of identity and belonging among individuals (Assmann 2001: 21). Caves, in this context, fulfill the function of cultural repetition and reenactment through rituals. The relationship between ritual and memory can thus be interpreted through the spatiality of the cave.

Space should be evaluated in conjunction with the social and cultural phenomena that structure, create, define, shape, transform and differentiate it (Alver 2007: 26). The concept of space connects the mental with the cultural, and the social with the historical (Lefebvre 2014: 25). At this point, the relationship between memory and space becomes significant. Memory is formed through the process of socialization. It is dynamic and sustains itself through continuous communication. If there is a disruption in this communication, or if the framework of the present reality changes or disappears, forgetting occurs (Assmann 2001: 45). In the relationship between space and memory, the functionality of rituals gains importance. Here, the role of rituals in the act of remembering becomes particularly significant.

The primary tool of every memory technique is spatialization. The art of memory operates through imagined spaces, while the culture of remembrance functions by marking natural spaces (Assmann 2001: 68). In cultural memory, figures of remembrance are closely linked to space. Spaces play a powerful role in the formation of collective memories and identities (Morley & Robins 1997: 131). Even if memory's function of recollection is neither geographical nor historical, it always requires a concrete space (Assmann 2001: 46). Space holds a dynamic role shaped by human activity and social interaction. Human interaction with place encompasses various processes, including the structural dynamics of the society in which one lives, everyday life practices, socialization and routines of spatial engagement, all of which are continuously reshaped (Akyıldız 2017: 40). What animates and gives meaning to space are the actions of the people within it (Lefebvre 2014: 149). Every community seeking to solidify itself as a group creates spaces as symbols of its identity and anchor points for

its memories. The group and the space together form a symbolic partnership. Even if a group becomes separated from its space, this connection is sustained through the symbolic reproduction of sacred places (Assmann 2001: 46–47).

There are multiple reasons why caves have been used as ritual spaces. Rituals transcend the ordinary atmosphere of daily life, creating a sacred space and time. The time of rituals is sacred, and ritual spaces are surrounded by symbolic elements (Wulf 2009: 231). The emotional intensity that emerges among participants during rituals evokes feelings such as security, pleasure and power in individuals. During the ritual, the symbols, words, gestures and expressions used by participants constitute the language of the ritual. Moreover, this symbol-laden language strengthens the sense of belonging among group members (Collins 2004: 49). The continued existence and vitality of rituals centered around caves today are closely linked to the meanings and perspectives that participants attribute to these sacred spaces. Collins interprets the perspective of ritual participants as follows:

The physical presence of two or more individuals in the same space influences one another. While an emotional exchange occurs among ritual participants, those outside the ritual are emotionally excluded. Participants focus on each other through shared objects, actions, and communication. They are aware of the common focal point they concentrate on. Thus, participants share a collective state of mind or emotional experience (Collins 2004: 48).

Participation in cave rituals fosters a heightened sense of group consciousness and reinforces group identity. Therefore, rituals play a crucial role in organizing and maintaining social relationships as well as ensuring social order (Peacock 1979: 391). They provide individuals with a sense of identity and belonging. People visit caves with various intentions, such as seeking healing, making wishes, praying, or offering sacrifices. They perform these rituals with the aim of connecting their intentions to the sacred. This function of rituals also contributes to social order. By guiding individuals on how to behave within society and providing predetermined behavioral patterns, rituals eliminate the need for constant new searches. Additionally, rituals strengthen emotional ties to the past and, as a result, teach future generations how to act. In this way, they ensure the continuity of the social structure and the transmission of cultural heritage (Karaman 2010: 233).

In a spatial context, the cave is one of the sacred places where culture is constructed and tradition is sustained. In archaic societies, rituals and ceremonies performed in caves taught individuals how to live, whereas today, they serve the function of preserving social order. As Assmann states, rituals form the underlying structures that establish the foundations of social identity systems (2001: 143). While rituals in primitive societies were primarily conducted to

strengthen collective consciousness, they have become increasingly significant in modern societies for the preservation and continuation of identity awareness. In Turkish culture, the cave has also acquired various functions as a ritual space.

1.1. The Cave as a Place of Healing and Wishing

In Turkish culture, healing spaces are places where individuals seek to improve their physical or spiritual well-being. People visit tombs, sacred mountains and caves to find healing. By visiting these sacred sites, they also perform various rituals with the intention of curing their illnesses. In Turkey, many caves are visited for healing and therapeutic purposes. In a ritualistic context, illnesses fall under the category of crisis rites, which are rituals performed in response to unexpected situations. Rituals organized to overcome the uncertainty and distress caused by these crisis situations vary widely. They are collective rituals performed when an entire group is affected by a crisis. Rituals aimed at healing from illness, protection from fire, preventing crop failure and famine through rain-making ceremonies, and safeguarding against theft, jealousy and evil fall into this category (Honko cited in Ersoy 2009: 133). As a healing space, the cave serves as a place of solace for those seeking cures for various illnesses, individuals wishing to conceive, and those praying for good fortune, among other purposes.

One of the healing sites is the Ashab-ı Khef² Cave, located in the Tarsus district of Mersin. Visitors to the cave use various elements within it – such as the perforated stone, the camel stone, the cave walls and the water dripping from the ceiling – for healing purposes.

At the entrance of the Ashab-ı Khef Cave, on the left side, there is a stone approximately one meter high that resembles a headless, seated camel. This stone is known as the “Camel” or “Camel Stone”. According to belief, when Dakyanus and his soldiers found the young men and were about to enter the cave, a camel appeared and lay down at the entrance, blocking their path. No matter what they did, the camel would not move. Eventually, they cut off its head, yet it still did not rise. Meanwhile, the sleepers escaped through a hole above the cave. Today, visitors pray at this stone and believe that rubbing their aching body parts against it will relieve pain. They also touch the stone with their hands and then rub their hands on their faces and bodies. Additionally, the perforated stone, located just behind the camel stone at the cave’s entrance, is used for both seeking healing and symbolically shedding sins. Visitors often use these two stones together. (Uğureli 2017: 41–42)

One of the most significant elements of ritual, the hole, is a crucial symbol with two main aspects. On a biological level, it possesses fertilizing power and is associated with fertility rites; on a spiritual level, it represents an opening between this world and the otherworld. Worshiping or showing reverence to 'perforated stones' is a widespread practice across the world. Examples include sites where women pray for their children's health, infertile women crawling through the hole, perceiving it as the gateway to the world, or envisioning it as a representation of the female reproductive organ (Cirlot 1971: 149–150, cited in Koç 2022).

Hollow stones, rocks, and remnants – such as caves and tree crevices – can be interpreted as thresholds where exchanges take place. Around spaces attributed with threshold significance, beliefs and emotions such as reverence, sanctity, attentiveness, purification, excitement, fear, protection and safeguarding are intensely manifested (Koç 2022: 93). Passing through a perforated stone can be seen as leaving behind evil and chaos while transitioning to order and the good side. Van Gennep classifies the ritual of passing through a hole as part of the category of material and spiritual rites. In rituals involving passage through or beneath a hole, various objects (such as stones, feathers, or cloth) are left as offerings to facilitate the transition. The act of leaving these objects in a sacred space serves as a form of consecration to the protective spirit of the place, which, in van Gennep's terms, is an act of supplication (2022: 31). The rituals performed in caves, such as throwing stones into water while passing through a hole or tying fabric to a tree within the cave, further support van Gennep's perspective.

Passing through a perforated stone is also a renewal ritual performed through the stone as a means of protection from evil and disease. In the village of Teniste in Mersin/Bozyazı, there is a cave that is visited by those who are unable to conceive. Inside the cave, there are two stone pillars standing side by side, sharing a single base but diverging into two as they rise. Those who seek to have children pass between these two pillars. Additionally, offerings are made, and sacrifices are performed in the cave (Kayabaşı 2016: 158). The act of passing between these two pillars can be interpreted, in line with van Gennep's (2022) perspective, as the transfer of misfortune. When one passes through a perforated stone or between two pillars, they symbolically transition from a dangerous world to a better or neutral one. The cave itself serves as the entrance to this new realm. Stones, believed to harbor ancestral spirits, can enable infertile women to become fertile due to both their form and origin. The ritual of touching the stone to attain fertility symbolizes a return to the womb. Passing through a hole is a ritual that signifies rebirth through a feminine cosmic principle (Eliade 2014: 226, 230).

One of the prominent sacred symbols in cave rituals is water. Water flowing from caves has always been considered sacred and healing. The Cave of the Seven Sleepers is a karstic cave due to its geographical features, making

its interior constantly humid and its walls wet. According to local beliefs, the water dripping from the cave walls represents the tears of the Seven Sleepers and is regarded as sacred and healing. For this reason, visitors seeking cures for various illnesses drink the water flowing from the cave walls. In this context, special attention is given to clothing and behavior within the cave to avoid showing disrespect to this sacred site. It is believed that any act of disrespect towards the cave may result in a decrease in the water flowing from its walls (Uğureli 2017: 41–42). According to Eliade, the function of water remains constant: it dissolves unity, erases forms and ‘purifies from sins’. Water both revitalizes and purifies. Every contact with water symbolizes the two fundamental cycles of cosmic rhythm: reintegration with water and creation. This is because water itself is creation and is therefore sacred (Eliade 2014: 217). For this reason, the water within caves is also sacred and must be treated with the same reverence as the cave itself. It is believed that if respect is not shown, the sanctity will be disrupted.

Eliade states that water represents all potential and creative forces. It is the source of existence, possessing universal healing properties; it removes diseases from individuals and restores the health of the sick (Eliade 2014: 196). Contact with water symbolizes a form of rebirth. Similarly, the water found in caves serves as a cosmogenic symbol of universal healing. When consumed, cave water dissolves all forms, absorbing and neutralizing illness and malevolent forces through its transformative power, thus facilitating healing.

One of the notable symbols in rituals is stone. Stones, particularly in monumental structures, tombstones and sacred sites, have been used to mark boundaries and serve as a means of spiritual communication. Their sacredness primarily stems from their association with a specific object or place (Eliade 2014: 222). Similarly, stones within caves are regarded as sacred. The presence of stone within the cave grants it sanctity. In this context, stones function as intermediaries rather than objects of worship. Eliade interprets stones not as objects of veneration but as instruments facilitating sacred connection. In rituals associated with caves, stones are directed toward the spirit awakened within the cave and the sacred symbol that blesses it. At the Cave of the Seven Sleepers, individuals seeking to conceive, those searching for healing and those wishing to improve their fortunes visit the site to perform various wish-making rituals. One such ritual involves pressing a stone against the damp cave wall while making a wish. It is believed that if the stone sticks to the wall, the wish will come true; if it falls, it will not. Another ritual involves touching and rubbing one’s face against footprints on the cave walls, believed to belong to Kitmir, the faithful dog of the Seven Sleepers, while making a wish (Uğureli 2017: 56).

Another healing ritual performed in caves involves sleeping within the cave. In the Bozyazı district of Mersin, a particular cave is visited by women who have experienced recurrent miscarriages. Women seeking to prevent pregnancy loss go to the cave, where prayers are offered to a revered elder believed

to reside there. As part of the ritual, rice is cooked and distributed. Following this, the woman must sleep in the cave for a certain period. It is believed that after this ritual, she will no longer suffer miscarriages (Bali 2015: 170). In a ritual described by Arnold van Gennep regarding the Kamchatkans, the birch tree is considered a sacred tree and is used in many ceremonies. In Kamchatkan society, birch branches are brought into the felt tent as part of the ritual. Inside the tent, participants arrange the branches in a circle and pass through them one by one, a practice they refer to as purification from faults. They regard the branches as carriers of the sacred (van Gennep 2022: 31). Sleeping in a cave stems from the desire to be directly sanctified by the power of the space. Infertility in women can be interpreted as something transferred and transformed through the cave. Sleeping in the cave functions as a form of purification ritual. When the woman awakens and exits the cave, she is believed to have been cleansed of impurities and sanctified. Symbolically, sleeping in the cave represents a return to the womb.

1.2. The Cave as a Shrine Place

In Turkish culture, the structures where religious scholars, saints, and revered figures are buried are called ‘türbe’ (mausoleums). These sacred sites are visited for purposes of reverence and worship, as they are believed to manifest the sacred in folk beliefs. Muslims hold deep respect and veneration for the tombs of prophets, saints and religious figures. By constructing türbes over these graves, they continue to express their reverence for these holy individuals. Eliade explains the act of respecting and visiting sacred sites such as türbes as a way for people to re-experience the sacred (Eliade 1991: 10). The belief in visiting türbes (mausoleums) is rooted in the idea that coming into contact with these sacred spaces through specific rituals and procedures will provide benefits based on one’s needs. It is believed that the spiritual powers (karāmāt) demonstrated by saints during their lifetimes extend after their death to the surrounding trees, stones, rocks, hills and caves (Kıyak 2012: 162). As a result, people visit these sites to connect with the sacred, experience miracles, seek healing for illnesses and make wishes. One such sacred site where these rituals take place is the cave shrines.

Sacred spaces are places where humans encounter the divine. Sacred times, on the other hand, are occasions such as festivals, special days and nights, in short, moments when religions, memories and expectations are experienced (Uygur 2015: 465). Caves are one of the places where people meet the sacred, particularly visiting on special days imbued with sanctity. Visiting the shrines or graves within caves is a mystical act. Something invisible and impossible to describe with words takes on a true and sacred form within these spaces. Those who participate in the rituals and worship conducted in these spaces are believed to manifest a sublime joy through their actions, entering a higher realm beyond their usual lives (Huizinga 2018: 32–33). Sacred spaces are locations of

cultural memory and societal recollection, serving as sites for remembrance and learning. Shrines, mosques and places of offering associated with caves are among these sacred spaces. In these places, where the sanctity of God resides, the tombs and shrines of saints are also considered sacred and blessed. Offerings are made at the shrines of blessed saints, who are believed to possess the divine grace, with the hope that prayers and wishes will be fulfilled (Uygur 2015: 466). Eliade notes that worship and offerings made in temples aim to distinguish sacred spaces from the profane (Eliade 2014: 296). The shrines and pilgrimage sites within caves are structures based on symbolism associated with centers that confirm sanctity. In Turkish culture, the sacred spaces where saints are buried are important means for reaching God (Ergun 2004: 336). The shrines and graves of saints are places that carry the divine grace.

In this study, rituals performed during shrine visits centered around caves, such as tying cloth to a tree, sticking stones to a wall, offering both blood and non-blood sacrifices, throwing and pulling bones, praying, and sleeping in the shrine, have been identified as examples. One of the sacred sites where these rituals are conducted is the tomb of Musa Dede located within a cave in Alanya. Visitors to the Musa Dede tomb come seeking healing for wounds that have not healed for a long time. They first pray for Musa Dede, then use a piece of clean cloth or a cover to wipe the wound. Afterward, they hang the cloth used to wipe the wound on a tree branch inside the cave while praying for the wound to heal. After praying, they leave a coin in the cave and exit without looking back. According to the belief, if the person who leaves the coin turns around and looks, their wish will not be granted (Merdin 2016: 91).

In *Homo Ludens*, Huizinga does not regard play merely as entertainment or a childish pastime; rather, he sees play as the very foundation of culture, with ritual and sacred ceremony constituting the oldest forms of play (2018: 19). Building on Huizinga's perspective, the rituals observed during visits to shrines – such as tying rags to trees, drawing lots with bones, or offering sacrifices – should not be seen as purely religious acts but also as ludic practices. Rituals performed at shrines follow specific rules (e.g., where the blood of the sacrifice must be poured, how the cloth should be tied, the requirement to leave without looking back). The ritual must occur outside of ordinary life, in a designated space and during a sacred time period (such as Hıdırellez or Nevruz). Moreover, the ritual is laden with symbolic meanings; it transcends the tangible world and reveals the invisible. According to Huizinga, all play is symbolic: it represents something real but is not itself real, and in this sense, rituals performed in cave shrines are a clear example of the ritual dimension within the play-culture relationship (Ibid.: 28). According to Huizinga, tying a rag is a ritual gesture but simultaneously an explicit rule of the game: “If you look back, your wish will be voided” – a typical rule in play. The meaning of this ritual is realized only when it is “played” in accordance with the sacred stage of the space. If one steps outside the play – by breaking the rule – then

the wish is nullified. This reflects Huizinga's principle that "a game cannot be played without rules" (Ibid.: 19–20).

Van Gennep interprets the act of leaving objects such as stones, rags, cloth, or feathers as offerings in material and spiritual rites as a supplication to the protective spirit of the region (van Gennep 2022: 31). The Turks, who seek to reach God through His beloved servants and regard sacred spaces as centers where the sacred manifests intensely, have attributed sanctity to trees found near almost every shrine or tomb. Trees located adjacent to shrines, tombs, or graves are considered within the concept of the 'Tree of Life'. In fact, what endows shrines and tombs with their sacredness is the presence of these venerable trees. Therefore, nearly every shrine or tomb is accompanied by such majestic trees. Visitors to these sites offer bloodless sacrifices to these sacred trees (Ergun 2004: 337). Seeking to attain the divine blessing carried by these trees, individuals engage in acts of supplication and prayer at these locations, tying pieces of cloth to the branches of the sacred trees. Through this practice, they believe they can access divine grace, obtain healing, or have their wishes fulfilled.

Rituals involving bones are particularly noteworthy in the ceremonies performed at shrine caves. In a cave within the Abdulvahap Gazi Shrine in Malatya, certain rituals are conducted based on the belief that the soul resides in the bone. The Abdulvahap Gazi Tomb in Malatya contains a cave where visitors seeking to conceive a child perform the 'bone-pulling' ritual. Women who wish to bear children visit the shrine and the cave, pulling bones from the pit at the foot of the grave, where sacrificial bones are discarded. It is believed that if the drawn bone is a vertebra, the woman will give birth to a son; if it is a rib, she will have a daughter. The child, if male, is traditionally named Abdulvahap, while if female, she is named Zeynep (Karaağaç 2013: 25). The use of bones as ritual objects in various ceremonies is based on the relationship between *kut* (divine blessing) and the soul. Indeed, in nomadic and hunter-gatherer societies, bones constitute the fundamental element that enables resurrection and renewal of life. Due to the belief that the soul – the animating force of a person – resides in the bones, they hold a special significance (Bayat 2006: 61). Bones, much like blood, are imbued with power. In Turkish culture, it is believed that lineage originates from bones and that bones form the essence of a living being (Roux 2017: 85). Although the rituals performed in caves for the unborn child can be considered a form of exchange ritual, they also serve to establish the child's societal status. Even before birth, the child attains divine *kut* within the cave. Bone-related rituals conducted in caves are deeply connected to birth and lineage in Turkish culture. These rituals, which center on the relationship between bones and *kut*, create a powerful symbolism within the cultural memory of society.

"Culture is born in the form of play; from the very beginning, culture is something that is played. (...) Through these games, the community expresses

its way of interpreting life and the world. Thus, it is not that play is transformed into culture, but rather, from its earliest stages, culture bears the marks of play and develops within the forms and context of play” (Huizinga 2018: 52). In this ritual, a woman who wishes to have a child draws a bone from among the sacrificial bones placed near the grave. The gender of the child is then determined according to the bone that is drawn. According to Huizinga, this is a form of divination – one of the oldest forms of play. Drawing lots with bones constitutes a “game of chance” with an unpredictable outcome, and at the same time, it is deeply connected to the community’s myth of ancestry. This ritual creates a ludic uncertainty: the woman waits for the result, chance intervenes, and in this way a symbolic future is constructed. This is a clear example of Huizinga’s idea that “play carries within itself the capacity to generate myth” (Ibid.: 53).

In addition to seeking healing for illnesses, people often turn to sacred sites – believed to possess folk therapeutic power – for the fulfillment of their wishes. The public makes votive offerings in the name of the sacred figure associated with the site (Uygur 2015: 469). Visitors to the cave containing the tomb of Asar Dede offer votive offerings and perform animal sacrifices. One of the most notable practices in caves is the act of making votive offerings. Those who visit Asar Dede’s tomb also engage in this practice. Vows are made for divine *kut* (blessing). A votive offering (*adak*) is defined as “a conditional promise or pledge made to God, a sacred figure, or a sacred place (such as a tree, water source, stone, well, or lodge) in exchange for the fulfillment of a specific wish” (Tanyu 1967: 9). Those who make wishes tie pieces of cloth to trees as part of the ritual. Following the sacrifice, the liver of the animal is hung on a tree, and its blood is poured at the base of the tree. The food prepared from the votive offering’s meat is consumed on-site; it is neither taken home nor removed from the sacred space but instead scattered around the trees. Visitors also recite the Qur’an and perform prayers (Ergun 2004: 606). The act of offering sacrifices is regarded as a sacred ritual in many cultures and is considered a means of communicating with God, spirits, or sacred beings.

Eliade emphasizes that sacrificial rituals are performed in differentiated, sanctified and symbolically central places. These rituals are conducted in locations that society considers sacred, and such sites function as central spaces imbued with spiritual and religious significance. The performance of sacrifices in these symbolically central places serves to affirm and reinforce their sanctity and religious meaning (Eliade 1991: 34). Offering sacrifices and making votive offerings can be understood as a means of securing divine *kut* (blessing). Similarly, Tylor interprets sacrifice as an offering made to secure the sanctity of the deity – an original gift presented to the supernatural. Sacrificial rituals are seen as an attempt to balance or influence the impact of supernatural forces and the divine upon humans (Tylor 1920: 375 as cited in Erginer 1997: 21). For this reason, sacrifices are performed at many shrine caves to seek the fulfillment of wishes, to gain the favor of the sacred and to attain divine *kut*.

When considered within the framework of the phenomenological understanding of space articulated by Bachelard in *The Poetics of Space*, caves emerge not merely as physical shelters but as spaces imbued with profound symbolic meanings in both individual and collective consciousness. According to Bachelard, the significance of a space is shaped not by its functionality but by the images, emotions and associations it evokes in the imagination. In this context, the rituals performed by individuals who turn to caves in their quest for fertility, abundance and healing – such as sleeping inside the cave, drinking its water, or touching its walls – reveal the protective and regenerative dimensions of the cave, which align with the archetype of the “maternal womb”. Practices such as tying rags, making votive offerings, or drawing lots with bones further demonstrate that the cave is not only a physical refuge but also an imaginal realm where collective memory and cultural identity take shape. From Bachelard’s perspective, such practices constitute tangible reflections of the emotional and imaginative bond that humans establish with the cave. Here, the cave becomes a locus for both bodily healing and inner purification (2020: 50–80).

1.3. The Cave as a Place for Celebration and Festivity

Caves have been used as spaces for festivities, ceremonies and celebrations since archaic times. In world mythology, caves are regarded as dwellings of gods and spiritual beings. Therefore, celebrations and ceremonies held in caves have been conducted with the intention of paying homage to deities or spirits. The rituals performed in caves encompass various purposes, including seasonal transitions as part of the natural cycle, the celebration of fertility, healing and purification.

The origins of the human need for ceremonies and celebrations lie in the social relationship between humans and nature. People interact not only with those they live alongside but also with the natural environment in which they exist. Natural phenomena leave profound impressions on human life and influence their emotional world. The geographical conditions in which people live, along with natural events and seasonal changes, are among the reasons why individuals commemorate their sorrows, concerns, joys and grief through various rituals and celebrations (Alyılmaz 2009: 30). Rituals serve as a means of seeking refuge in supernatural forces through ceremonies. Rituals are significant events in which religious beliefs and values are put into practice, and religious experiences and rites are performed. Seen as a tool for establishing a connection with the supernatural, rituals represent the practical aspect of religion. They are employed to commemorate significant moments of a society, to cope with social hardships and to alleviate individual sorrows such as death. These ceremonies play a crucial role in fulfilling people’s emotional and spiritual needs. Through rituals, individuals develop a habit of seeking refuge

in supernatural forces and, by believing in their assistance, strive to overcome the challenges of life (Haviland et al. 2008: 664–670).

In cultural memory, remembrance is fundamentally manifested in the form of festivals and ritual celebrations. The structure of rituals necessitates the reproduction of a specific order with minimal alteration. Consequently, rituals are generally transmitted over time without significant change, maintaining a traditional structure. This serves as an essential means of ensuring the continuity of cultural heritage and social identity (Assmann 2001: 99). Ceremonies, rituals and other ceremonial events are employed to evoke images of the past and to recall past experiences. In these events, a society's values, beliefs and history are expressed through symbolic and ritualistic means. Such practices contribute to the preservation and perpetuation of social identity and cultural memory (Connerton 1999: 11–12). Ceremonies do not emerge through improvisation or spontaneous actions. On the contrary, they are deliberately planned and prepared events. The conscious execution of ceremonies creates a special atmosphere that allows for the expression and communication of emotions. Beyond merely revealing emotions, ceremonies foster strong interaction and bonds among participants, facilitating a shared experience within society (Ibid.: 70–72). Ceremonies, festivals and celebrations, which are carried out consistently within a specific period, time and space, reinforce feelings of social belonging. Through the rituals performed in these spaces, individuals acquire a sense of group identity.

Caves are not merely places visited for seeking healing or making wishes; they also serve as sites for festivals and ceremonies. Assmann interprets remembrance as the most essential function of cultural memory. Festivals and ceremonies fulfill the function of “revitalization and repetition” in cultural memory through rituals. The purpose of festivals is not to create a sacred time in contrast to everyday time; rather, they serve to segment time and to distinguish the routines of daily life. Festivals are organized at specific periods in the life of a society and are celebrated on designated days. These regular and recurring celebrations establish a rhythm in society's perception of time. By occurring at fixed intervals throughout the year, festivals function as a means of dividing and structuring time within a community (Assmann 2001: 61).

In Turkish culture, various festivals and ceremonies take place in caves. “Ceremony, festival, and contest... These are the oldest forms of play” (Huizinga 2018: 13–15). One of the festivals celebrated in the Ashab-ı Kehf Cave is the Gadir-i Hum Festival. The Gadir-i Hum Festival perfectly aligns with Huizinga's definition. It is a Shiite festival celebrated by Arab Alevis and is tied to a specific sacred date: the seventh day of the Feast of Sacrifice (Eid al-Adha), commemorating the day when Ali was declared caliph by the Prophet Muhammad. This date constitutes a special, sacred time. According to Huizinga, the time of play is always distinct from ordinary time; it is akin to “sacred time”. The space, too, is special: shrines are visited – these shrines form a “magic

circle” (Huizinga 2018: 17). Moreover, the acts of “sacrificing animals, sharing meals, visiting shrines, burning incense, and reciting the Qur’an” each demonstrate that this is a symbolic, rule-bound, communal ritual play. “Ritual, ceremonial play, cannot cease to be play; when it does, the rite dies” (Ibid.: 19). This statement shows that every aspect of the Gadir-i Hum Festival (visitation, sharing, prohibitions, sacrifice) functions as a living form of play. When the play ends, the ritual loses its effect. Therefore, as Assmann notes, the function of “preserving the identity of the group” is sustained through these festivals and rituals, contributing to the continuity of Arab Alevi identity.

The Gadir-i Hum Festival is celebrated by Arab Alevis on the seventh day of Eid al-Adha. According to belief, this day marks the occasion when the Prophet Muhammad declared Ali as his successor before ascending to the Mi'raj. It is regarded as the “Night of Decree” (Laylat al-Qadr) for Arab Alevis, although they also acknowledge the Sunni belief in Laylat al-Qadr. The celebration begins on the seventh day following the first day of Eid al-Adha and lasts for one and a half days. During this festival, people visit shrines; however, the primary celebrants are the wealthy. In each village, five or six affluent individuals (or more if available) slaughter sacrificial animals and distribute the meat to the poor. Communal meals are prepared and shared. It is believed that on this day, the fire of hell is extinguished. Certain customs are observed, such as refraining from sweeping the house and making pilgrimages to nearby shrines throughout the day, where incense is burned, and the Qur’an is recited. Alcohol consumption is strictly avoided, and continuous prayers are performed. Additionally, cutting anything with a knife is avoided unless absolutely necessary. The day is observed with an emphasis on solidarity and communal spirit. The Cave of Ashab-ıKehf serves as the initial site of the Gadir Hum Festival due to its significance as the largest shrine in the region and its association with the Hajj pilgrimage. (Uğureli 2017: 42)

Cultural memory necessitates ceremonial communication. Hıdırellez is a celebration with ritual origins, marking abundance and prosperity (Özdemir 2005: 49). As a festival commemorating the arrival of spring and the revitalization of nature, Hıdırellez falls within the category of calendrical rites. This date signifies the end of winter and the beginning of summer and is regarded as the start of the new year. Reenacting festivals such as Hıdırellez through rituals, as Eliade suggests, is akin to reliving the act of creation. Rituals are perceived as a means of re-enacting creation and experiencing the world as if it were beginning anew. Therefore, rituals such as New Year celebrations symbolize a new beginning initiated through an act of creation. The New Year

holds an ‘exemplary’ value in society, as it is a day that symbolically marks a new beginning (Pettazzoni 2002: 74, 87). Calendrical rites such as Hıdırellez are regarded as safeguards of social identity due to their function of reenacting creation and symbolizing a new beginning. For years, the Cave of Ashab-ı Khef has served as a site for Hıdırellez celebrations. On the final day of the Hıdırellez festivities, visitors gather at the cave. People from Tarsus and other districts and villages of Mersin visit the Seven Sleepers and participate in the Hıdırellez celebrations. As part of the events organized by the municipality, a Mehter (Ottoman military band) performance takes place. Additionally, the municipality sets up a Halil İbrahim table, symbolizing unity, solidarity, and abundance (Uğureli 2017: 43).

The Cave of Ashab-ı Khef in Afşin, along with the surrounding complex, is one of the region’s significant sacred sites. In the Afşin / Seven Sleepers Cave, the Yemliha Walk is traditionally held. This walk takes place annually during the first week of June; however, it has been discontinued since 2014 due to security concerns.

The walk symbolizes Yemliha’s journey to the city to procure food after waking up and his return to the cave accompanied by the townspeople. The walk extends from the district center to the külliye, covering a distance of approximately seven kilometers. Upon completion of the walk, the community gathers at the külliye, where Çoban Kefeştatayyüş Pilavı is prepared. The participants share the meal and offer prayers together. Subsequently, they walk back to the district center as a collective act, symbolizing the Seven Sleepers’ triumph in their case and their attainment of freedom. Leading the procession, seven individuals symbolizing the Seven Sleepers walk at the forefront, accompanied by a dog. (Uğureli 2017: 52)

As can be observed, rituals exist to ensure the continuity of a group’s identity. In this context, they establish and reproduce the group’s identity by sustaining the ‘world’. For archaic societies, rituals constituted cultural reality and order itself. Therefore, order must be preserved and reproduced through ritual. Since order does not emerge spontaneously, there is a need for the enactment of rituals (Balandier 2010). As sites of ceremonies and festivities, caves contribute to the construction of social identity by hosting rituals. During festivals such as Gadir-ı Hum, Hıdırellez, or Nevruz, individuals visit caves to both reinforce their sense of belonging and serve as a bridge for transmitting traditions to future generations. These celebrations and ceremonies aim to ensure that society lives in harmony with nature and approaches the sacred with reverence. Additionally, rituals performed in caves strengthen the spiritual and cultural bonds within the community. All these rituals enhance individuals’

relationships with nature, the divine and spiritual entities, thereby shaping the identities of communities.

According to Bachelard, the poetics of space lies in its function as a repository of meaning. Rituals performed in caves – such as tying rags, making votive offerings, or drawing lots with bones – are not merely ritualistic acts but also imaginative practices. Through these acts, the cave is revealed not only as a site of physical refuge but also as a space of spiritual memory for the individual. In particular, cave visits during festivals such as Hıdırellez, Gadir-iHum, and Nevruz become ritual moments in which individuals reconstruct the past through imagination and render time itself poetic. Consequently, within the framework of Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*, caves should be understood as sensory and image-laden realms of individual and collective memory, inner retreat, healing and transformation (2020: 50–90). As Bachelard suggests, caves are not merely “places” but “lived experiences”. They are living poetic spaces in which the individual both turns inward and reconstitutes a sense of communal belonging.

CONCLUSION

The place of caves in human history has transcended their role as mere primitive living spaces, acquiring profound cultural and symbolic meanings. In Turkish culture, caves hold significance not only as shelters that provided ancestors with protection against harsh natural conditions but also as sacred entities. The foundation of this sanctity lies in the resemblance of the cave's structure to the womb, the very source of human life. In Turkish mythology, caves are associated with figures such as Ak Ene and Umay Ana, symbolizing fertility and abundance. This association demonstrates that caves not only serve as physical refuges but also reflect deep-seated beliefs concerning the continuity of life and the cyclical nature of existence.

Primitive societies regarded caves as central spaces for various rituals, including hunting preparations, agricultural fertility rites, healing practices and communication with supernatural forces. These rituals not only reinforced the sacred significance of caves but also strengthened humanity's mystical connection with the universe. Even today, the deep belief systems and ritual practices of the past continue to manifest through modern celebrations and ceremonies centered around caves. Caves persist as both repositories of historical memory and spaces where cultural identity is preserved, maintaining their spiritual significance in contemporary times. This continuity underscores the timeless nature of humanity's relationship with nature and the sacred.

This historical and cultural continuity gains a profound philosophical dimension when considered alongside Plato's Allegory of the Cave (Ferguson 1922: 15–28). Plato's cave symbolizes the illusion experienced by individuals who are confined to a world limited by sensory perception. Attaining truth

becomes possible only by breaking free from this world of shadows – that is, by becoming conscious and enlightened. Allegorically, the cave represents a state in which individuals are content with ignorance, accept what is given without question, and seek truth merely in appearances. However, from the perspective of primal communities, the cave is not a site of estrangement from truth but rather a sacred space where union with the divine and harmony with the cosmic order are achieved. In this context, both a contrast and a meaningful connection can be drawn between Plato's cave and the ritual caves of traditional societies. While Plato's cave signifies an epistemological entrapment in which the individual remains chained by mental constraints, the cave of the archaic community functions as a site where cultural memory is preserved and communication with the universe is established. When these two perspectives are read together, the cave emerges as both a sacred space where mystical bonds are forged, and a symbolic realm representing the possibility of intellectual transformation. In this sense, the cave is simultaneously a site where the individual becomes connected to collective memory through ritual participation, and, in the Platonic sense, a threshold that must be transcended in order to reach the truth. In both interpretations, the cave appears as a timeless and multi-layered symbol that shapes the individual's relationship with the self, society and the truth.

Caves, as one of the oldest sacred spaces in human history, have served not only as natural shelters but also as central sites for both social and individual rituals. In particular, individuals seeking healing have engaged in various practices based on the belief that caves symbolize fertility and abundance. The act of infertile individuals sleeping inside caves, drinking from cave springs, or postpartum women touching cave walls to enhance lactation reflects the healing power attributed to caves, which are often associated with the image of the womb. Additionally, rituals such as tying votive cloths, attaching stones to cave walls, making offerings, presenting bloodless or blood sacrifices and casting or pulling bones serve as tangible expressions of society's mystical connection with nature and the sacred. These practices indicate that caves are not merely physical spaces but also serve as loci where social identity, a sense of belonging and cultural memory are shaped and preserved.

Throughout history, caves have been used as sites for ceremonies, celebrations and festivals, serving as focal points for fertility rituals linked to seasonal cycles, purification ceremonies and rituals expressing reverence for ancestors. The concept of the 'ancestral cave' which reflects the deep respect for ancestors in Turkish mythology, has reinforced the sacred status of these spaces. For instance, it has been observed that the Gadir-iHum Festival is celebrated in the Cave of the Seven Sleepers (Ashâb-ı Kehf), while the Yemliha Walk and special communal meals take place at the Seven Sleepers Cave in Afşin. These ritual practices further solidify the role of caves within the social structure, fostering shared emotional experiences and a sense of group identity among

participants. Visits to caves during festivals such as Gadir-i Hum, Hıdırellez and Nevruz enable individuals to connect with the past both personally and collectively, ensuring the continuation of traditions and the transmission of cultural heritage to future generations.

Ultimately, the role of caves in healing, fertility and abundance rituals demonstrates that these spaces have transcended their status as mere natural formations to become culturally significant centers imbued with deep symbolic meanings. Cave rituals have endured to the present day as a means of both seeking spiritual healing on an individual level and strengthening social bonds, thus supporting cultural continuity across generations.

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NOTES

- 1 In Turkish mythology, Umay is a sacred goddess associated with fertility, abundance, protection and motherhood. She is generally seen as a spirit that protects children, mothers and animal offspring.
- 2 The Companions of the Cave (Ashab-ı Kehf, also known as the Seven Sleepers) is a story found in both Islamic and Christian traditions. It tells of a group of young men who, in order to escape a tyrannical ruler persecuting them for their faith, took refuge in a cave. This event is narrated in the Qur'an, specifically in Surah Al-Kahf (18:9–26). According to these verses, a few young men, living among a polytheistic people, openly declared their belief in the oneness of Allah and rejected idolatry. To escape being stoned to death or forcibly converted, they sought shelter in a cave, embarking on an eternal journey. Together with their dog, they fell into a deep sleep and are believed to have awakened 309 years later. Their awakening symbolizes a mystical revival, a rebirth into a new era.

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