

The Morality of Stone: Ethical Geography, Spatial Memory, and the Cultural Construction of Morality in the Case of Malatya-Akçadağ-Kürecik

Ali Arı

Independent researcher from Harunuşağı, Kürecik (Akçadağ, Malatya, Türkiye). Kürecik is located in eastern Türkiye, within the Akçadağ district of Malatya province. Since childhood, the author has conducted long-term field observations in the Kürecik region, particularly in and around the village of Harunuşağı, collected oral narratives, and worked on the cultural ecology of the region. This article is a product of that long-term field experience.

Abstract

This article introduces the concept of “ethical geography” through the case of Kürecik, a rural and mountainous cultural region in the Akçadağ district of Malatya, eastern Türkiye. Kürecik is shaped by Kurdish/Zaza-Alevi oral culture, sacred places, pastoral memory, carpet weaving, traditional tattooing, oath practices, lament traditions, and ritual objects.

In this study, ethical geography means a cultural memory system through which a community carries moral values not only through texts or institutions, but also through places, bodies, objects, sounds, speech, and rituals. The Kürecik case shows that morality is not only taught as an abstract rule. It is placed in mountains and stones, shared through ritual food, woven into carpets, marked on bodies, voiced in laments, bound by oaths, and heard in bird calls.

The article analyzes three place-based narratives—Ali Şükran Mountain, Cömert Kasap, and Çoban Dede—as a three-layered ethical model: vertical ethics, horizontal ethics, and internal ethics. It also examines the Pepuk/cuckoo bird narrative, oath culture, women’s lament practices, Akçadağ carpets, deq tattoos, and ritual objects such as çangal and cılıkak. The central question is: What kind of morality does a geography teach its people?

Keywords: ethical geography, Kürecik, Türkiye, Akçadağ carpets, oral memory, Alevi culture, Kurdish/Zaza culture, deq, sacred sites, lokma, lament, oath, ritual object, Pepuk/cuckoo bird narrative.

Note for International Readers

To understand this article, Kürecik should first be imagined as a mountainous rural landscape rather than as a single village or town. It is located in eastern Türkiye, in the Akçadağ district of Malatya province, within the wider upland world of eastern Anatolia. The area is shaped by villages, highland pastures, seasonal movement, animal husbandry, sacred hilltops, stone markers, oral memory, and Alevi-Kurdish/Zaza cultural life. Places mentioned in this article—Harunuşağı, Başyurt Plateau, Zırnak Mountain, and Ören—belong to this local geography of mountains, plateaus, villages, and sacred memory.

Several terms are used in their local sense. **Alevi** refers here to a heterodox Islamic and Anatolian religious-cultural tradition with strong oral and ritual dimensions. **Ziyaret** means a sacred place visited for prayer, vow, healing, remembrance, or moral reflection. **Lokma** is shared ritual food and represents gratitude, equality, and communal belonging. **Deq** refers to traditional tattooing, especially associated with Kurdish women in parts of Anatolia and Mesopotamia. **Çangal** and **cılıkak** are local protective or ritual objects

connected with abundance, the evil eye, animals, household blessing, and seasonal practices. **Pepuk** is the local name for the cuckoo bird; in oral tradition, its call is heard as a sound of grief, guilt, and conscience.

The article does not claim that these elements belong only to Kürecik. Rather, it argues that in Kürecik they come together in a dense and coherent cultural system. This system is described here as ethical geography.

Introduction

The past of societies is often read through written documents, state archives, court records, population registers, and official historical narratives. Such sources are essential for historical research. Yet in communities where oral culture remains strong, memory is not preserved only in writing. It is also carried by places, bodies, sounds, objects, and rituals. A mountain, a stone, a sacred site, a bird call, a lament, an oath, a tattoo, or a carpet motif can become a lasting carrier of memory.

This article proposes the concept of **ethical geography** in order to describe this relationship between place, memory, and morality. Ethical geography refers to the ways in which a community transmits its understanding of the good, the true, the just, the sacred, the generous, and the loyal through geographical and cultural signs. In this framework, morality is not only taught through abstract rules. It is lived, touched, heard, woven, marked on the body, shared in food, and attached to specific places.

The Malatya–Akçadağ–Kürecik region offers a strong field for understanding this concept. It is a mountainous and pastoral region in eastern Anatolia. Villages, highland pastures, sacred hilltops, stone markers, animal herding, seasonal routes, and oral traditions shape daily life and memory. In this setting, mountains, stones, narratives, shared ritual food, oaths, tattoos, carpets, laments, and protective objects are not isolated folklore items. They are different layers of a shared moral memory system.

The main question of this article is therefore simple but theoretically important: **Can the moral world of a community be read not only in oral teachings or religious rules, but also in geography, body, object, sound, and ritual?**

Method and Field Background

This study is based on the author's long-term familiarity with Harunuşağı and the wider Kürecik region from the 1980s to the present. Harunuşağı is one of the local villages within the Kürecik cultural landscape. Because the author is originally from this village, the research draws on childhood memory, participant observation, oral history, family narratives, and conversations with elders and local knowledge-bearers.

The main narratives analyzed in the article—Ali Şükran, Cömert Kasap, Çoban Dede, and Pepuk—were collected from oral accounts in and around Harunuşağı and Kürecik. Ali Şükran, Cömert Kasap, and Çoban Dede are connected with local places; Pepuk is a wider oral narrative known in the region. The analysis of Akçadağ carpet motifs is compared with the official geographical indication registration document issued by the Turkish Patent and Trademark Office on March 8, 2019 (Registration No. 422). Deq motifs are interpreted in relation to the broader literature on Kurdish tattooing and regional body memory.

This article also synthesizes the author's earlier works on Kürecik, including studies on the morality of stone, Cömert Kasap, the Pepuk legend, deq motifs, Akçadağ carpets, and ritual objects.

What Is Ethical Geography?

In this study, ethical geography is defined as follows:

Ethical geography is a cultural memory system through which a community records and transmits moral values through place, body, object, sound, speech, and ritual.

The idea has three basic dimensions.

First, **place carries moral weight**. A mountain, stone, grave, spring, or sacred site is not only a physical location. It may teach people what to respect, remember, fear, and protect.

Second, **narrative gives place meaning**. A stone may be only a stone. Once a story is attached to it, it can become a sign of gratitude, generosity, guilt, promise, or conscience.

Third, **ritual keeps meaning alive**. Sacred-site visits, lokma sharing, oaths, laments, tattoos, and woven motifs bring moral memory into everyday life.

Ethical geography is related to cultural geography, oral history, anthropology, memory studies, and Alevi studies. It resonates with Pierre Nora's idea of "sites of memory" and Tim Ingold's emphasis on lived environments. Its guiding question is simple: **What kind of morality does a geography teach its people?**

Kürecik as a Cultural Memory Field

Kürecik should be understood as a cultural basin rather than a single village or administrative unit. It lies in the mountainous uplands of eastern Anatolia. Villages, highland pastures, sacred sites, seasonal routes, and local memory places form its cultural landscape. Its world is shaped by Alevi ritual life, Kurdish/Zaza oral culture, pastoral practices, women's lament traditions, carpet weaving, tattooing, and protective ritual objects.

The region's moral memory is not located in a single institution. It is distributed across many cultural carriers. A mountain may teach gratitude. A grave may teach generosity. A shepherd story may teach conscience. A bird call may recall guilt. A carpet motif may protect the home. A tattoo may preserve an ancient symbol on the body. An oath sworn upon the sun, moon, or children may bind speech to cosmic and social responsibility.

This distributed structure is what makes Kürecik a particularly strong case for ethical geography.

Three Place-Based Narratives: A Model of Vertical, Horizontal, and Internal Ethics

The clearest examples of ethical geography in Kürecik are three place-based narratives: Ali Şükran Mountain, Cömert Kasap, and Çoban Dede. Each one is connected to a place, and each one teaches a different moral orientation.

Ali Şükran Mountain: Vertical Ethics

Ali Şükran is associated with a high mountain in the Kürecik region. According to local memory, Imam Ali came to this high place and offered thanks. The name itself evokes gratitude: "şükran" means thankfulness or gratitude.

For an outside reader, the important point is not whether the event can be historically verified. The important point is how the place functions in local moral imagination. The mountain becomes a vertical moral axis. It teaches humility, gratitude, surrender, and

awareness of the human being's smallness before God and the cosmic order.

Thus Ali Şükran represents **vertical ethics**: the relation between the human being and the sacred, the sky, God, height, and transcendence.

Cömert Kasap: Horizontal Ethics

Cömert Kasap literally means “the generous butcher.” In local memory, it refers to a grave or sacred site located on a hill east of Başyurt Plateau, a highland area within the Kürecik landscape. The site is described as a grave marked by black stones. The narrative remembers Cömert Kasap as a generous and hospitable person whose economic situation later declined. He left the region, died away from home, and his body was brought back and buried in this place.

For an international reader, several layers need explanation. The word “butcher” is not only occupational. In the cultural context of Kürecik, it evokes meat, sacrifice, shared food, guests, generosity, and communal obligation. The name also resonates with **Ahi** or **civanmert** ethics—Anatolian traditions of craft morality, honesty, lawful earning, generosity, hospitality, and service to society.

Cömert Kasap therefore connects two moral worlds: the Alevi practice of lokma-sharing and the Ahi/civanmert ideal of ethical livelihood. The story teaches that wealth is not valuable when hoarded; it becomes meaningful when shared. It also teaches loyalty to the dead, attachment to homeland, and the moral importance of returning the body to the community.

Cömert Kasap represents **horizontal ethics**: the relation between human beings, guests, neighbors, the poor, food, generosity, and social loyalty.

Çoban Dede: Internal Ethics

Çoban Dede means “Shepherd Grandfather” or “Shepherd Elder.” It refers to a sacred site connected to a large standing stone on the summit of Zırnak Mountain, within the Harunuşağı area. The narrative centers on a shepherd, his flock, thirst, a vow, and conscience.

In the story, the shepherd's flock suffers from thirst. The shepherd turns to God and makes a vow: if water is found and the flock is saved, he will fulfill an offering or sacrifice. Water appears, and the flock is saved. The moral tension of the story lies not merely in the miracle, but in the responsibility created by the vow. Once a promise is made, it binds the person internally.

Çoban Dede therefore teaches that a human being is responsible not only before society, but also before his own conscience. Even when nobody is watching, the promise remains. The sacred site becomes a place where memory, vow, and internal moral accountability come together.

Çoban Dede represents **internal ethics**: conscience, responsibility, vow, trust, and the inner obligation of the self.

Together these three narratives form a simple but powerful moral model:

The mountain teaches gratitude.

The butcher teaches sharing.

The shepherd teaches conscience.

The Pepuk Narrative: Conscience as Sound

The Pepuk narrative—Pepuk being the local name for the cuckoo bird—adds the dimension of sound to ethical geography. This story is known in different forms across Zaza/Kurdish-Alevi oral culture. In many variants, it centers on a tragic death within the family. Sometimes the story is told as an accidental killing of a sibling; in other versions, the tragedy is linked to a stepmother or to family conflict. The details change, but the emotional core remains the same: a child or sibling is lost, and the surviving voice is trapped in guilt, remorse, and endless mourning.

The call of the Pepuk bird is heard by local people as a voice of conscience. It is interpreted through phrases such as “Who did it?”, “I did it,” “Who killed?”, “I killed.” In other words, the bird’s call becomes an acoustic confession.

In Kürecik, Pepuk is not tied to a specific sacred site in the way Ali Şükran, Cömert Kasap, or Çoban Dede are. It lives in oral tradition as a sound-memory. It teaches that nature may remember what human beings try to forget. Even if society falls silent, the bird continues to call.

Pepuk therefore represents **the auditory layer of ethical geography**. If Çoban Dede is the place of conscience, Pepuk is the sound of conscience.

Oath Culture: The Binding Force of Speech

Oath culture in Kürecik reveals another layer of ethical geography: the moral power of speech. Oaths are not treated as ordinary statements. They bind the speaker before society, sacred order, and cosmic witnesses.

In Kürecik, oaths may be sworn upon the sun and the moon. For an outside reader, this should be understood as a form of cosmic witnessing. The sun and the moon are not worshipped as separate deities; rather, they function as signs of visibility, continuity, and sacred order. Speech is placed before the sky.

The heaviest oath is often the oath sworn upon children. People avoid swearing on children unless there is no other way. This shows that the child represents innocence, lineage, future, life, and entrusted continuity. To swear upon a child is to bind speech to the most sacred form of human responsibility.

Oath culture thus continues the ethical logic of Çoban Dede. The vow in the shepherd narrative and the oath in everyday life both show that speech has moral consequences.

Lament and the Object Memory of Mourning

The lament tradition adds the dimension of grief and material memory. In Kürecik, women who are skilled in lamenting may hold a garment of the deceased—a sweater, jacket, shirt, or similar object—while performing the lament.

This practice is important because the garment becomes more than an object. It carries the bodily trace, scent, absence, and memory of the dead person. By holding the garment, the lamenting woman makes absence tangible. Personal grief becomes collective memory.

Women in this practice are not merely mourners. They are performers and carriers of social memory. The lament gives voice to grief; the garment gives grief a material center.

The Pepuk narrative and the lament tradition belong to the same moral universe. Pepuk attaches grief to bird sound. Lament attaches grief to human voice and the object of the dead.

Akçadağ Carpets: The Symbolic Archive of the Home

Akçadağ carpets are central to the material culture of the region. The Akçadağ Carpet was registered by the Turkish Patent and Trademark Office on March 8, 2019, with Registration No. 422 as a protected geographical indication. Its geographical boundary includes central Akçadağ, Kürecik, and Ören. This means that Akçadağ carpets are not merely local household objects; they are officially recognized cultural heritage items that include Kürecik within their geographical field.

For an international reader, the carpet should be read as a visual archive. It organizes the interior space of the home. If mountains, stones, and sacred sites carry moral memory in the outside world, carpets carry symbolic memory inside the home.

Akçadağ carpet motifs form a symbolic language of the home. Some motifs speak of fertility and domestic continuity. The **eli belinde / kirmen ucu** motif is linked to femininity, fertility, abundance, good fortune, and birth. Other motifs connect the house to pastoral life. The **ram's horn** evokes strength, herds, productivity, and abundance. The **waterway** motif suggests purification, renewal, and the continuity of life.

A second group of motifs protects the household. The **eye, nık/scorpion, and pıtırak** motifs are associated with protection from the evil eye and harmful forces. A third group marks belonging. **Damga/im** motifs point to family, clan, tribal, and communal identity. The **hand, tree of life, and şeker/küpe** motifs relate to women's labor, marriage, transition, fertility, and domestic continuity.

Taken together, these motifs make the carpet function like a domestic cosmogram: a symbolic map inside the home. It has a center, borders, protective signs, fertility signs, and belonging marks. In this sense, the carpet is a silent book woven by women's labor.

Deq: The Body as Archive

Deq refers to traditional tattooing, especially associated with women in Kurdish cultural regions. In Kürecik, deq motifs should be read as bodily signs of protection, abundance, beauty, belonging, and memory.

A particularly striking motif identified in recent work is a dotted swastika-like figure. In this context, the motif is treated as an older folk symbol rather than through any modern political meaning. It may be associated with the sun, rotation, life cycle, abundance, direction, and protection from the evil eye.

The dot is also meaningful. It may suggest a center, an eye, a seed, life, or a protective focus. Other deq motifs—dot, line, cross, eye, hand, plant forms, and geometric signs—also belong to a symbolic world of protection, fertility, light, and cosmic order.

Deq and carpet motifs should be read together. The carpet carries memory inside the home; deq carries memory on the body. Both are visual archives.

Ritual Objects: Çangal, Çılıkak, and Lokma

Çangal and çılıkak are local ritual or protective objects associated with abundance, the evil eye, animals, marriage, household blessing, and seasonal practices. They materialize protection and fertility. They show that morality and blessing are not carried only by words; they may also be carried by objects.

Lokma-sharing is another key ritual practice. In Alevi culture, lokma is shared food, but it is also an ethical act. It expresses equality, gratitude, generosity, and communal belonging. In the Kürecik context, lokma connects directly to the Cömert Kasap narrative and to

Ahi/civanmert ethics.

Thus çangal, çilkak, and lokma show how ethical geography operates through ritual objects and shared food.

Layers of Ethical Geography in Kürecik

The ethical geography of Kürecik operates through several connected layers:

Place: mountains, stones, sacred sites, graves.

Narrative: Ali Şükran, Cömert Kasap, Çoban Dede.

Sound: Pepuk and lament.

Speech: oath, vow, oral narrative.

Body: deq tattoos.

Domestic interior: Akçadağ carpets and motifs.

Object: ritual objects, protective objects, garments of the dead.

Ritual: lokma, vow, sacrifice, visitation, mourning.

Cosmos: sun, moon, gratitude, sacred witnessing.

Life and lineage: children, innocence, future, entrusted continuity.

These layers work together. The mountain teaches gratitude. The grave teaches generosity. The shepherd stone teaches conscience. The bird teaches guilt and mourning. The oath binds speech. The carpet protects the home. The tattoo protects the body. The lament protects memory from forgetting.

Theoretical Contribution

Ethical geography offers a bridge between history, anthropology, cultural geography, oral history, and material culture studies. Classical history often asks: Where is the document? Anthropology often asks: What does the ritual do? Ethical geography adds another question: What morality does a geography teach?

This question allows the past to be read not only as a sequence of events, but also as a system of moral memory. Kürecik shows that local narratives and objects are not minor folklore details. They are cultural structures through which a community teaches gratitude, generosity, conscience, memory, protection, and belonging.

This approach may be applied beyond Kürecik. Other oral culture regions in Anatolia, Mesopotamia, the Caucasus, the Balkans, and elsewhere may also be studied through the relationship between place, memory, and morality.

Conclusion

The case of Malatya-Akçadağ-Kürecik shows that morality may be embedded in mountains, stones, sacred sites, shared food, tattoos, carpets, oaths, laments, bird sounds, ritual objects, and the garments of the dead. In Kürecik, morality is not only spoken. It is placed, woven, carried, heard, sworn, shared, and mourned.

This study proposes ethical geography as a cultural memory concept developed through the Kürecik field. In its shortest form:

Ethical geography is the transformation of morality into memory within geography.

Kürecik is a living, multilayered, and powerful example of this transformation.

Selected Bibliography

Arı, A. (2026). *Taşın Ahlakı: Kürecik'te Etik Coğrafya, Sözlü Hafıza ve Toplumsal Anlam Üretimi*. Zenodo. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19094580>

Arı, A. (2026). *Cevânmerd-i Kassâb'dan Cömert Kasap'a: Ahilik, Safevî-Alevi Hafıza ve Kürecik'te Etik Coğrafyanın Yerel Sürekliliği*. Zenodo. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19182399>

Arı, A. (2026). *Dağda Kalan Ses: Kürecik ve Çevresinde Pepuk (Guguk Kuşu) Efsanesi*. Zenodo. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19440050>

Turkish Patent and Trademark Office. (2019). *Akçadağ Carpet Registration Document*, Registration No. 422 (08.03.2019).

Author's field collections, Harunuşağı-Kürecik, 1980s-2025.