

Story 1223 1990 Tape 11

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Munzur, a Tunceli Saint

I am Ayşenur Ökten, assistant professor at Karadeniz Teknik Üniversitesi. I shall tell you a story that I heard about Ovacık¹ in Tunceli Province while I was on "compulsory duty" at Elazığ.² It is a tale that is set in the Munzur Mountains, which are partly in Tunceli Province. People who lived there told it to me as something that happened, but I have no way of knowing how accurate it is.

There was once a very rich ağa³ who lived at Ovacık.

¹A kaza town. The action of this tale occurs in an unidentified village within that kaza.

²This refers to a brief period in the history of Turkish higher education. During the 1980s federal law required younger, lower-ranked faculty members in the old and great universities of İstanbul and Ankara to teach for a period of time at one of the newer universities outside the major metroplexes. Those "provincial" universities were very badly staffed because professors had refused to work in remote and undeveloped areas despite the much higher salaries which they offered. The plan collapsed because urban professors left the profession rather than leave the cities.

³An ağa (English, agha) is a rural landowner, sometimes wealthy, often powerful. The word does not indicate an official title but describes an economic status. They are often the principal employers of farm workers, and they are often viewed by their employees as harsh, driving, and abusive. The term

Among the people who worked for this ağa was a shepherd named Munzur

One day the ağa set out to make the pilgrimage to Mecca. In those days there was very poor transportation, and so it took a long time to go to Mecca and return. As a result, the family of the ağa did not hear from him for several months. One day after he had been gone for some time, the shepherd, Munzur, went to the wife of the ağa and said to her, "Lady Ağa,⁴ my ağa asked me to bring him some helva.⁵ If you will cook some helva, I shall take it to him."

The ağa's wife was quite amused by this request of the shepherd. She thought, "Munzur has a craving for helva and wants me to make some for him, but this was the only proper way that he could tell me about it." Munzur was a good shepherd and so the woman decided to indulge him in this request. She cooked a large batch of helva and gave it to him

On the following day Munzur returned the empty tray and

ağa is also used in a complimentary way, as an honorific, for a distinguished or just older person than the one using the term. Thus an older brother is called ağa bey by his younger siblings. Ağa bey may be used as a deferential term to one older or more prestigious than the speaker. A taxi driver may refer to his passenger as ağa bey; a salesman speaking to a male customer may call him ağa bey.

Turkish word used here is Hanımağa.

⁵A very popular candy made from sesame oil, honey, and various cereals.

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said, "Lady Ağa, my ağa enjoyed the helva very much, and he sent his thanks to you for making it for him."

The Lady Ağa was delighted by the cleverness of this shepherd. Thinking that Munzur himself had eaten the helva, she laughed and said, "Afiyet olsun!"⁶

Quite a bit later the ağa returned from Mecca. One of the first things he said to his wife when he arrived home was, "Thank you, lady, for sending Munzur to Mecca with helva for me. It was delicious! He brought me the helva and then returned immediately with your tray."

When word of this spread among the people of that village, it caused great excitement. Many of the villagers said, "That Munzur must be a holy man! He was gone for only a day, but during that time he actually went all the way to Mecca with the helva and returned!"⁷

⁶Spoken by the hostess, usually after food has been served, this traditional statement means "I hope you enjoyed it!" or "I hope that you ate it with hearty appetite!"

⁷Ability to travel great distances in just a few hours is frequently attributed to saints in Turkish folktales. Several (but not all) of such preternatural trips in ATON tales are to Mecca. Some modern ESP specialists refer to such alleged travel as "tele-transportation," on an analogy with "mental telepathy."

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Everyone was thrilled with the awareness that there was a saint among them. Their excitement quickly grew into religious fevor, and they rushed to pay their respects to him at the base of the mountain where he herded the ağa's flock of sheep and goats.

At that time Munzur was milking the goats. He had filled a pail with goat milk and was carrying it to the place where he stored it. But when he saw the entire population of his village rushing toward him in great agitation, he turned around and fled up the mountain. As he ran, he fell from a cliff, killing himself and spilling the milk on the ground below. Since that time that mountain has been known as Munzur Mountain and at the place where his milk spilled there burst forth a large spring, which is known as Munzur Spring.

That spring is a very unusual place. It is filled with a special kind of trout which are famous worldwide for their excellent flavor. During the spawning season, for about ten days, when these trout are laying their eggs, the water that flows from that spring is as white as milk. This is thought to be a miracle by many local people, but what seems to be whiteness of the water may simply be bubbles stirred up by the unusually rapid movement of the fish.

There is another element of this story which is considered to be miraculous by many people. On that mountain there

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said to be a number of heel marks in the rock. These are said to be the footprints of Munzur Baba,⁸ made on the day that he died.⁹

I have told this story just the way I heard it from a person who lived near Ovacık. I later learned that there are other forms of this story, but they all have certain things in common

Even to this day that place on the mountain is known as a sacred area, and the trout are known about by people everywhere

⁸Baba means father, but here it is used not in a literal sense but in a religious one.

⁹Small scoop marks in the rock are often alleged to be the footprints of a hero or of a saint. Occasionally such marks are said to be the hoofprints of a hero's horse. Near Nallihan--the name means Horseshoe Inn--there are such marks which are said to have been made by Kirat, the marvelous horse of the epic hero Köroğlu. Nallihan is in the western end of Ankara province.