

## THE AFTERLIFE OF SACRIFICE IN THE KURDISH MOVEMENT

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In March 2015, I went to the Diyarbakır Greater Metropolitan Municipality, just as I had done many times over the course of my fieldwork, to conduct a follow-up interview with Berivan,<sup>1</sup> a Kurdish woman in her early thirties. Her work at the municipality involved close interactions with Diyarbakırîtes, inhabitants of a city that had traversed two very different stages of Kurdish revolutionary politics—a period of intense warring and states of emergency (1984–2002) and a period of democratization (2002–2015).<sup>2</sup> When the conflict between the Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê, hereafter PKK) and the Turkish state broke out in 1984, the state declared a state of emergency across the Kurdish-majority cities of southeastern Turkey (or northern Kurdistan), including Diyarbakır (Amed, in Kurdish). It turned rural areas into security zones and forcefully evacuated the villages to cut off the PKK's contacts with these villages. The expansion of conflict into the rural and urban areas led to mass migrations to Diyarbakır, doubling its population to 1.5 million inhabitants and creating many infrastructural problems. In 1999, pro-Kurdish parties began to win seats in municipal elections.<sup>3</sup> With the lifting of the decade-long state of emergency in 2002, Diyarbakır became an example of “a laboratory of sovereign rule” in the revolutionary struggle (Klem and Maunaguru 2017, 630). My research traces the

translation of the Kurdish movement's revolutionary ideas into urban culture, as well as the reconstruction of a democratic society amid an ongoing but decelerated conflict, neoliberal encroachment, and the adverse influence of the Turkish state in Diyarbakır.<sup>4</sup> It was during that decade and a half that revolutionaries like Berivan—herself an ardent supporter and militant of the movement, with three martyrs in her family—became civic workers, shaping the everyday life of the war-torn city.

As we moved from her crowded office to a private room in the municipality, Berivan became visibly tense. She explained that her supervisor, a Kurdish man also from the movement but with upper-class privileges she lacked, had summoned her to his office and had proceeded to reprimand her over a resident's complaint. A Diyarbakır resident seeking services had evidently disliked the way Berivan had talked to him. Berivan recounted to me the angry words she and her supervisor had exchanged.

Berivan: I talk to people in Kurdish. Maybe that's why it sounded harsh to him. You cannot berate me like this without understanding the situation. My family put you in your position here [*Benim ailem seni buraya getirmiştir*]. You have no right to do this.

Supervisor: This is not your father's place [*Burası senin babanın yeri değil!*]

Berivan: You know what? This is exactly my father's place [*Burası tam da benim babamın yeri*]. This seat you're sitting in is my father's seat. It was secured with my father's blood. Get up! [*Kalk*]

In the end, Berivan left the office—in tears. Despite bringing in a reference to her martyr father, and even the sacred word *blood*, she had failed to establish a moral authority that would take her out of a difficult situation. Instead, she acutely realized that the moral hierarchy based in the sacrifice her father (and other martyrs) had made during the revolutionary struggle had vanished. What was her father's sacrifice for, then?

The exchange was one example among many of the deep frustrations I encountered during my fieldwork. They communicated an ever-widening rift between the revolutionary cause and Kurdish governance. For some, the democratization period needed to be led by revolutionary principles: a moral hierarchy based on the superiority of heroic, fatal sacrifice, and a political struggle toward self-rule

that included self-defense. Others welcomed the change. For them, the new Kurdish revolutionary politics needed to demonstrate its capability of handling everyday matters, such as garbage management, as well as cultural, social, and political matters, such as domestic violence and gender equality, ecologically sound living, and grass-roots democracy. People like Berivan saw themselves as marginalized, dismissed, and denied their value as relatives of the sacred. In the context of 2011–2015 Diyarbakır, such rifts had surfaced into a bitter polarizing language within the Kurdish revolutionary community, breaking long-term friendships and comradeships at a time when the Kurdish movement had finally gained power. Municipal seats were won, but what had happened to the revolution?

Kurdish studies scholars analyze tensions and disappointments through a comprehensive and multilayered attention to the ideological, economic, and social differences that surfaced in the democratization period. Situating Kurdish governance within the decolonization literature, *Zeynep Gambetti (2009)* identifies early signs of neoliberal encroachment in the movement, shaping new class identities. Cuma Çiçek refers to the deepening conflicts of interest between national and economic blocs in the movement that the democratization agenda failed to resolve (*Çiçek 2017, 107–27*). *Bülent Küçük (2019, 7–10)* shows how these economic tensions reflect on and are shaped by two political subjectivities: the radicalizing youth and the legalizing middle classes. *Küçük (2019, 12–13)* also underlines the tensions arising from the PKK's imposition of its violent strategies over democratic politics. *Umut Yıldırım (2019)* demonstrates how the dual agenda of Kurdish governance, functioning within neoliberal structures and decolonization, has simultaneously led to the pervasion of neoliberal entrepreneurial subjectivity and affective states of “dissonance.”

Building on this literature, I focus on the moral confusions and uncertainties around the new political project: How to translate the value of revolutionary sacrifices into the democratic struggle to remake the social and the political? As this ethnography demonstrates, this translation was not simply a matter of a shift in political agenda, but a deeper transformation of values, subjectivities, and everyday life in the Kurdish movement. How would this-worldly correspondence to revolutionary sacrifice be identified within the everyday life in Diyarbakır? Who would do the translations? How would they shape the new politics in the democratic project?

Sacrifice lies at the core of moral hierarchies and socio-political orders. Unsettling the ancient notions of sacrifice as a gift to God, earlier anthropological theories contend that there is no such thing as a free gift (*Mauss 1992*). Gift-giving

and sacrifice initiate relationships based on moral and social indebtedness; “there is perhaps no sacrifice that has not some contractual element” (Hubert and Mauss 1981, 100). Through sacrificial rituals, societies form a “wider, nonindividual, and life-transcending unity” and mold their “vital” powers into societal, political, and even military structures (Bloch 1992, 42). Sacrifice and the communities of indebtedness help the nationalist and militarist sovereignties control and produce effects to bind their subjects closer in an ever-widening way (Rashid 2020).

In contrast to this earlier work, more recent studies refuse to think of sacrifice in terms of its function and focus on its disruptive, disordering, and revolutionary aspects. They argue that too much emphasis on reciprocity inserts an insidious logic of debt into social relationships, foreclosing the possibility of a “true” gift or sacrifice (Derrida 1992, 24). These critics find in gift and sacrifice an excess irreducible to debt (Derrida 1995; Bataille 1991). Giving can be meaningful as much as it looks like destroying or losing, a principle that precludes exchangeability or reciprocity (Bataille 1991, 68–70). Sacrifice is revolutionary as it creates an absolute rupture from existing reality, and unleashes a transformation that cannot be foreseen, contained, or managed. Carrying out a liminal period with a lot of uncertainties, and thereby with potential for political intervention, sacrifice in essence constitutes a revolutionary act.

While these positions on the possibility or impossibility of a repayment of a sacrifice approach the question from within the ritual, I suggest a shift to its temporalities. Sacrifice exists across disparate, changing, and at times overlapping temporalities in relation to its context, the actors who sacrifice, the sacrificial object, and what is considered sacred. Two senses of temporality are present in this ethnography: first, chronological time (emergency and democratization periods), and second, sacred time (the centrality of revolutionary sacrifice as sacred, and its decentering). Scholarship on one of the most dramatic forms of sacrifice, martyrdom, has mostly analyzed sacrifice from within its sacred time—where it creates bonds, releasing an energy considered sacred, and making violence into a “formation” (Feldman 1991). Yet sacred and chronological temporalities diverge, converge, and otherwise relate to each other. Malagasy, for example, alternate between pre-colonial, colonial, and present temporalities of sacrifice in an “artful” way to resolve tensions and remake their communities (Cole 2001, 197). The present tense is used in Angolan revolutionaries’ self-sacrificial practices as “an invitation to optimism, concretization of change” (Blanes 2021, 136). Chronological time, especially the present tense, constitutes the most neglected temporality of sacrifice in anthropological theories, subsumed under sacred pasts and sacred

futures. Alternative presents cast a different light on sacred temporalities, reshaping evaluations of loss, debt, and revolution.

In this essay, I use sacrifice's afterlife to examine moral confusions in a democratizing society. In chronological time, afterlife refers to the indeterminate but gradual slippage of fatal loss due to the conflict's slowing down. It makes for a messy episode, because sacrificial death has never completely disappeared, though notions of survival, normality, and future have come to the fore. In sacred time, the afterlife of sacrifice refers to the ongoing succession of afterlives that entail changes to the Kurdish movement's moral/social temporal order within the lived historical time of emergency/democratization periods. It entails both the "victory" and the frustration that the victory does not completely feel like one. To explore the messiness of these afterlives, I turn to recent explorations of "afterlives" in anthropology.

The term *afterlives* resurrects specters of what is assumed dead, lost, or otherwise disappeared. Anthropologists explore the lingering presences, or "hauntings" (Gordon 2008), in the aftermath of an event that would challenge our understanding of the event and its social and political meanings (Schäfers 2020; Navaro et al. 2021). Alice Wilson (2023, 3–4) collects values, ideas, social networks, and hopes of the Dhufari revolution, "the lasting legacies" that persist even after the revolution's demise and under authoritarian repression. Refusing to interpret the revolutionary afterlives through a static win-or-fail lens, Wilson (2023, 13) sees them as a potentiality, like "a living tree with branches and roots" growing into new experiences and insights. In Turkey, Aslı Zengin (2019, 92–93) traces queer afterlives: trans sex worker women are subjected to hate crimes, and it is their trans friends who create an afterlife for their lost one by taking care of her body, grieving for her, and creating a home and a queer family among themselves. Through such care, transwomen cultivate their own forms of sovereignty from within their intimate lives. Whether a movement, an aspiration, or a human is assumed dead, afterlives indicate the continuation of their lives in other ways, often with critical insights and potentialities that can unsettle existing orders.

The afterlife of sacrifice refers to a potentiality that casts new light on both sacrificial loss and the sacred it aims to regenerate. In the Kurdish case, we have seen the divergence of sacrifice from its ritual form at the convergence of chronological and sacred temporalities of sacrifice, "the victory." This is experienced by Berivan and other relatives of the martyrs as the apparent failure of their relatives' loss to accumulate into a hope for a revolutionary future, or a shared value for a revolutionary community, or a power over mundane life. Marlene Schäfers (2023)

illustrates the pervasive concern among of the relatives of the martyrs to establish afterlives for them through their photographic images. These “latent” images carry within them the regenerative, hegemonic, and yet undeterminable power of sacrifice, which can project sovereignty but also instill ambivalence into such projections. Sacrifice does not indicate “birth” (Lambek 2007) or “oneness” (Holbraad 2014) anymore; it proves much more plural and messy.

However destabilizing, debilitating, and frustrating the decentering of revolutionary sacrifice is, sacrifice branches out into new forms in the aftermath. Failure, or “a victory that cannot feel like one,” opens into a multiplicity of possibilities shadowed by the polarizing narratives of neoliberal complicity, revolutionary nostalgia, or hopelessness. Catherine Alexander (2023, 24) describes failure as “a mode of excess and refusal that transcends or merges scales and temporalities, spills over from work into kin care, threatens to turn charges of moral failure back at the accusers, reverberates across space and time.” Afterlives of sacrifice help revolutionaries impose their own temporalities, vulnerabilities, and aspirations onto the revolutionary cause and gesture toward new revolutionary possibilities.

The expansion of the revolutionary temporality with the afterlives of sacrifice disrupts the linear accession of past, present, and future (Walton and İleengiz 2022) also engrained in the revolutionary projects. Being open to the interventions of the chronological present, afterlives save chronological time from being subsumed under sacred time. Multiple temporalities revealed through sacrifices, some of which can be mundane, help rethink revolutionary politics not only as events of rupture but also, and rather, as slow events, one sacrifice at a time, that are not lost to its accelerated temporality. There emerge new interactions across different temporalities, across political and moral spheres, and across revolution and its others. They nourish the optimism for revolutionary futures because they are “impossible events that happened nevertheless” (Al-Khalili et al. 2023, 12).

In the Kurdish movement, such interactions have allowed diverse articulations of sacrifice with implications for the moral orders tightly dependent on the primacy of heroic, fatal sacrifice and for new forms of revolutionary politics. In the afterlife, we talk of plurality; “the experience of revolutionary legacies is as intersectional as is that of revolution” (Wilson 2023, 10). Similarly, translations from sacrifice to the aftermath are as diverse as the experiences of and aspirations for revolution. The experiences of wounding and dying are complemented by different vulnerabilities and how to care for them. The notion of life also becomes diversified; it is no longer imagined only as a weapon that exposes the weakness of

sovereign power (Bolton 2023, 165) but also as a world of radical vulnerabilities, connections, and relationalities.

Through sacrifice and its legacies, this ethnography shows, revolution travels into spaces beyond the formal structures of power and order, reaching into the moral, intimate, and everyday realms of remaking the world. This inquiry reflects the shifts in my ethnographic research. I arrived in Diyarbakır in 2011 to do fieldwork for eleven months. Here, I followed my feminist activist friends and acquaintances as they shuffled from one NGO to another while simultaneously volunteered at a human rights organization. Over time, my fieldwork gradually moved away from the conventional sites of politics in NGO offices, rituals, and protests to more commonplace settings such as beauty parlors, sports centers, cafés, and homes. In these spaces, I have witnessed how people engender a new revolutionary culture from the bottom up, through their own sacrifices, loss, and hope. Sacrifice can still involve relinquishing something for the greater cause, but the forms, temporalities, affects, spaces, and scales of this sacrifice are more diverse. These intersecting realities coincided with the fragile Kurdish-Turkish peace process (2013–2015). In the following I offer a glimpse into the first experiments in creating the afterlives of sacrifice.

Ethnography involves shifts, and it shifts things. In Diyarbakır, for the first time, I had to contemplate what having a Kurdish maternal line meant to me. This fact had neither been pertinent nor a source of pride before. I always thought of it as a stifled part of my family history. My close friends in the field saw me as a beginner in Kurdish matters; others, however, rightly saw in me the signs of several privileges: Turkishness, a republican upbringing in Western towns with state officer parents, and a higher education in the United States. During my research, I felt that I could not claim that heritage, but I could also not ignore its slow, intimate emergence in that Kurdish-majority environment. While this foreignness kept me away from the more active and radical parts of the Kurdish movement, I managed to connect more closely with the ordinary members of the movement. In our respective distances, we found the time and space to talk about their experiences of navigating the difficult questions of the democratization process, conversations that constitute the basis of this article.

## THE REVOLUTION

In the earlier stages of the PKK's martyrology, we see both anthropological senses of sacrifice at play; sacrifice as building an order, "debt without gift," and sacrifice as an absolute gift, "gift without debt" (Bolton 2023, 164). For the first,

the PKK's discourses revolve around "our debt to the martyrs" (*şehitlere borcumuz*), an idea that invites the incoming guerrillas and militants to remain sacrificial subjects for the revolutionary cause. For the latter, the emphasis lies on the heroic resistance of the sacrificer, his/her embodiment of the sacred, and the jump forward toward the utopian future enabled by their sacrifice. Their "divine" gift cannot be repaid on similar terms, but one is still indebted, and there still exists the possibility to reciprocate by further sacrificial action (in the form of debt) that can emulate the heroic resistance. While the PKK discourses on martyrdom in the first and intense stage of the war with the Turkish state—from 1984 to 1999—depicted exemplary acts of sacrifice as the basis of a new moral hierarchy, debt coagulated a sacrificial community that first forged in the mountains and later expanded into the city. This section provides the background to this development, demonstrating the construction of a moral hierarchy based on sacrificial death and the formulation of debt repayment as a form of resistance.

"Fires of liberation" (*özgürlüğün ateşi*) has been a recurring theme accompanying the PKK's guerrilla warfare since its inception in 1984. During the brutal rule of the Turkish military junta from 1980 to 1983, some of the members of the PKK had fled to Lebanon. Others found themselves captured and imprisoned. Mazlum Doğan, the founding member of the PKK, was among them. In 1982, he hung himself to protest the widespread torture at the notorious Diyarbakır prison; the matches that he lit before dying created the myth that he burned himself alive (Hakyemez 2017, 122). Later, other militants would conduct similar self-immolation acts in prison and in Europe. Their sacrificial acts were spectacular events enchanting revolutionary Kurds. Doğan's sacrifice would later be recognized in the establishment of the PKK's guerrilla academy under his name, institutionalizing the sacrificial act into the PKK's state-like becoming.

The image of fire, creation out of destruction, became central to the PKK's "myth of resistance" in the ever-growing war of the the 1990s. This myth centered on an indigenous spring festival, Newroz, whose epic tale of revolt against an evil Assyrian king became re-narrated as an allegory of the PKK's own resistance movement and whose traditionally lit bonfires were redefined as "fires of liberation" (Aydın 2014; Gunes 2013). Associating the Kurds with the Medes, an ancient Iranian people who won their liberation from the Assyrians, the PKK's resistance myth marked its struggle with the authority of ancient origin. But it was the self-immolation of PKK militants in and beyond prisons, particularly on the day of Newroz, March 21, that endowed the party's myth of resistance with the force of life and death. The literal and metaphorical connections between fire,

death, and rebellion helped forge sacrificial death as the ground of moral certainty, or the revolutionary “truth” (*hakikat*). The deceased guerrillas, including Berivan’s father, were considered the martyrs and new building blocks of the PKK’s resistance myth.

An institutionalizing, utopian, and supposedly truthful struggle emerged from this sacrificial energy, elevating the present to the messianic temporality of sacrifice. This construct was moved to a new level with the suicide attack by Zeynep Kınacı (code name, Zilan), who in 1996 dressed up as a pregnant woman and killed herself, along with seven soldiers, in Dersim (Tunceli). As the first suicide bomb attack in Turkey and by the PKK, her death sacralized the revolutionary goal of “a free Kurdistan” even further: Kınacı was designated “a goddess” by Öcalan, her self-destruction held up as the metaphorical rebirth of the Kurdish nation (Çağlayan 2013, 16). Other female militants in the mountains and elsewhere used the expression “becoming Zilan” (*Zilanlaşmak*) (Düzel 2018, 1), construing their militant subjectivities through sacrifice. The PKK’s elevation of self-sacrifice as an exemplary act for the Kurdish struggle inserted a gendered moral hierarchy of martyrdom. Self-sacrificial acts helped increase the mobilization and recruitment of new guerrillas and create the image that the PKK embodied the struggle for freedom (Gunes 2013, 263).

Pursuing a transcendentalist struggle for freedom, the PKK invented its own theology of revolution by binding sacrifice with death to generate a yearning for martyrdom and a conviction in the utopian future. As Banu Bargu (2014, 259) observes with the socialist death-fasters in Turkey, every martyr embodied the future community, building it “cell by cell” and ensuring its immortality. Indeed, both the death-faster and the PKK guerrillas constituted “living” martyrs; by joining the struggle, they entered a liminal period during which they were assumed to leave aside their previous lives and enter the world of utopia. In their recruitment ceremonies, the initiating guerrillas made their oath for the martyrs, and Öcalan and took their noms de guerre from the martyrs, such as Mazlum, Egîd, Zilan, or Berîtan (Rudi 2019, 202). Their transition to the world of the sacred would start with joining the struggle and end with their heroic death.

Sacrificial gift (“gift without debt”) required transcendentalist action, and sacrificial debt (“debt without gift”) required relentless resistance. One can find the theme “dying resisting” (*direnerek ölmek*) in the guerrilla narratives published in the PKK’s official magazine *Serxwebûn* (*Independence*) between 1984 and 1999. The propensity to die “easily” is called “suicidalism” and repudiated. The guerrillas express constant worry of dying from accidents of nature, such as in an avalanche,

rather than during an armed confrontation, because that would be a “worthless death” (*boşa ölüm*). What emerged was a moral hierarchy in which self-sacrifice was held up as the yardstick against which other forms of revolutionary sacrifice were measured. This elevation of martyrdom to pride of place had the unintended effect of rendering other forms of revolutionary sacrifice invisible. The afterlife of sacrifice allowed other forms of revolutionary sacrifice, especially for women, to become visible and reveal the multiple ways that sacrifice generated unforeseeable consequences for the democracy project of remaking the social, the moral, and the political.

### AN EMERGING UNIVERSE OF DEBT

Kurdish revolutionaries like Berivan saw the first win of a municipal seat in Diyarbakır by the pro-Kurdish party in 1999 as a victory. “We hardly dared go inside,” she said, looking at the municipal building. The phrase “we hardly dared” here is an imperfect English translation of the negative Turkish verb *kıyamamak*, used to describe situations in which one cannot do something to someone or something due to the love one has for them. For Berivan, the municipality was a new political power and an object of affection over which she and the rest of Kurdish society fussed tenderly. It was an experiment in alternative sovereignty, which soon became the center of evaluations of sacrifice and debt.

The year 1999 marked a watershed moment in Kurdish revolutionary politics. After his capture by the Turkish security forces, Öcalan formulated a new political program for the PKK titled “democratic confederacy.”<sup>5</sup> The new program abandoned the project of a separate state and reformulated radical democracy as the new direction of Kurdish politics (Öcalan 2015). By pursuing diverse forms of direct democracy and defending the values of gender equality, ecological revitalization, and civil politics, Kurds and the other peoples of Turkey and the Middle East would gradually forge mature systems of self-rule within their respective national borders (Akkaya and Jongerden 2013). Öcalan’s groundbreaking declarations came in parallel with the Turkish state’s turn to democratization as part of the European Union (EU) accession process. In 2002, the state of emergency was lifted and restrictions on the expression of Kurdish identity were relaxed, albeit in a two-step-forward, one-step-backward fashion.

From 1999 onward, pro-Kurdish parties began securing municipal seats in the Kurdish-majority cities of Diyarbakır, Mardin, Van, Hakkâri, and others. During that time, revolutionaries like Berivan, who had previously engaged in clandestine activities, began working in public service departments on water

resource management, public transportation, public relations, preschool education, and women's shelters. Their work negotiated the uneasy shift in Kurdish politics from a revolutionary militarized resistance toward urban civil democratic governance. The imperative to transform Kurdish (and Turkish) society from within the neoliberal conditions of municipal work dictated by the Turkish state's policies made this transition contentious. Attempting to trade in the familiar "struggle with arms" for a new "struggle with the pen" even as the conflict persisted in the form of Turkish military blockades punctuated by periods of ceasefire and a PKK guerrilla army standing on alert in the Iraqi mountains rendered the place of revolutionary sacrifice in the new order of things indeterminate.

The municipality's victory was not only symbolic. Working within the legal system brought advantages: municipal budgets, institutional buildings, thousands of employees, and the power to shape public discourse (Watts 2010, 162). Employment in municipalities run by pro-Kurdish parties became one of the most secure forms of income in the region. Prior to 1999, only nonrevolutionary Kurds had been allowed to become civil servants. For Kurdish revolutionaries, becoming civil servants now meant working to reestablish Kurdish society by realizing commensurations between revolutionary and democratic social and moral orders while living economically secure lives.

Growing social and political capital and slowing down conflict enabled alternative forms of politics, increasing the visibility of the martyrs. Cemeteries for the PKK martyrs were built (which would later be destroyed in the post-2015 resumption of the conflict). Statues of important resistance leaders were erected; one of the most significant ones was Seyyid Riza's in Dersim (Ilengiz 2020, 87–88). The Kurdish youth, emerging as the new actors of revolutionary politics in the city, contributed to this sacrificial politics. Circulating stories of violence that they and/or their relatives had endured, and reproducing the moral hierarchy of the revolutionary sacrifice through definitions of the martyrs as heroes (Neyzi and Darıcı 2015, 62), the Kurdish youth imagined themselves in the "sacred communion of the living and the dead" (Neyzi and Darıcı 2015, 68). Mixed feelings of loss, guilt, hope, and hopelessness, joy, celebration, and, above all, indebtedness shape the afterlife of sacrifice.

A central term that reflects indebtedness in the revolutionary vocabulary is *bedel*. *Bedel*, originally an Arabic word, translates as "the price of something," as in the price of bread. Yet glossed from within the Kurdish revolutionary moral universe, it denotes the sacrifices one has made for the sake of the cause—a free Kurdistan. The common expression among Kurdish revolutionaries, "we paid a

high price” (*çok bedel ödedik*), underlines sacrifice’s excessive loss and suffering and affirms the central role these losses play in the formation and maintenance of the sacred, defined as “the cause.” Voiced frequently in the peace process period—both publicly in Turkish media representations of the state violence endured by Kurds and privately in human rights organization meetings—the statement “we paid a high price” testifies to the sacrifices made by the Kurdish people.

The pressing feelings of *bedel* and indebtedness raised possibilities of repayment in the aftermath. Initial assessments were saturated by gendered, moralizing, and class-based distinctions articulated through everyday lives in the revolutionary community. A binary language of politicians (and politics) emerged, separating “revolutionaries” (i.e., those who “truly” sacrificed) from “careerists.” The separation was deepened with references to symbolic, social, and cultural capital: the latter group had bachelor’s degrees in the relevant professions and spoke Turkish with no accent. Some knew English. They lived bourgeois lifestyles, residing in newly built, upscale gated communities. This contrasted with the revolutionaries who lived in crammed neighborhoods like Bağlar. They had shorter CVs, for they had dropped out of school and university in the 1990s at the height of the conflict, either to commit to the struggle or when requested to leave “the schools of the colonizers” by the PKK. For women, going to a hairdresser (for a hairdo, coloring, or other services) could be seen as a symbol of privilege and a lack of sacrifice. The increasing, everyday linkages between sacrifice and new forms of capital indicated an aftermath of sacrifice focused on reciprocating debt in the new order. At the heart of such debates were the families of the martyrs.

### EMBODYING DEBT

During my fieldwork, I met several relatives of the deceased PKK guerrillas. In a city that has been torn by decades of conflict, it would indeed be hard to find anyone without a martyr relative in their extended families. Yet a specific group had more public and organized visibility under the honorific titles of “value families” (*değer ailesi* in Turkish) or “martyr families.” These value families formed solidarity-based communities and organizations, one of which was the Mesopotamian Aid, Solidarity, and Cultural Association for Those Who Have Lost Their Relatives (Mezopotamya Yakınlarını Kaybeden Ailelerle Yardımlaşma Dayanışma ve Kültür Derneği, or MEYA-DER), with the express aim of helping families identify the burial sites of deceased guerrillas, organizing funerals and mourning tents, handling the legal bureaucracy pursuant to the death of a guerrilla or the imprisonment of a family member, and arranging transportation to prisons. They also

performed a task of vital importance to these families: they helped locate their children, whether alive or dead, which required keeping communication channels open with the PKK.

The association was located in the impoverished neighborhood of the Bağlar, thirty minutes walking distance from the urban center where most NGOs were located. A small plate with “MEYA-DER” written on it was pinned to the edge of the apartment wall. As I climbed the stairs and approached the door, a strong smell of food seeped out from inside. With a MEYA-DER staff member, we entered the room they called “the office.” Inside were three desks, each with a computer, and a few chairs. My interviewee sat behind one of the desks in a formal meeting manner, while I settled into the guest chair. The other rooms I saw after our conversation reflected a different atmosphere from our formal setting: two large rooms were decorated as living rooms, with pull-out sofas to be used when the value families outside of Diyarbakır needed to come to the city to arrange a visit to a prison, to make an appeal at a state organizations, or to attend a funeral. In another visit, I would see the space converted into a mourning house after the arrival of a dead PKK guerrilla’s remains.

This home-turned-office’s distance to the urban and political center exemplifies the decentering of sacrifice as acutely felt by Berivan and others. Yet, as it simultaneously carried out the formal and informal practices of democratization politics, the value families brought a new collective body, and a new life to sacrifice. My interlocutor, Ayşe, described how they were “united in pain” (*acıda birleşen*). All the staff hailed from value families. They pledged to “carry the struggle forward” mainly through preserving their relatives’ legacy, living exemplary lives (Işık 2023, 263–79), and remaining devout to the martyrs. Out of their indebtedness to the martyrs, they took care of each other, which meant providing monthly food subsidies, scholarships for children, or logistical support with funeral organization. Their stories were distinct but also common, to an extent that if I listened to one “mother’s” story, I could understand the suffering of the rest (also see Karaman 2016). It was not uncommon to hear that marriages were arranged within the value-family community: one of my interlocutors who had such an arranged marriage reasoned that it was not so much love but the shared sense of loss and pain that brought and kept her and her husband together. As they clamor about their indebtedness to the martyrs and perform behind-the-scenes revolutionary work, the value families continue to sacrifice, in forms such as claiming the remains of their guerrilla relatives, conducting a proper burial, exposing the state’s necropolitical treatment of the guerrilla bodies (Bargu 2019), or in more “mundane” forms

such as taking care of the remaining members of the families. They endure state's constant mechanisms of rendering them indebted to themselves (Biner 2020). It was from within this unending, communal, and varied complexity of suffering and debt that value families created an afterlife of sacrifice.

With the merging of indebtedness and sacrifice in the decentered, quiet yet continuous experiences of the value families, sacrifice is no longer neatly defined in terms of heroic, resistant self-sacrifice. The "gift of sacrifice" is not only oriented toward a sacred future but also to the present, demanding to remake the political and moral order. Bridging the connection between sacrifice and the sacred, the aftermath of sacrifice turns *bedel* into a demand, a claim, an expectation. Value families' experiences shift the focus away from the beginnings of sacrifice, where the question of whether one's sacrifice is genuine or not dominates, to its aftermath, where sacrifice is integrated into social and political life as an untenable/unpredictable force.

### GOVERNING SACRIFICE

Recall how the revolution's expansion into everyday life in Diyarbakır enabled diverse afterlives of sacrifice. The employment policies at the municipality constituted a contentious area of commensuration; for the Kurdish revolutionaries, translating their militancy into the emergent languages of professionalism and efficiency created a new challenge. Not knowing the expert lingo became grounds for their dismissal. Unable to respond to the question "Which school did you graduate from?" and not being able to prepare lengthy CVs, these militants-turned-civil servants had to work extra hard to demonstrate the relevance of their revolutionary militant work to urban politics.

Value families' integration into the employment policies enabled a calculative logic in the afterlife of sacrifice to flourish. In the early 2000s, the municipality implemented a controversial hiring policy by imposing unofficial quotas for value family members in their cadres. The rationale for the quota was that the care and upkeep of surviving family members and militants had been entrusted (*emanet etmek*) to the movement. That was not just a matter of moral conscience and revolutionary solidarity; it would also endow the Kurdish civic authority, which had deep ties with the movement, with moral strength. The rumor was that at some point, the job application forms included a section inquiring about the number of martyrs the applicant had in their family. While I have yet to see an example of such a form, if it ever existed, it would have been hastily retracted: such bare-bones

bureaucratization risked stripping martyrdom of its sacredness, something the movement could not afford and would not have intended.

This rumored blunder notwithstanding, during my fieldwork scrutiny over the authenticity of one's sacrifice and the evaluation and judgment of fitness based on employees' revolutionary past, the number of martyrs in the family, and the family's level of commitment to the movement formed part of everyday conversations. The gift of sacrifice was made sense of through counting, calculating, and quantifying: the number of martyrs a family had given to the cause, the number of years a person spent in prison, and the number of torture techniques the body had endured. How much suffering would count for which position? What kinds of jobs should value-family members be given without undermining their moral standing? Such were some of the emerging metrics of revolutionary sacrifice in the new social order that took place next to the Turkish state's authoritarian debt logic: selecting arbitrarily "deserving" citizens and punishing the rest (Yoltar 2020). Similar moral judgments suffocated the Kurdish community; for some revolutionaries, value families' "demanding" and "taking" constituted pure "selfishness" and "not knowing the struggle and its values." The irony was that the position for the irreducibility of the sacredness of sacrifice to any social form would end up taking it out of the emerging political and moral order. Such correspondence and proportionality constantly drawn between sacrifices made and sacrifices accounted for is both revolutionary and painfully otherwise, for the failure to commensurate them would mean the irrelevance of the revolution. The possibility of irrelevant sacrifice lurked around the edges of the new political and moral order.

One can argue that the employment policy was one example where the Kurdish municipal governance intended to go beyond what I would call a "theater of nationalist sacrifice" and create a revolutionary afterlife of sacrifice. Such a "theater" was happening in Turkey; even though the disabled Turkish veterans who fought in the war with the PKK were provided with enormous state resources, they could not escape marginalization and irrelevance within society (Açıksöz 2019). Seeking ways to integrate the value families into the new social and political order could have gone beyond turning them into mouthpieces of a bygone era and turning them into real agents in everyday politics. Nevertheless, the accounting logics engrained in employment presented challenges to turning suffering and loss into socially reproductive forms; the stereotypical example would be the hiring of a value family member in what was considered as "menial" jobs, such as garbage collection.

In the aftermath of sacrifice, separations between the moral and the social, the past and the present, the timeless and the timebound are only possible when sacrificial loss is seen as a singular, unrepeatable, one-time event. The problem is that it is not: loss is generative. It rarely remains in place and is thereby subject to the unpredictability of sacrificial operations. The “purity” of the sacrificial gift is no guarantee of its alterity. Kurdish municipal governance needed to reciprocate: the new order to be built through the process of civil politics was not only about continuing the revolution; it also meant to return on the many sacrifices made by building an afterlife. Expanding the public evaluations of sacrifice and its repayment, it experimented with certain ways, such as employment, only to confront the dilemma of reproducing the moral universe of original sacrifice within the new politics. Their experimentations failed to respond to the question: If a martyr’s sacrifice is so irreducible to everyday social forms and temporalities that it is painfully difficult for their biological kin, who have in many ways come to embody the now eternal martyrs themselves, to function within them, what then remains of the revolution? In the last stages of the peace process, the period in which I conducted this research, the Kurdish movement’s political power, exerted through the municipal government, was undermined by this moral deadlock between commensuration and incommensurability, measuring and evaluating.

### MUNDANE SACRIFICE

Besides the municipal policies, the potentiality of the afterlife of sacrifice among the revolutionary crowd sprouts in quiet, messy, and gradual ways. The multiplicity of the aftermath enables the recognition of other forms of sacrifice that have remained invisible within the moral hierarchy, shaped by the sacredness accrued to martyrdom. These sacrifices can be quite mundane, such as not being able to get pregnant, continue one’s education, travel, or spend more time with one’s family, living in the hypermilitarized environment of Diyarbakır, witnessing the death of a close friend, being unable to distance oneself from politics and war, or “not wearing a more relaxed attitude toward life,” as one interlocutor put it. Such “mundane sacrifices,” as I call them to point out their distinction from the martyrly sacrifice and connection to everyday life, insert their own temporalities into the struggle. They turn the wait for a utopian future into a revolutionary present.

While sacrificial debt partakes in the construction of a wounded collective identity for Kurdish youth, as in [Leyla Neyzi and Haydar Darıcı’s \(2015\)](#) ethnography, it can also establish generative, fluid, and caring relationships within the

Kurdish community. Diverse translations of the gift of sacrifice into everyday lives do not necessarily mean forgetting about the debt, but channeling it to forge other relationships of responsibility and care. For example, Gûlasor, a young woman whose father left for the mountains when she was two, had a different notion of debt. She saw her father's sacrifice as his individual decision and did not find it right to make a claim as a member of a value family. It was rather her mother, a single mother and an activist, whom she felt more indebted to, and she planned to "do many things for her." Gûlasor reciprocated her debt as a member of the Kurdish collective by establishing a relationship of care with her mother in their everyday lives in Diyarbakır. Such care "work," [Roxani Krystalli and Philipp Schulz \(2022, 15\)](#) make clear, substantiates the political work of revolutionary politics, as well as bringing insights into "the practices and politics of remaking a world in the wake of violence."

Afterlives of sacrifice make the different agencies and subjectivities of the revolution visible, as well as their gendered experiences. During my fieldwork, I met several interlocutors who joined the movement in their early youth in the late 1980s and 1990s and had been to the mountains only for a short period or not at all, spared from this sacrifice because their families "had already sacrificed enough." Some participated in urban militancy, helping build grass-roots networks for the emerging civic organizations. Some spent years in prison. Some are traumatized due to the loss of a close friend. Others left the movement. These revolutionaries, whom I would call "ordinary" revolutionaries just to underline their non-heroic forms of resistance and their situatedness at the peripheries of the movement, formed increasing voices for an end to *bedel* language (*bedel dili*).

One of these ordinary revolutionaries was Sevgi. She was a Kurdish woman in her early forties, working as a cadre, which meant committing all of her time and energy to the struggle. After a brief period in the mountains and two years of imprisonment, she was charged with public relations duty in the city. She was a self-made revolutionary, rising out of poverty and an oppressive marriage. While hers was a story of empowerment, it entailed a lot of "mundane" sacrifices: not being able to conceive during a period of intense activism, being unable to look after her sick mother as much as she wanted, being unable to go public with her new partner as a divorced woman, and being unable to have a private space of her own or a stable life because of her cadre responsibilities. She continued, "One never has a plan or a project about one's life. The *bedel* I'm paying is both material and immaterial [*manevi*]. And it seems like we're going to have to keep on paying it until the end of our days . . . I've given up on having a child. I could have had a child.

I'm also a woman, you know. It's in my nature to have needs—in the emotional and sexual sense. I can't meet them now. This, too, is *bedel*." In our first meeting, she sounded hopeless, but during our second meeting, Sevgi announced that she was taking big steps in her life; she would settle into her own home and live with her new partner, both of which were moves of privacy and done in secret not to jeopardize her position in the movement.

Encouraged by the moral imperative, "I have paid a lot of *bedel*," these ordinary revolutionaries brought sacred temporality into their lifetimes, because it was now possible to change things in the present. At the time of our interview, Sevgi was struggling to reverse the effects of the excessive medicalization of her body she had endured during fertility treatments. Sevgi's life changes were not undertaken explicitly as a way to transform political discourses within the movement, but rather to slowly recreate the world through care and creativity (Kurtović and Sargsyan 2019). Ordinary revolutionaries like Sevgi turned everyday life into a space where afterlives of sacrifice sustained the revolution. For them, the convergence of the sacred and sacrificial temporality of sacrifice helped challenge its moral hierarchy without abandoning sacrifice's moral world. Yet it still enabled exchanges across previously distant spheres of time, value, and action.

Distancing from the moral hierarchy of revolutionary sacrifice forces one to be creative in their translations. Israeli ex-soldier conscientious objectors redefine nationalist sacrifice to include their own marginalization and abjection; they intend to frame their "mundane" sacrifice as marginalized members of a militarist society as social capital to create a change from within (Weiss 2014, 402). Such interventions can queer sacrifice; Kurdish trans sex workers in Turkey adopt "chameleon subjectivities," using tactics both from the revolutionary and Turkish nationalist political repertoire (Karakuş 2022). Creativity includes uncertainty; there is always the risk that the sacrifice will not be recognized as such, and they will meet the accusations of being "traitors" or "selfish" (Schäfers and Düzel 2020).

By publicly articulating their mundane sacrifices and making changes to their lives in the service of recompense, ordinary Kurdish revolutionaries like Sevgi probe an end to a moral hierarchy based on revolutionary sacrifice as heroic death. Summoning the possibility of a life that might be lived otherwise, these articulations take as their aim the attainment of social status, social capital, employment, and the less visible assets of privacy, intimacy, health, a return to education, travel time, or the possibility of detachment from political norms. This diversification of sacrifice allows Kurdish revolutionaries to articulate their past and ongoing hardships and forfeitures. They transport *bedel* out of guerrilla space and into their own

nonguerrilla lives and shift the story of sacrifice from the heroes in the mountains to the ordinary revolutionaries—neither heroes nor abject victims—and their everyday city-life sacrifices. As they open up revolutionary sacrifice to forms other than heroic death, social life opens to revolution. Through mundane sacrifice and its repayment, revolution turns into an everyday remaking of a new life.

Bringing sacrifice down from the transcendent heights of heroic death to the mundane hubble-bubble of the lived life through myriad acts of commensuration is not declaring “an end” to the revolution. Revolutions are not mere one-off events, but unfixed cultural phenomena that can only be understood by acknowledging both sacrificial conviction and “the dissipation of conviction where such sacrifice seems altogether meaningless” (Haugbolle and Bandak 2017, 202). In the democratization era, ordinary Kurdish revolutionaries reclaim the symbolic and social capital of sacrifice without drawing on hegemonic public discourses, opening instead possibilities for the moral agency with which to insert their own formulations of what revolution might mean.

In the context of struggles over power and influence and the ongoing conflict between the PKK and the Turkish state, an end to sacrifice makes for a stretch in imagination. *Bedel* in both its guises—revolutionary and mundane sacrifice—remains a worn-out but omnipresent moral anchor. Even when people complain of the excessive use of *bedel*—“*Bedel* again? Really? Enough with this rhetoric!”—there is an awareness of its dormant potential to expand evermore. If attempts to commensurate the revolution with the new order pose hard questions about the relevance and results of the revolution, they also provide clues about the new socio-moral orders being forged.

## CONCLUSION

An interlocutor friend once said, “revolution took everything from me and gave me everything I have.” Life as gifted, life as a gift, all in one revolutionary body. Sacrifice’s afterlives are as many as the ways revolutionary experiences are remembered, accounted for, and continued. The experiences of the value families expose the central irony of sacrifice, how it tends to be both the sacred as an aspiration and the mundane for a new politico-moral order. The Kurdish municipal governance’s experiment with the integration of the gift of sacrifice into the new order reproduces neoliberal logics of quantification. Ordinary revolutionaries quietly translate their own sacrifices and debt into the realm of the everyday. Tracing these painful, disruptive, and transformative paths reveals how afterlives of sacrifice are both messy and insightful about revolutionary potentialities.

In the aftermath, new temporalities of waiting, of recuperating a medicalized body, of taking care of an aging mother, and others interact with sacred time. My interlocutors constantly move to and fro between different temporalities, the ritual and the everyday, the social and the political through creative, caring, gradual acts of translation. These translations brim with conflicting effects, such as frustration, desperation, hope, and care, among others, yet they are where the revolution breathes.

The concept of *afterlife of sacrifice* aims to go beyond affirming the presence and power of “the ghosts” of the past. These ghosts sustain the revolution in unlikely spaces (Wilson 2023), stir both hope and desperation (Salem 2020), and catalyze ethical self-transformation toward resistant subjectivities (Yonucu 2023). This article points to a messier situation: while revolution shapes sacrifice, afterlives of sacrifice shape revolution. I offer the concept of the *afterlives of sacrifice* as a comparative operator for underlining the intersecting, uneven, and constantly changing temporalities of revolutionary commitment. The concept allows us to see how revolution finds new lives through invisible, generative, and diverse forms of loss and sacrifice. Rethinking revolutionary temporalities reveals the attempts to reorder moral hierarchies, the introduction of new political practices and relationalities, and explorations of “the other sides” (Mayblin and Course 2014) of sacrifice. The afterlives of sacrifice, then, shed a new light on the revolution, where loss and care, destruction and healing, perfection and imperfection can coexist.

As ordinary Kurdish revolutionaries in this ethnography recounted their lives in and through *bedel*, mobilizing it into demands for repayment, relevance, and recognition, they did so acutely aware of the fact that the afterlife of sacrifice can be restricted in a present with no possibilities of sustaining revolution in an otherwise. The moral confusions and fragility of translations become harder to bear. In such an environment of diminished possibilities, there is no guarantee that ordinary sacrifice will be recognized as such. This came to pass with the resumption of conflict in 2015. The months-long conflict took place not in the mountains but also in the urban historic centers of Kurdish-majority cities, in and among people’s houses (OHCHR 2017). In 2016, most of the democratically elected Kurdish members of parliament and mayors were arrested via emergency decree, and trustee (*kayyum*) governors appointed to the municipalities. More than a few of my interlocutors, including Berivan, saw themselves dismissed from their positions. Confronted with the possibility of imminent death, living in a reoccupied city under siege, and no longer able to invest in legal forms of politics, the Kurdish

revolutionaries must now decide how to evaluate the return to emergency and the suspension of sacrificial afterlife.

### ABSTRACT

*What happens when sacrifice is imagined in terms of a debt that can be repaid? In the ongoing conflict begun in 1984 between the Kurdistan Workers' Party and the Turkish state, Kurdish revolutionary discourse has characterized death as the required price for liberation. After 2002, a shift away from revolutionary violence and an increase in civil politics with more diverse actors allowed for public recognition of sacrifice other than death. This ethnography in Diyarbakır conceptualizes "the afterlives of revolutionary sacrifice" to unearth the multiple temporalities of revolutionary struggle. Rather than viewing sacrifice through the lens of the revolutionary sacred, the article rethinks revolution through the vulnerabilities, relationships of care, and hopes that such temporalities entail. It highlights the afterlives of sacrifice to complicate the traditional narratives of heroism and martyrdom, sheds light on everyday struggles, affects, and relationships, and questions how we value sacrifice for political change. [sacrifice; revolution; debt; bedel; afterlives of sacrifice; Kurdistan Workers' Party; Turkey]*

### ÖZET

*Bedelin geri ödenebilecek bir karşılığı tahayyül edildiğinde ne olur? Kürdistan İşçi Partisi ile Türkiye devleti arasında 1984 yılında başlayan ve halen devam eden çatışmada, Kürt devrimci söylemi ölümü özgürlük için ödenmesi gereken bir bedel olarak nitelendirmiştir. 2002'den sonra devrimci şiddetten uzaklaşılması ve daha çeşitli aktörlerin yer aldığı sivil siyasetin oluşması, ölüm dışındaki bedellerin de kamuoyu tarafından görülmesini sağladı. Diyarbakır'da geçen bu etnografik çalışma, devrimci mücadelenin çoğul zamansallıklarını ortaya çıkarmak için «devrimci bedelin sonraki yaşamlarını» kavramsallaştırıyor. Makale, bedeli devrimci kutsalın merceğinden görmek yerine, devrimi bu tür zamansallıkların barındırdığı kırılğanlıklar, ihtimam ilişkileri ve umutlar üzerinden yeniden düşünüyor. Geleneksel kahramanlık ve şehitlik anlatılarını karmaşıklaştırmak için bedelin sonraki yaşamlarını vurgulamakta, gündelik mücadelelere, duygulara ve ilişkilere ışık tutmakta ve siyasi değişim için bedel nasıl değer verdiğimizizi sorgulamaktadır. [bedel; devrim; borç; bedelin sonraki hayatları; Kürdistan İşçi Partisi; Türkiye]*

### KURTE

*Çi dibe dema bedêl wek deynekê tê xeyalkirin ku paşê dikaribe bê dayîn? Di şerê navbera Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê û dewleta Tirkiyeyê de ku di 1984an de destpêkirî û hê jî berdewam e, gotara şoreşger a kurd mirinê wek bihayeke ji bo azadiyê lazim wesf kiriye. Piştî 2002yan, dûrketina ji şîdeta şoreşger û bi geşbûna siyaseta sivil ya bi aktorên cihêtir, rê li ber vekir ku derveyî mirinê jî bedelên din ji aliyê raya*

*gîştî ve werin dîtin. Vê xebata etnografîk a li Diyarbekirê, ji bo derxistina holê ya pirhejmariya wextîni ya têkoşîna şoreşger, “jiyanên paşê yên bedêlên şoreşger” têgîni dîke. Gotar, di dewsa dîtina bedêlê ya ji rojika pîroziya şoreşgerê de; şoreşê bi rêya şikestinbarî, têkiliyên îhtîmâmê, hêviyên ku wextîniyên vî cureyî dihewînin ji nû ve difikire. Ji bo tevlihevkerina vegotinên şehîdî û qehremaniyên kevneşopî, bal dikişîne ser jiyanan piştî bedêlê, ronî dide ser têkoşîn, hest û têkiliyên rojane û pirsiyar dîke ka ji bo guherînên siyasî em çawa qîmet didin bedêlê. [bedêl; şoreş; deyn; jiyanan paşê yên bedêlê; Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê; Tirkiye]*

## NOTES

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1. All names are fictitious to protect the anonymity of my interlocutors. All translations in the text are my own.
2. The periodization aims to mark a) the major condition within which the Kurdish movement struggled (emergency), b) the major direction toward which the movement gears itself (democratization).
3. Due to the repetitive cycle of banning by the Turkish courts and their re-emergence under a new name, the pro-Kurdish parties referred to in this article are effectively one and the same party. So as not to confuse the reader, I refer to them en masse as “pro-Kurdish parties.”
4. Although the PKK initially dominated the Kurdish movement, I use the term *Kurdish movement* here to refer to a large conglomeration of civilian and armed organizations, the majority of which endorse the realization of “radical democracy” via different and often conflicting means.
5. Charged with treason and separatism, in June 1999 Öcalan was sentenced to death without appeal, later to be commuted to life imprisonment. Öcalan remains in solitary confinement on İmralı Island to this day.

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