



The Transformation of Lake Van into a Cultural Symbol

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Abstract: This study investigates how Lake Van, the largest lake in Türkiye, has been transformed from a physical landscape into a cultural symbol imbued with shared meaning. It asks how and why Lake Van's symbolism evolved and identifies the socio-cultural processes driving this change. Adopting an interpretive qualitative approach in cultural sociology, the research draws on Émile Durkheim's theory of collective representations, Clifford Geertz's interpretive anthropology, and Jeffrey C. Alexander's strong program as a theoretical framework. The analysis centers on diverse narratives and practices surrounding Lake Van – including the Van Lake Monster legend, the Akdamar Island love story, the endemic pearl mullet's annual migration, local conservation efforts, and media/tourism representations – to understand how cultural narratives endow the natural environment with significance. The findings reveal that these collective narratives have elevated Lake Van to the status of a sublime symbol of regional identity. This symbolic transformation has strengthened social cohesion and local pride, while also spurring cultural tourism and bolstering environmental stewardship. Ultimately, Lake Van's case exemplifies the dynamic interplay between cultural narrative and social reality in the making of collective symbols.

Keywords: Collective memory, Cultural symbol, Effect of symbol, Lake Van, Symbol construction

1. Introduction

Natural landscapes and landmarks often carry significance beyond their physical attributes, becoming imbued with cultural and symbolic meanings for the communities that surround them. In sociological terms, such places can evolve into collective symbols that encapsulate shared identities, values, and memories (Durkheim, 1995). A cultural symbol can be defined as any object, image, or practice that represents something beyond its intrinsic characteristics, embodying shared meanings within a culture (Geertz, 1973). Likewise, collective memory denotes the pool of memories and knowledge shared by a social group, which underpins that group's identity (Halbwachs, 1992). Such memory-laden places serve as anchors of communal identity; as Nora (1989) suggests, they function as lieux de mémoire—sites where history and memory converge to imbue a physical space with profound cultural resonance.

Lake Van, situated in eastern Anatolia, exemplifies this transformation from a natural landscape into a cultural symbol. As the largest lake in Türkiye and an ancient cradle of civilization, Lake Van has long

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stood at the center of the region's cultural imagination. Locals affectionately refer to it as “Van Denizi” (“the Van Sea”), a nickname that reflects the lake's vastness and its deep integration into local identity.

Over time, a rich tapestry of legends, folklore, and communal practices has woven the lake into the region's cultural fabric. The Van Lake Monster myth, the poignant legend of star-crossed lovers on Akdamar Island, and the marvel of the endemic pearl mullet's annual spawning migration are among the storied traditions that have developed around Lake Van. In parallel, community-driven efforts to preserve the lake's pristine waters—as well as its celebratory portrayal in local media and tourism—have further reinforced Lake Van's symbolic status. Collectively, these narratives and practices have elevated Lake Van from a mere geographical feature to a shared emblem of regional identity and heritage, imbued with a sense of sacred significance.

This article investigates the cultural construction of Lake Van as a symbol, tracing its shift from a physical landscape to a collective representation. To guide this analysis, the study draws on Émile Durkheim's (1995) theory of collective representations, Clifford Geertz's (1973, 1983) interpretive anthropology, and Jeffrey C. Alexander's (2003, 2010) “strong program” in cultural sociology. Using this theoretical framework, the analysis examines each of the aforementioned cultural narratives and practices as a facet of Lake Van's symbolic construction. Through these examples, the article probes the process by which a natural environment is elevated into a shared cultural icon that carries meanings of community, heritage, and sacred value. In doing so, the study sheds light on the dynamic interplay between cultural narrative and social cohesion, offering insight into how collective symbols are constructed and sustained in contemporary society.

Ultimately, the central question driving this research is how and why Lake Van's cultural symbolism has evolved over time, and what socio-cultural processes have propelled this symbolic transformation. To address this question, the following section details the study's methodology and theoretical framework, laying the groundwork for the analysis that follows.

2. Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This research employs an interpretive qualitative methodology (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012) in order to examine the cultural meanings surrounding Lake Van. Interpretive research operates on the premise that social realities are constructed through meaning-making processes and are open to multiple contextual interpretations. Given that our research question centers on cultural symbolism and collective memory—understood as the shared pool of knowledge that underpins group identity (Halbwachs,

1992)—a qualitative narrative analysis is particularly appropriate. This approach facilitates an in-depth understanding of how local actors themselves interpret and re-signify Lake Van’s significance. Rather than measuring variables or testing hypotheses, an interpretive paradigm focuses on elucidating symbolic meanings in context, aligning with the study’s aim to explain how and why Lake Van has been imbued with shared cultural meaning, as Schwartz-Shea and Yanow (2012) note, such research designs prioritize understanding over prediction, which is crucial for unpacking processes of symbolic transformation. Scholarly literature provides the primary foundation for analysis.

The empirical focus of the research is on textual and narrative analysis of the myths, legends, folklore, and representations that have accrued around Lake Van. This analysis is guided by a three-pronged theoretical framework drawn from cultural sociology and interpretive anthropology. In particular, the article draws on Émile Durkheim’s theory of collective representations, Clifford Geertz’s approach of interpretive anthropology, and Jeffrey C. Alexander’s “strong program” in cultural sociology. Each of these theoretical perspectives offers a lens for understanding how shared meanings are constructed, maintained, and manifested in social life. Together, they enable us to examine how a natural feature like Lake Van becomes embedded in collective memory and regional identity as a cultural symbol. The following subsections briefly summarize each framework and explain how it applies to the case of Lake Van.

2.1 Durkheim’s Theory of Collective Representations

Émile Durkheim’s conceptualization of the sacred and the profane provides a foundational lens for analyzing how ordinary objects or places can become powerful collective symbols. In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkheim (1995) argues that societies construct “collective representations”—symbols, beliefs, and myths that both reflect and reinforce social cohesion. Through communal rituals and shared participation, even a natural landscape can be transformed into a sacred carrier of meaning. Crucially, Durkheim contends that sacredness is not an intrinsic property of an object, but rather a quality bestowed upon it by the community that collectively invests it with symbolic power.

A central mechanism in this process is the concept of the totem, which represents both the identity of the group and its underlying moral order. According to Durkheim, worship of the totem is essentially a form of the community worshipping itself – the symbol stands in for the group’s collective identity and values. This notion of totemism is tightly linked to Durkheim’s idea of collective consciousness, the system of shared beliefs and sentiments that binds individuals together and forms the moral framework of the society. In Durkheim’s view, collective rituals focused on a totemic object generate social solidarity and affirm the group’s common identity (Durkheim, 1995; Lukes, 1975).

Applying this Durkheimian approach to Lake Van, the lake and its constellation of legends function analogously to a totem for the communities of the region. Lake Van, along with its famed narratives (such as the Van Lake Monster and the Akdamar Island love legend), serves as a modern totem symbolizing the collective identity of the local people. Community practices surrounding the lake—annual festivals on its shores, storytelling sessions about its mysteries, or pilgrimage-like journeys to sites like Akdamar—operate as rituals that continually reaffirm the lake’s sacred status in collective memory. In Durkheimian terms, when the local population celebrates the lake through song, story, or ceremony, they are effectively affirming their social unity and shared values under the emblem of Lake Van. Indeed, ethnographic accounts of Anatolia suggest that natural landscapes often attain sacred status through just such interweavings of narrative, memory, and ritual (Uçar, 2020). Durkheim’s framework thus helps explain how Lake Van became “sacralized”: through repetitive social practices and shared myths, the community has elevated the lake from a mere physical entity to a revered symbol of itself.

2.2 Geertz’s Interpretive Approach

Clifford Geertz’s interpretive anthropology (Geertz, 1973, 1983) offers a complementary perspective that shifts the focus to the meaning of symbols in their cultural context. Geertz famously described culture as a series of “webs of significance” that humans have spun and in which they are themselves suspended. These webs constitute the intricate symbolic structures that give order and meaning to people’s lives. The task of social science, Geertz argues, is to perform “thick description” – that is, to interpret the layers of meaning in these webs by examining symbols, rituals, and stories in rich context. Rather than seeking universal laws, an interpretive approach aims to read cultural practices as one would read a text, decoding the symbols to understand what they signify to participants.

A key insight of Geertz’s approach (Geertz, 1973, 1983) is that cultural meaning is multi-layered and context-dependent. Any given action or object can carry manifold meanings. For example, a community’s annual fish migration is not merely a biological event; interpreted culturally, it might become a metaphor for the resilience of the people or a ritual of renewal marking the passage of seasons. Such meanings are not obvious without context – they are embedded in local stories, metaphors, and historical references. Geertz, therefore, treats cultural expressions (myths, legends, celebrations, etc.) as texts to be interpreted within their social setting. The researcher’s role is to tease out these meanings by situating symbols in the “web” of connections that give them significance.

Applying Geertz’s approach to Lake Van, the rich narratives surrounding Lake Van can be analyzed as symbolic texts that reveal the region’s cultural imagination. Legends like the tale of Tamara on Akdamar

Island or the sightings of the Van Lake Monster are not just entertaining folklore; in an interpretive view, they encode deeper communal values and anxieties. To fully understand what Lake Van means to local people, we must examine how these stories are told and enacted. Geertz's approach directs attention to the performative contexts of meaning-making. For instance, the Van Lake Monster legend is kept alive through festivals, souvenir production, guided boat tours to "monster spots," and even humorous performances – all of which are part of the web of significance that sustains the monster's meaning for the community. Similarly, the Akdamar love story is commemorated in cultural events and tourism narratives that imbue the lake with romance and pathos. These practices are what Geertz would term social performances, and through thick description of such performances, we discern that Lake Van symbolizes notions of mystery, love, and endurance in local culture. Notably, as culture evolves, so do these webs of meaning. In the modern era, new media and tourism initiatives have reinterpreted and broadcast Lake Van's symbols to wider audiences. Television documentaries, YouTube videos of the lake's sights, and travel blogs all contribute to the continual re-coding of Lake Van's meaning in the digital age. Geertz's framework thus helps us interpret Lake Van's symbolic construction as an ongoing narrative process, wherein each retelling and display of the lake's stories adds another layer of meaning without erasing the old ones.

2.3 Alexander's Strong Program in Cultural Sociology

Jeffrey C. Alexander's "strong program" in cultural sociology provides a modern theoretical angle that treats culture as an autonomous force in social life. Alexander argues that cultural structures—myths, narratives, symbolic codes—are not mere reflections or epiphenomena of economic and political conditions, but have independent causal power in shaping society. In his work, Alexander (2003) calls for analyzing these cultural structures as independent variables in their own right, rather than reducing meaning to a byproduct of material interests. The strong program insists that if we want a full explanation of social phenomena, we must take seriously how shared meanings and collective representations motivate action and create social outcomes.

One of Alexander's key contentions is that cultural meanings actively generate real-world effects. This stands in contrast to earlier sociological approaches that treated culture as secondary or reflective (for example, a Marxian view where culture is part of the "superstructure"). Instead, Alexander posits that narratives, ideals, and symbols can directly shape public policy, influence collective behavior, and confer legitimacy on institutions. In other words, culture has a performative role: through what Alexander and Smith (2003) term "cultural performances," societies enact their values and, in doing so, bring about tangible outcomes. Parades, commemorations, heritage festivals, or even viral media events can thus be

analyzed as performances that mobilize symbols and emotions to achieve social cohesion or change.

Applying Alexander's approach to Lake Van, viewing Lake Van through the strong-program lens means asking how the cultural narratives about the lake have had practical consequences for the region's social and political life. Indeed, the transformation of Lake Van into a celebrated symbol has not been a neutral process—it has actively shaped local initiatives and identities. For example, the popular epithet for the lake, "Doğu'nun İncisi" ("The Pearl of the East"), was adopted in cultural festivals and tourism campaigns, promoting a sense of pride and a new regional branding. This deliberate reimagining of the lake's image exemplifies a cultural performance in Alexander's sense: Community leaders, artists, and officials mobilized a symbolic narrative (Lake Van as a precious "pearl") to unite people and attract attention. The strong program directs us to notice how such symbolic acts have concrete effects. In Lake Van's case, the cultural elevation of the lake has spurred collective action in various forms. There have been heritage projects to preserve historical sites around the lake, environmental campaigns to protect its waters, and economic initiatives leveraging the lake's mystique to boost tourism. These efforts did not emerge in a vacuum; they were catalyzed by the mythic and sentimental narratives circulating about Lake Van, from the monster legend to the Akdamar love story. In this way, the lake's symbolism has helped shape policies (e.g., conservation designations), drive tourism development, and strengthen local civic engagement—demonstrating Alexander's claim that culture can be causally powerful.

Furthermore, Alexander distinguishes between different cultural structures—such as binary codes (sacred/profane, pure/impure) and narrative genres (tragedy, romance, satire)—which influence how meaning is communicated. In Lake Van's case, the love tragedy of Akdamar, the mythic awe of the lake monster, and the ecological narrative of the pearl mullet migration each mobilize a different narrative genre and symbolic code, producing layered and sometimes competing meanings. These forms of symbolic layering are key to understanding how Anatolian geography is culturally appropriated in modern heritage politics.

Recent cultural sociologists argue that meaning-making is central to social life (Alexander & Smith, 2003). In the 'strong program' of cultural sociology, culture is treated as an autonomous domain, not just a reflection of society, highlighting symbols and narratives as independent forces (Alexander, 2010). Following this approach, Lake Van can be seen as a cultural icon: a material object filled with symbolic significance. Alexander (2010) terms this 'iconic consciousness', referring to the emotional and cultural power that particular objects or places acquire in collective life. This perspective complements classical theories by showing how a natural lake can become a symbolic centerpiece of identity and memory.

In addition to these theoretical frameworks, it is important to situate Lake Van's symbolism in a broader cultural context. Anthropologists have long noted that natural features like lakes and rivers are often imbued with sacred meaning across societies. Strang (2004), for instance, observes that water is virtually never viewed as a purely physical resource; rather, it is “densely encoded” with social, spiritual, and cosmological meanings in every culture. This insight resonates strongly in the context of Anatolia. Historians and ethnographers document a traditional “water cult” in Turkic cultures, wherein natural water bodies—rivers, springs, lakes—are venerated and believed to harbor guardian spirits (Uçar, 2020, pp. 27-31). Within Turkish and Central Asian folklore, lakes are often seen as dwellings of mystical beings or as blessed sites, underscoring that water is not just a backdrop but an active element of spiritual geography. This cultural background helps explain how Lake Van, in particular, could attain a sacred symbolic status. Deep-seated cultural dispositions to revere majestic bodies of water meant that Lake Van was primed to become a repository of legend and memory. The legends of Lake Van's monster or the sanctity of Akdamar Island can thus be viewed as local inflections of a wider human pattern: the elevation of significant lakes to the realm of the sacred. Recognizing this anthropological and cultural context enriches our use of Durkheim, Geertz, and Alexander by grounding their theories in the lived realities of the region's culture.

Drawing on these approaches, the article discusses the symbolism of Lake Van in the context of, on the one hand, earlier theories of sacred or intense imagery (Durkheim's approach), and, on the other hand, contemporary understandings of how culture is performed, contested, and emotionally charged (Geertz, Alexander). Durkheim's theory (1995) will help explain the sacralization of Lake Van, Geertz's (1973, 1983) approach will guide the interpretation of local narratives, and Alexander's (2003, 2010) strong program will illuminate the real-world effects of these cultural meanings.

3. Mythic Narratives and Contemporary Symbolic Practices

The Van Lake Monster and Akdamar Island legends stand out as quintessential mythic narratives – emotionally charged tales that embed Lake Van within a shared symbolic framework of meaning. Each legend elevates the lake beyond its physical landscape, infusing it with collective significance and emotional resonance. Through these narratives, Lake Van is transformed into a vessel of communal memory and shared values, as the monster myth casts the lake as a site of mysterious power and awe, while the Akdamar love story frames it as a backdrop for timeless romance and tragedy. Such stories function as collective representations in the Durkheimian (1995) sense, effectively sacralizing the lake in local memory and imagination. In turn, they weave Lake Van into the “webs of significance” that define culture (Geertz, 1973), conferring shared meaning within the community. In short, these legends serve to

anchor Lake Van in a web of collective memory (Halbwachs, 1992) and identity. As the focus now shifts from the Van Lake Monster to the Akdamar legend, the analysis continues to explore this mythic narrative layer while foreshadowing a subsequent turn to contemporary symbolic practices that similarly reinforce Lake Van's cultural significance.

3.1 The Van Lake Monster Legend

One of the most prominent cultural narratives elevating Lake Van's mystique is the legend of the Van Lake Monster (Van Gölü Canavarı). This creature is said to lurk in the deep, dark waters of the lake, and accounts of its sightings have captivated the public for decades. The modern legend took shape in the late 20th century, particularly after 1995, when a local university researcher famously claimed to have captured the monster on video, spurring national media attention. However, folklore about a fearsome being in Lake Van long predates these contemporary reports (Aykaç & Karaduman, 2023; Öztürk, 2020). As far back as the 17th century, the Ottoman traveller Evliya Çelebi wrote of a "Van dragon" in his *Seyahatname* (travelogue), and an Ottoman newspaper from 1889 recorded a tale of a creature dragging a man into the lake (Beydiz, 2022, pp. 1365-1367). Such early accounts suggest that the notion of a lake monster taps into long-standing local beliefs and the awe inspired by the lake's vast and enigmatic waters.

According to eyewitness descriptions, the Lake Van Monster is a massive, serpentine creature with dark, scaly skin and a length of up to 10–15 meters, often likened to a dinosaur-like marine reptile. Despite periodic investigations – including a government-sponsored scientific study – no concrete evidence of the creature has been found. However, the legend has firmly taken hold in the public imagination. Many locals and visitors claim to have seen the monster over the years, and it has become part of regional folklore and identity. In the late 1990s, a 4-meter-tall Lake Van Monster statue was erected in the Gevaş district to honor the legend and entice curious tourists. In this way, the Van Lake Monster legend continues to be celebrated in the region, reflecting how a local mystery can evolve into a source of communal identity and economic interest even in the absence of scientific validation (Aykaç & Karaduman, 2023). The very persistence of belief, despite the lack of proof, underscores how collective imagination can override empirical skepticism in sustaining a local myth (Beydiz, 2022).

The monster has also permeated popular culture: local poets – and even a former Prime Minister – have penned verses about it, and filmmakers have created movies and documentaries featuring the creature as a symbol of the region. For instance, Bülent Ecevit, who later served as Prime Minister, wrote a 1997 poem about the monster that underscores how deeply this creature has been woven into the region's cultural fabric (Ecevit, 2005, pp. 157-158; Uğurlu, 2007, p. 373). On the global stage, the Van Lake

Monster is frequently listed among the world's legendary lake creatures, alongside the likes of Ogopogo, Storsjöodjuret, Nahuelito, Selma, Nessie, and Memphre (Piegsa-Quischotte, 2010). International media have even dubbed it "Turkey's Loch Ness," a reference to Scotland's famous Loch Ness Monster, which is often described as a large, long-necked aquatic creature resembling a plesiosaur. This moniker places Lake Van on the global map of mysterious waters and cryptid lore. Moreover, nearly every lake region in the United States boasts its own monster legend (Beydiz, 2022, p. 1368), and the Van Lake Monster has been likened to North America's Lake Champlain monster. These comparisons not only bolster the monster's fame but also integrate Lake Van's myth into a broader, transnational folkloric framework of lake monsters and unexplained phenomena.

From a cultural sociology perspective, the Van Lake Monster legend vividly illustrates how a community can collectively construct and embrace a modern myth to symbolize their environment. Using Durkheim's (1995) theory, one could argue that the monster serves as a collective representation of Lake Van's power and mystery – essentially a charismatic totem or emblem for the community. The very act of believing in, retelling, and even ritually "searching" for the monster brings people together in a shared folklore tradition. Gatherings and boat tours centered on the monster's supposed haunts function as informal rituals that strengthen social bonds and create what Durkheim would call collective effervescence around a common belief. Likewise, Geertz's (1973) interpretive approach directs us to consider how locals and visitors interpret the monster legend not necessarily as a literal truth, but as a meaningful story about the unknown depths of nature and the uniqueness of Van. In this interpretive reading, the monster symbolizes the idea that Lake Van is not an ordinary lake; it harbors secrets and commands respect, much like a sacred entity in the cultural imagination. Finally, drawing on Alexander's (2003) strong program in cultural sociology, we see the real-world consequences and causal power of this narrative. The legend has spurred concrete economic and social activities: it attracts tourism, inspires local merchandise and media content, and even motivates scientific inquiry (albeit aimed at a mythical creature). In essence, the Van Lake Monster has transcended the status of a simple lake tale to become a regional icon in its own right (Alexander, 2010). It demonstrates how myth-making can convert a natural feature into a cultural symbol that carries collective significance and practical impact for the community.

Indeed, creative works have further illuminated the Van Lake Monster's cultural significance. For example, Ecevit's poem titled "Van Gölü Canavarı" ("Lake Van Monster") adopts the voice of the monster to address skeptical "know-it-alls," declaring: "Even if the know-it-alls don't believe – I live in Lake Van." The poem describes how the creature lurks unseen in the lake's depths and only occasionally surfaces along the moonlit shores. Ecevit's verses praise the lake's starlit beauty at night and portray the monster

as a mysterious being sustained by the breath of those who imagine it. In this poetic interpretation, the monster is ultimately a gentle “hidden mystery” living in the collective imagination (Ecevit, 2005, pp. 157-158; Uğurlu, 2007) – a folkloric symbol kept alive through popular belief and local pride. Such literary treatment underscores how deeply the legend is interwoven with local culture, effectively canonizing the creature as an emblem of Lake Van’s mystique in collective memory.

The legend has likewise been brought to life on screen, revealing its underlying cultural codes. A notable example is the 2012 Turkish comedy film *Van Gölü Canavarı*, which satirizes the frenzy surrounding the monster. In the film’s story (set in Van), three down-on-their-luck locals decide to build a fake monster and film it, hoping to profit from the sensation. Their hoax works all too well: news crews and tourists flock to Lake Van, and the trio earn good money showcasing their “monster” – until an unexpected twist at the end, when the real lake creature suddenly appears before them. This lighthearted plot highlights how the community’s enthusiasm and curiosity about the monster can be exploited for fame and economic gain, even as it playfully reinforces the legend’s power. The film suggests that even a fabricated monster story can unite people in excitement, and the lingering possibility of a genuine creature beneath the waters keeps the myth alive. In a different vein, a recent documentary *Seyirlik Bir Gariplik: Van Gölü Canavarı* (2022) uses the monster as a metaphor, exploring its historical roots and its role in the “collective imagination” of Van’s people. By weaving together ancient mythology (including Urartian-era lake legends and Evliya Çelebi’s 17th-century “Van dragon” tale) with modern folklore, the documentary critically examines why such legends endure and how they reflect a society’s deeper fears and hopes. These cinematic and literary portrayals make the monster’s narrative codes more visible – emphasizing communal belief, regional identity, and the human tendency to seek meaning in the unknown. Notably, folklore research on the Van Lake Monster similarly interprets the creature as a cultural mirror of local anxieties and aspirations (Öztürk, 2020). In sum, across poems and films, the Van Lake Monster legend is continuously reinterpreted and performed, reinforcing a shared sense of wonder and belonging. Likewise, another legendary narrative rooted in the lake’s islands carries a more romantic symbolism, as the next section explores.

3.2 Akdamar Island and the Legend of Tamara

If the Van Lake Monster represents the lake’s mystery, Akdamar Island embodies its romance and historical depth. Akdamar is a small island on Lake Van renowned for an ancient Armenian church – the 10th-century Cathedral of the Holy Cross – and for a much-celebrated local legend of love and tragedy.

The Akdamar legend (often locally titled *Ah Tamara*) is an orally transmitted tale of forbidden love set

on this island, preserved in multiple variants within regional folklore. Its core narrative tells of Tamara, a beautiful Christian maiden (often said to be a monk's daughter residing on the island), who falls in love with a young man from the mainland. Each night, Tamara secretly signals her lover by lighting a lantern, guiding him as he swims across the dark lake to meet her. When Tamara's father discovers the affair, he intervenes on a stormy night by extinguishing or misleading the guiding light. The young man loses his way in the darkness and drowns in the turbulent waves, crying out "Ah, Tamara!" with his final breath. Upon hearing her name in his dying cry, Tamara is heartbroken and leaps from a cliff into the lake to her death. Thus, according to legend, the island's name – Akdamar – is said to derive from that tragic final exclamation (Demir, 2024, pp. 1275-1277).

This poignant tale of thwarted love has been passed down through generations and remains one of the most well-known folk legends in Türkiye. It adds a layer of cultural meaning to Akdamar Island beyond the island's physical beauty and historical landmarks. Visitors to the island today often recall the Tamara story as they admire the medieval stone church and the almond trees that blossom each spring. In essence, the island is not just a piece of land, but a stage upon which a timeless drama of love and loss is imagined to have unfolded. The narrative of Tamara and her doomed lover thus enriches Lake Van's cultural identity, casting the lake as a setting for epic romance in addition to its natural grandeur.

Analyzing this legend through our theoretical lenses reveals its crucial role in symbolizing the lake. From Durkheim's (1995) perspective, the Akdamar love story can be seen as a part of the community's collective representations – a shared narrative that carries moral lessons (the pain of betrayed or unattainable love) and binds people through a common heritage of storytelling. By venerating this tale, the community effectively sacralizes the geography: the waters between the mainland and Akdamar Island become hallowed by the memory of sacrifice and love. In Geertzian (1973) terms, the legend functions as a cultural text that must be "read" for its deeper meaning. The tale encodes local interpretations of love, fidelity, and fate, and it gives experiential depth to the landscape – the lake itself becomes, symbolically, an agent in the love story (sometimes calm and life-giving, sometimes treacherous and tragic). From Alexander's (2003) strong program viewpoint, the enduring popularity of the Akdamar legend demonstrates the causal power of cultural narratives to shape social life. This story has inspired various cultural productions – art, literature, songs, and even tourism initiatives such as local festivals and performances that re-enact the legend. Each retelling of Ah Tamara is a cultural performance that reinforces Lake Van's symbolic status: the lake is where Tamara's tragedy eternally resonates in collective memory. As a result, Akdamar Island today stands as a cultural symbol inextricably intertwined with Lake Van, illustrating how myth and place together can crystallize into a potent marker of regional identity. In other words, Akdamar has become a

lieu de mémoire – a site of memory – for the community’s ideals of love and devotion (Nora, 1989). The legend’s continual commemoration ensures that the island is not only a historical and natural treasure, but also a living repository of the region’s collective imagination and identity.

4. The “Pearl Mullet” Migration: Nature as Cultural Heritage

Lake Van’s significance is rooted not only in myth and legend but also in a striking ecological phenomenon: the story of the pearl mullet (*inci kefalı*). This endemic fish species has become a symbol of the lake’s natural abundance and resilience, effectively tying Lake Van’s environment to the region’s cultural identity. Lake Van, the world’s largest soda lake, is renowned for its highly alkaline (pH 9.8) and saline waters. Such extreme conditions support only a single fish species—the pearl mullet—making the lake’s ecosystem both distinctive and fragile (Olgun, 2025; Bardakcı Şener et al., 2021).

As Lake Van’s sole native fish, the pearl mullet (*Alburnus tarichi*) has an anadromous life cycle: it spends most of the year in the lake’s inhospitable waters, but each spring (April to July) it must migrate into the surrounding freshwater streams and rivers to spawn (Sarı, 2008). This migration is a remarkable natural spectacle—each year, millions of mullet surge upstream, leaping against the current. Such events have become part of the lake’s cultural calendar: Bingöl and Çakır (2020) note that the region’s natural wonders and related festivals play an important role in promoting local identity and attracting visitors.

For centuries, pearl mullet sustained the communities around Lake Van—traditionally dried or grilled as a staple food—yet in the modern era, the fish’s role has come to transcend sustenance. In recent years, as overfishing during the spawning season threatened the species’ survival, a collective conservation effort mobilized to protect the mullet as a shared heritage. Authorities imposed seasonal fishing bans and stepped up enforcement against poaching, while local environmental groups launched public awareness campaigns that reframed the pearl mullet not as just another resource but as the living incarnation of the lake’s life force that had to be safeguarded. These efforts succeeded: The pearl mullet population rebounded, and by the 2020s, the species was granted a geographical indication, marking it as a unique element of the region’s natural heritage (Bardakcı Şener et al., 2021; Olgun, 2025; Sarı, 2008). This recognition—a certification of the mullet’s cultural and economic importance—has further solidified its standing as a living symbol of Lake Van. It is commonly referred to by locals as “Van’ın incisi” (the “pearl of Van”), underscoring the fish’s symbolic value to the community.

From a cultural sociology perspective, the pearl mullet’s annual migration exemplifies how an environmental phenomenon can be symbolically codified and ritually celebrated within a community.

Drawing on Geertz's interpretive anthropology (Geertz, 1973), we can observe that the community has imbued the fish's life cycle with symbolic meaning: the arduous upstream journey of the mullet is understood as a narrative of perseverance and renewal, mirroring perhaps the community's own historical endurance. The seasonal gatherings of residents who watch the spawning run have taken on the character of modern rituals—akin to an annual festival—that reinforce a sense of communal identity tied to the lake's natural rhythms. In Durkheimian (1995) terms, the taboos and communal rules surrounding the mullet (such as the ban on catching the fish during its spawning season) represent a collective act of sacralization: by placing the species under communal protection at critical moments, society has effectively sanctified it and set it apart from the profane realm of ordinary fishing.

Alexander's "strong program" in cultural sociology underscores that the narrative of this "miraculous migration" carries real consequences: it spurs policy changes (e.g., fishing regulations), shapes economic behavior (development of eco-tourism and local fish festivals), and fosters collective pride (Alexander & Smith, 2003). In short, what began as a routine ecological occurrence has been transformed into cultural heritage. The pearl mullet's migration story now reinforces Lake Van's identity as not only the subject of mythic and romantic tales, but also as a cradle of natural wonder that the local culture fiercely protects and commemorates.

Building on these insights, several sociological concepts further illuminate the pearl mullet's cultural significance. The notions of cultural coding and the sacralization of nature help explain how the community symbolically marks the mullet's migration as sacred, while the idea of social resilience highlights how shared symbols fortify communal endurance amid change. The act of attributing meaning to the mullet's upstream struggle—celebrating it with festivals and defending it through collective action—illustrates how a natural rhythm is reimagined as a shared cultural event.

At the same time, much of the existing literature on Lake Van's heritage has yet to fully integrate insights from Turkish scholarship on the region's cultural ecology. Works such as Eren's (2010) ethnographic study of local ecological practices and death rituals, and Gürbüz's (1997) geographical analysis of tourism around the lake, provide valuable context on the region's human–environment interactions. Likewise, studies by Koyuncu and Karakılçık (2018) on the basin's socio-cultural structure, Keleş Eriçok (2019) on cultural route planning in the area, and Saylan (2021) on social media engagement with the Van Gölü Express testify to an extensive body of local research. However, these perspectives have not been systematically incorporated into the symbolic-sociological analysis of the pearl mullet as a cultural symbol.

To further enrich the analysis, one can invoke Pierre Nora's (1989) notion of *lieux de mémoire*—sites of memory. The places associated with the mullet's migration have become imbued with collective memory and symbolic resonance. The streams where the fish leap, the shores where spectators congregate, and the seasonal festival grounds together form a memory-laden landscape. They are not merely physical locales, but socially constructed spaces where natural history and cultural memory intertwine—anchoring the pearl mullet's story in the region's collective consciousness.

5. Environmental Protection Efforts and Moral Responsibility

The growing recognition of Lake Van as a cultural symbol has gone hand in hand with heightened efforts to preserve its environmental integrity. Scholarship and media have highlighted the lake's rich heritage and natural beauty, reinforcing its iconic status (Avşar, 2021, p. 115; Yiğitler, 2023, p. 119). In the face of challenges such as pollution, untreated sewage, and receding water levels due to climate change-induced drought, local and national stakeholders have mobilized to protect the lake's ecosystem. These initiatives frame the lake as a precious inheritance that must be safeguarded for posterity – effectively casting environmental stewardship as a moral responsibility. For instance, the Turkish state formulated a comprehensive Van Lake Basin Protection Action Plan in the late 2000s, leading to practical measures like modern wastewater treatment facilities to curb pollution inflow (Koyuncu & Karakılçık, 2019, pp. 172-180). By 2022, the government officially designated Lake Van and its surroundings as a natural protected area with sustainable use provisions, recognizing the need to control development and prevent further ecological degradation (T.C. Çevre, Şehircilik ve İklim Değişikliği Bakanlığı, 2022). Such steps indicate a high-level commitment to keeping Lake Van “blue and clean” for future generations – a goal in line with the sustainable management emphasis found in previous regional planning studies (Yılmaz & Aşur, 2019, p. 281; Koyuncu & Karakılçık, 2019).

Civil society has also played a pivotal role in framing Lake Van's protection as a collective responsibility. Local organizations – notably the Van Lake Activists Association (Van Gölü Aktivistleri Derneği) – have been instrumental in raising public awareness and organizing community-based conservation activities. These activists often invoke the cultural importance of the lake to galvanize support, using slogans like “Van Gölü kirlenmesin, mavi kalsın” (“Let Lake Van not be polluted, let it remain blue”) to appeal to local pride and identity. Annual events such as shoreline clean-up drives, tree-planting campaigns around the basin, and environmentally themed festivals (including bicycle tours encircling the lake and the Akdamar Island Almond Blossom Festival each spring) blend environmental action with cultural celebration. In these events, participants treat the lake not just as a resource but as a revered centerpiece

of their community. In effect, these gatherings serve as public rituals that demonstrate a shared moral commitment toward Lake Van's welfare. The popular imagery of Lake Van as the "blue jewel" of Türkiye – a phrase often invoked in media coverage of its conservation – encapsulates how environmental advocacy is interwoven with symbolic value. Indeed, such cultural branding and festival performances have become important tools for promoting the region's identity and rallying support for conservation (Bingöl & Çakır, 2020, p. 115; Uğurlu, 2007; Bekmez Yelen, 2023).

Notably, Lake Van's environment itself has long been entwined with sacred narratives (Bekmez Yelen, 2023). Pre-Islamic shamanistic traditions left traces of nature worship in this region (Kaplan, 2010, p. 67), reflecting a broader Turkic water cult that venerates lakes and springs as animated, sacred entities (Uçar, 2020, pp. 27-31). The medieval Holy Cross Church on Akdamar Island – a historically sacred site at the heart of the lake – further underscores Lake Van's spiritual heritage (Yiğitler, 2023, p. 135). Through a Durkheimian lens, modern conservation efforts can be seen as collective rituals of moral regulation organized around a cherished symbol. The community's agreed-upon rules against polluting or overusing the lake have effectively drawn a symbolic boundary between the "sacred" (the lake's well-being) and the "profane" (actions that harm it), establishing taboos akin to those that protect holy sites. In other words, just as a shrine is safeguarded by prohibitions to preserve its sanctity, Lake Van's symbolic purity is upheld by shared environmental norms. This sacralization of nature transforms ecological guidelines into moral injunctions, reinforcing communal values and a sense of duty toward the lake's care.

From an interpretive perspective, the discourse around Lake Van's protection is richly layered with symbols and metaphors. Locals and observers often personify or exalt the lake in cultural rhetoric—calling it "our blue jewel" or invoking legendary imagery like the Van Lake monster—to convey why it must be preserved. In Geertz's (1973) terms, these expressions and practices function as texts to be interpreted, revealing how scientific facts are woven into the community's "webs of significance". Environmental issues are thus understood through a cultural lens: concerns about water quality or biodiversity loss are imbued with emotive meaning and moral weight. In this interpretive framing, defending the lake becomes not only a technical matter of ecology but a meaningful narrative of protecting a living symbol of the community. The result is a form of ritualized environmental practice, where acts like cleaning the shore or planting trees are seen as symbolically resonant performances of care, rather than merely utilitarian tasks.

Adopting Alexander's cultural-sociological perspective, these shared meanings are not just rhetoric—they possess real generative power. The strong program in cultural sociology emphasizes that collective beliefs and narratives can drive action (Alexander & Smith, 2003). In Lake Van's case, the

widespread reverence for the lake has translated into concrete policy measures and public behaviors aimed at safeguarding it. In fact, the lake today functions as an iconic site of collective consciousness (Alexander, 2010), its material presence charged with emotional and moral significance. The cultural symbol of a cherished lake actively mobilizes social resources for its protection, reversing the usual assumption that environmental health supports culture; here, culture itself spurs the initiative to protect nature. This dynamic has deep roots. For centuries, travelogues and local lore have extolled Lake Van's sublime qualities—19th-century writers described Van as a near-paradisiacal place by the lake's shore (Musalı, 2014, p. 10; Uğurlu, 2007, p. 372)—and that enduring sense of awe now finds expression in modern conservation commitments. In sum, the environmental initiatives in the Lake Van region powerfully illustrate how the Lake's evolving symbolic status shapes real-world practices. Protecting Lake Van is viewed not only as an ecological necessity but as an ethical obligation to preserve the integrity of a shared cultural legacy – a source of regional pride entrusted to current citizens and to future generations.

6. Tourism and Media Representations

Tourism and media representations have become central in both shaping and disseminating Lake Van's cultural symbolism. The region today stands out as one of Türkiye's notable cultural-tourism centers, thanks to sublime landscapes intertwined with rich legend and heritage (Bingöl & Çakır, 2020; Gürbüz, 1997; Aykaç & Karaduman, 2023; Yılmaz & Aşur, 2019; Saylan, 2021). Over recent decades, Lake Van has been promoted as a must-see destination not just for its scenic beauty, but also for its tapestry of legends and historical sites – from ancient Urartian fortresses to medieval churches – that imbue the landscape with narrative appeal, as well as the shrines around Lake Van (Gökçe et al., 2021; Geyikoğlu, 2008; Bekmez Yelen, 2023). Travel literature frequently highlights Lake Van and its surroundings as a major attraction (Yiğitler, 2023), and tourism planners have even proposed cultural routes to link these heritage sites and myths for visitors (Keleş Eriçok, 2019). The natural, cultural, and historical treasures around the lake's shores continue to draw tourists (Bingöl & Çakır, 2020). Tellingly, Van has long been described as a “paradise-like place” – an epithet found in historical accounts and still invoked today (Musalı, 2014, p. 10; Uğurlu, 2007, p. 372). Such language reveals how physical grandeur and cultural aura have melded in public consciousness. These romanticized descriptions, reinforced by the region's abundant folklore, recast Lake Van as more than a lake – it becomes a storied landscape of wonder and heritage (Ergöz, 2023; Sevinçli, 2018). Notably, local entrepreneurs and officials have capitalized on this symbolic aura: festivals celebrate the Van Lake Monster legend, and guided tours or souvenir merchandise invoke the lake's myths, all integrating cultural memory into the tourism economy (Aykaç & Karaduman,

2023). In essence, the tourism sector does not merely use Lake Van's symbolism – it actively participates in constructing and broadcasting it, explaining in part how the lake's symbolic stature has grown and why it endures as a source of regional pride and economic hope.

Media coverage has likewise amplified Lake Van's symbolic profile by framing local narratives for broader audiences. International travel and paranormal television shows – from *Destination Truth* (2009) to *Animal X* (1999) – have staged expeditions to Lake Van, implicitly comparing its mystique to Scotland's Loch Ness and situating Van among the world's legendary lakes. Such portrayals export local myths onto a global stage, suggesting that Lake Van's monster legend carries a transnational allure. National news outlets also regularly feature the lake's cultural and natural spectacles. For instance, Akdamar Island makes headlines each spring when its almond trees bloom or during the annual religious service at the restored Armenian church, events that spotlight Van's blend of natural beauty and historical depth (Bingöl & Çakır, 2020). These stories often intertwine the legend of Princess Tamara with the island's real history, offering a narrative-rich image of the lake that appeals to potential visitors and instills pride in locals. Similarly, the pearl mullet's spawning migration has become a media highlight: each year, national newspapers and TV channels broadcast striking images of silver fish leaping en masse, often under headlines celebrating this “miracle of nature” in Van. The journalistic choice to label an ecological event a miracle or part of living heritage (instead of a mere biological phenomenon) exemplifies how media discourses attach cultural meaning to the lake's environment. In recent years, social media has provided new avenues for such representations: viral YouTube videos of the scenic Van Gölü Express train journey, for example, have brought Lake Van's charm to the attention of younger, online audiences (Saylan, 2021). This cascade of media attention not only informs the wider public of the lake's wonders but also reframes those wonders in culturally resonant terms – as scenes from legend, embodiments of heritage, and symbols of communal identity. Media, in effect, extends and transforms Lake Van's local “storyscape” into a national narrative, illustrating another mechanism in the evolution of the lake's symbolism.

From an analytical perspective, these tourism and media practices function as cultural performances that continually (re)produce Lake Van's collective meaning. Adopting an interpretive qualitative lens (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012), we treat travel brochures, TV documentaries, festival events, and news stories not just as economic or informational outputs, but as texts and rituals of meaning-making. In Clifford Geertz's (1973) terms, the public narratives around Lake Van are part of the interpretive story a society tells itself – a rich “web of significance” spun around the lake. Through tourism promotion and media storytelling, local myths, historical anecdotes, and natural events are translated into broader symbolic discourse that outsiders can appreciate. This essentially extends the lake's meaning beyond the

region, weaving Van's local significance into a wider cultural fabric. At the same time, Jeffrey Alexander's strong-program perspective highlights how such narratives are deliberately leveraged for identity and interests. Lake Van's accumulated prestige and meaning – what Pierre Bourdieu (1986) would term symbolic capital – is being harnessed to advance tangible goals like regional development and branding via cultural tourism (Bingöl & Çakır, 2020; Yılmaz & Aşur, 2019). The festivals, heritage tours, and branded products (from postcards emblazoned with monster imagery to packets of “Van fish”) are not trivial byproducts; they are collective performances that broadcast and reinforce the lake's image for strategic effect. In this sense, culture is not a passive backdrop but an active force: the symbolic construction of Lake Van motivates real investment, policy attention, and community initiatives. By promoting the lake's legend and lore, local actors effectively use meaning as a resource, turning cultural narratives into economic and social capital (Alexander, 2010). This illuminates how Lake Van's symbolism has evolved – through conscious cultivation and commodification of cultural narratives – and why it carries weight, serving both as a wellspring of collective identity and a tool for material gains.

Equally important is the reflexive impact of these representations on the local community's own sense of the lake. Émile Durkheim's (1995) concept of collective representations reminds us that when shared symbols are celebrated publicly, they can generate a feedback loop of communal enthusiasm or collective effervescence. Thus, when Van's residents see their lake revered on national television or observe travelers flocking from afar to experience its stories, it heightens local pride and reaffirms the lake's special, “sacred or sublime” status in their consciousness. What might begin as a tourism promotion can end up strengthening communal bonds: each external acknowledgment of Lake Van's significance validates the community's own reverence for the lake. In Durkheimian terms, the lake and its constellation of legends have come to function akin to a totem for the region – a focal symbol through which social solidarity is continually affirmed. The ongoing media and tourism attention act as ritual affirmations, ensuring that the meanings attached to the lake are not static relics but living parts of everyday social life. In summary, tourism and media serve as powerful amplifiers of Lake Van's cultural symbolism, continually communicating, reinventing, and confirming what the lake represents both within and beyond its home region. Through stories told, images shared, and experiences staged, the idea of Lake Van as more than a mere body of water – as a cherished collective icon – is perpetually rejuvenated. This dynamic interplay between local narratives and their wider dissemination reveals concrete processes by which a natural landscape is elevated into a collective symbol, illuminating the broader question of how and why Lake Van's cultural symbolism has evolved over time.

7. Discussion and Conclusion

Lake Van's evolution from a physical landscape into a celebrated cultural symbol underscores the powerful ways communities attach layered meaning to their natural environment. Over time, the lake's symbolism expanded and deepened as successive narratives and practices accrued around it. Ancient mythic tales—such as the Van Lake Monster legend and the Akdamar Island love story—first imbued Lake Van with mystique and emotional resonance, elevating it beyond a mere body of water. In recent decades, ecological phenomena like the endemic pearl mullet's annual migration have been reinterpreted as symbolic events, while community-led environmental conservation campaigns have further invested the lake with moral significance as a cherished heritage to protect. Simultaneously, tourism initiatives and media representations have amplified these meanings to wider audiences, branding Lake Van as a proud emblem of regional identity. Through these interwoven socio-cultural processes—folklore and storytelling, ritual celebration, environmental activism, and promotional media—the people of the region have transformed Lake Van from a natural wonder into a shared repository of memory and meaning.

Interpreting this transformation through multiple theoretical lenses highlights why and how Lake Van's symbolic status took hold. In Durkheimian (1995) terms, the lake today functions as a sacred collective representation—essentially a totemic emblem that embodies the community's identity and fosters social cohesion. Geertz's (1973) interpretive anthropology further reveals that each narrative attached to Lake Van forms part of a complex cultural text or “web of significance”, wherein stories of mystery, love, struggle, and reverence for nature are richly encoded. Through thick description, we discern how legends, festivals, and local traditions have been woven into a multi-layered symbolic tapestry around the lake. Meanwhile, from Alexander's strong program perspective, these cultural narratives are not mere epiphenomena; they possess real agency in shaping social life (Alexander & Smith, 2003). The symbolic construction of Lake Van has inspired concrete outcomes—spurring heritage tourism, influencing artistic and literary productions, legitimating environmental policies, and mobilizing community initiatives—demonstrating how meaning-making can actively reshape the material reality of the region.

Crucially, Lake Van's cultural symbolism is dynamic rather than static. The community continually reproduces and renegotiates the lake's meaning through ongoing storytelling and collective practices. For instance, the Van Lake Monster legend is regularly revived through local festivals, media, and even monuments, ensuring that new generations of believers (and skeptics) keep the mystery alive. Likewise, the Akdamar Island love tale is frequently retold and commemorated in song, literature, and tourism narratives, transmitting its emotional weight to each new cohort. The pearl mullet's leap every spring is celebrated

not only as an ecological spectacle but also as a cultural festival of renewal. Meanwhile, grassroots “Save Lake Van” campaigns continually adapt to emerging environmental challenges, reinforcing the lake’s importance as a communal cause. Through such continuous performances and reinterpretations, Lake Van remains not just a lake but a living symbol—a mirror reflecting the evolving values, anxieties, and aspirations of its people over time.

In a broader perspective, the case of Lake Van offers important implications for cultural sociology and our understanding of community-based symbolic constructions of nature. It illustrates how, through collective meaning-making, a community can turn a geographical feature into a pillar of social identity, moral significance, and shared memory. This analysis not only enriches academic understanding of how cultural symbols are formed and sustained, but also suggests that intentionally cultivating positive narratives about natural sites can yield tangible benefits for communities. By telling and institutionalizing empowering stories about a place—stories that celebrate its uniqueness, sacredness, and communal value—local actors may enhance social cohesion, bolster cultural pride, promote environmental stewardship, and even stimulate sustainable economic opportunities (for example, via cultural tourism). Lake Van’s transformation, therefore, stands as a testament to the power of cultural narratives in linking people to place and in mobilizing collective action around natural heritage.

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