

8. The Alevis: religious, ethnic or political minority?

Martin van Bruinessen

8.1. Shifting self-perceptions

The Alevis constitute a different type of minority than ethnic groups such as the Kurds or Circassians and non-Muslim religious communities such as Jews or Armenians. The name Alevi suggests a distinctly religious identity and at least a nominal association with Islam, but Alevis lack the centralized religious authority of the non-Muslim groups as well as their legally recognized separate status. During the past century, Alevis have moreover been fiercely divided amongst themselves about what distinguished them from the non-Alevi majority and whether Alevism was a religion at all. Many 'secular' intellectuals insisted that Alevism was a cultural tradition and a humanistic worldview that had little to do with Islam. By the late 1970s, in the context of political polarization of Turkish society, Alevism was widely perceived as a political identity of distinct leftist inclination.

In the left movements and organisations that flourished between 1960 and 1980, ethnic background was generally considered as irrelevant and at best a matter of some exotic interest. It was clear, however, that Alevis were over-represented in all left movements as well as in several Kurdish associations and parties, although they rarely if ever mentioned their Alevi background. The left generally tended to view the Alevis as inherently more sympathetic towards socialist ideas because of the history of popular uprisings and oppression by the

Ottoman state, and the alleged egalitarian traditions of Alevi communities¹. Political activists of Alevi background downplayed the religious dimension of Alevism and insisted that their struggle was in the name of socialism (or Kurdish nationalism of a distinct socialist slant) rather than Alevism².

The political violence of those years culminated in a series of anti-Alevi pogroms in which right-wing thugs, some of them brought in from far away by the fascist youth organization, attacked Alevi neighbourhoods and the defenders were joined by radical left activists from elsewhere. The conflict of right and left was conflated with the older tension between Sunni Muslims and *Kızılbaş* (literally Red Head - one of the main groups of Alevi).

The region where these confrontations took place (Malatya, Kahramanmaraş, Sivas, Çorum) was ethnically mixed; there were Turkish and Kurdish speakers among both Alevi and Sunnis, and many of them were tribally organized. The Sunni-Alevi clashes strengthened the Alevi communities' perception, in spite of the considerable variety in their cultural and religious traditions, of a strong commonality among themselves (in which they even included the Arab Alevi) and an almost unpassable boundary between them and neighbouring Sunni Muslim groups. Both the ethnonyms "Turk" and "Kurd" were commonly used by Alevi for their Sunni neighbours, not for themselves. Geographically as well as in self-perception, Alevi communities were squeezed in between Kurds and Turks. They came to constitute a sort of ethnic group in the sense of Fredrik Barth's transactional account of ethnicity (Barth 1969)³. Many individual Alevi

¹ A clear overview of the attitude of leftist activists towards Alevi and their experience with Alevi communities in that period is given by Bahadır 2020.

² There was one notable exception. Nejat Birdoğan, who was to gain fame as the author of some of the best empirical studies of Alevi communities in the early 1990s, was arrested after the 1980 coup d'état under the notorious article 163 of the penal code, which bans political activism in the name of religion. He was the only non-Islamist ever arrested under that article, being accused of propagating the idea of an Alevi state (personal communication with Birdoğan, mid-1990s).

³ According to Barth, it is not a distinct culture or historical continuity that constitutes the ethnic group, as had been the common anthropological view, but the maintenance of social boundaries separating it from other groups (in the case of the Alevi, boundaries with Sunni Kurds and Turks). For Barth, boundaries take precedence over the "cultural stuff", but some elements of culture may be elevated as symbols that mark the social boundary (e.g. iconic representations of Ali and his two-pointed

have felt torn between two rival claims to their identity, Kurdish (or Turkish, as the case may be) and Alevi⁴. The left, which rejected Sunni religious prejudice as well as Turkish chauvinism and idealized Alevism as a tradition of popular resistance to oppression by the state, offered a perspective to negotiate the boundary, conflating three stigmatic identities, the “three K”: *Kürt, Kızılbaş, Komünist*.

The most iconic of these massacres was that of Kahramanmaraş in December 1978, in which over a hundred people were killed and hundreds of houses and workshops were destroyed and burned down⁵. These violent clashes all involved the mobilization of right-wing hoodlums by the ultranationalist youth organization (*ülkü ocakları* - idealist hearths), the assassination of prominent individuals or bombings as triggers of the violence, conspiracy theories about communist and Alevi attacks on mosques or on Sunni villages, and massive assaults on Alevi neighbourhoods. In Kahramanmaraş, Alevi neighbourhoods were under siege for several days, without the police or army intervening. Most of those killed, however, belonged to Alevi families living in Sunni majority neighbourhoods, where there was no effective communal defence and where their houses had been marked in advance.

The Kahramanmaraş massacre persuaded the government (then led by the left-leaning Bülent Ecevit) to give in to the military's demand to declare martial law in Istanbul, Ankara and large part of Eastern Turkey. In September 1980 the armed forces went a step further and carried out a coup, detaining political leaders of government as well as opposition, banning all political parties, trade unions and associations, and initiating a massive hunt for political activists, targeting especially the left and the Kurdish movement.

Determined to prevent a revival of political polarization, the military overhauled the political and legal system and had a new

sword Zulfikar on the Alevi side, Islamic concepts of ritual purity and seclusion of women on the Sunni side), whereas the significance of other cultural traits, including language, is played down.

⁴ Identity struggles and debates appealing to political, religious and ethnic or ethn-national identities continued during the following decades. See van Bruinessen 1997 and, by a prominent participant, Aygün 2020.

⁵ For a perceptive analysis in English of the events and their social and political background see Sinclair-Webb 2003.

Constitution drafted that severely curtailed civil liberties. In what seemed a departure from the military's tradition of staunch secularism, a conservative variety of Sunni Islam, the so-called Turkish-Islamic synthesis, was adopted as an antidote to socialist thought. Religious education, which had until then been an elective subject in state schools, became mandatory. The Ministry of Education had new textbooks for history and "knowledge of religious culture and morality" (*din kültürü ve ahlak bilgisi*) written that reflected the newly adopted, conservative Sunni school of thought⁶.

Alevi children had previously been able to avoid the religion classes because they were elective but were henceforth obliged to attend and learn of the obligation of prayer, fasting etc. The regime moreover embarked on a drive to build mosques and appoint imams in villages where there was none (which were usually Alevi villages)⁷. As an effort to convert Alevis to Sunni Islam these policies appear to have been a failure. However, they made Alevis more acutely aware of the difference between their own traditions and Sunni Islam and caused an increased interest in the religious dimension of those Alevi traditions. By the end of the decade, when some of the restrictions on civil society were lifted, this was to give rise to a vocal Alevi activism that was cultural and religious rather than socialist.

8.2. Geographical distribution and historical background of Alevi communities

The name "Alevi" is a blanket term applied to a broad range of communities that are not all closely related and that are primarily defined by their difference from normative Sunni Islam (which in most cases involves a rejection of the canonical obligations of prayer (*namaz*), fasting in Ramazan, donating the alms tax (*zekat*) and pilgrimage to Mecca, their special devotion for the prophet Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law Ali and his descendants, and a distinctive

⁶ On the Turkish-Islamic synthesis, see Toprak 1990; Güvenç et al. 1991; Copeaux 1997, 77-101; on its impact on historiography and school textbooks Copeaux 2002. The new curriculum and the content of the textbooks for religion studies are analysed by Uyanık 2009.

⁷ These measures are referred to in Bilici 1998 and Yaman 2004, 132-134.

communal ritual known as *ayin-i cem*. The largest sub-groups of Alevis used to be known as *Kızılbaş*, *Bektaşî* and *Nusayri*. Smaller groups are known by tribal names such as *Çepni* and *Sıraç*, *Tahtacı* and *Abdal*.

There are Kurdish and Zazakî-speaking Alevi (*Kızılbaş*) communities in the upper and middle Euphrates basin, Turkish-speaking Alevi communities in the region enclosed by the river *Kızılırmak* in Central Anatolia and thinly dispersed in West and South Anatolia as well as in European Turkey and parts of Bulgaria and Rumania, and Arabic-speaking Alevis (or *Nusayri*) in Hatay and Adana, along the north-eastern corner of the Mediterranean. The last-named group adhere to the same tradition as Syria's 'Alawites, which is significantly different from that of the Anatolian Alevis⁸.

The name *Kızılbaş*, applied to the Kurdish and Zaza as well as some of the Turkish Alevis, points to their historical connection with the Safavid movement, whose followers were so named because of their distinctive red headgear. The Safavids found much enthusiastic support throughout Anatolia in the 15th and 16th centuries. Their most charismatic leader, Shah Isma'îl, and his closest followers were expelled towards the east by the Ottoman Sultan Selim I (1512-1520) and founded a state in Iran. Shah Isma'îl, who composed religious poetry under the pen name of Hata'i, has remained a highly venerated figure among the Alevis, and Sultan Selim the archetypical enemy because of his massacre of allegedly tens of thousands of *Kızılbaş*.

Another subgroup of the Turkish Alevis, partly overlapping with the *Kızılbaş*, is that of the village *Bektaşî*, who owe this name to a historical affiliation with the alleged descendants of the 13th-century peripatetic Sufi Hacı Bektaş and the central lodge of the Bektaşî Sufi order in Nevşehir. The Alevis of Southeastern Europe also acknowledge affiliation with Hacı Bektaş and especially with his contemporary, the dervish saint Sarı Saltuk (Kiel 2000).

The core institution among these communities is that of *dedelik* (literally grandfatherhood), hereditary ritual leadership largely monopolized by holy lineages known as *ocak* (hearth). Each village community

⁸ An early survey made of these various communities by the nationalist author Baha Said in the early 1920s was recently reprinted: Baha Said Bey 2006. More recent and more detailed surveys, based on personal field observations, in Birdoğan 1992 and Türkdoğan 1995. The most ambitious and most informative survey, based on hundreds of interviews with resource persons in the *Kızılırmak* region, is Yıldırım 2018.

is traditionally affiliated with a specific *ocak*, of which usually only a small number of members is selected to fill the role of spiritual preceptor and ritual specialist, *dede*⁹. Each *ocak* claims descent from a well-known saint in Alevi sacred history, and through him from one of the Shi'î imams. The family that claims descent from Hacı Bektaş, known by the title of *çelebi* (gentleman) and the family name of Ulusoy, constitutes a special case among the *ocak*. They reside in the village where the central lodge of the Bektaşî Sufi order was located and are considered as the highest religious authorities by the village Bektaşî as well as some (but by no means all) of the Kızılbaş *ocak*. Most *ocak* serve Kurdish as well as Turkish village communities. The Arab Alevis do not take part in the same *ocak* system, but they also have hereditary religious specialists known as *shaykh* (elder), who play a highly influential role in the community¹⁰.

The *ayin-i cem* has to be led by a *dede*, assisted by a second ritual specialist, the *rehber* (guide), who in most cases belongs to a different *ocak*. A third important participant in the ritual is the *zakir*, the singer-musician who performs sacred poetry, accompanying himself on the long-necked lute called *bağlama* (also *tanbur* or *tomir*). The *zakir* does not have to belong to an *ocak*, and the same is true of the men who perform the nine further functions that are specified as necessary conditions for a proper *cem* ritual, making up the sacred number of twelve functions (*on iki hizmet*). Traditionally, only born Alevis of both sexes who have moreover received initiation in an *ikrar* (affirmation) ceremony, as was the case of most or all adults in the village community, are admitted to the *ayin-i cem*¹¹. A second degree of initiation involved the establishment of symbolic kinship between two married couples,

⁹ The first major study of the *ocak* system is the dissertation by Ali Yaman, son of the prominent *dede* Mehmet Yaman, for which he interviewed 110 *dede*, representing some forty *ocak* (Yaman 2004). See also the survey of *ocak* in Birdoğan 1992, the analysis by Gezik & Özcan 2013 of the complex relations between Kurdish *ocak*, and the attempt at a systematic inventory in Yıldırım 2018, 227-246.

¹⁰ Much less is known of Nusayri ritual and belief than of the other Alevi communities. The *shaykh* are believed to hold secret religious knowledge that they are not allowed to share with commoners, even though they impart religious education on male members of the community (Arnold 2005, Doğruel 2005, 187-197).

¹¹ Among the Arab Alevis there is a similar communal ritual, in which however only adult men take part. Only men are initiated; women receive no religious education. See Arnold 2005, 310-312.

who became each other's *musahip*, i.e. vowed to unlimited mutual support and sharing of property.

All these institutions, it appears, were already present in the Safavid movement but may well have even older origins. Before the Safavids, in the era of transition from Christianity to Islam, the Wafa'iyya, another popular religious movement named for the 11th-century Kurdish saint Abu'l-Wafa Taj al-'Arifin, found a large following among the Turcoman and Kurdish tribes and peasantry of Anatolia (Ocak 2005; Karakaya Stump 2020). Genealogical documents preserved by several *ocak* in Eastern Turkey indicate that their ancestors were originally affiliated with the Wafa'iyya, later transferred their loyalties to the Safavids and in some cases yet later shifted to the Bektaşî Sufi order as a more politically secure umbrella under Ottoman rule (Birdoğan 1992, Karakaya Stump 2020).

Although the Wafa'iyya, the Safavids and the Bektaşîs are considered as heterodox by present standards of Sunni orthodoxy, the original communities that gathered around Wafa'i and Safavid emissaries may not have been too different from the majority of Anatolian Muslims of their day, with whom they shared many popular beliefs and practices. It was the political conflict between the Ottoman and Safavid states from c. 1500 onwards and the gradual establishment of a learned and Shariah-oriented version of Islam by the Ottoman state that made the proto-Alevis appear as increasingly deviant. In peasant uprisings of the 16th century it is hard to distinguish political and economic dissent from religious heterodoxy. The Janissary troops who put down the major uprisings probably held religious views that were not too different from those of the rebels¹². When the Ottomans established their control over Central and East Anatolia and made the first tax surveys, there were no villages with a mosque. The religion of the mosque and *medrese* (seminary) was an urban affair; the institutions and the foundations supporting them were founded by the state or by high officials. Orthodox Sunni Islam only gradually spread to the

¹² On these uprisings: Sohrweide 1965, Imber 1979. The Janissaries, slave soldiers recruited as young boys from subjected Christian peasant populations and educated as Muslims, had a special connection with the Bektaşî Sufi order (Birge 1937, 74-78). The documents cited by Sohrweide and Imber indicate that there was an active persecution of Anatolian *Kızılbaş* in the 16th century but that condemnations of their religious deviance concerned in fact their political allegiance to the Safavid enemy.

countryside, in step with the gradual expansion of state control. In that respect, the post-1980 urge to build mosques in Alevi villages and teach Sunni doctrine to Alevi children represents a return to Ottoman style governance¹³.

For the Arab Alevi, who have a different history and were never affiliated with the Safavids, it has also been argued that they had constituted an established and well-connected strand of Islam since before Sunni or Shi'i orthodoxy were codified. In his study of the `Alawis of Syria (and by implication the Arab Alevi of Turkey), the historian Stefan Winter concludes that in the Middle Ages they did not constitute a marginal rural community but were a heterodox sect whose religious ideas "not only appealed to an urban intellectual class but also served to focus and express the social grievances of recently and perhaps still incompletely Islamized rural populaces" (Winter 2016, 41)¹⁴. For most of their history, the `Alawi communities were not as marginal and oppressed as their self-image has it.

The *Nusayri*, *Kızılbaş* and *Bektaşî* still constitute three more or less separate communities (or rather ensembles of communities, each with considerable internal variety), with different traditions of belief and ritual, and with different relations with the state and with Turkey's official Islam as represented by the Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, commonly and briefly known as Diyanet). The *Kızılbaş*, and among them especially the Kurdish/Zaza Alevi of Dersim, Malatya and Kahramanmaraş are least affected by normative Islam, whereas among the village *Bektaşî* of Central and Western Turkey normative Islam in its Sunni or Shi'i form has made some inroads. The *Nusayri* tradition has evolved independently of the *Kızılbaş* and *Bektaşî*; their rituals are different and so, presumably, is their doctrine – but since the doctrine is only known to the religious elite, most Arab Alevi commoners do not really know how different theirs is from those of the other Alevi groups.

¹³ There had been at least one earlier deliberate effort to build mosques and appoint imams in *Kızılbaş* villages under the late 19th-century Sultan Abdulhamid II, see Çakmak 2019, 325-326; Kieser 2000, 167-170; Winter 2018, 220-228.

¹⁴ The author observes that the `Alawi *da`wa* (proselytization) was actively supported by the Shi'i Hamdanid dynasty ruling in Aleppo in the 10th century. Under the Sunni dynasties ruling Syria in the following centuries (the Ayyubids, Mamluks and Ottomans), `Alawis were consistently seen as deviant but not really persecuted (Ibid., *passim*).

In the Ottoman Empire, these heterodox communities were not formally treated as religious minorities, unlike the various Christian and Jewish groups, which as *dhimmi* (in Turkish *zimmi*) had a protected status but were subject to special taxes. For tax purposes and military duties the heterodox communities were considered as Muslims, and the early population censuses (*tahrir defterleri*) do not list them separately¹⁵. The *Kızılbaş* no doubt were seriously mistrusted because of their loyalty to the Safavid enemy. Many in fact had followed Shah Isma'îl to Iran, and many more were to follow after the brutal suppression of later uprisings. Otherwise, however, the state did not much discriminate against the proto-Alevis, although prejudices against them were probably widespread, as is apparent from other Ottoman sources, such as Evliya Çelebi's famous *Seyahatname* (Book of Travels).

Pious Sunnis avoided social contact with Alevis, accusing them of unspeakable sins including incest and nightly rituals that turned into sexual orgies. (*Mum söndüren*, "candle extinguishers", is how these communities were often called, with much explicit speculation on what happened once the lights were out). Because they did not perform the obligatory five daily prayers and the necessary ablutions, they were seen as ritually unclean and literally untouchable. Food prepared by Alevis could under no circumstances be eaten by a good Sunni Muslim – something that remained an impediment to friendship and co-operation between Sunnis and Alevis well into the 20th century.

8.3. The Alevis and the Republic

Many Alevis, especially the older generations and those of Turkish ethnicity, are staunch Kemalists, convinced that Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk)'s secularizing reforms protected the Alevis from Islamic fundamentalism and empowered them. However, the Republican People's Party (CHP), which was once, under Atatürk, the sole legal party and almost identical with the state apparatus, lost much of its popular support after Turkey's transition to a multi-party system, not only among conservative Sunni Muslim voters but among the Alevi electorate as

¹⁵ The 'Alawis are the only exception, because the Ottomans in their first census held on to a tax that had been levied specifically on the 'Alawis by the preceding Mamluk regime. As Winter remarks, this makes them only sectarian group thus recognizable in Ottoman tax registers (Winter 2016, 78-83).

well. From the 1970s onwards, when the party adopted a social democratic discourse, the Alevis have at most times been a reliable source of electoral support for the CHP and prominent Kemalist intellectuals have been courting the Alevis¹⁶. Presently Alevis probably constitute the CHP's last remaining compact bloc of voters (but the Alevis are highly divided politically: many of the Kurdish Alevis support the pro-Kurdish party HDP).

There exists a persistent myth that Turkey's Republican elite looked favourably upon the Alevis, perceiving them as allies in the struggle to modernize and secularize Turkey and enabling their social mobility. In fact the Kemalists were above all Turkish nationalists, for most of whom Sunni Islam was an essential element of Turkish identity. There were, it is true, a few nationalists who perceived Alevism as representing the most authentic Turkish religious tradition, untainted by the Arabic religiosity of Sunni Islam, just like the simple Turkish language of Alevi poetry was seen as purer and more authentic than the convoluted Ottoman Turkish with its heavy load of Persian and Arabic borrowings. However, even the most secular-minded among the Republican elite held on to some of the old prejudices against Alevis, to which was added a certain disdain for their backwardness and superstitions¹⁷.

Alevis were also affected by the measures banning Sufi orders and closing Sufi shrines, which were issued in 1925 in response to the (Sunni Kurdish) Shaykh Sa'id uprising. Alevi shrines (including most notably that of Hacı Bektaş and the central lodge of the Bektaşî order) were also closed and the Alevi ritual of the *ayin-i cem*, though not explicitly mentioned, shared the ban. The implementation of these measures was not uniform: some communities continued to perform the *ayin-i cem* more or less regularly, though in secret, elsewhere it gradually disappeared, along with other traditional religious practices.

The Republic's "civilizing" struggle against backwardness and tribalism at times took violent form. The biggest violent event in the history of modern Turkey was the 1937-38 military campaign against Der-sim (later renamed Tunceli), a mountainous region inhabited by Zaza and Kurdish-speaking Alevis. Villages were bombed and torched,

¹⁶ See the analysis of CHP-Alevi relations over the years in Schüler 2000 and the observations in Massicard 2013, *passim*.

¹⁷ Perhaps the most detailed study of Turkish nationalist perceptions and attitudes towards Alevis is Dressler 2013.

fleeing people were sprayed with poison gas, burned alive or walled up in the caves where they tried to hide. The campaign arguably constituted genocide; at least ten per cent, and possibly a much higher proportion of the population were killed (van Bruinessen 1994). Many of the survivors were deported to Western Turkey, in an effort to assimilate them to Turkish culture. It is a moot point whether the campaign was directed against the Dersimis as Kurds or as Alevi; however, it was not their religious beliefs but the perception of their refusal to adapt to Republican modernity that was the prime motivation. (Interestingly, many people in Tunceli have become strong supporters of the Republican People's Party and decline believing that Atatürk personally was responsible for the genocidal campaign).

Alevi are still divided in their attitude towards the Kemalist Republic. Many continue to believe that the Republic liberated them and protected them from Sunni fanaticism. Many others, however, speak of the massacres in Dersim as part of a long series of anti-Alevi violence, beginning with the suppression of Alevi rebellions in the 16th century and the execution of the Alevi poet and saint Pir Sultan Abdal, through an earlier Young Turk campaign against the Alevi Kurds of Koçgiri in 1920-21, to the pogroms of the 1970s and yet another series of violent events in the 1990s¹⁸.

A state institution that became increasingly influential after 1980 and at least indirectly affected the Alevi was the aforementioned Diyanet, which is in charge of all mosques and imams in the country¹⁹. Diyanet officials have displayed different attitudes towards Alevi, sometimes condemning them as perverts and deviants, but more frequently claiming that "true" Alevi have much in common with Sunni Muslims, especially those of a Sufi inclination. They have insisted that historical saints such as Hacı Bektaş abided by the Shariah, prayed five times a day and fasted during Ramazan, implicitly accusing contemporary Alevi of deviating from this "genuine" Alevism. The actually existing and

¹⁸ The campaign against Koçgiri is discussed by Kieser 2000, 382-4, 398-403 in the context of a broader analysis of Young Turk attitudes towards Alevi, Armenians and foreign missionaries. The events in the 1990s include the torching of an Alevi cultural festival in a hotel in Sivas in 1993 and a pogrom in Istanbul's Gazi neighbourhood in 1995, in both of which state agents were believed to have acted as provocateurs. See Massicard 2013, 44-46, 50-55.

¹⁹ On Diyanet's growing importance and rapidly increasing budget, see van Bruinessen 2018.

specifically Alevi traditions (the *ayin-i cem*, *semah*, *dedelik*, *ikrar*, *musahiplik*) were not acknowledged by Diyanet. Against accusations that Diyanet discriminated against Alevis, its spokespersons time and again insisted that it treated Sunnis and Alevis equally as Muslims and built mosques for both, and that Sunnis moreover loved Ali just as much as Alevis did²⁰.

The curriculum of religion classes (*din kültürü ve ahlak bilgisi*) that became mandatory after 1980 was not prepared by Diyanet but by the Ministry of National Education. The textbooks of those years (analysed in Uyanık 2009) do not even allude to the existence of Alevism and are written in a style that addresses the readers as if it is self-evident that they are Sunnis. Many years later, following the AKP's victory in the 2007 elections, the Erdoğan government for a brief period made efforts to reach out to the Alevis and redress their complaints. One concrete result of the "Alevi opening" was the addition of some 15 pages specifically describing Alevism to the school textbooks. The new content, however, was again written by Sunni theologians and did not reflect the wishes of Alevi resource persons who had been heard, inevitably weakening the trust some Alevis had initially placed in the government's proclaimed intent of dialogue (Soner, Toktaş 2011, Yaman 2021). These developments will be discussed in some detail in the final section of this chapter.

8.4. Social and economic change

Migration to regional or metropolitan cities in search of work or education, which began in the 1950s, brought many more Alevis in direct contact with the state. The rise of the left, during the 1960s and 1970s, involved many young Alevis and offered them an alternative way of understanding their marginalized identities. Some of the new immigrant neighbourhoods emerging in the cities were predominantly Alevi in composition. Leftist organizations vied for control of these neighbourhoods, helping to create something of an Alevi public sphere (in which Alevi history and Alevi symbols were given a political rather than a religious significance)²¹.

²⁰ See the discourse analysis of Diyanet's official statements on Alevis in Uyanık 2009, 126-176.

²¹ For a description of life in one of these neighbourhoods, Ali Baba Mahallesi in Sivas in those years, see Ata 2021; on a famous leftist Alevi neighbourhood in Istanbul see Wedel 2002.

The increased visibility of Alevis and the emergence of a parallel Alevi economy in regional urban centres such as Sivas, Malatya and Kahramanmaraş also led to increasing tension and conflict between Sunni and Alevi communities. In one of the earliest explanations of violent Sunni-Alevi conflict, the socialist author Ömer Laçiner, who knew the situation on the ground from growing up as a Sunni in Sivas, described how Alevi shopkeepers and craftsmen, although economically weak, were resented as competitors by the established petty urban traders, craftsmen and workers who were typically Turkish speakers and Sunni Muslims (Laçiner 1978; see also Laçiner 1985).

There were as yet no explicitly Alevi associations; the organizations that had many Alevi members were either *hemşeri* associations (in which people from the same hometown or province of origin, for instance Sivas, gathered) or leftist groups united by a common ideology and worldview (in which the martyred Alevi poet Pir Sultan Abdal and Lenin or Che Guevara could rub shoulders as advocates of social justice). However, there was one political party that specifically targeted Alevi voters though carefully avoiding to use the word Alevi. This was the Union Party (Birlik Partisi), originally established in 1966 with the support of a broad range of prominent, mostly conservative Alevi personalities in an attempt to stop the political left making further inroads among the Alevi electorate. By the early 1970s, the party adopted a leftist discourse that was reminiscent of that of its earlier competitor, the socialist Workers' Party of Turkey (Türkiye İşçi Partisi), which had meanwhile been banned. The Union Party never succeeded in winning more than a small proportion of the Alevi vote²².

The urbanization of large numbers of Alevis also caused the traditional religious leaders, the *dede*, to lose much of their influence. Most villages used to be visited at least once a year by the *dede*, who then presided over the *ayin-i cem* ritual. Until well into the 1980s, urban communities were not served by *dede*, and interest in the religious tradition was, especially among the younger generations, minimal. To the extent that people took pride in their Alevi identity, they tended to emphasize it was a cultural tradition rooted in popular protest against

²² Ata 2007 is an excellent study of the history of this party and its efforts to establish relations of trust with various Alevi authorities and segments of the Alevi communities. On the importance of *hemşeri* associations for Alevi migrants in the cities, see Çelik 2003.

an oppressive state, with distinct musical and poetic expressions. The annual cultural festival in the village of Hacı Bektaş, organized since 1964, became and remained until the early 1980s a celebration of Alevism as a progressive, humanistic strand in Turkey's social fabric (Norton 1995). Its character changed after the state co-opted it in the wake of the 1980 military coup, in an effort to buy the loyalty of the Alevi communities.

Although individual Alevis experienced social mobility and made careers in business, education, the professions, or the bureaucracy, they were usually not recognisable as such. Most in fact deliberately hid the fact that they were Alevi in order to pass as ordinary Turks. Among the secular middle classes, there was no discernible difference between Sunni and Alevi, for public display of religiosity was unusual until much later. Mandatory religious education in school, introduced after 1980, was resented by many Sunnis as well as Alevis, though for the latter it represented a greater threat to the part of their identity that they were trying to hide.

8.5. Alevism goes public: the Alevi revival

The date when Alevis began positioning themselves explicitly as Alevis in the public sphere can be dated more or less precisely, with the publication of the so-called Alevi manifesto (*Alevi bildirgesi*) in the Kemalist daily *Cumhuriyet* of 6 May 1990. The signatories of the declaration included Alevi personalities as well as prominent progressive non-Alevi intellectuals²³. The text of the manifesto had been prepared the previous year at a gathering in Hamburg, Germany, and it is probably correct to state that the Alevi revival began in Germany rather than Turkey itself. Alevis had been well-represented, perhaps even overrepresented, among labour migrants and refugees there. Cities like Berlin and Hamburg hosted large Alevi communities, and it was there that, using the greater freedoms granted by German law, Alevis established the first associations and began demanding equal rights with Sunni Muslims (Sökefeld 2008). Intellectuals from Turkey were invited to discuss matters of Alevi history and identity, state policies,

²³ The entire declaration is reproduced in Zelyut 1990, 295-301. Zelyut was one of the Alevi signatories; the others included such non-Alevi luminaries as Yaşar Kemal, Aziz Nesin, İlhan Selçuk and Nejat Birdoğan.

and human rights. The Alevi declaration was a direct response to the government policies of imposing a conservative Sunni Islam during the oppressive decade of the 1980s²⁴.

The manifesto began with the claim that there were 20 million Alevis in Turkey, which amounted to a third of the population – a huge exaggeration, but one that served to draw attention to the unfairness of their neglect. State expenditure for religion, paid also from Alevis' tax contributions, the declaration continues, only serves Sunni Muslims. Diyanet only represents Sunni Islam; the obligatory religion lessons in state schools only teach Sunni Islam; the state finances mosques and mosque personnel but no Alevi institutions and functionaries. The manifesto calls for official recognition of Alevism and support of a reformed *dede* institution, as well as more adequate representation of Alevis and Alevism in the media and in the school curriculum. These are the demands that Alevis have continued pursuing in the following decades.

The publication of the Alevi manifesto was followed by a frantic publishing activity, as new Alevi journals emerged and the book market was flooded by books that debated Alevi history, culture, religious practices and whatever else it was that defined or constituted Alevism. The first wave of identity-reinforcing publishing was soon followed by academic studies by students and university lecturers of Alevi background²⁵. Alevis also entered the public sphere in other ways: city-based associations were established: the conservative Hacı Bektaş Veli Cultural Association, the left-leaning Pir Sultan Abdal Cultural Association, and the conservative CEM Foundation²⁶. And a new institution made its appearance, the *cemevi* (literally house of the *cem*), a building especially dedicated as a venue for the *ayin-i cem* (besides serving other community functions).

²⁴ It was a Hamburg-based Alevi association that published the first major book of the Alevi resurgence, Birdoğan 1990.

²⁵ Karin Vorhoff carried out an inventory and systematic analysis of the production of the first years (c. 1990-1995), in which intellectuals of Alevi background attempted to define what Alevism is: Vorhoff 1995, 1998. Two decades later, Rıza Yıldırım critically surveyed the literature on what he calls "modern Alevism", classifying them into four groups: historical, anthropological, nationalist-conservative and Alevi approaches (Yıldırım 2018, 43-78). On ethnic lines of division in the Alevi movement see van Bruinessen 1997.

²⁶ A detailed account of the emergence and development of Alevi associational life is given in Elise Massicard's excellent study (2013, 47-55, 163-184).

In the villages, the *ayin-i cem* had typically been held in the house of one of the inhabitants, although there were also villages that had a dervish lodge (*tekke, dergâh*), where the *cem* could be held. As remarked above, the ban of Sufi orders and Sufi shrines also affected the performance of Alevi ritual, and due to its village-based nature the ritual did not travel easily to the urban environment. The first urban *ayin-i cem* were organized in the context of a short-lived early movement for revival of Alevi tradition in the 1960s. These were a few isolated celebrations as largely symbolic gestures, that were not repeated until much later²⁷. In his memoirs, the *dede* Mehmet Yaman notes that former Bektaşî lodges were the sites of the Alevi revival in Istanbul: at first the Karaca Ahmed lodge and later, when the *cem* ceremonies were drawing larger numbers of attendants, in the Şahkulu lodge, which was renovated in the 1990s and became the site of more frequent *ayin-i cem* celebrations (M. Yaman 2018, 167-169). Then, one after another, new *cemevi* were opened in different districts of Istanbul and other cities²⁸. Most of the new *cemevi* were community centres, offering various other social services besides a location for congregational ritual – basic courses in Alevism for young people and funerals being especially important services.

In the urban setting, and especially in the diaspora, the *ayin-i cem* differed from the traditional ones in the villages. They were not closed meetings of a village community where everyone knew everyone else but open gatherings accessible to all Alevis and even to interested on-lookers. Initially, the congregations that took part in *ayin-i cem* in the new *cemevi* consisted of people from many different regions, and *dede* of different *ocak* presided over the ceremonies. The *cemevi* thus contributed to the integration of different strands of Alevism; even Arab Alevis, whose village traditions were significantly different and who did not have the *dede* and *ocak* institution, were observed to take part and learn the rules of the *ayin-i cem*. As more and more *cemevi* were opened,

²⁷ Members of the Ulusoy family and some other prominent Alevi personalities organized what may have been the very first modern urban *cem* ceremony in Ankara in 1963, with the participation of the most prominent Alevi minstrels of the time (Masicard 2005, 121-122; Yıldırım 2017, 103-104). In Istanbul, somewhat later in the decade, the *dede* Mehmet Yaman and friends held one or a few ceremonies in an old lodge of the Bektaşî Sufi order, the Karaca Ahmed Dergâhı, which was restored for this purpose (M. Yaman 2018, 168-169).

²⁸ At present, there are said to be over a hundred *cemevi* in Istanbul alone, and more than two thousand in all of Turkey (Yaman 2022, 99-100).

however, some became exclusively affiliated with a specific *ocak* and its traditions. Gradually, some of the distinctions existing between rural Alevi communities were reproduced in urban communities.

Recognition of the *cemevi* as a house of worship on a par with the Sunni mosque became a core demand expressed by Alevi spokespersons. Mosques receive free electricity and water from the state, and the Alevis demands the same for their *cemevi*. However, until now the state has consistently rejected this demand. In the official perception, most clearly stated by Diyanet but also by theologians at the various Faculties of Theology, the *cemevi* is like a Sufi lodge, just as the *ayin-i cem* is like any other Sufi ritual, which is considered as a form of devotion but not as worship (*ibadet*) strictly speaking.

8.6. Religious education

Until very recently, Alevi religious education has been of a highly informal nature only. Children were told religious lore by their parents and heard stories from older men and women considered as knowledgeable. On the occasion of his visits to the village the *dede* explained the rituals and their meaning; in their own village surroundings, both the *dede* and his wife (*ana bacı*) were available for explanations. Interested young men learned to sing some of the sacred poetry, which expressed condensed (and not immediately intelligible) religious teachings. Migration and modern education further alienated many young people of Alevi background from this rudimentary religious knowledge. Alevi identity was primarily defined through the “othering” of Alevis by the Sunni majority and by the state. For many, the minor details of each region’s religious traditions were less relevant than the shared stigmatic identity. Alevi poetry and music, cultivated as a “folk” tradition rather than anything religious, was adopted as the major symbol of identity that could also be a source of pride.

The introduction of compulsory Sunni religious education in school, from the 1980s onwards, raised an interest in the religious differences between Alevism and Sunni Islam and in the possibility of Alevi religious education. The surge in publications on Alevi subjects in the 1990s responded to a widely felt need for knowledge about Alevism as an alternative to Sunni Islam. Alevi intellectuals offered a wide range of reinterpretations of the history and meaning of Alevism,

often more sociological than theological. The Alevi associations meanwhile provided a safe environment, where people could meet and freely discuss and learn more about Alevism. It seemed that intellectuals and associations might serve the Alevis in roles of leadership and representation for which the traditional *dede* were ill-equipped and that possibly the Alevi intellectual might come to replace the hereditary *dede*.

But it soon became clear that a redefined Alevism whose core is religious doctrine and ritual rather than folk culture cannot easily be constructed without the *dede*. As the Alevi manifesto had it, there was a need for a reformed *dede* institution and a more systematic education of the *dede*. It was a handful of *dede* with a modern education who took the leading role in seeking to transform their traditional role and to adapt what had been a village ritual to the new urban and transnational environment, presiding over *ayin-i cem* ceremonies in Istanbul, Ankara and major West European cities and volunteering to give systematic courses on Alevi ritual and belief.

One of them was Mehmet Yaman, who combined his legitimacy as a *dede* from a prominent *ocak* in Erzincan with an education in an *imam-hatip* school (training school for imams and preachers) and Muslim theological college. He claims he was the first to deliver systematic courses on Alevism, first in the Şahkulu lodge in Istanbul in the early 1990s and later also in several German cities (Yaman 2018, 169-174). Similar courses were soon also given in other *cemevi*. An encyclopaedic book of his on Alevi traditions and ritual (Yaman 1993) found employ in some of these courses and was reprinted several times²⁹.

Another *dede* who adopted a prominent role in the 1990s was the law professor İzzettin Doğan, whose father Hüseyin Doğan from Malatya had been the most widely respected *dede* of his generation. İzzettin Doğan, a conservative personality who cultivated Turkish-nationalist circles, sought a role for himself as the intermediary between the state and the Alevi communities through the CEM Foundation that he

²⁹ Yaman was not universally accepted in Alevi circles, however. Many feared that, due to his education in Sunni institutions, he was too much influenced by Sunni teachings to be a true representative of Alevism. His own explanation of why he chose that particular education was that Alevi burials are performed according to Islamic rites and each Alevi community therefore needs a person who can perform the Muslim prayers and recitations properly. Because Sunni imams may refuse to perform that service for Alevis, at least some Alevis need to learn enough to act as imams (conversation with the author, Berlin, June 1997).

established in 1995. Fiercely opposed to the leftist emphasis on the elements of resistance and opposition in Alevi tradition, Doğan insisted on its Islamic aspects and its presence as a major strand in Turkish-Islamic civilization. He disseminated his views on Alevism in professorial-style seminars and frequent press interviews, which made him the best-known (though not most representative) spokesperson for Alevism³⁰. Unlike other Alevi associations, the CEM Foundation never called for the abolishment of Diyanet and of mandatory religious education but demanded representation of Alevis within Diyanet in the form of a distinct sub-directorate.

Other *dede*, who were working with the main Alevi associations, may have been at least as effective in shaping the reinvented urban *cem* ritual and informally disseminating religious knowledge. One of them, Hasan Kılavuz, who for some time was the chairman of the *dede* council of the largest Alevi umbrella organization in Germany, became quite well-known for claiming that Alevism had little in common with Sunni Islam and was practically an independent religion³¹. (After his return to Turkey, where he leads an Alevi association in Mersin, he became more accommodating towards Diyanet, which illustrates the difference in attitudes between associations in Turkey and Western Europe).

The Alevi associations, especially those in Germany, have experienced difficulties in finding *dede* who were both knowledgeable and supportive of their ideological viewpoints. They have been calling for a system of *dede* education similar to that of Sunni *ulama* (experts of Sunni Islam law) but independent of the state. The efforts by the Alevi Academy, established by intellectuals in European exile, to develop a curriculum for *dede* training in the form of seminars were an interesting experiment but the organizers themselves acknowledged that they could not confer legitimate authority as a *dede* upon the graduates (Dressler 2006, 283-285).

Europe was a significant actor in the background in yet another sense: in negotiations on Turkey's possible accession to the European Union there was much pressure for reforms concerning, among other things, democratic and minority rights. In the first two five-year periods as the ruling party (2002-12), the AKP carried out a number of

³⁰ A more extensive description of Doğan's activities is given in Dressler 2006, 277-282. For a convenient overview of his views, see Aydın 2000.

³¹ This made Kılavuz, who has a leftist background, the polar opposite of İzzettin Doğan among the Alevi religious elite, see Dressler 2006, 285-287, 290.

significant reforms and made accommodating gestures towards Kurds and Alevis, initiating a dialogue with various representatives of both groups. In what was called the “Alevi opening”, the government held meetings with *dede*, academics, theologians, trade unionists, functionaries of associations and artists to listen to their complaints and demands (Soner, Toktaş 2011). In a report on the process, the co-ordinator of the “Alevi opening”, the academic Necdet Subaşı, notes the disunity among Alevis about many fundamental issues including how to define Alevism, but also the broad agreement about their demands from the state:

“But one sober note, the Alevi community leaders always emphasized certain demands in terms of their expectations from the state and the political power. This catalogue of demands remained constant, including a share from the state budget for their clergy, recognition of *cemevis* as houses of worship, either the abolition of religion classes or the inclusion of Alevism in these classes in the public school curriculum. Ultimately, these demands should be met because secularism implies that the state needs to treat all faiths equally.” (Subaşı 2010, 173).

On the issue of the status of the *cemevi* and the *dede* the government refused to give in, arguing that the only house of worship for Muslims is the mosque and that the *cemevi* is like a Sufi lodge and the *dede* like a Sufi shaykh, neither of which receive state support.

The only concession the government made concerned the textbooks on religion and morality, to which a number of passages on Alevi Islam were added. These reflected the official position of Diyanet and the theological faculties that Alevism was part of the Anatolian Sufi tradition, with a strongly devotional attitude towards Ali and the Shi`i Imams, whom Sunnis as well as Alevis respect. Alevi saints and poets were mentioned side by side with other Anatolian saints, folk heroes and religious poets. However, none of these passages even mentioned institutions and traditions that the Alevis themselves considered as important and distinctive. Judging by the textbooks, Alevism was not much different from any Sunni Sufi tradition³². As a further gesture to

³² Consecutive editions of the official textbooks are analysed in Türkmen 2009. Disappointment with the lack of substantial change is expressed clearly in Yaman 2021.

the Alevis, Diyanet published a series of lavishly produced “Alevi-Bektaşî classics”, *i.e.* annotated facsimile editions of manuscripts in the possession of prominent Alevi families. The chosen texts also represented Alevism as close to the orthodox Sufi tradition, and many Alevis perceived this publishing venture as yet another attempt to assimilate Alevis to Sunni Islam³³.

Meanwhile, several Alevi authors wrote alternative textbooks on religious culture and morality from an explicitly Alevi perspective, which unsurprisingly cannot be used by schools but may be used by parents at home³⁴. Several people took their objections to the obligatory religion courses to the European Court of Human Rights, claiming that the course violated their religious freedom and demanding exemption from the course for their children³⁵. The Court, judging that Alevism is a distinct faith that differs from the Sunni understanding of Islam taught in schools, ruled in favour of the applicants and Turkey’s Council of State followed this ruling in similar cases. In response, the government claimed that the addition of some sections on Alevism to the textbooks had restored neutrality between sects and that more material on Alevi might yet be inserted. Promises were also made to introduce an elective course on Alevi Islam in the secondary school curriculum. So far, none of this has happened and it appears highly unlikely that the AKP and Erdoğan’s circles are willing to make further concessions to Alevi demands³⁶.

8.7. Conclusion

The debates on compulsory religious education have shown that religion is a matter of serious concern to the state in Turkey. The state sets the boundaries of what is acceptable religiosity. Twenty years of

³³ The series, edited by the academic Osman Eğri, included texts attributed to Hacı Bektaş that controversially show him to be a Shariah-abiding Sufi, besides a number of works that belong to the core of the Alevi tradition, such as *Şeyh Safî Buyruğu* (Shaykh Safî’s Command).

³⁴ Briefly discussed in Yaman 2021, 434.

³⁵ Brief descriptions of the cases in Türkmen 2009, 388-389; Yaman 2021, 426-427; Shakman Hurd 2014, 426-429. In its verdict, the ECHR argued that the courses did not impart neutral knowledge about religious culture but instructed in specifically Sunni religious practices.

³⁶ See Ali Yaman’s analysis of the latest (2018) version of the official textbooks which continue to reflect, as he has it, “a Sunni understanding of Alevism” (Yaman 2021, 429-430).

AKP rule may have shifted the boundaries a little, but the continuity between the period of military-dominated secularism of the 1980s and that of Erdoğan's consolidated rule is remarkable³⁷. The debates have highlighted one specific dimension of the relations between Alevi and the state as well as between Alevi and their Others, *i.e.* the religious dimension. The same is true of the other demands that were formulated during the "Alevi opening": recognition of the *cemevi* as a place of worship and formalisation of the *dede* institution. The Alevi revival, the state's response to Alevi demands, and the response of various European institutions to Alevi demands for recognition have "religionized" Alevi identity, as Dressler has argued. Academic studies of Alevi and Alevism have also focused overwhelmingly on the religious dimension.

However, a focus on religious authority, ritual and religious education does not exhaust what it means to be an Alevi in Turkey. Alevi are still being stigmatized by many of their fellow citizens and mistrusted by the state, especially if they are also Kurds and more especially if they are from Tunceli/Dersim. Many Alevi who had been hiding their Alevi background after moving to the large cities became more comfortable acknowledging this identity as a result of the Alevi revival of the 1990s, which gave people of Alevi identity the sense that they shared many interests apart from a common religion. Precisely because many Alevi did not care much for details of religious doctrine or ritual, it was easy for Arab, Kurdish and Turkish Alevi to be active in the same associations and for a sense of common identity to consolidate itself. Turkey's deep involvement in the Syrian conflict, which many Alevi perceived as a struggle between the Islamist Erdoğan and the Alevi Bashar Asad, strengthened their sense that being an Alevi in Turkey implies political dissent, secularism and a modernist humanism.

Alevi identity retains the aspect of a political (and oppositional) identity besides that of a dissenting minority religious identity. This political identity unites the Alevi with non-Alevi committed secularists, both of the Kemalist and Kurdish socialist varieties. The degree of commitment to religious, Kemalist or socialist ideals and values constitutes major fault lines dividing the wider Alevi community.

³⁷ Both Türkmen 2009 and Shakman Hurd 2014 emphasize the state's efforts to control the religious subjectivities of its citizens. Türkmen notes shifts but also the remarkable continuity in content of the textbooks during the AKP period.

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