

# THE ALEVI OF ANATOLIA

By: David Zeidan, December 1995

## INTRODUCTION

The Alevi constitute the second largest religious community in Turkey (following the Sunnis), and number some 25% (15 million) of the total population (Alevi claim 30%-40%!). Most Alevi are ethnic and linguistic Turks, mainly of Turkmen descent from Central and Eastern Anatolia. Some 20% of Alevi are Kurds (though most Kurds are Sunnis), and some 25% of Kurds in Turkey are Alevi (Kurmanji and Zaza speakers).

Alevi consider themselves to be part of the wider Shi'a movement, who revere Ali (Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law) and the Twelve Imams of his house. Like all extreme Shia, their reverence for Ali verges on deification, for which reason classical Sunni ulama classified them as ghulat (exaggerators), outside the orthodox Islamic fold. Alevi are also called Kizilbash (the name of the Turkmen followers of the Safavid Sufi order of the 15th and 16th centuries), and Bektashi (followers of the Anatolian Bektashi Shia Sufi order founded in the 13th century). Further names used signify specific tribal and linguistic identities: Tahtaci; Abdal; Cepni; Zaza; or are names of great men revered by the Alevi: Caferi; Huseyni.

Alevi are distinct from the Arabic speaking Alawis of Syria and Southwest Turkey (Nusayris). Both are extreme Shia (ghulat) communities with similarities in doctrine and practice, but separate historical developments.

Alevi traditionally inhabit rural Central and Eastern Anatolia, in particular the triangle Kayseri-Sivas-Divrigi. Kurdish Alevi are mainly found in Tunceli, Elazig and Mus provinces. On the Mediterranean coast there are some tribal Alevi settlements of Tahtaci and Cepni. Alevi areas are peripheral and underdeveloped, resulting in the migration of Alevi to the large industrialised cities of western Turkey (and to Western Europe, mainly Germany) in relatively larger proportion than rural Sunnis. Alevi in Europe (especially in Germany), experiencing the freedom of a pluralistic society, stimulated new interest in Alevi ethnicity and culture (Alevilik).

Alevism originated out of a complex mix of mystical (Sufi) Islam, Shi'ism, and the rivalry between the Ottoman and Safavid Empires. Some Sufi orders like the Safavi and Bektashi accepted Shi'a reverence for Ali and the Twelve Imams, and their adherents and sympathisers became the Alevi. Alevi opposition to the Sunni Ottomans in the 16th century resulted in geographical and social marginalisation. In order to survive despite majority hostility and persecution the Alevi developed a tight social-religious network, and (like Druze, Shia, and Alawis), dissimulation and secrecy about their religion (taqiya). They form an endogamic (marrying only within their group) religious community that has definite ethnic markers.

The Alevi liturgical language is Turkish, as opposed to Sunni and Twelver Shia use of Arabic. They thus see themselves as the "real Turks", maintainers of true Turkish culture, religion and folklore in face of the Arabizing Ottoman Sunnis.

The dominant Sunni Islam which serves as the generally accepted orthodoxy in the Turkish state branded Alevism as heretical thus encouraging distorted perceptions of Alevis as sectarian "others" - attaching to them a stigma from which they still suffer today. There is still a persistent social gap between Sunni and Alevi in Turkish society nourished by centuries of majority persecution, prejudice and misconceptions. In the eyes of many traditional Sunnis Alevis are unclean, practice immorality and orgies, and are not true Muslims.

Whilst Sunnism and Twelver Shi'ism possess a tradition of authoritative religious scholarship backed by carriers of formal learning, Alevism lacks both and is more a flowing together of various related movements, doctrines, ideas, rituals and traditions in a flexible synthesis, its strength lying in shared local traditions and esoteric interpretations of Islamic belief and practice.

Until the 1980s it looked like Alevism was losing its unique characteristics and was being absorbed into the total of modern Turkish society. Alevi tradition has however shown a capacity for survival, renewing its particularistic traditions in the face of modernisation. The mid 1980s saw the start of a revival of the Alevi community through a reconstruction and transformation of its religious and social structures, a return to its communal identity patterns, and a reformulation of traditions. This process is linked to a politicisation of group members and an assertive reaffirmation of the collective Alevi identity.

The seeming collapse of Kemalism in the 1990s has created new problems and opportunities for Alevis, most of whom had appreciated Ataturk's extreme secularism even though it suppressed Alevi culture, as it ended centuries of Alevi persecution and massacres by the Sunni majority.

An Alevi revival is now flourishing as young Alevis are for the first time in history willing to openly admit their Alevi roots. Not so long ago, they would have denied their being Alevis if asked. Alevis had always practiced their rituals behind closed doors, but in recent years hundreds of Alevi religious societies have been founded, Alevi monasteries have opened in major cities, and Alevi rituals held in public venues in the large cities.

## ORIGINS

During the great Turkish expansion from Central Asia into Iran and Anatolia in the Seljuk period (11-12th centuries), Turkmen nomad tribes accepted a Sufi and pro-Ali form of Islam that co-existed with some of their pre-Islamic customs. These tribes dominated central and eastern Anatolia for centuries with their religious warriors (ghazi) spearheading the drive against Byzantines and Slavs. Many Armenians converted to Turkmen type Islam while retaining some Christian practices, and some observers believe that heterodox Armenian Christianity exerted a significant influence on the beliefs of the extremist Shi'ite sects.

Sufism stressed esoteric, allegoric and multiple interpretations of scripture combined to intuitive faith and a search for ecstatic experiences, and was spread by wandering dervishes believed to possess bereket (spiritual power) and keramet (miraculous powers) due to their special nearness to God. Dervish founders of tarikat (Sufi orders) were revered as Saints (veli) and called dede, baba, pir, or seyh, their tombs serving as pilgrimage centres.

Following the Seljuks, the Ottomans established their power in western Anatolia and gradually incorporated Eastern Anatolia into their empire. After Timur's victory over the Ottomans in the 15th century, the Ottoman hold on Eastern Anatolia weakened for a while, with autonomous Turkmen states (Ak-Koyunlu, Kara-Koyunlu) fighting each other for hegemony.

The Kizilbash (red-heads) were Turkmen tribes who adhered to the Safavid Sufi Order, whose Sheikhs claimed descent from Ali. Under Isma`il (d. 1524) they became dominant in Eastern Anatolia and conquered Azerbaijan with its capital Tabriz, where Isma`il named himself Shah in 1501 and went on to conquer all of Iran. His missionaries spread a message of revolt against the Sunni Ottomans in Anatolia, claiming that Isma`il was the awaited mehdi (messiah), and Anatolia became the scene of protracted warfare between Ottomans and Safavids.

The Bektashiyya is a Shia Sufi order founded in the 13th century by Haji Bektash Veli, a dervish who escaped Central Asia and found refuge with the Seljuks in Anatolia at the time of the Mongol invasions (1219-23). This order gained a great following in rural areas and it later developed in two branches: the Celebi clan, who claimed to be physical descendants of Hacı Bektas Veli, were called Bel Evlamlari (children of the loins), and became the hereditary spiritual leaders of the rural Alevi; and the Babagan, those faithful to the path (yol evlamlari - children of the way) who dominated the official Bektashi Sufi order with its elected leadership.

Later, the Bektashiya became the order of the Janissary special troops, tolerated by the Ottomans as its monasteries and pilgrimage centres could be manipulated to control its Alevi followers.

After the foundation of the Safavid Persian state, the new Turkmen Shahs gradually rid themselves of their tribal and sectarian origins in their bid to build a unified Iranian state. Twelver Shiism was proclaimed state religion, with a special role for the Safavi Shahs as descendants of Ali and the Imams. This state religion developed into a very different system to the Alevi faith of their Kizilbash troops. Arab Twelver theologians were recruited from Jabal Amil in Lebanon and from Bahrain, and most Iranians were forcibly converted to Twelver Shiism. The Kizilbash tribal troops were gradually disbanded in favour of a regular Iranian slave army.

The Ottomans had accepted Sunni Islam in the 13th century as a means to unifying their empire, and later proclaimed themselves its defenders against the Safavid Shia state and related heretical sects. This created a gap between the Sunni Ottoman ruling elite and the Alevi Anatolian population. Anatolia became a battlefield between Safavids and Ottomans, each determined to include it in their Empire. Ismail instigated a series of revolts culminating in a general Anatolian uprising against the Ottomans, whose Sultan Bayezid mounted a major expedition 1502-1503 which pushed the Safavids and many of their Turkmen followers into Iran. His successor, Sultan Selim I "The Grim", launched a vigorous campaign into eastern Anatolia, utilising a religious edict condemning Alevi as apostates to massacre many. In the summer of 1514 Selim launched another offensive and won the major battle of Chaldiran on the eastern side of the Euphrates, convincing the Safavids to avoid open conflict with the Ottomans for the next century, and enabling him to overcome the last independent Turkmen dynasties in eastern Anatolia in 1515-1517.

Suleyman the magnificent also ruthlessly suppressed Safavid supporters in eastern Anatolia leading three campaigns into northwest Iran. Finally in 1555 the peace of Amasya recognised Ottoman rule over Iraq and Eastern Anatolia and Iranian rule over Azerbaijan and Caucasia.

The Kizilbash in Anatolia were now militarily, politically and religiously separated from their source in Iran, retreated to isolated rural areas and turned inward, developing their unique structures and doctrines. Following the severe persecution and massacres by the Ottomans which went on into the 18th century, Alevi went underground using taqiya, religious dissimulation permitted by all Shi'a groups, to conceal their faith (pretending to be Sunnis) and survive in a hostile environment. Kizilbash and Bektashis shared common religious beliefs and practices becoming intermingled as Alevi in spite of many local variations. Isolated from both the Sunni Ottomans and the Twelver Shi'a Safavids, Alevi developed traditions, practices, and doctrines by the early 17th century which marked them as a closed autonomous religious community. As a result of the immense pressures to conform to Sunni Islam, Alevi developed a tradition of opposition to all forms of external religion.

Some of the differences that mark Alevi from Sunnis are the use of wine for religious ceremonial functions; non-observance of the five daily prayers and prostrations (they only bow twice in the presence of their spiritual leader), Ramadan, and the Haj (they consider the pilgrimage to Mecca an external pretense, the real pilgrimage being internal in one's heart); and non-attendance of mosques.

Alevi were forbidden to proselytise, and Alevism regenerated itself internally by paternal descent. To prevent penetration by hostile outsiders, the Alevi insisted on strict endogamy which eventually made them into a quasi-ethnic group. Alevi taboos limited interaction with the dominant Sunni political-religious centre. Excommunication was the ultimate punishment threatening those who married outsiders, cooperated with outsiders economically, or ate with outsiders. It was also forbidden to use the state (Sunni) courts.

## MODERN HISTORY

Rural Alevi were marginalised and discriminated against in the Ottoman Empire, although the official Bektashiya order enjoyed a privileged role through its close association with the Janissary professional military corps. In 1826 Sultan Mahmud II massacred the Janissaries and suppressed the Bektashi order. Yet Bektashi secret circles remained extremely active, Bektashis becoming progressive, anticlerical, and liberal, viewed suspiciously by the authorities and cooperating with others hostile to the establishment such as Freemasons and Young Turks. Until 1925 it was estimated that 10 to 20 percent of Turkey's adult male population were still members of the Bektashiya.

Alevi saw Ataturk as a mehdi (Messiah), a Saviour, a divine emanation following Ali and Haji Bektash, sent to save them from the Sunni Ottoman yoke, who turned Alevi ideals into state practice, and his portrait is hung up beside Ali's in many Alevi homes. Ataturk on his part saw the Alevi as allies in his struggle against the traditional Ottoman elite and for secularism and Turkish nationalism. He selectively included Alevi cultural markers in his construct of the new Turkish

national collective identity. However, to ensure national unity, the unique Alevi identity was subordinated to the general Anatolian-Turkish national identity.

Alevi are proud of their cooperation with Ataturk, and the fact that the Celebi and Dede Baba of the Hacibektas monastery had supported him. Alevi were his faithful allies in the war of independence, in the setting up of the modern Turkish secular nationalist state, and in the destruction of Ottomanism. The early Kemalist republic is regarded as the ideal state in which the Alevi were fairly represented proportionately to their percentage of the total population in the National Assembly.

Kemalism turned Alevi into legally equal citizens, and its reforms had a radical impact on them as roads were built through their formerly isolated areas, compulsory schooling was introduced, and communications improved, drawing them out of their marginalisation into active engagement in social and political life and into deeper contact with the outside world and the state centre. The new Turkish Republic fulfilled many Alevi expectations, enabling them to identify with and support its nation-building measures - the Alevi still see themselves as the protectors of Kemalism and democracy in Turkey.

In his drive for secularization Ataturk later (1925) destroyed most religious frameworks, Sunni as well as Alevi, closing down the orders and confiscating their monasteries. Although driven underground, the orders continued to enjoy popularity in secret.

Secularization diminished traditional threats to Alevi existence transforming Turkish society into a less Alevi-hostile community. The downplay of religion in public life and the Westernisation of the ruling elite tended to turn Alevism into just one of several cultural and folklorist themes in Turkish nationalism. While still trying to maintain their ethnic identity, Alevi became increasingly secularised and neglected their traditional institutions. However, the wall of Sunni prejudice to the historically marginalised Alevi was not easily overcome, and Alevi remained to some extent the object of suspicion, in their turn remaining somewhat sceptical of the central state and its institutions.

As the existential danger receded and the community opened up to the outside world, solidarity ties loosened. ritual and ceremony lost some of their meaning and the spiritual leadership gradually lost its authority. This change in Alevi internal structures was accelerated by the massive migration into the cities, where Alevi underwent a process of secularisation and modernisation which broke traditional hereditary ties to the religious hierarchy. Religion lost its relevancy and even intermarriage was practiced by some. A new generation grew up in the 1960s that had not passed through initiation and was not familiar with the Alevi "Way" (yol).

However, the stigma of Alevism remained even as the younger generation tried to adapt itself to the secular Turkish identity. Alevi found that they still faced discrimination in employment and education, and again turned to taqiya for stigma management, adapting to Sunni ways in order to get a share of the scarce resources. Many concealed that they were Alevi, visited the mosques, and kept Ramadan. Education and migration were seen as the gateway to social upward mobility, and from 1960s on a new Alevi middle class appeared.

Under Menderes the Hacibektas centre was restored and reopened in 1964 as a museum, with annual celebrations in August for tourists in memory of the Saint.

When Sunni fundamentalism appeared in the 1970s, many Alevis reacted by reinterpreting Alevism in socialist and Marxist idiom that seemed to have an affinity to Alevi ideals. There was a generation gap in Alevism: the older generation remained Kemalist and hoped for the official reopening of the Bektashi order whilst the young generation became very politicised as they came in contact with revolutionary thought in universities, high schools, and trade unions. They claimed that the old forms were outdated and that Alevis must work for a radical restructuring of society. They saw all "reactionary" elements which tried to assimilate them into mainstream Sunni life as enemies, and joined extreme leftist parties, reinterpreting historical opposition to Sunnism in terms of class struggle and continuing the traditional Alevi role of opposition to the state. Some leftist Alevi activists also turned against their own religious hierarchy, branding them feudal exploiters of the masses and driving dedes out of their villages.

Much of the violence during the late 70s although presented by state and media as left versus right was in fact Sunni versus Alevi. Ultra-nationalists allied themselves to Sunni fundamentalists in attacking Alevis. Even some communists of Sunni background sided with conservative Sunnis against their political allies of Alevi background. In 1978 in the city of Kahramanras in southern Turkey local Sunnis went on a rampage, slaughtering scores of leftist Alevis from the nearby villages in the worst massacre in living memory.

The violence of the 70s resulted in the military takeover of 1980 whose purges hurt Alevis harder than others because of their leftist commitment, and the Hacibektas celebrations were forbidden for several years. As a reaction, community identification intensified and religious and cultural boundary markers against the Sunni majority regained importance.

The return of many Turks to their religious roots and the politicization of their communal identities were a crisis response to modernity and the accelerated rate of change it forced on Turkish society. Secularist ideologies such as Kemalism and socialism seemed to have failed and not delivered the hoped for goods. Alevis were not willing any more to sacrifice their communal identity on the altar of class-struggle and began consciously to identify themselves as a political group on the basis of a shared religious identity.

Turkish state politics after the military takeover encouraged Sunni-orthodox and nationalist unity ideology. Sunni Sufi orders such as the Naqshbandi, Suleimanci, and Nurcu became more visible, and Sunni propaganda disseminated by the government stated that Alevis were actually Sunnis with some divergent customs, negating the uniqueness of Alevism and trying to integrate it in state Sunnism. Whilst accepting that Alevism has important Turkish elements, the authorities tried to Sunnify Alevism, initiating a state policy of assimilation and Sunnification. Infrastructure improvements in Alevi villages were made conditional on compliance with mosque construction and the participation of all Alevi children in Sunni religious instruction.

As Sunni Islamism gained strength in the late 1980s and religious intolerance spread, an Alevi backlash occurred in the form of a cultural revival spearheaded by the new educated Alevi elite who organised foundations and trusts, rebuild Saint tombs, and restored rituals. There was an effort to reclaim traditions and remark boundaries, a call to reconstruct Alevi culture, community, and identity. A process was initiated of a reinterpretation of Alevi history and religion, culminating in an "invention of traditions" accompanied by a "coming out" of Alevis from century long dissimulation practices. For the first time in modern history Alevis dared to publicly accept their stigmatized identity, articulate their collective interests towards the state, and demand equality with the Sunni majority.

The 1980 military takeover brought all Turkish secularist movements under pressure due to the growing Islamization of public and private life. Alevi groups allied themselves to secular-liberal Sunni groups that feared for the secular Kemalist state - but Alevi groups at this time were not absorbed by these groups but cooperated with them as a separately identifiable group.

The democratic opening in Turkey in 1988/1989 broke taboos and opened up public discussions in the press. Publications were allowed that would never have been permitted before and liberals pushed for ethnographic studies of the Turkish society mosaic. Since 1989 the liberal press has accepted Alevism as a separate religious community. Along with other marginalized groups Alevi groups increased their political activism and fought for equality and official recognition of Alevism as an Islamic community with its special characteristics, for legalization of its religious ritual and practice, for integration of Alevi doctrine in the state education system, and for allotment of a fair share in the media.

The government was unhappy about the outcome of liberalisation. It had hoped to woo Alevi groups into a pure Turkish nationalist camp and separate them from other oppressed minorities, especially the exploding Kurdish nationalism. There was a growing state interest in dividing Alevi groups from Kurds and manipulating them to further the regime's aims. The Alevi groups for their part, encouraged by the weakening of the Soviet block and revived claims for minority recognition around the world, pressed for increased recognition in Turkish society. Alevi publications multiplied, and Alevi groups supported the claims of other minorities such as the Laz and the Kurds.

The pervasive influence of religion in public life in the 1990s has grave potential for a worsening of Sunni-Alevi tensions. In 1990 the Ministry of Culture took over the organisation of the Hacibektas festivities under the excuse of making it an international attraction. Alevi groups were unhappy about its interference in the programme especially in 1993 and 1994 as government officials stressed the Turkish elements in Alevism but ignored the community's specificity and did not give it any operating space as a minority community.

Renewed inter-communal violence is sadly on the rise. In July 1993 at a cultural festival in Sivas a Sunni fundamentalist mob set fire to a hotel where many Alevi participants had taken refuge and 35 people were incinerated. The state security services did not interfere and the prosecution against leaders of the riot was not energetically pursued.

More recently Istanbul municipal leaders from the Islamic political party Refah tried to raze an Alevi monastery and close the Ezgi cafe where young Alevi groups meet. In January 1995 a comedian cracked a joke about "Alevi incest" on Turkish TV sparking the first ever street protest by thousands of Alevi youths.

Some Alevi groups now demand a political party of their own to combat Sunni dominated Islamist parties, whilst others are afraid an Alevi party might lead to civil war.

## BELIEF AND PRACTICE

Alevism was never a unified, monolithic whole, but covers a wide spectrum of concepts and streams. Teachings were reinterpreted independently of any central authorities, contributing to the variety and flexibility of Alevism. Whilst some see it as syncretistic, with unislamic themes integrated into it, others see it as the true uncorrupted Islam.

Alevis regard themselves as true Muslim followers of Haji Bektash who emphasize the role of Ali in addition to the oneness of God and the prophecy of Muhammad. They accept Ali as the only legitimate successor to Muhammad add to the Witness formula (shahade) the words "and Ali is God's Friend". Muhammad and Ali are emanations of the Divine Light - Muhammad is the announcer, Ali the preserver of Divine Truth, and both seem sometime to merge into one divine figure. The veneration of Ali, approaching deification, is a central marker of all streams and Ali is placed above Muhammad with divine characteristics attributed to him as the gate (bab) to esoteric knowledge. As extreme Shias, Alevis believe in the incarnation of the Divine Light in Ali and his descendants the 12 Imams who are seen as infallible and sinless guardians of true Islam.

Alevis venerate Ehlibeyt - the House of the Prophet (Muhammad, Ali, Fatima, Hassan, Hussein) - seen as transcendent and superior to all others, and offer them love and reverence (sevgi ve saygi). They reject all enemies of ehlibeyt, especially the Ummayyads who are seen as the personification of evil: they imposed Sunnism as the dominant orthodoxy to enslave the masses; distorted true Islam; destroyed the original Quran and pro-Alid Hadiths, and persecuted the Imams.

The Islamic concept of God as patriarchal and authoritarian, judging people by their works, is coupled to the idea of a loving God with whom you can be united by a heartfelt faith and esoteric rites. Alevis have a trinitarian concept of the Godhead consisting of Allah, Muhammad and Ali. God manifested himself in human form (tecelli) cyclically in history, but ultimately and finally in Ali.

God is approached by four different "gates": Shariat (Islamic law) - the Sunni way of external duties; Tariqat (the path) - the inner way of the heart into which Alevis are born; Marifet (knowledge) - the esoteric intuitive knowledge of God to which few people attain; Haqiqat (ultimate truth) - union with God, the highest degree, to which only a very select few (Saints) attain. Each gate has ten makams (stations, duties) which the faithful must master before progresing to the next gate.

Alevis interpret the Quran in an esoteric, allegoric and symbolic (batini) manner, rejecting literal interpretations. In addition to the Quran, Alevis have their holy books called "buyruk" that expound doctrine and ritual and are claimed to have been written by Cafer-i Sadeq, Seyh Safi ad-Din and others. Alevi also have many liturgical hymns called nefes. attributed to Sah Imail and Pir Sultan Abdal.

Alevis concentrate on the inner meaning of religion and repudiate the external forms of Islam and its five pillars. Alevi villages lack mosques except were forcibly built in Ottoman times or induced to build them in order to gain access to government funds in recent decades, and there are no muezzin calls to prayer.

The ultimate eschatological hope is the returning mehdi who is fervently awaited as the Saviour who will set all things right, initiating a new and just world-order. Shah Ismail and Ataturk are seen as mehdis of their time, guiding men in the right way and prefiguring the ultimate mehdi.

Alevi have a Sufi doctrine of the "Perfect Man" (Insan-i Kamil) and salvation lies partly in emulating perfect figures, such as Ali, Hacı Bektac, and other Saints.

Central to Alevi faith is the edeb moral code: the ideal Alevi is "master of his hand, his tongue, his loins" ("Eline diline beline sahip olmak") - an ethic that forbids theft, lies, and adultery and is the absolute centre of Alevi behaviour. God is present in every man and every man must seek for "purity of heart" and self-knowledge, piety being measured by lifestyle and not by ritual. Love and forgiveness are seen as important elements in interpersonal relationships.

Alevi practice taqiya, the duty to keep their faith secret and practice dissimulation of their own beliefs and assumption of a majority religion external front seen as obligatory in times of persecution to ensure survival of the community. Alevi men tended to have mustaches which covered their upper lip to help recognise each other and symbolize the secrecy of their creed.

In this century, secularised urban Alevi would hide their Alevism from authorities and neighbours and visit Sunni mosques to escape stigmatization and ensure equal access to state resources and social upward mobility.

Alevi society is divided into two separate endogamous groups, with no intermarriage allowed between them: the spiritual and social elite, the ocak, who claim descent from Ali, Hussein, the 12 Imams, legendary Saints or religious warriors (ghazi) and constitute a priestly caste, and the majority lay members, the talips (disciples). Religious knowledge was passed down orally in the "Saintly" ocak families who were responsible for the religious and social leadership of the community. Most ocakzade (sons of ocak) recognize the ultimate authority of the supreme head of the Celebi in Hacibektas monastery. From these descent lines come the mursits (teachers), dede (grandfathers), pirs (elders), and rehber (guides). They stand in a master-disciple relationship to each other in their hierarchy, and each has specific duties towards the lay community. The dede oversees several villages and visits them annually, the rehber representing him in each village.

The ocak perform the rituals, teach the new generation, initiate the young, mediate in conflicts, and aid talips in need. They are the central authority for the survival of Alevi religious knowledge and identity. Some 10% of Alevi are of ocak lineage. Every lay member has a specific dede as teacher, the relationship between them strengthened by the talip appearing before his dede once a year to be questioned as to his conduct.

Rituals (ibadet) are communal, their aim being unity (birlik) and love (muhabbet) within the community. They express God's love to man, His most perfect creation in whom He manifests himself.

Alevi rituals differ markedly from those of Sunnis: they fast in the month of Muharram for 12 days in memory of Hussein's death at Karbala and the sufferings of the 12 Imams, this fast is called yas, and reaches its climax on the day of Ashura in which symbolic foods are eaten and nefes recited, the early tragedy symbolizing all discrimination and persecution suffered by Alevi since then.

The central ritual of Alevi religious life is the ayn-i cem (cem for short) celebration that is a replay of Muhammad's legendary heavenly journey (mirac) with the assembly of forty (kirkklar meclisi), combined with a memorial to the suffering of the Twelve Imams. A sacrificial meal (lokma), a ritual alcoholic drink, nefes hymns accompanied by music on the saz, dance (sema), and the ritual lighting and extinguishing of candles, are elements of the celebration. The ayn-i cem takes place only when distrusted outsiders are not present, and is held at night under great secrecy - a fact that

opened it to Sunni speculations of immorality. Once a year this ritual is held under the leadership of a dede assisted by a rehber in a private house or a communal building (cemevi) attended by women on almost equal footing with men.

For Alevis, the ayn-i cem is as important as Kurban Bayram (Abraham's Sacrifice) to the Sunnis. This ceremony cannot take place unless all are at peace with each other, a condition attained by the questioning (sorgu, bas okutma) of all initiates to ensure reconciliation in the community. The dede is the chairman but all can take part in the judicial procedures whose aim is reconciliation, not punishment. Punishments include fines, corporal punishment, and excommunication.

After the questioning the real ritual starts: the initiation (nasip alma) of the new generation symbolises their progress from Seriat to Tarikat and is likened to a new birth. They enter a master-disciple relationship with a dede and vow (ikrar) to follow the Alevi path (yol). Then comes the ceremony of the twelve services (oniki hizmet) led by the dede, rehbar and elders.

Members of the community approach the dede in pairs, hand in hand, kneeling down and walking on all fours like lambs to kiss the hem of his coat. Sema music is performed and the men and women dance, some dancers going into a trance. Alevi mystical poetry commemorating the martyrs of the Alevi community is recited. The rite culminates with the "putting out of candles", when water is thrown on 12 burning candles to extinguish them in front of officiating elders. People moan, weep, and curse those responsible for the death of Ali and the martyrs.

Other Alevi Holy days are Nevruz, the Persian New Year celebrated on the 9th March, the Khidirellez day on the 6th May in honour of Khidr (Elijah, St. George), and the twelve day Muharram fast culminating in Ashura.

Alevi society has a double structure of kinship to protect it against outside pressures and central government penetration: beyond the blood-kinship of family, each lay person is the disciple (talip) of a spiritual guide from a sacred lineage in a quasi father-child relationship. In addition, two unrelated lay men together with their wives enter into an unrevokable kinship relationship (musahiplik) that demands total solidarity and sharing of all possessions and responsibility for all debts, as well as mutual encouragement and exhortation to walk the Alevi path. It is also called yol kaedesligi (path fraternity) and ahiret kardislegi (other world fraternity) and is deeper than a blood relationship. Inter-marriage between the two families is forbidden to the second generation.

A characteristic of Alevi society are the ideals of equality, justice, and respect for all, which give Alevi women a more respected status than that of Sunni women. Alevi women do not need to be veiled and are not as segregated, nor fear polygamy or one-sided divorce. They also partake equally in the religious life of the community.

The main Alevi symbolic heroes are Ali, Hussein, Cafer-i Sadik, all Twelve Imams, Haci Bektas Veli, Sah Ismail, Balim Sultan, Pir Sultan Abdal, and the modern mehdi - Ataturk:

Cafer-i Sadik was the 6th Imam, author of the Buyruk Alevi scriptures and founder of the Cafari madhab.

Haci Bektas Veli (1248-1337 ?) - is pictured as a Turkish thinker, hero, saint, wise man, and miracle worker of `Alid descent who formed a synthesis of Turkish and Islamic civilisations, reforming Islam in a way suitable to his time and culture.

Sah Ismail is seen as a central identification figure, who fought bravely for true Alevism against the evil and cruel Selim I (The Grim) who mercilessly massacred Alevis and whose reign was the darkest in Ottoman history. Ismail is a figure of light, the friend of the poor, and a fighter for Turkish culture - his state was Turkish in its spiritual and literary creation. His defeat at Chaldiran is seen as a new Karbala and the later Safavid Twelver Shia state he founded as a mistake due to his weakness and to external attacks.

Balim Sultan - systematised the Bektashi order rules, and established the order as part of the Ottoman establishment and as order of the Janissary corps.

Pir Sultan Abdal (d. 1550?) - a mystic, poet, and rebel, was the father of folk-singers and the poet of rebellion who identified with the marginalised masses. He led a peasant rebellion against the Ottomans and was killed in the purges of Safavi followers after Chaldiran. His poetry inspired revolutionary Alevi youth in the 1970s, and his famous lines: "Come O people, let us be one, let us be alive, let us be great" became the Alevi slogan.

## RELATIONSHIP TO SUNNI ORTHODOXY AND FUNDAMENTALISM

During the Ottoman period Sunnis accused Alevis of syncretism, rebellion, betrayal, and immorality as ghulat heretics. From the dominant Sunni perspective, Alevi interpretations of Muslim traditions were false and they were accused of suspicious practices and beliefs, including sexual orgies and incest. In modern times Sunni nationalism has tried to reduce and relativize the differences between Sunni and Alevi Islam, claiming that Alevism was the Sunni religion of nomadic Turkmen who deviated somewhat from orthodoxy.

Alevis are now trying to overcome the centuries of Sunni prejudice and persecution and assert their own identity. Alevis see Sunni narrowmindedness as originating in Arabia and as contrary to the Turkish national character. Sunna and Hadith were Arab elite innovations to ensure their dominance of Islam and enslave the masses by their manipulation - and the Ottomans followed in their footsteps. All evil developments in Islam are seen as the fault of Arab society and character. Sunnism is not true Islam, but an aberration that by its strict legalism opposes free, independent thought and is seen as reactionary, bigoted, fanatic, and antidemocratic.

Alevis use Sunnism as the "Other", the opposite pole to Alevism, by which they identify themselves. The original Quran does not demand five prayers, nor mosque attendance, nor pilgrimage - the Sunnis distorted early Islam by omitting, misinterpreting, or changing important passages of the original Quran, especially those dealing with Ali and ritual practice. Only Alevis have kept Muhammad's Islam in its pure form, fulfilling his demands for moral purity, love of humanity, and faith in one God, and only they can claim to be the "true Islam." Alevis see themselves in contrast to Sunnis as tolerant and not aggressive xenophobic chauvinists. Sunni nationalism is seen as intolerant, domineering, unwilling to recognise Alevi uniqueness.

Alevis traditionally saw themselves as belonging to the "community of the saved", a chosen people who possess the divine secret knowledge and are superior to the misled Sunnis in their zeal for

externals. They trace their roots to the original true revelation of Islam to Muhammad in Arabia, and stress that it was a religion of freedom, equality, and justice. Ali as Muhammad's only true successor and the most perfect of Muslims carried on true Islam and was the representative of the poor and the marginalised. All great Alevi leaders have the typical Alevi characteristics of justice, egalitarianism, humility, and peacefulness. They all were revolutionaries aiming at radical change in society, loyal to ideals, fighting for the final triumph of good over evil. In God's inscrutable providence, good Alevism was forced to an underground existence of dissimulation and retreat due to a powerful onslaught of evil.

In the political arena of today Alevism is seen as a counterforce to Sunni fundamentalism, ensuring the continued secularism of Turkey. Alevis, who have a great interest in blocking the rising fundamentalist influence are the main allies of the secularist forces, and are also searching for alliances with moderate Sunnis against the extremists, demanding from the state recognition of Alevism as an official Islamic community equal but different to Sunnism.

#### Alevi views of Alevism

Alevism is not monolithic, but exhibits a variety of interpretations with no consensus on the dominant mix. The modern Alevi leadership stresses internal harmony, and the development of an integrated ethnic "us" community in an effort to present a common Alevi front against state and Sunni fundamentalists.

Alevis situationally prioritise various aspects of their identity presenting Alevism as a separate religion, a belief-system, the true Islam, an Islamic Caferi madhab, a Sufi tariqa, an ethnic group, a philosophy, a worldview, a way of life, a political position, a social opposition, a culture, and a civilisation.

Alevism is presented as the religion of reason and wisdom which stresses education, is progressive, stands for secularism, democracy and science, promotes personal and public honesty, and is compatible with modernity.

Since the beginning of the Republican era, the "Turkish thesis" claimed Turkishness as a main marker of Alevism, seen as a specific Turkish religion which succeeded in combining Islam with elements of authentic Turkish culture including Shamanism, thereby developing a faith much more suitable for Turks than Arabic Islam and including authentic Turkish traits such as tolerance, humanitarianism, egalitarianism, and a stress on the inner religion of the heart - traits suppressed by Sunnism. Alevism is viewed as the true preserver of authentic Turkish culture, religion, and language amidst Ottoman pressures to Arabise or Persianise. Turks were a civilised nation in contrast to the primitive and brutal Arabs who tried to dominate Islam and enslave all other people. The Turks are the real guardians and sword of Islam - and the Alevis are the real Turks.

Modern Alevi apologetics trace Alevism back to the founding stage of Islam, refuting the old accusations of Alevi heresy by the Sunni orthodoxy and using Quran and Hadith to defend Alevi doctrine and practice. Ali, Hussein, and other Shia-Alevi heroes are set up as identity figures and role models for the new generation. Haci Bektas Veli and other Alevi saints are used to stress the regional uniqueness of Alevism and its special relationship to "Turkism", and are presented as national heroes fighting for Turkish culture.

Another view sees Alevism as the authentic expression of an Anatolian culture, and sets up an Anatolian cultural mosaic as against specific Turkish nationalism. This mosaic includes the Greeks and Armenians in addition to Turks, Kurds, and Zaza, as an important part of the mix, as they were allied to the Alevis against the Ottoman oppression. In this view Alevism is defined in more universalist cultural forms, recognising three factors that united in its creation: the local Anatolian heritage; the Central Asian Turkic culture and religion migrating to Anatolia since the 11th century; and the old Anatolian Greek, Roman, and Christian inheritance. A synthesis was created of these three elements with Islam superimposed on the lot creating an Anatolian religion suitable for Anatolian populations.

Alevis also see Alevism as the true Shia Islam of the Caferi madhab, an Islam that can adapt to modernity as it is flexible, adaptable, and tolerant. The Turks accepted Shia Islam on conversion out of a natural sense of equality and justice. Iranian Imami Twelver Shi'ism is seen as an aberrant Shi'ism, as only the Alevis have kept the authentic, original, pure Shiism alive. They stress their separateness from Iranian Twelver Shiism and the revolutionary Iran of today.

Alevism is also presented as a humanistic ideology, as represented by the typical Alevi characteristics of tolerance, love, and respect for all men created in God's image and in whom God manifests himself, regardless of race, religion, or nation. Love, help for those in need, kindness, solidarity, sharing, honesty, self knowledge, freedom, equality, fraternity, democracy - all are seen as unique humanitarian Alevi traits.

Socially Alevism is seen as a positive revolutionary force always fighting against oppression and all forms of evil in society, representing the poor and marginalised nomads, peasants and worker classes in their struggles against their exploiters, and demanding equality and justice. Ali was the defender of the poor and oppressed. Hasan and Huseyn were martyrs in the cause of the dispossessed. Religious differentiation was transformed into political differentiation and Alevism became the representative of socialism, progress, social justice, and a classless society, branding Sunnism as reactionary.

As a revolutionary political ideology Alevism always led the fight for liberation against all tyranny in the succession to Muhammad, upholding the oppressed masses against a Sunnism which served the rich and powerful dominant elites.

## RENEWAL OF RITUALS AND RECONSTRUCTION OF COMMUNITY

Government efforts at the end of the 1980s to assimilate Alevis into a Sunni-Turkish unity ideology caused an Alevi reaction and backlash expressed in efforts to renew specific Alevi pride and assertiveness, unite the diverse elements, and mobilise the young generation. The new educated elite lead in this effort at a renewed ethnic group construction using the reinvention of tradition and a revitalisation of Alevi rituals to draw strength from the past and reform the present. The reformers are committed to the rehabilitation of traditional knowledge, customs, and philosophy in modern forms, including also a rehabilitation of the spiritual ocak leadership as bearers of the specific Alevi essence. Ethnic markers like overhanging mustache, chains with Alevi symbols, etc. are reintroduced, and Alevism is transformed from a folk religion to a modern competitor to Sunnism.

This reinvention of Alevism after a 30 year break leads to a reaffirmation of Alevi markers that differentiate the community and express its uniqueness and greatness. The old Alevi rituals are being adapted to the urban dislocated youth, attempting to strengthen their Alevi identity and mark boundaries to Sunnism. The Cem rituals have become a visual training ground for youth in Alevi traditions, and are held in town wedding halls and sport halls as mass happenings. In this milieu Alevi music and poetry are flourishing again.

The new lay leadership recognises the mistake of driving the dedes out of the villages in the revolutionary zeal of the 1960s and 1970s. They see the need for the ocak to teach the spiritual heritage to the new generation and to preserve Alevi culture and stress the importance of cooperation between laity and dedes. They recognise the need to minimise differences by reforms aimed at fixing a unified Alevi dogma in writing. The dede caste are now respected as symbols of Alevism, and a reform of the institution of dedelik is being discussed which includes the foundation of a central training institute, a theological faculty and a central Alevi research institute in Hacibektas.

Writing is taking over from oral traditions as many try to answer the question: What is Alevism? The new Alevi authors consciously accept the Alevi identity on the basis of traditional lineage descent criteria - being born to Alevi parents. They also accept other traditional criteria of Alevi identity: a unique religious faith with its specific view of God, Saints, values, norms, rites, and customs. A boundary setting towards others, a "we" as against a "them" group consciousness is promoted as Alevi authors use idioms associated with ethnic group identity that stresses "our" culture, our faith, our identity versus the "other".

## RISE OF A NEW LEADERSHIP AND A NEW ACTIVISM

It was the rise of a new lay secular intelligentsia, expressing the emergence of a new middle class as leader of the Alevi community, that was the catalyst to revival. This new lay elite was well educated and had a standing in general Turkish urban society. The 1980 military takeover resulted in many Alevi academics being fired and exiled, resulting in their becoming deeply involved in Alevi identity formation and the strengthening of Alevi group consciousness.

The new elite, in its push for change, constructs a new picture of Alevi history in line with its present worldview. Ideas and institutions significant to the present situation are cast back onto

Alevi founder figures such as Ali and Hacı Bektaş Veli who are presented as the acme of perfection and Alevi ideals of absolute justice, solidarity with the poor, selfknowledge, humility, wisdom, respect for all men.

As a result of the above developments we are facing a new phenomena of the Alevi coming out into the open, boldly proclaiming their Alevism, determined to take their own destiny into their own hands and not let others determine it for them. Traditional passivity has turned into an activism that has created an independent political force separate from state and parties. This activism, ideologisation and mobilisation are expressed in the founding of many new Alevi organisations and the publication of Alevi journals and books.

This Alevi activism can also be seen as part of wider movement of minorities claiming recognition, equality, and freedom in the Turkish state and including Kurds, Alevis, Laz, and Zaza. All these are reconstructing their own identity and demanding a secular pluralistic democracy that will ensure group equality and access to resources.

## ALEVI DEMANDS OF THE TURKISH STATE

Modern Alevi activism has led to the formulation of political demands to the state for equal treatment of Alevism to Sunnism, and for a total secularisation of the state to ensure equal access to resources and power, as well as for real democracy, egalitarianism, and social justice for all groups in Turkish society. They also demand the implementation of the UN human-rights charter, an end to torture and to the death sentence, and a guarantee of basic citizen rights including religious and conscience freedom.

Alevis want the state to recognise Alevism as a unique faith allowing free religious expression for Alevism and a stop to enforced mosque building in Alevi communities. They demand the state open the tekkes, legalise the Sufi orders, allow Alevi children to learn Alevism in school rather than Sunni Islam, and allow free access to state archives and documents that concern Alevism.

Turkey is experiencing a new interest of non-Alevis in Alevism, and their identification with it. Eventually Alevism will have to accept such sympathisers despite traditional exclusivity, secrecy, taqiya, and endogamy. Descent could become less important and Alevism would be more like a Western religious sect pushing for separation of church and state.

## ALEVIS AND KURDS

Kurds had lived peacably with Turks until the state suppression of Kurdishness and the separatist movement of recent decades. On the other hand, Alevis and Sunnis have been fighting each other for centuries in Anatolian villages.

Historically Alevism united Turks and Kurds in one Alevi community that felt nearer to other persecuted Anatolian communities such as Armenians and Assyrians than to Sunni Turks or Kurds. However the ritual language of Zaza and Kurmaji speakers is Turkish - a sign of Turkish dominance. Until WWI the area was populated by multi-ethnic groups, Kurds and Armenians comprising the majority. As a result of the Armenian massacres and their deportation by the Young Turks in 1915 the Armenian population almost disappeared, and the Alevi Kurds spread further east into Western Iran where they are called Ahl-i Haqq (Ali Ilahis).

A special affinity has been noted between the Armenians and the Alevi Kurds. Some observers claim that Armenians when under persecution nominally accepted Alevi Islam, and Alevi Kurds retain some Christian practices.

In the 1980s the authentic Turkishness of Alevism became a dominant discourse, causing Kurdish (and Zazaki) Alevi to question their identity: is Alevism Turkish or supra-national? are they Alevi first and Kurds second, or is it the other way round? The ethnic and linguistic differences became stronger in the Alevi camp, Kurdish Alevi claiming that Alevism is a Kurdish religion which the Turkmens accepted as they migrated into Anatolia. They also claim that rather than become Sunnis, persecuted Turkish Alevi became Kurds, keeping their Alevism.

Alevi revivalists who at first ignored ethnicity have now to search for unifying factors, trying to show Alevism as an ethnically mixed community, and distance themselves from the Turkish thesis. They stress Alevism as a bridge uniting Turks and Kurds. There are efforts at integration of all linguistic groups into one Alevi unity so as to strengthen their demands from the state. Since 1992 the Anatolian-mosaic model, claiming plurality and equality of all communities, is becoming dominant, replacing the specific Turkish-Alevi model.

Historically there is a gap between Alevi and the Sunni Kurds who are seen as tools of the Ottoman tyranny, willing to oppress and massacre Alevi and other non-Sunni minorities in Anatolia and take their lands. However, today as the Kurds have become a persecuted minority, most Alevi are sympathetic to their cause. Radicalisation of Kurdish nationalism due to state repression raises questions for these groups. In the field of multiple identities - which will be prioritized?

#### ZAZA ALEVI OF TUNCELLI (DERSIM)

Dersim (Tunceli) province is the centre of the Kurdish Zaza speaking Alevi and it suffers from the double defect of being both religiously Alevi and ethnically Kurdish. The mixing of Alevi leftism with Kurdish separatism in this remote province has made it a thorn in the side of every central government since Sultan Selim The Grim. It remains the least developed of Turkey's provinces.

The Zaza (Dimli) language belongs to a different Iranian language sub-branch from Kurmanji, and speakers of these languages cannot understand each other. The Zaza claim all Kurds were Alevi until converted by force to Sunnism. Although usually seen as Kurds, there is traditional enmity between Alevi Zaza Kurds and Sunni Kurds speaking Kurmaji. Zaza Alevi see themselves mainly

as Alevis and oppose tendencies to divide Alevism into Turkish and Kurdish communities. However, as Kurdish nationalism grows, more and more Zaza speakers decide to prioritise their Kurdish identity over their Alevi identity.

The Dersim revolt of 1938 occurred when the local inhabitants led by Seyyed Reza revolted against the imposition of the national draft and taxes in kind. They blew up bridges, blocked passes, and slaughtered soldiers in revenge against massacres of civilians. The rebellion was savagely crushed by the Turkish army who rushed reinforcements to the area and used planes to dive bomb the villages. The massacre and atrocities that followed, as well as the forced mass migration of the survivors to different areas of the country, have been erased from official Turkish history, living on only in the memories of the survivors. It is only now, after half a century, that the younger generation is starting to explore the roots and consequences of that episode.

Some Zazakis claim that they are not Kurds but a separate ethnic group and that Zazaki is not a Kurdish language, but a different Iranian dialect. Some of the Zaza immigrants to the West have formulated a new ideology of a separate Zaza nation demanding autonomy in the Zaza populated areas of Turkey.

## ALEVIS AND EVANGELISM

Observers state that a majority of Muslim converts in Turkey came from an Alevi background, and this has been substantiated by other sources. Seeing that many missionaries to Turkey were not even cognizant of Alevi existence, the question must be asked why it is that evangelistic efforts aimed at Sunni Turks resulted in the conversion of Alevis.

The answer seems to lie in two directions: first, the well known pattern of marginalised minorities in the modern nation-states tending to accept radical ideologies (mainly leftist-Marxist, but also Christian) as an expression of protest against majority domination and discrimination and as a way out of their impasse. Second, Alevi religious doctrine and practice seems much closer to Christianity than does Sunnism. This is especially true in the areas of heart faith as against externalised legalistic law keeping, the stress on love in human relationships, the notions of incarnation and Trinitarianism present to some extent in Alevism, etc.

Another question we need to ask is that if when aiming at Sunnis we see Alevis converted, then how much more effective would we be if we consciously aimed our evangelism at Alevis, using their discourse and idiom. That would also mean setting up separate specialised evangelistic efforts to reach Sunnis, which might be more effective than our generalised practices up to now.

We also need to think of the possibility of separate fellowships for converts from the different communities, as the distrust and prejudice can carry through a long time after conversion and sour relationships within the fellowships. Might it not be that the often perceived distrust among Muslim converts lies partly in this sectarian divide? While the Gospel breaks down all barriers, let us not forget that it takes time, and that it might be prudent to start with separate fellowships, that also

initiate styles of worship with more affinity to either the Alevi or Sunni converts, enhancing their "feel good factor" and sense of security.

## SUMMARY: ALEVI ETHNICITY & PROSPECTS FOR TURKISH STATE

The changes in Turkish society forced by Ataturk's secularisation drive resulted in deep changes in the Alevi community. Their traditional social-religious organisation broke down, and religion itself seemed to weaken as the younger generation adopted leftist and Marxist attitudes. However this did not mean the loss of ethnic identity, but rather a reinterpretation of their religious idiom and group-defining criteria in socio-political terms. Their adoption of "progressive" ideologies opened the way for alliances with other, non-Alevi, "progressive" groups, as well as for a universalization of their unique Alevi doctrines, now seen as an expression of the universal human search for equality and social justice and freedom from oppression and exploitation.

Whilst the younger generation seemed to have lost its religious traditions, and many observers claimed Alevis were being assimilated into the total Turkish society, the last two decades have seen a revival of specific Alevi identity, fuelled by Alevi revival in the West (especially Germany), and by the resurgence of Islamic Sunni fundamentalism in Turkey, which has endangered the secularist Kemalist orientation of the state, and increased attacks on Alevis in press, media, and street violence. Alevis are now reconstructing their religious traditions, doctrines and organisations as well as demanding a fair share of access to the state and its resources as a separate religious/ethnic community in Turkey.

The question for the Turkish state and its leaders is whether they can reconstruct a national Turkish identity that does not base itself solely on the Sunni element of society, but is secularist and pluralistic enough to accept Alevism (and Kurdism) as equal partners in the national formula, with legitimate expressions of their cultural and religious uniqueness and equal access to all state resources and power centres. This entails the use of the state and all its organs in a massive construction of a pan-national consensus on this identity, which would label as illegitimate any attacks on the former marginalised groups.

A continuation of the present trend to add only the Turkish-Sunni element to the Kemalist-secularist identity, and crush all other autonomous identities, will ensure Turkey a long and violent internal struggle which will weaken the state, damage its international relations, and might in the long-term lead to its disintegration.

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