

# **Alevi in Cemevis: Religion and Secularism in Turkey**

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Three years ago, one afternoon at the Okmeydani *Cemevi* in Istanbul, I was helping out Ali, a teenager who volunteered to work there certain days of the week. We were cleaning up the congregational hall of the cemevi after the service when we found some nuts and paper tissues left on the floor. Ali, partly because of my presence, was embarrassed and furious. He started to criticize the congregation for their ignorance. Then his uneasiness with the lack of orderliness within the community expanded to cemevi itself: “Why do not we have tidy place [of worship] like Sunnis? In every mosque everyone gathers for prayer at the same time, the prayers are the same everywhere, there is no difference in terms of individual practices of imams compared to our *dedes*. We should work hard to make all cemevis alike, just like mosques.” In this paper, I will discuss some of the tensions and struggles underlying Ali’s frustration with cemevis, and try to offer some explanation by situating Alevi communities within the larger context of secular public religion in Turkey.

Alevi are diverse ethno-religious communities comprising one fifth to one third of Turkey’s population. Due to their non-conformist beliefs and practices, they have often been considered heretics, if not ignorant Muslims by Sunnis, in need of enlightenment about ‘the true Islam’ (Clarke). For instance, the majority of Alevi do not go to mosques, or perform daily prayers (*namaz*). Instead they participate in *cem* ceremonies, communal gatherings led by *dedes*, charismatic spiritual leaders who claim to descend from the line of the prophet Mohammed. Alevi beliefs and practices are immensely diverse as a result of the predominantly oral transmission of lore and traditions –at least until recently- as well as relatively isolated trajectories of historical development in various regions (Van Bruinessen). There are not only regional, but also ethnic and linguistic differences that cut across Alevi communities, underlying the presence of a multitude of Alevisms in Turkey. Until recently, the relatively marginalized public position of Alevi forced them to practice in secrecy. Diverse Alevi communities had often limited contact with not only the Sunnis, but also with other ‘Alevi’ communities (Olsson et al.). Hence, the reasons of Ali’s frustration with “the lack” of a certain type of order in his cemevi lie first of all with the absence of such homogeneity within and

between Alevi communities. The same diversity characterizing Alevi presence in Turkey is reflected on the architecture, design and uses of cemevis.

Cemevi literally means “house of gathering.” Cemevis are cultural and religious centers established by and for Alevis. They emerged in the urban centers largely during the last two decades. Cemevis provide space for organizing cem ceremonies and communal services such as funerals, sacrificing of animals and distribution of alms. They also are sites of ‘cultural activities’ such as music and dance classes. The struggles revolving around the construction of cemevis as places of worship alternative to mosques have engendered heated debates about the secularism and religion in Turkey since the early 1990s. Prior to the emergence of cemevis in cities, the communal services such as cem were often held in the houses of the members of the congregation in a circular way, usually during the winter months (Aydin). Urban migration of the post 1960 period has been a seminal catalyst of the construction of cemevis. There were only three cemevis in Istanbul before 1993 and by March 1994 the numbers had increased to around twenty (Seufert). During the fieldwork that laid the groundwork for this paper, between 2004 and 2007 only in Istanbul there were around thirty cemevis.

The ongoing process of establishing cemevis as legitimate places of worship has not been a smooth one. From the early 1990s on cemevi constructions have often been initiated illegally and they have gradually become established as “culture centers,” which is the only viable legal status a cemevi can possibly attain today. To date the Turkish state refuses to recognize cemevis as places of worship, a category reserved for mosques exclusively.

After this brief introduction, I will now discuss the increasingly widespread efforts to define Alevi beliefs, practices and communities in a systematic and monolithic fashion and implications of such unitary tendencies for cemevis. Such tendencies have to do with the shifting location of Alevi beliefs and practices from the semi-isolated lifeworlds of various Alevi communities to become part of the public realm. One of the outcomes of the movement of various Alevi communities to urban centers has been the need to redefine what it meant to be an Alevi, because the ambiguous and multiple meanings of Aleviness posed difficulties regarding the incorporation of Alevis into the state discourses and governance strategies. Categorizing a number of non-Sunni communities as ‘Alevis’ and conceptualizing their diverse beliefs and practices under the unitary signifier of ‘Alevism’ makes it easier to deal with, operate on, handle, and administer Alevi communities in the public sphere by both state and non-state actors, including Alevist organizations. The multiplicity of meanings surrounding

Aleviness poses problems for the Alevist organizations in terms of their claims to represent the interests of Alevi communities in public sphere. As a result, Alevist organizations themselves ironically undermine very diversity of communities they claim to represent as they purport to speak for the totality of Alevi communities, which they call the ‘Alevi society’.

The political atmosphere of the 1990s provided opportunities for political mobilization on the basis of Alevism. This was partly possible caused by Turkish state’s efforts to incorporate Alevi communities into state discourses by Turkification and secularization of Alevi pasts (Bozarlan). Increasing Sunnification of the state and society under Islamist politics during the same period urged the secularist segments of the society to seek alliance with an emergent Alevist movement. Accordingly, Alevism was reformulated either as the ‘humanist’ face of Islam or the ‘Turkish Islam’ in order to balance the increasing power of the groups that conceived Sunni Islam as a basis for political mobilization (Camuroglu). The process of Turkey’s accession to the European Union was another important factor that introduced a new legal framework through which the demands of Alevist organizations could be articulated against the unitary stance of the nationalist state through multiculturalist discourses (Erdemir). There has been a growing trend towards the emergence of centers, and institutionalized Alevi groups have been contesting each other to attain the monopoly over the right to represent the best interest of *all* Alevis.

The emergence and rising number of cemevis in public space point to an attempt on the side of Alevi communities to inscribe their identity in urban space. In this regard cemevis complement the visibility of Alevism in public sphere with Alevi visibility in public space. This situation serves rendering Alevi presence in urban public space recognized and normalized. The institutionalized presence of Alevi communities in the urban public space poses a claim of recognition directed at the Sunni majority and the state, hence a will to incorporate into the larger societal and state institutions. Cemevis in this process materialize as vantage points from which Alevi organizations launch their negotiations with the state for legal recognition necessary for attaining religious and cultural rights.

Now let me elaborate on the impact of politics of representation on the Alevi institutions and practices within the context I laid out. Such transformations have been articulated through the institutional and legal frameworks that Alevi groups were increasingly subject to in the urban context. For this reason, experience of Alevi communities in the urban space entails conceptualizing their gaining visibility in the public space beyond the paradigm of the ‘flourishing’ of a suppressed identity, since, as David Morley remarks “not everyone can feel comfortable in the public sphere in a naturalised and secure way when they become visible

as the other” ( p. 119). Sharing the same urban space with Sunnis and participation in public sphere have made Alevis increasingly anxious about their *difference* from Sunnis. As a result Alevist politics of difference is also predicated on a strong anxiety to stress the *similarities* between Alevis and Sunnis due to the asymmetrical power relations between the two groups. Cemevis today play a significant role in the Alevist politics of representation: open-to-public cem ceremonies are organized to promote the image of a moral and credible ‘other’ in the eyes of Sunnis; and, a modern and secular community in the eyes of secularist groups, state actors and Westerners who visit cemevis to observe cem ceremonies. The language used in cem ceremonies and funeral prayers (Turkish or Arabic?), the regulation and distribution of female bodies in congregational halls (mixed or separate with men?) as well as the costumes Alevi dedes wear during the performance of Alevi rites and services (similar to, or different than imams?) are all subjects of fervent debates.

Two examples from my fieldwork is in order to illustrate this point. During an interview a dede told me that once a family approached him before a funeral to ensure that he would not make any remarks that might sound offensive to their Sunni neighbors. They also asked if he could recite at least a few prayers in Arabic during the funeral. This family wanted to show their Sunni friends that they were ‘proper’ Muslims just like them. The second example is from a cem ceremony I attended with Fatma, an Alevi woman. Fatma was a lower middle class professional who run her own textile shop. She had brought a Sunni friend to observe the cem ceremony with her. When the ceremony started she pointed to some women in the congregation, most of whom were rural migrants with working class background, and said, “Why are they wearing headcovers (*baş örtüsü*)? They should come here as they are (*oldukları gibi*).” Fatma was surprised to see Alevi women covering their heads because of her lack of unmediated contact with other Alevi women. This prevented her from seeing that some – especially middle aged and older– Alevi women cover their heads not only during cems but also in their everyday lives, albeit not in the same way as Sunni women do. Fatma was embarrassed in the presence of her guest that these working class women did not perform as the “modern secular” religious subjects as they should.

The fact that Alevis live under the gaze of multiple others, most important of which is the Sunnis, play an important role in the definition and the organization of Alevi beliefs and practices. Similarly, mosques are the “other” of cemevis. Just like Alevism is defined on the basis of what it “lacks” in comparison to Sunnism, cemevis are defined according to what they “lack” compared to mosques. Cemevis are places that are defined on the basis of real or imagined *lack* (of legitimacy, history, legal status or financial means), of *absence* (of a unitary

architecture, a community), of *incompleteness* (of symbolic and material construction) and of *danger* (of police raid, Islamist attack, and legal ambivalence as regards their status). Although cemevis have been constructed discursively as what mosques are not, they are also defined with reference to mosques. The process of constructing cemevis involves mosques as models to be emulated or rejected, depending on the political orientation of the organization that is building the cemevi. They have, partly for this reason, become increasingly similar to what mosques signify for Sunni communities: places of worship.

Constructing cemevis that are modeled after mosques points to a process through which Alevi are being Alevized just like Sunnis were Sunnified under the monolithic and centralized control of state sponsored, secularized Islam in Turkey. The definition of “place of worship” brings together restrictions on the spatial configuration of cemevis: the confinement of Alevi practices to the realm of secularized religion and exclusion of any other activity or practice that has a stake outside this secularized realm of the ‘religious’ as ‘politics’. The discursive battle revolving around the construction of cemevis operate through binaries such as culture versus religion, Alevism versus Sunnism, cemevi versus mosque, dedes versus imams, and so on. Nonetheless, the oppositional frameworks fall short of explicating the complexity of this process that is based on constantly shifting boundaries of difference: losing their authority as the descendants of the prophet, dedes are compelled to become professional clerics like Sunni imams; cems are redefined exclusively as *religious* rites/ceremonies and they are standardized as formalized prayers.

The notion of cemevi as “place of worship” has, at this point, become rather taken for granted among Alevi, prevailing over other meanings and aspirations regarding these places. As experiencing one’s Aleviness ceases to be embedded in the realm of the everyday by the displacement of cem ceremonies from home spaces to cemevis, participation in Alevi rituals and cem ceremonies becomes more of a self conscious act, that is, a matter of personal conscience and deliberation. In the cemevis I visited, participants in cem ceremonies were expected to perform “prayers” within clearly demarcated time limits through an increasingly unified cem liturgy. I would argue that this points to an emergent Alevi religiosity that is based, as Talal Asad remarks, on “the construction of religion as a new historical object: anchored in personal experience, expressible in belief-statements, dependent on private institutions, and practiced in one’s spare time” (p. 207).

The increasing fragmentation of social space into neatly demarcated places for housing, recreation, entertainment, education, sports, religion and so on is a sign of secularization process. This tendency, in the lives of Alevi, manifests itself through the displacement of cem

ceremonies from home spaces to cemevis. This situation points to a reinstitutionalization process characterized by an increasing specialization and professionalization of communal services. The ways in which Alevism is reinstitutionalized through cemevis point to the organization of a secularized way of life for Alevi communities. The performance of Aleviness is displaced from the realm of intimate habitual practicing into the anonymous setting of cemevis. And this could only be possible by initially defining Alevism within the framework of religion, as religion exclusively. To put it differently, it was essential to define Alevism on the religious grounds first, in order to secularize it later. In this reformulation, the sacred becomes crystallized as religion through the systemizing and homogenizing affects of doctrinization, and standardization of beliefs and practices. Following this, Alevism as religion finds *its place*, and it is positioned at its exclusive location: the cemevi.

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