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Alevîs

The Alevîs are a number of heterogeneous socio-religious communities in Turkey and the Balkans, historically referred to as Qızılbaş, who in the twentieth century began to share in a common trans-regional Alevî identity called Alevism (Tr. Alevîlik).

1. Genealogy

There are four primary historical meanings of the name Alevî (Ar. 'Alawî): (1) a descendent from the first Shî'î Imâm 'Alî b. Abî Tâlib; (2) a person following 'Alî and thus a Shî'î in the widest sense; (3) pejoratively, a heretic with Shî'î tendencies; and (4) since the early twentieth century, an umbrella term for those endogamous, socio-religious communities found mainly in Anatolia, Thrace, and, to a lesser extent, Bulgaria and Albania, which were historically referred to as Qızılbaş (Tr. Kızılbaş). This entry is concerned with the fourth meaning.

There are occasional pre-nineteenth century Anatolian references where the term Alevî appears to be used as a self-signification, for example in a poem ascribed to the semi-legendary sixteenth-century Qızılbaş poet Pîr Sültân Abdâl, in which each strophe ends with the line Hûseyînîyim, Alevî-yim ne der sin ("I am Hüseyînî, I am Alevî, what do you say") (Ozcêli 1996, 188-9). The ascriptions Hüseyînî and Alevî could refer to descent from the two figures or express symbolic attachment to them. In a poem attributed to the late sixteenth-/early seventeenth-century poet Kül Himmet, the term Alevî appears as a name:

Cümle bir mürşide demişler beli,
Tebshilleri Allah Muhammed Ali,
Meşrefi Hüseyînî ismi Alevî,
Muhammed Ali'ye çkar yollan.
Altogether they say yes to the guide,
Their prayer beads [repeat] Allâh, Muhammad, 'Alî,
Their affiliation is Hüseyînî, their name is Alevî,
Their way leads to Muhammed-'Alî
(Gülparmak 1963, 32).

Such examples are rare, however, and they hardly signify more than a strong veneration of 'Alî and/or claims of an Aşid pedigree.

In modern times, the term Alevî begins to appear in the writings of foreign observers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Here, Alevî (ةلوي), also transliterated into European languages as Aleivi (Luschan, 198), 'Alevî (Grenard, 512), Alevî (G. E. White, passim), or 'Alevi (Grothe, 156), is reported to be a self-identification used in opposition to the negatively loaded term Qızılbaş. While the term Qızılbaş had been used rather indiscriminately to denote the alleged moral and religious deviance of the thusly identified individuals and groups, the usage
of the new term might have aimed at a more positive representation, comparable to the case of the Nusayri, who adopted the name ‘Alawi in the 1920s to gain legitimacy against accusations of heresy (Firro 2005).

Since Alevilik ("Alevism") is a modern concept applied to groups previously labelled Qızılbaş, pre-twentieth century Alevîs are sometimes referred to as Qızılbaş-Alevî. The gradual switch from the term Qızılbaş to the new designation Alevî reflects an attempt to provide the respective groups with legitimacy in the wake of the emergence of a trans-regional Alevî group identity that transcends the localities of particular Alevî tribes. H.-L. Kieser (2000 and 2003) sees the emergence of an Alevî identity as having been encouraged by the Tanzimat reforms, which corresponded with a growing demand for religious and national self-determination as articulated by non-Muslim minorities in Anatolia. Different Qızılbaş-Alevî groups, some of which lived in close and friendly contact to Armenians, may have felt encouraged to reconfigure their identities and emphasize their commonalities and connectedness. This process also may have been reinforced by the efforts of Sultan ʿAbd al-Hamîd II (r. 1876–1909) to draw the Qızılbaş-Alevî into Sunni orthodoxy. After a relatively liberal phase in the early years of the Young Turk regime, the state’s grip on the Qızılbaş-Alevî tightened again during the First World War, when the Young Turks began to aggressively push a vision of Sunni Turkish nationalism (White 1918, 247; Hasluck, 339; Kieser 2003). A series of articles by BahâSa’îd published in the late 1920s in the nationalist magazine Türk Yurdu (re-published by Gürkem 2003) marks the entrance of the notion of Alevilik in modern Turkish public discourse. Portraying Alevîs as true preservers of Turkish language and culture, these and other Turkish nationalist writings (e.g. Atalay 1924; Yusuf Ziya [Yörükân] 1998) had an integrative aim insofar as they were softening the strong connotation of disloyalty and sectarianism originally associated with the term Qızılbaş. However, the new focus on the Turkishness of the Alevîs implicitly questioned the legitimacy of Kurdish Alevîs, who were (and are) therefore sometimes depicted as original Turks only incidentally made Kurdish (Atalay, 19). Given the threat perceived by the new Turkish nationalist order in light of recent Kurdish uprisings (the Dersim uprising of the Koçgiri Qızılbaş-Alevî during 1919–21, and the Shaykh Sa’îd uprising in 1925), this can be read as a move to split the loyalties of the Alevîs in order to undermine oppositional forces by rallying Sunnîs and Alevîs under the banner of Turkish nationalism.

Nonetheless, the meaning of the term Alevî was in the 1920s still rather vague and was used as a form of self-identification not only by Qızılbaş-Alevîs but also by Bektâşîs (Atalay, passim). In fact, until the second half of the twentieth century, the regional communities that are today associated with Alevism coalesced mostly under names such as Tahtacı, Çepni, Amucah, Koçgörî, Zaza, Abdal, Bektâşî, Bedreddînî, and Bâbâî (cf. Andrews 1989 and 2002). Most of these names reflect specific tribal, ethno-lingual, regional and/or professional backgrounds. All of these groups, while fostering their particular identities, nevertheless share a huge amount of beliefs, rituals, and social structures, as well as an overlapping reservoir of oral and, to a lesser extent, scriptural traditions. The Tahtacı (lit. "Woodworker," a name obtained by way of their specialization
in woodwork) are among the best studied of these Alevi subgroups (Illustrations 1 and 2). They form a purely Turkish-speaking, very exclusive community with a strong particularist identity, even vis-à-vis other Alevis. Tahtacı are found mainly in the Aegean and Mediterranean coastal regions of southwest Turkey (a region stretching over the provinces from Balıkesir to Konya, with a concentration in Antalya), and they cultivate a series of customs distinguishing them from the rest of the Qızılbaş-Alevi (Kılıç-Brodgå) 1988; Ergin 1998; Çiçek 2005; cf. the early pioneering work by Yusuf Ziya [Yörük].

Following the secularisation of Turkish society, instigated by the top-down modernisation project in the early Republic of Turkey, and Turkish migration to the urban centres in the middle decades of the twentieth century, traditional identifications such as Tahtacı lost their social meaning, especially in urban environments, while the name Alevi became more prominent. Nevertheless, it took until the middle of the century before the label Alevi achieved predominance over the pejorative Qızılbaş as a signifier of a now trans-regional identity that cut across the boundaries of traditional identifications. Especially in regional contexts, however, the latter are still used, and some, mainly Kurdish Alevis, identify themselves as Kızılbaş (Shankland 2003, 19). While the appropriation of the name Alevi and its gradual acceptance in the Turkish public reflects a certain improvement of the Alevis' social standing, it is also true that for those hostile to the Alevis the new name retains the negative connotations of Qızılbaş.

Today, by far the largest Alevi community exists in Turkey, with serious estimates ranging between 15 and 20% of the population (Andrews 1989, 56-7, 116). About two thirds of them are Turkish speaking, the others speak north-western Iranian languages, either the Kurdish dialect Kurmanji, or Zazaki. Smaller, less researched Alevi communities exist in Thrace and the Balkans, mainly Bulgaria, and to a lesser extent in Arab, In Bulgaria, an overarching Alevi identity (here called Alani) was less successful in replacing the still relatively strong traditional Qızılbaş-Alevi identities of the Kızılbaş, Bektashi, Bâbâî, Musahip, and Bedreddin communities (cf. Georgieva 1991, De Jong 1993, Gramatikova 2001). Most Alevis of Turkey, with the exception of the Tahtacı, live traditionally in the central Anatolian and eastern provinces stretching from Ankara in the west to Bingöl in the east, and from Amasya in the north to Gaziantep in the south, with particularly strong populations in Tunceli, Tokat, Yozgat, Sivas, Erzincan, Bingöl, Elazığ, and Malatya. Relatively smaller Alevi communities can be found in Turkish Thrace, as well as west of the Marmara Sea.

2. History

The modern debate about Alevism's origins is intrinsically political. Historically, the name Qızılbaş designated the mainly Turkmen and Iranian followers of the militant Sufi order of the Şafawiyya, who wore red headgear, hence the name Qızılbaş ("red head"). In the late fifteenth century, the Şafawiyya enhanced its political ambitions, and in 1501 founded the nominally Twelver Shi'i Şafaviid Empire under the leadership of Shah Isma'il (d. 1524). Motivated by their political and spiritual bonds to Isma'il, whom they venerated as Mahdi, Anatolian Qızılbaş undertook several anti-Ottoman revolts at the beginning of the sixteenth century (Sohlweide 1965). But the Ottomans
were able to suppress these uprisings, and subsequently strengthened their rule by means of resettlement, centralisation, and assimilation policies. The Qızılbaş, on the other hand, sought shelter from Ottoman authority by withdrawing into remote areas of Anatolia. From an Ottoman perspective, the Qızılbaş appeared as politically unreliable and potentially subversive, and the latter could never entirely get rid of the stigma of treason attached to them (Ortaşı 1997). Rhetorically, the Ottoman state legitimised its anti-Qızılbaş measures with religious arguments: in addition to their political disloyalty, they were accused of heresy (Dressler 2005). When it turned out that the Şafavids were ultimately unable to challenge Ottoman hegemony in Anatolia, the religious attraction of the Şafavi pārs, who gradually subscribed to a more orthodox interpretation of Twelve Shi‘ism, decreased (Glassen 1971) although there is evidence that the connection between Şafavids and Anatolian Qızılbaş groups continued into the seventeenth century (Karakaya-Stump 2008). Some of the Qızılbaş-Alevis assimilated over time into the Sunni mainstream. Those who upheld their traditions were never totally integrated into Ottoman society. It was not until the rule of the Young Turks that individual Qızılbaş-Alevis began to enter—if only at the lowest levels—into positions in Ottoman institutions (Kieser 1998, 283).

In Ottoman documents, the Qızılbaş are usually referred to in derogatory and apologetic language. They are labelled nifīš (“heretics/schismatic”), mailḥid (“apostate”), zijīd (“unbeliever”), etc., terms used rather unanimously to delegitimise communities that were viewed as heterodox to given mainstream definitions of Islam (see Ahmet Refik 1932; Imber 1979; Ocak 1998). Attatched to these labels, which have been and still are used indiscriminately to denounce not only Alevis but also other groups at the margins of the Islamic discourse often signified as “extremist Shi‘is” (ghulāt), such as the Ahl al-Haqq, Naṣāyir, Yazidis, and Shabaks, is a set of discriminatory stereotypes such as allegations of incest and, more generally, a lack of morals, negligence in the ritual practices, defamation of human beings (especially ‘Ali but also other saintly figures), as well as open defiance of the šari‘a (Hasluck, 358–9).

Ever since Western observers “discovered” the Qızılbaş-Alevis in the mid-nineteenth century, the thesis of their at least partial origins from Anatolian Christians has had its (mostly Christian) supporters (e.g. Kuzzel-bashes 1857). The methodological problems behind that approach were pointed out by F. W. Hasluck (Hasluck 1921). A second discovery of the Alevis began in the early twentieth century when Turkish intellectuals argued against such suggestions by attempting to demonstrate “a direct connection between Qızılbaş-Alevism and pre-Islamic Turkish religions, and by claiming a purely Turkish racial origin for its adherents” (Karakaya-Stump 2004, 331). In addition to the contributions of Bahā Sa‘īd (d. 1939), Besim Atalay (d. 1965), and Yusuf Ziya [Yörük] (d. 1954), it was most prominently Mehmet Fuat Köprülü’s work on heterodox Anatolian Islam that established the parameters for the further study of Alevism as a syncretism built on pre-Islamic Turkish religion cast as Shamanism and Central Asian Turkish Sufism with incorporated elements of ghulatī, Ismā‘īlīsm, as well as Bātinism (bātīnīya). These authors established a genealogical link connecting ancient Central Asian Turkish traditions with the Anatolian Bābā‘î and Bektā‘î milieus, of
which the Qızılbaş and Alevi were seen as an extension. In the footsteps of Köprülu, Irène Melikoff conceptualises the Alevi and Bektaşi traditions as complex syncretisms of Islamic with Manichaean and Christian elements, dominated, however, by Alai-Turkish, pre-Islamic elements, for which reason she characterises Alevism as “Islamicised Shamanism” (esp. Melikoff 1998, chap. 1; idem 2003). However, Devin DeWeese has convincingly criticised the idea that pre-Islamic Turkish religion could be sufficiently described as Shamanism arguing that Shaman practices were performed only by a limited group of religious specialists who would be called upon for very particular occasions (DeWeese, 32-50). While the thesis of Alevism’s Turkish origins certainly fits well into the agenda of the Turkish nation-state project, it has to be noted that Kurmanji and increasingly also Zazaki-speaking Alevis have established competing ethno-religious discourses of Kurdish and/or Iranian, i.e., mainly Zoroastrian, roots of Alevisism (see Bruinesen 1997; cf. White and Jongerden 2003; Kieszer 2003). Most of contemporary Alevi-produced historiography, however, situates the birth of Alevism in the context of the political struggle for leadership of the Muslim umma after the death of Muhammad more or less in line with the Shi’i master narrative.

Like Melikoff, Ahmet Yaşar Ocak also regards the thirteenth century as crucial for the emergence of the Alevi and Bektaşi traditions. However, he puts relatively more emphasis on the historical and thematic lines that connect the Baha’i and Bektaşi milieus with movements located within the Islamic tradition, such as the Sufi traditions of the Yasaviyya and Wafaiyya orders (OcaK 1989 and 1997; Erinsal and OcaK 1995). The formation of Qızılbaş-Alevism undoubtedly has to be located in the period between the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries moulded by the demographic, socio-economic, political, and religious turbulences that took place between the Mongol invasion and the consolidation of Ottoman and Safavid powers, respectively. Historical traces connect the socio-religious milieus of both the Bektaşi order and the Anatolian Qızılbaş with the revolutionary Bedreddin movement in the early fifteenth century (Baiłvet 1995); the Abdalfla-Rum dervishes which emerged in the fourteenth century, possibly as an extension from the Baha’i, and submerged into the Bektaşi order in the sixteenth century (Karakaya-Stump 2008); and the Wafaiyya order also linked to the Baha’i movement that had challenged Rum-Saljuq rule in 1240 (OcaK 1989; Karakaya-Stump 2007; Dressler 2002).

The most characteristic feature of the socio-religious organisation of Qızılbaş-Alevism is the ocaK system, which in fact predates the Qızılbaş movement. OcaK (“hearth”) is the name of the sacred lineages of the dedes (“elders”) and şeyids (“vezirs”), which were widespread in Anatolia, and roots of which can already be found in the environment of the Baha’i-movement in the thirteenth century. The term ocaK itself is a vestige of pre-Islamic Turkish traditions, in which the hearth was the central place of the ancestral cult, a threshold to the world of the ancestors that secured a family or clan’s existence (DeWeese, 41–3). At least some of these ocaKs had formalised affiliations with the Wafaiyya in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the time period during which the Qızılbaş movement emerged (Karakaya-Stump 2007, and 2008). As recent research suggests, Iraq was the religious centre for many ocaK lineages, and their representatives
travelled there for *ziyârâ* (pilgrimage) of the Shi'i Imâms, as well as to be certified and to renew their genealogical claims of descent from the Prophet Muhammad, on which their charisma and authority as *dâle* was dependent. It was only between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that the Wafâyâya had submerged into the Bektâş order, and that certain branches of the latter became recognised by many Qızılbaş-Alevi as religious authorities. The currently predominant position of the Çelebi-Bektâşîs from the convent in Hacıbektaş/Nevşehir, whose authority is based on the claim of direct descent from the semi-legendary thirteenth-century figure Hâji Bakrîş Wali (Tr. Hacı Bektaş Veli), as mother *ocak*, to which many other Alevi *ocaks* subscribe, is of a more recent development in the nineteenth century. In fact, some Alevi *ocaks* continued to have institutional connections with Iraqi Bektâşîs until the mid-twentieth century (Karakaya-Stump 2008). Endogamous community structures and hereditary kinship bonds became a distinctive feature of the Qızılbaş-Alevî, distinguishing them from the Bektâşîs, with whom they share many beliefs and practices. In modern Turkish parlance, Alevîs, who honour Hacı Bektaş Veli as their second most important saint after 'Alî, and Bektâşîs are often not distinguished—a phenomenon that can be observed already in the 1920s, that is at the very moment when the term Alevî slowly began to enter the public discourse. Atalay reports that many Bektâş would prefer to identify themselves by the term Alevî (Atalay, 6). Here, Alevî refers to the religious orientation. He also notes that the Anatolian Bektâşî, whom he refers to as “village Bektâşî” (*köy Bektâşîler*) would be Alevî (Atalay, 7); more specifically, they would be *ju'farî* in terms of their madhâbah and Bektâşî and Alevî in regard of their *tariqa* (Atalay, 4).

3. Texts

In Qızılbaş-Alevî culture, texts were for the most part transmitted orally. Compared to the oral transmission of religiously significant texts by the Qızılbaş-Alevî bards, the *şakâ* (lit. “in love [with God]”), written texts were of secondary importance and only accessible to a literate elite. The oldest written manuscripts of the Qızılbaş-Alevî can be traced back to the sixteenth century when parts of both Qızılbaş and Bektâş oral traditions were written down for the first time. The cluster of texts at the heart of the Qızılbaş-Alevî literary tradition, which was preserved and transmitted by the *şâk* families, reflects its syncretistic character. Thus, Alevîs count as part of their scriptural heritage many texts that originated outside of Anatolia and were at some point integrated into Qızılbaş-Alevism.

The most widespread and distinctive texts of the Qızılbaş-Alevîs are the so-called *beyrûk* (“Order(s)”). The earliest *beyrûk* go at least as far back as the reign of the Şafavî Shah Tahmâsp (d. 1576), who apparently sent them to his Qızılbaş followers as a means of instruction and indoctrination. Still, similar text material might already have been in use as instruction manuals of the Şafaviyya (Yıldız 2001, 329). *Beyrûk* manuscripts related to those found among Anatolian Alevîs exist among the Shabaks of Iraq, who are also former Qızılbaş allies of the Şafavîs and who bear many similarities with the Qızılbaş-Alevîs (Bruinesen 1998). The variety of *beyrûk* manuscripts, of which there are as of yet no critical editions, suggests that they were originally not seen as unalterable sacred canons, but rather used and transmitted.
in line with the needs of a mainly oral culture, and subject to alterations and additions (Otter-Beaujean 1997, 215). The manuscripts can roughly be divided into two main textual traditions of which there exist several versions of each. First, the so-called Shaykh Şafi Buyruğu (original title Mescid-i-Emir Bebek't-i-Abi'm), named after the patron saint of the Safawiyas, Shaykh Şafuddin Ardabili, who is given a prominent role therein; this is the most widely disseminated buyruk among the Alevis. The oldest manuscript of this text dates back to the early seventeenth century and is located at the Konya Mevlana Museum (published by Ahmet Tacioglu 2004); the first, partial, edition of a Shaykh Şafi Buyruğu had been published by Mehmet Yaman (1984). Secondly, the so-called Cafer es-Sadik Buyruğu, named after the sixth Shi'i Imam, who likewise figures here as a main authoritative voice. This text has been referred to as Tahtaca Buyruğu by some due to its importance for the Tahtaca, whose rituals follow its instructions relatively closely (Yildiz 2004, 330). Today there are several printed editions transcribed in Latin script, the most reliable of which being those of Aytekin (1958) (the very first publication of the text) and Bozkurt (2006).

The buyruk texts, written for the most part in a conversational style, contain doctrinal instructions, as well as elaborations on Shi'i and Sufi narratives and concepts. Central themes are the mythology surrounding the kirkar cenini (see below), the hierarchies within the community and obligations attached to a particular rank, the rules and stages of the religious path such as the tasawwuf concept of the “four gates” (dört kapa), and the al-insin al-kamil. Further important themes are the role and life of 'Ali and the ahl al-bayt, illustrations of the meaning of the relationship between 'Ali and Muhammad, as well as savings of 'Ali, Muhammad, 'Asfar al-Suba'i, Saifuddin Ardabili, as well as other Imams and Sufi saints. It is interesting to note that these buyruk texts, based on sixteenth-century materials, have hardly any elements of pre-Islamic religious themes. This, and their strong Shi'i orientation, distinguishes the buyruk texts from the materials produced in roughly the same period in the related and partially overlapping Bektaşi milieus. The latter, as for example the Haçi Bektaş hagiography, are deeply imbued with pre-Islamic religious elements, but display no particularly Shi'i influence (Mélikoff 1998, 106-7). Both strings appear to have merged in the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as for example the poems of Piri Sulhan Abdal and even more so Kul Himmet from this time period indicate (cf. Mélikoff 1998, passim; Aslanoğlu 1997). Certainly, the Turkish akhi and futuwwa traditions of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, with their chivalrous virtues and their veneration of 'Ali as the embodiment of their ideals, have contributed to a certain respect for Shi'i symbols in Anatolia (Mélikoff 1998, 107-15). But it is still unclear to what extent pre-Islamic and Shi'i elements, which became the religious melange characteristic of Qızılbaş-Alevism from the sixteenth century onwards, had begun to amalgamate already earlier among the akhi members and their followers.

Historically, buyruk texts, with their detailed description and explanation of the Qızılbaş ritual, might have served the dedes, the leaders of Qızılbaş-Alevi communities, as sources for ritual and mythological knowledge. Until the first publication of buyruk texts in the mid-twentieth century, the manuscripts were kept in secret by the dede families and were difficult to access for outsiders. Recently, they regained
importance in the context of Alevî endeavours to legitimise Alevism vis-à-vis Sunni mainstream discourse, which tends to favour scripture over oral traditions.

The religious literature circulating among Qızılbaş-Alevî and Bektaşî overlaps considerably. A major text of this shared tradition is the Manakib-i Hacı Bektaş-ı Veli, also known as Vilâyetname ("hagiography") of Hacı Bektaş Veli, which recounts his life and miracles. There are many manuscripts of this text, the earliest of which date back to the sixteenth century. Its initial version, of which there is as yet no critical edition, originated during the reign of Bayezid II (r. 1481–1512). The text was published first in German translation by E. Große in 1927; since, there have been several Turkish editions, for example those by A. Gölpinarlı, first published in 1958, and E. Gökşan (1996). Another popular hagiography, which originated in the early Bektaşî milieu and subsequently entered the Qızılbaş-Alevî tradition, is the Hâcım Sultan Vilâyetname. According to Öçak, this text, which has survived only in a relatively small amount of scattered manuscripts, even slightly precedes the Manakib-i Hacı Bektaş-ı Veli (Öçak 1992, 52). It illustrates the fabulous story of Hâcım Sultan, a khalifâ of Hacı Bektaş. According to the legend, both were sent by Ahmad Yasavî and arrived in Anatolia together (the text was published in 1914 with German translation by G. Jacob and R. Tschudi). A further text of this Bektaşî milieu which embodies the ethos of early Ottoman ghâzî Islam, in which pre-Islamic and Islamic elements fused and a conquest-oriented jihâd ethos accompanies elements of religious eclecticism, is the Abâl Mûsa Vilâyetname. This hagiography bears strong similarities to the Hacı Bektaş hagiography (see Güzel 1999).

Qızılbaş-Alevîs and Bektaşîs further honoured a number of popular Shî'î texts of both educational and contemplative character. Among those are the Hüsâniye (also Râsâîî-i Hüsâniye), an apologetic prose text defending Twelver Shî'ism against Sunnîs, stemming from an early sixteenth-century Arabic text, which had been translated and spread by the Şafvîs among their followers. Also in this category belongs the Fazîletname by the late fifteenth-/early sixteenth-century Mehmûd b. Fîlî Yemîntî. Yemîntî is credited for having contributed to the spread of hûrîfi ideas in Anatolia and Iran. The Fazîletname, imbued with tâsawwuf and hûrîfi concepts, is dedicated to 'Alî's exceptional life and character and the miracles surrounding him (Ottoman edition by H. Hızır and A. Haydar, 1327/1909; for an edition in modern Turkish, see E. Gürçen 1960). The Câvâdêname of Fadullâh Astarâbâî (d. 1394), the founder of the hûrîfi movement, can also be found in Alevî and especially Bektaşî circles. Finally to be mentioned is a series of texts describing and mourning İsmâîl Husaynî's martyrdom at Karbala, called Mâküll-i Hüsînî (similar versions are widely dispersed throughout Arab, Persian, and Turkish Shî'î lands). One of the most widely spread texts of this genre in Anatolia is the Kûmârî (also Kûmûzî l-Masâbîh). Into the same category belongs the Hadîbâtu l-Sâ'adâ ("The Garden of the Blissful") of the great Turkish poet Mehmûd b. Sûleyman Fuzûlî (d. 1556). This text, much honoured by Alevî and Bektaşî, tells the story of the abh al-bâsî culminating in the Karbala' massacre (Turkish edition, Ş. Gungör 1987).

All of the abovementioned texts bear strong elements of oral culture, reflecting an environment in which the written word was not so much something to be read, but rather a reminder of stories that were to be
told, rites that had to be conducted, prayers that had to be said, poems and songs that had to be performed. In fact, poetry appears to have been the main carrier of the Qızılbaş-Alevî tradition, allowing for both continuity and change. While some of this poetry has been conserved in handwritten poem anthologies (çünk) and düvâns works, it has been mostly transmitted via the memory of the Qızılbaş-Alevî bards. Qızılbaş-Alevîs revere in particular the so-called “seven distinguished bards” (yedi ünlü ozan), namely Haç'a (the penname of Şahî İsmâ'îl), Nisûm, Yeînit, Fuzûlî, Fr Sultan Abdal, Kl Himnet, and Virânt (for information regarding their lives and works, see Melikoff 1998). The Alevî aşık, also called ozan, can be compared to the Celtic bard, the French troubadour, or the German minnesinger (Reinhard, 200), and he has a crucial function for the transmission of the cultural memory of the Qızılbaş-Alevî. When the aşık performs, usually accompanying himself on the saz (a long-necked lute), he interprets his own poems as well as those of other aşîks, living and past. His repertoire comprises epic tales, songs of worldly love and devotion, religious hymns, mythical and mystical allegories, as well as social and political critiques. The aşık accompanies the aşînî çem ceremony (lit. “celebration of community”), the central Alevî rite (short: çem). Singing religious hymns (called nefes or devrîş) while playing the saz in the çem is a function invested with high social prestige (Illustrations 6 and 7). While it is one of the primary functions of a dede to provide introduction in the ritual and mythical knowledge and to introduce the rules of the path (yol), it is one of the primary functions of the aşık to pass on and interpret the traditions through his songs. Religious themes of aşık poetry include the adoration of the twelve Shi‘î Imâms, especially ‘Alî, the rules of the path, the relationship between a religious guide (mektûb, i.e., the dede) and his disciple (mûrid), as well as ethical instructions. The aşık tradition continues today, though it has lost its former function as guarantor of the textual memory of the community with increasing literacy and scripturalisation of Alevî texts (cf. Dressler 2003). While the stock of Qızılbaş-Alevî poetry is closely related and overlaps considerably with Bektâşî poetry, the latter tends to be richer in regards to mystical and cosmological speculation.

4. Belief and Practice

The religious worldview of Alevis is based on a bêtir interpretation of Islam, stressing the inner meaning of religion. Relativising the external (zâhir) dimensions of iman (“faith”), Alevîs play down both the literal meaning of the Qur’ân as well as the practical religious duties of mainstream Islam. While most Alevis would recognise the Qur’ân as an important book and revelation, they also accept the Shi‘î accusation of an alleged Sunnî alteration of the text. While many Qur’ânic references can be found in the texts of the Alevis, the Qur’ân plays a rather marginal role in Alevis practice. In light of the assimilationist pressures faced in a majority Sunnî environment, Alevi apologists tend to ascribe a secondary role to the Qur’ân, which is expressed in popular sayings such as “I am the speaking Qur’ân” (konuyan Kur’an benim) ascribed to ‘All. Alevis consider mainstream Islamic practices of secondary importance for those who long for the “Truth” (haqq), i.e., God. The American missionary G. E. White recounts the following typical Alevî response to a Sunnî inquiring about the former’s observance of the ritual prayer: “What does the Almighty need of your
prayers... He knows what you are without your telling Him” (G. E. White, 228).

While the texts of the Qızılbaş-Alevi tradition suggest that the degree to which this bəltən worldview led to outright rejection of shərətī a law varied, there is no doubt about the Alevi’s general lack of commitment to a strict following of the main Islamic observances, or their avoidance of shərətī courts. Alevi’s do not fast during Ramadan, but traditionally for twelve days during the month of Muharram in commemoration of the Karbala’ tragedy. The fast is called mətem orcu (‘fast of grief’). Alevi’s do not aspire to the hajji to Mecca, but instead regard the human heart as the real Ka’ba to which every human should turn. Pilgrimages to shrines with local or trans-regional Alevi significance, such as the holy shrines of the Şii in Iraq, and—as more popular in modern times—the mausoleum of Haci Bektaş in Cappadocia, are, however, of great significance (Illustration 8). In Alevism, God’s transcendent otherness is relativised by hulūl, i.e., the inner-worldly manifestation of the divine, especially in Şii, as well as by an adaptation of Ibn al-ʿArabī’s ʿulūdūl al-yaʿṣīla and ʿurūfī influence. The divine is believed to be present in certain stones, springs, trees, as well as in saints and their tombs (Engin and Franz 2001, vol. 2, part 2). The veneration of a wide array of natural objects and sacred places, often in defiance of official orthodoxy, is widespread in rural forms of Islam and not distinctively Alevi (Illustration 9). Brümmersen sees especially Kurdish and Zaza Alevi practices rooted in the veneration of nature and alludes to possible influences by their Yeşil, Nisayr, and Armenian neighbours (1997, esp. 3–7).

Şii motifs are prominent in Qızılbaş-Alevi’s textual tradition (especially in the bayrak), permeate its religious language and imagery, and are omnipresent in its cosmology, myths, and ritual. Characteristic for Qızılbaş-Alevism is the central place of ‘Ali, venerated as the shah (“king”) of the saints, in ritual and cosmology. Mélékoff sees in the Qızılbaş-Alevi veneration of ‘Ali a merger of pre-Islamic Turkish cosmology and Şii terminology (Mélékoff 2001, 75–81). Alevi ‘Ali imagery would resemble the belief in the archaic natural forces of the not-yet-Islamised Turks, with ‘Ali embodied in the crane bird (tur, who figures very prominently in Qızılbaş-Alevi poetry and ritual (Arnaud-Demir 2002; cf. Mélékoff 2001, 77–8). While influences of pre-Islamic Turkish religion on the Alevi religious worldview as a whole can hardly be denied, the dominant element appears nevertheless to be the popular Şii narrative with leanings towards elements marginalised by orthodox Şii theology, such as belief in the divinity of ‘Ali, and the transmigration of souls (tanāshkh), as well as the significance of divine knowledge (muʿrīfa or ʿilm) ascribed to the ahl al-bayt, especially ‘Ali, and also embodied in the Alevi dedes. With the Karbala’ incident as its foundational myth, the Alevi narrative evolves as a chain of suffering, ultimately only to be overcome by the return of the Muḥdi. This mood of suffering comes alive in the ʿayvi-cam ritual, where the fate of the ahl al-bayt, especially Husayn’s martyrdom at Karbala’, is emotively commemorated. This salvation narrative has seen its secularised reincarnations in the twentieth century, when it was projected through the lenses of nationalist and leftist ideologies (Bumke 1979, Dressler 1999, Vorhoff 1999).

The dominance of Şii mythology in Qızılbaş-Alevism can largely be attributed to the Safavid influence and the bayrak texts, which illustrate the cosmological significance of the connection between
Muḥammad and 'Ali. Both created from one divine light, their existence precedes the creation of mankind, an understanding that led to much mystical speculation on the nature of Muhammad-Ali, and Allāh-Muhammad-'Ali. The apocryphal prophetic hadith, popular among Shi'i, anā maddinatu-l ʿilmī wa Allāh bābuhu lã (“I am the city of knowledge, and 'Ali is its gate”), can also be found in the bayrak texts (see e.g. Aytekin, 203), where it is interpreted in terms of an essential identity of the two. However, a prominent element in bayrak text and oral Alevi tradition, the mythos of the kirkar cemi (“Cem of the Forty”), which describes Muhammad's reunion during his miḥray with the thirty-nine prophets and saints led by 'Ali, clearly establishes the latter's superiority. This is also reflected in Alevi ritual texts and poetry, and reflects a superiority of waḥīy (“sainthood,” Tr. velayet) over nuḥawwun (“prophethood,” Tr. nûlüçot). The āsir-i cem, the nucleus of Alevi practice, is a ritual re-enactment of the kirkar cemi. The cem was traditionally held once a year and fulfils both religious and social functions. Cem ceremonies, which comprise prayers, listening to religious hymns (nefes), and ritualised dialogues between the dede and his affiliated tâhâ community (see below), are for the most part conducted in Turkish, with the exception of certain Arabic prayer formulas. While some of the Kurdish Alevîs conduct the cem in their native
Zazaki or Kurmanci tongues, others also use Turkish as a ritual language. Sometimes it is called oniki hizmet cemi (“Cem of the Twelve Services”), a name relating to the twelve symbolic services fulfilled by the same number of individuals. This gives the ceremony its unique structure (Yaman 1998). Not every village had its own dede, who would usually come at least once a year to perform the cem and collect his due (huqq Allâh). To the distinctive features of the cem belongs also the senâh (Ar. sanâ‘) dance, a ritual performed jointly by men and women in circular movement in imitation of the flight of the holy crane bird târâta (Illustration 10); the senâh is mythologically rooted in Muḥammad’s spontaneous dance while intoxicated by grape juice consumed at the kirklar cemi as reported in the buhrak. The ritual consumption of şerbet (fruit syrup) during the cem, depending on region and context sometimes also alcohol, refers to this mythical event.

One of the most distinctive socio-cultural features of Alevis is the institution of musahibîlik (“companionship”), also called yol kardesîğî (“brotherhood on the path”). Musahibîlik is founded in the companionship and unity of Muḥammad-All, and refers to a voluntary lifelong union of two couples with both religious and socio-economic significance (Kehl-Bodrogi 1997). Musahib couples vow to support each other through any hardship, and the connection is considered to surpass those of blood relationships.

In the traditional context, entering a musahib communion, ritually celebrated in a special cem ceremony, meant initiation into the ritual community. Since the second half of the twentieth century, however, the socio-religious significance and rate of occurrence of musahibîlik, practiced with slight regional differences, has sharply declined. In strongly secularised, largely urbanised environments requiring a high degree of flexibility, musâhitîlîk communions, a part of the traditional socio-economic net of traditional rural Alevism, are difficult to maintain.

In traditional Alevis, i.e., Alevism as it was practiced prior to the erosion of its community structures due to urbanisation and secularisation from the 1950s onward, dêdelik, the office of the dede, a male prerogative, comprised important social and religious leadership functions (Illustration 11). Following Köprülu, Melikoff sees in the dede a continuation of the pre-Islamic Turkish shaman, the kam-uçan, who was able to travel to the world of the spirits and to assume the forms of certain animals, functioning as a healer and mediator (Melikoff 1998, 9–13). Shamanistic
features notwithstanding, it was his healing and mediating skills as well as the idea of his distinguished descent, sipah, that became over time the backbone of the dede’s authority. Alevi dedes are revered as şeyids, i.e., descendants from the prophet Muhammad—in Alevism as a rule via Muhammad’s daughter Fāṭima and ‘Ali. Kurdish Alevis mostly refer to their dedes as şeyid. In addition, many dedes claim ancestry from Anatolian saintly figures from the thirteenth to the sixteenth century, many of which appear already in early Bektashi literature such as the Hacı Bektashi Velîyetnamesi and the Menâkıb el-Kudüsîyye (Erinsal and Öçak 1995). The sacred osak lineages of the dedes are complemented by non-osak lineages, whose members are called fâîh (“seeker”), a telâwîfîf terminus used for novices on the Sufi path. The relationship between members of an osak clan and those fâîh who recognise the members of this osak as dede is described in terms of parents and children. Intermarriage between the two groups was considered incest and strictly forbidden, and the bonds between particular dede and fâîh families used to be hereditary. Competing osaks are in complicated hierarchical relations with each other, where some osaks are themselves in a fâîh position towards another osak. Reputation and authority of different osak, and indeed different types of osak, vary significantly. Historically, dedes were able to designate representatives among their fâîh followers, who would then temporarily take over some of the dede’s functions. Quite often, those aîdes bequeathed their positions to their offspring, and their lineage then earned recognition as so-called dilîme osak (“makeshift osaks”). Some Alevi argue that many of the osaks existing in Turkey today are actually dilîme osaks lacking the charisma of an Alid pedigree (Yaman 2004).

The main role of the dede is to lead the Alevi rituals, especially the cen (Illustration 12). The dede’s functions within the cen are manifold. His presence and guidance is a precondition for the ceremony, where he acts as instructor on the requirements and rules of the mystical path. In addition, the dede traditionally acted as mediator and judge (for examples of dedes’ social roles in a Turkish Alevî village in the late 1980s, see Shankland 2003, esp. 109–11, 121–2, 130–1). In the traditional setting, the cen ceremonies were places of conflict resolution and reconciliation between members of the community; the dede had the power to reprimand unruly behaviour, and even expel members from the community. The functioning of traditional Alevi communities was dependent on a system of social control and corresponding ethics, which are paradigmatically expressed in the command to “control your hand, your tongue, and your waist” (elîne, dilîne, beline sahip olmak), which has Manichean origins (Melikoff 1998, 163). Also found in the bayrak texts, this command condemns transgressions committed by hand (theft, begging), tongue (lying, defamation, insult), and waist (adultery, sexual contact outside the ritual community).

5. Modern Developments: Secularisation and Religious Revival

The transformations Alevism underwent in the twentieth century can be summarised in terms of, first, secularisation and assimilation, then politicisation, and finally a cultural and religious revitalisation (for a concise overview, see Ellington 2004). The secularisation politics of the early Turkish Republic affected the social structures of Alevism. The 1925 ban of the Sufi orders, titles, and activities impacted also on the
Alevi’s, especially those with ties to the Çelebi Bektâşis. There are accounts of how bedes were discriminated against by local state representatives in the early years of the Republic. Much more significant, however, was the economically motivated exodus to the urban centres in the middle of the century, which often cut the regular personal interaction between ve’al and tâlîb families thus undermining the social foundation of traditional Alevi communities (Shankland 2003, 135-6). With many of the younger Alevi generations turning to leftist ideologies in the 1960s and 1970s, the bedes’ authority lost further ground, and bedes were often portrayed as charlatans exploiting ordinary people (Bumke 1979).

The dissolution of traditional Alevisim was gradual, with different speeds and intensity depending on social and geographic location. With the exception of sporadic phases of limited publicity due to the efforts of small groups of activists, Alevis for the most part of the twentieth century took refuge in lâğv and kept away from public discourse. This changed dramatically with the increasing polarisation between the militant right and the left in the 1960s and 1970s. The former denounced Alevis as Kızılabş, Kurds, and communists, regarding them as threatening at once the religious, ethnic, and political identity of the country. In the same period, a new Alevi middle class began to evolve in the cities. The breakdown of the traditional hierarchies facilitated the emergence of a new urban Alevi elite, i.e., individuals who assumed leadership functions in secular Alevi organisations in the 1980s and 1990s. In the late 1980s, Alevisim experienced a dramatic revival, and from then on Alevi put strong emphasis on their religious identity. This development has to be situated in the aftermath of the 1980 coup d'état, in which the ideological parameters of the Turkish state were redefined in terms of a moderate Islamic nationalism. Alevis were obvious targets of this new politics, which defined Turkish Islam as Sunni Islam, and which paved the way for intensified efforts in assimilating them, for example through the establishment of mandatory religious education (based on the Sunni faith) in schools and the increase in the mostly unwanted construction of mosques in Alevi villages. In the 1990s, Alevis were then discovered by the military and by the secularist elites as allies in the ideological battle against the growing movement of political Islam.

In the 1980s, many observers had already forecast the extinction of Alevisim, predicting its survival in folkloristic forms only. As a consequence of secularisation and the far-reaching dissolution of traditional community structures, most Alevis of today are widely disconnected from traditional Alevi practices. But in a situation in which Islam was reinforced as a pillar of Turkish identity, new opportunity spaces for the promulgation of religious symbols opened up. Appropriating these opportunities, Alevis began to formulate Alevisim increasingly in religious terms, forcefully confronting Turkish society with their demands for recognition as a religious tradition significantly different from Sunni Islam. In the 1990s, following the Alevi re-emergence, Turkey and also countries with significant amounts of Turkish immigrants, such as Germany, witnessed a process whereby the public appearance of Alevisim changed tremendously (Sükefeld 2008). Alevis began to engage in community building through cultural, social, religious, and political projects with the aim to revitalise and at the same time modernise Alevi traditions and to foster...
Alevi consciousness, especially among the younger generations. The Alevi re-emergence was accompanied by processes of differentiation along the fault lines of political identity characteristic for Turkish politics in general. A variety of Alevi discourses developed, competing in the way they relate political, religious, and ethnic identities (Vorhoff 1995 and 1998, Dressler 2002). The spectrum of self-identification within Alevism is quite impressive. While there is a broad consensus among Alevis that they are different from Sunnis, there is no agreement on the precise grounds of this difference. A major issue with serious political implications is the question as to whether Alevism should be seen primarily as a religious tradition, a culture, or an Anatolian worldview/philosophy and/or way of life. While the religious option has gained predominance since the mid-1990s, those emphasising the religious dimensions of Alevism still find much to disagree with each other in regard to the particularities of its religious character. Religious identifications range from “Alevism is the essence of Islam” to “Alevism is a religion in its own right.” For some, Alevism is an Islamic sub-group comparable to the Sunni and Shi’a sects, or comparable to the recognised madhahls of Islam; others stress its syncretistic character or closeness to other religions, such as Zoroastrianism or Christianity.

The Alevi’s going public was accelerated by two significant incidents in the 1990s. On 2 June 1993, thirty-five people—most of them Alevi—died after a group of Islamist Sunnis set fire to a hotel in Sivas that hosted guests of the annual festival honouring the sixteenth-century Qızılbaş poet Pîr Sultan Abdal. Local security forces watched the horrific massacre without intervening. The second incident occurred in 1995 in Istanbul’s Gazi neighbourhood, populated mainly by Kurds and Alevis. In demonstrations following a mysterious drive-by shooting of guests at an Alevi coffeehouse on 12 March, 19 demonstrators were killed in violent clashes with the police (see Jongerden 2003). These horrific incidents, the most deadly ones in a series of anti-Alevi violence in the 1990s, had a traumatising effect on the Alevis and accelerated Alevi identity formation and organisation building process. Kurdish (including Zaza) Alevis in particular see themselves in a double minority position, disadvantaged due to both their religious and ethnic identities. While Turkish, Kurdish, and Zaza Alevi identities certainly have particular ethno-cultural and political underpinnings, they are united by a shared memory of Alevi history as a chain of suffering. This narrative is emblematically anchored in the Karbalâ tragedy, and it connects the memory of oppressive Ottoman policies against the Qızılbaş with modern experiences of discrimination and violence. The Kurdish Alevi rebellions of Kojgîn in 1920–1 and Dersim in 1937–8 (Kieser 1998 and 2003), crushed by the Turkish nationalist forces of the independence movement and the young Turkish Republic respectively, anti-Alevi violence in Sivas and Maraş (1978) and Çorum (1980) (see Jongerden 2003, and Sinclair-Webb 2005), and a perceived hesitance of state forces to interfere against “anti-sectarian” violence targeting Kurdish and/or Alevi subjects, all reinforce this narrative. Despite the political differentiation of Alevi discourses, this memory, as well as vaguely used symbols of Alevi particularism have a strong integrative power (Massicard 2003). What Alevi further share is a tendency to construct Alevism as a tradition with universal appeal and vocation. As Shankland argues, “the efficacy of the Alevi religion as
an instrument of social control is growing less but that of Alevi religion as a culture, as a collection of interlocking ideals and symbols which people may use to assert their identity, survives with greater ease” (Shankland 2003, 133).

An essential question for the future of Alevis as a religious tradition is how to revitalise and sustain the dede institution (Dressler 2006). Especially in urban environments, the mediating functions of the dede, tied into the social fabric of traditional Alevis, have largely vanished. The cem ceremonies conducted in the modern cemesis (“cem houses”) of the urban Alevi organisations are widely indifferent towards traditional dede-fâlîb affiliations, which had in a traditional setting been a prerequisite for the ceremony. The relatively few still practicing dedes are responsible for ritual and to a certain extent religious instruction, but are generally deprived of their social leadership functions. Several Alevi organisations have embarked on developing dede education programs, which might contribute to a certain standardisation of especially Alevis practices. In general, the role of the re-instituted dede is mostly restricted to the sphere of ritual. The representation and organisation of local and trans-local Alevi communities is in the hands of a new Alevi lay elite, better equipped to deal with the bureaucratic, media, and legal issues Alevis are currently facing in their quest for public recognition. The changes in Alevi leadership and representation are emblematic for the development of Alevis at large, which can be described as a process of secularisation in terms of a transformation from an exclusive, socio-cultural community based on hereditary charismatic authority towards an inclusive universal identity grounded in egalitarian humanistic ideals (Dressler 2008).

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GENERAL WORKS

GENEALOGY AND HISTORY

Texts
Alhambra

The Alhambra is a walled complex of palaces built on the fortified Sabika hilltop overlooking the city of Granada, which was the seat of power of the Nasrids (r. 629-897/1232-1492), the last Muslim dynasty in al-Andalus. The site had been settled and a fortress built by the Umayyads.