



Kolleg-Forschungsgruppe

**multiple secularities**

Ahmet Kerim Gültekin

## **Kurdish Alevism**

Creating New Ways of  
Practicing the Religion

Working Paper #18

Working Paper Series of the HCAS  
"Multiple Secularities – Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities"

#18: Ahmet Kerim Gültekin. "Kurdish Alevism: Creating New Ways of Practicing the Religion"  
Leipzig University, 2019.

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Please cite as:

Gültekin, Ahmet Kerim. "Kurdish Alevism: Creating New Ways of Practicing the Religion." *Working Paper Series of the HCAS "Multiple Secularities – Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities"* 18. Leipzig University, 2019.

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The HCAS is part of Leipzig University and funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG).



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# Kurdish Alevism

## Creating New Ways of Practising the Religion

### Introduction

This paper will examine the transformation dynamics of social change in Kurdish Alevi communities, while mostly focusing on the increasing socio-political and religious role of *talips*. Until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the socio-religious structure of Kurdish Alevism was dominated by two hereditary social positions, much like a caste system: on the one hand, the members of the sacred lineages (*ocaks*), who embody the religious authority, and on the other hand, the *talips* who are subordinated to the *sacred lineages*. This socio-religious structure provided a framework for Kurdish Alevi socio-religious organisations.

Large-scale destruction in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century greatly affected Kurdish Alevi tribal communities, destroying their cultural institutions, and tearing apart religious relationships between sacred lineages and their followers. Over time, *talips* were able to take the initiative with regard to the organisation of the religion and identity politics. This paper will analyse the *reformation of religious practices* from the theoretical perspective of *religion-making*.<sup>1</sup> For around two decades, *talips* have been instrumentalising *sacred places* – a core component of Kurdish Alevi belief – in a way that reproduces Dersim cultural identity. This has led to an intriguing example of a religion-making process, in which some Western notions of both religion and politics have taken hold. While struggling against the Turkish state for official recognition of their religious and national identity, Kurdish Alevism began to form new religio-political institutions, theological discourses and even rituals that included some modern notions and ideas. For example, they claimed gender equality, social harmony, environmentalism, modernism (in the sense of living a Western lifestyle) and secularism (in the sense of being politically opposed to Islam, which the AKP regime in Turkey represents) as core discourses and distinguishing features of the religion.

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1 Markus Dreßler, "Modes of Religionization: A Constructivist Approach to Secularity," *Working Paper Series of the HCAS "Multiple Secularities – Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities"* 7 (Leipzig: 2019): 3–16.

While the transformation and re-making of Alevi religious identity has been a popular topic in international academia since the religious revival of Alevism began in the 1990s, the case of the Kurdish Alevi still requires further attention. The cultural transformation dynamics of contemporary *Kurdish Alevism* reveal unique sociological examples in terms of religion-making processes. Kurdish Alevi have experienced large-scale socio-cultural changes in recent decades. They have spread around the world, with many moving to Western Europe. Their lifestyles have changed dramatically; they have faced forced evacuations because of the war between armed guerrilla groups and the Turkish state. With their geographic area mostly destroyed, they have had to leave behind rural lifestyles. This, in turn, resulted in the disintegration of Kurdish Alevi's socio-religious organisations and practices. Nevertheless, Kurdish Alevi still maintain close contact with their sacred and beloved land, Dersim. While the socio-religious obligatory relations between *sacred lineages* and their *followers (talips)* have almost vanished, *sacred place beliefs* have become increasingly important in maintaining the ability to practise the religion and are representative of the cultural identity. More importantly, in my view, while sacred places have always been seen as a practical way of practising the religion, *talips* have taken the initiative with regard to re-producing<sup>2</sup> the religion.

Tunceli, a small, Kurdish-Alevi-dominated province in Eastern Turkey, has played an important role in the *revival of Kurdish Alevism*. The province can be regarded as a socio-cultural centre, whose significance is acknowledged far beyond the region's borders. The historical name for the region was Dersim, a name that has been pushed to the fore with the revival of Kurdish Alevism. Although Tunceli and Dersim are used synonymously, I use Dersim to refer to the *cultural geographic area*, that is, the area that Kurdish Alevi associate with their *re-invented ethno-religious identity*. Nowadays, Dersim is not only a powerful symbol, but also serves as a reflection of transnational Kurdish Alevi communities. Today's Tunceli province should be regarded as a *religious/sacred centre* of the community. Kurmanci- and Kirmancki-speaking Kurdish Alevi, who can be considered sub-communities of the largest religious minority in Turkey (the Alevi), constitute the majority of the population of Tunceli.

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2 I understand 're-producing religion' to be part of 're-producing culture', that is, the idea that social relations and structures are continuously renewed.

Despite *Alevism* and *Kurdishness* being popular topics in international academic circles since the 1990s,<sup>3</sup> *Kurdish Alevism* remained less known until the turn of the century. Kurdish Alevi identity involves intersected cultural boundaries between *Alevism* and *Kurdishness*. Its cultural sphere creates a unique cultural identity, in that both identities gain new socio-political and ethno-religious aspects. Kurdish Alevis share many similarities with other Alevi communities. However, they have their own socio-religious organisations, sacred place practices, mythological discourses and rituals. Although Kurdish Alevis now tend to define themselves as *Kurds*, their cultural heritage gives rise to many differences compared with other Kurdish communities and Kurdish nationalist politics.

During the early republic, some state-related amateur researchers described Kurdish Alevis as the assimilated descendants of *pre-Islamic Turks*.<sup>4</sup> This interpretation focuses on religious identity to define the particularity of Kurdish Alevis. Others, who claim that Kurdish Alevis have entirely different ethnic origins and a unique cultural origin that is referred to as *Zaza*, prefer to focus on the language (Kırmancki) as a defining feature of their sociological particularity. These differing definitions reflect the fact that Kurdish Alevism involves two sometimes conflicting cultural formations, namely

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3 For the first detailed edited volume about Kurdish Alevis (for English readers), see: Erdal Gezik and Ahmet Kerim Gültekin, *Kurdish Alevis and the Case of Dersim: Historical and Contemporary Insights* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2019). There are also some academic works (for English readers) that deal with religious, political, and historical aspects of Kurdish Alevis' cultural identity. See: Besim Can Zırh, "Kırmançiya Belekê: Understanding Alevi Geography in Between Spaces of Longing and Belonging," in *Alevis in Europe: Voices of Migration, Culture and Identity*, ed. Tözün Issa (London, New York: Routledge, 2017); Martin van Bruinessen, "Between Dersim and Dâlahû: Reflections on Kurdish Alevism and the Ahl-i Haqq Religion," in *Islamic Alternatives: Non-Mainstream Religion in Persianate Societies*, ed. Shahrokh Raei (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2017); Lokman Turgut, "An Inside View of the Kurdish Alevis: Diwana Heq of Pir Ali Bali," in *Religious Minorities in Kurdistan: Beyond Mainstream*, ed. Khanna Omarkhali (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2014); Janroj Keles, "The Politics of Religious and Ethnic Identity among Kurdish Alevis in the Homeland and Diaspora," in *Religious Minorities in Kurdistan: Beyond Mainstream*, ed. Khanna Omarkhali (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2014); Martin van Bruinessen, "'Aslımı inkar eden haramzadedir!': The debate on the ethnic identity of the Kurdish Alevis," in *Syncretistic Religious Communities in the Near East*, ed. Krisztina Kehl-Bodrogi, Barbara Kellner-Heinkele, and Anke Otter-Beaujean (Leiden: Brill, 1997); Paul J. White and Joost Jongerden, *Turkey's Alevi Enigma* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2003); Peter J. Bumke, "Kızılbaş-Kurden in Dersim (Tunceli, Türkei): Marginalität und Häresie," *Anthropos*, no. 74 (1979).

4 Sabır Güler, *Ötekinin Ötekisi – Etno-Dinsel Bir kimlik Olarak Alevi Kürtlüğün İnşası* (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2019), 125.

Kurdishness and Alevism. Given that Alevism and Kurdishness are not officially recognised religious or ethnic identities in the Republic of Turkey, Kurdish Alevis have faced discrimination, oppression, alienation and forced assimilation for centuries. Thus, both Alevi and Kurdish politicisation processes, which began in the early 1990s, have had significant multi-faceted impacts on the re-producing of a Kurdish Alevi cultural identity.

The data analysed in this paper is drawn from long-term ethnographical fieldwork conducted in Dersim in 2015 and 2016.<sup>5</sup>

### A Brief Socio-Historical Framework for Several Identity-Driven Notions: Kurdishness, Alevism, Kurdish Alevism and Dersim

*Alevism* is a highly controversial religious belief. Most scholars agree that it can be defined as a unique religious system or a form of Islamic heterodoxy in Turkey. Debate surrounding *Alevism* seems to focus on the *five pillars of Islam*<sup>6</sup>, especially when it comes to defining *who a Muslim is*. Alevis do not follow the five pillars, although they have maintained certain discourses and practices associated with the household of the prophet of Islam for centuries particularly Ali (the prophet's paternal cousin) and his descendants – to define their religious identity. Kurdish Alevis emphasise semi-deific characteristics of their hereditary sacred lineages rather than Islamic historical figures in order to define the uniqueness of their religion.

Alevi communities mainly live in a wide geographical area that reaches from the Balkans to the Middle East. Additionally, a sizeable number have been living in Western Europe for over half a century. They speak different languages, have diverse historical backgrounds, belong to various ethnic

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5 This paper provides an abbreviated framework of some arguments from the larger project report which will be published in Turkish. Ahmet Kerim Gültekin, *Kemeré Duzgıdan Düzgün Baba'ya Dersim Alevliğinde (Raa Haqi İnançında) Kutsal Mekânın Toplumsal Yeniden Üretimi – Kültürel Süreçlerde Süreklilik Halleri* (İstanbul: Bilim ve Gelecek Yayınları, forthcoming). I would like to thank Markus Dressler for his constructive feedback on this paper.

6 The five pillars of Islam refer to the five rules that are accepted as mandatory. These are *shahadah*, to accept Muhammed as a prophet of one, true God; *salat*, to pray five times a day; *zekat*, to donate 2.5% of one's income to the poor; *sawm*, to fast during Ramadan (the month of fasting) and *hajj*, to go to Mecca on pilgrimage. While there are differences between how the main sects of Islam practise the five pillars, it is agreed that these acts define what a Muslim is. Alevi communities also have different ways of understanding and practising these pillars. However, the majority, and particularly Kurdish Alevis, do not follow them.



identities and have different citizenships. They also have diverse religious customs. Today, most Alevi live in Turkey. They are the main socio-religious and political actors of today's *multiple Alevisms*<sup>7</sup>. Alevi in Turkey are still struggling to gain official recognition from the Republic of Turkey, despite being granted formal status as *an Islamic sect* or *an independent religion* by some European countries. Due to this contradictory position, they have become a much-discussed topic between Brussels (EU) and Ankara (Turkey), especially given that Turkey is pursuing EU membership. Once *defining Alevism* became a matter of international politics and a *legal* criterion for earning constitutional rights, academic work relating to Alevism started to gain importance.

*Alevism*, as a defining term, covers heterogeneous ethno-religious communities throughout a vast geographic area and the term refers to various social, political, historical and religious contexts.<sup>8</sup> Dressler establishes four primary historical meanings of the term *Alevi*.<sup>9</sup> *First*, Alevi is used to

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7 I use this term to include political and religious differences among Alevi communities. For a brief understanding of various political orientations among Alevi associations, see: Tahire Erman and Emrah Göker, "Alevi Politics in Contemporary Turkey," *Middle Eastern Studies* 36, no. 4 (2000).

8 For a comprehensive understanding of Alevism, see: Markus Dressler, "Alevi," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, vol. 3, ed. Kate Fleet, Gudrun Krämer, Denis Matringe, John Nawas, and Everett Rowson (Leiden: Brill, 2008); Celia Jenkins, Suavi Aydın, and Umit Cetin, *Alevism as an Ethno-Religious Identity: Contested Boundaries* (London: Routledge, 2018); Benjamin Weineck and Johannes Zimmermann, *Alevism Between Standardisation and Plurality: Negotiating Texts, Sources and Cultural Heritage* (Frankfurt a. M.: PL Publishers, 2018); Suavi Aydın, "The Emergence of Alevism as an Ethno-Religious Identity," *National Identities* 20, no.1 (2018); Issa Tözün, *Alevi in Europe: Voices of Migration, Culture and Identity* (London, New York: Routledge, 2017); Çakır Ceyhan Suvari and Elif Kanca, "The Alevi Discourse in Turkey," in *Studies on Iran and The Caucasus*, ed. Uwe Bläsing, Victoria Arakelova, and Matthias Weinreich (Leiden: Brill, 2015); Talha Köse, "Ideological or Religious? Contending Visions on the Future of Alevi Identity," *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 19, no. 5 (2012); Markus Dressler, *Writing Religion: The Making of Turkish Alevi Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Elise Massicard, *The Alevi in Turkey and Europe: Identity and Managing Territorial Diversity* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013); Ali Yaman and Aykan Erdemir, *Alevism – Bektashism: A Brief Introduction* (Istanbul: Barış Matbaacılık, 2006); Tord Olsson, Elisabeth Özdalga, and Catharina Raudvere, *Alevi Identity – Cultural, Religious, Social Perspectives* (Istanbul: Swedish Research Institute, 2005); Özlem Göner, "The Transformation of the Alevi Collective Identity," *Cultural Dynamics* 17, no. 2 (2005); David Shankland, *The Alevi in Turkey: The Emergence of a Secular Islamic Tradition* (London: Routledge, 2003); White and Jongerden, *Turkey's Alevi Enigma*.

9 Dressler, "Alevi."

refer to a member of the *sacred lineage*<sup>10</sup> of Ali, who is a paternal cousin (and also son-in-law) of the prophet of Islam. *Second*, it defines a *political position* for individuals who support Ali and the struggle that occurred immediately following the prophet's death. *Third*, as a result of this political aspect, the term refers to religious heresy. State-associated Islamic authorities have described Alevism as heretical for centuries. Needless to say, Islamic authorities represent Sunni domination (orthodoxy).<sup>11</sup> *Fourth*, Alevi is a product of *Turkish modernism*. This final understanding provides the contemporary socio-political and religious framework for state-related intellectual debates on Alevi communities in Turkey.

The term *Alevism* should be considered here as a result of the specific modernisation processes Turkey underwent during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>12</sup> After the Republic of Turkey was established, intellectuals and ideologists of Turkish modernism argued that the religious practices of Alevi communities were rooted in *pre-Islamic Turkish* traditions. Academics and politicians used Alevism to demonstrate that *Arabic Islam was alien to modern Turkish national and historical identity*. Since the early Turkish Republic, the heterogenic cultural dimensions of Alevi communities in Turkey have been classified, with *Turkish/Turkmen Alevism*, *Arabic Alevism* and *Kurdish Alevism* established as the main classification categories. Accordingly, Alevism

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10 Sacred lineages are a common phenomenon among Muslim societies and Alevism. Descendants of the family of Muhammad are also called *Sharif* or *Sayyid*. Kurdish Alevism uses the term *Seyyid*. Alevi families that claim descent from Muhammad are usually known as *ocaks* (meaning *hearth* in Turkish). For more information, see: Kazuo Morimoto, *Sayyids and Sharifs in Muslim Societies: The Living Links to the Prophet* (London: Routledge, 2012). See also: Sarah Bowen Savant and Helena de Felipe, *Genealogy and Knowledge in Muslim Societies: Understanding the Past* (London: Edinburgh University Press, 2014). For sacred lineages in various Kurdish societies, see: Martin van Bruinessen, "Religion in Kurdistan," *Kurdish Times* 4, no. 1–2 (1991).

11 The terms 'orthodoxy' and 'heterodoxy' are controversial, particularly when used in relation to Alevism. They are often used to label politically unequal positions as more or less 'correct'. For criticism of orientalist notions of 'heterodoxy', see: Mark Soileau, "Conforming Haji Bektash: A Saint and His Followers between Orthopraxy and Heteropraxy," *Die Welt des Islams* 54, no. 3–4 (2014); Ayfer Karakaya-Stump, "The Vefâ'iyye, the Bektashiyye and Genealogies of 'Heterodox' Islam in Anatolia: Rethinking the Köprülü Paradigm," *Turcica*, no. 44 (2012–2013); Markus Dressler, *Writing Religion*, 186–239; Janina Karolewski, "What is Heterodox About Alevism? The Development of Anti-Alevi Discrimination and Resentment," *Die Welt des Islams*, no. 48 (2008); Markus Dressler, "How to Conceptualize Inner-Islamic Plurality/Difference: 'Heterodoxy' and 'Syncretism' in the Writings of Mehmet F. Köprülü (1890–1966)," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 37, no. 3 (2010).

12 Dressler, *Writing Religion*, 1–31.

in contemporary Turkey claim to have different ethnic orientations (Turkish/Turkmen, Kurdish<sup>13</sup> and Arabic). In addition, since Kurdish Alevis speak two main languages – Kurmanci and Kırmancki – they are usually defined as Kurds or Zazas. Kurmanci is well known as Kurdish and Kırmancki is mostly known as Zazaki in contemporary Turkey. The majority of Kurdish Alevis speak Kırmancki; the others speak both languages or only Kurmanci.<sup>14</sup>

Kurdish Alevis live in several eastern provinces of Turkey. Due to forced migration they also live in central and western parts of Anatolia. Moreover, economic reasons have resulted in continuous migrations to Western Turkey and Western Europe since the 1950s.<sup>15</sup> Tunceli is located in the Eastern Anatolia region and is the only (Kurmanci-, Kırmancki- and Turkish-speaking) Alevi-majority province in Turkey, bordered by a tall mountain range and a huge dammed lake. It could be said that the mountains and the lake create a psycho-geographical boundary for Kurdish Alevis. So much so that they define the territory as a *sacred land*. The Munzur Mountains run along its western and northern borders, while the Bingöl Mountains are to the east, and the Keban Dam is to the south. These geographic borders all separate Kurdish Alevis from the Sunni-Muslim-dominated world. In my previous works, I emphasized this region

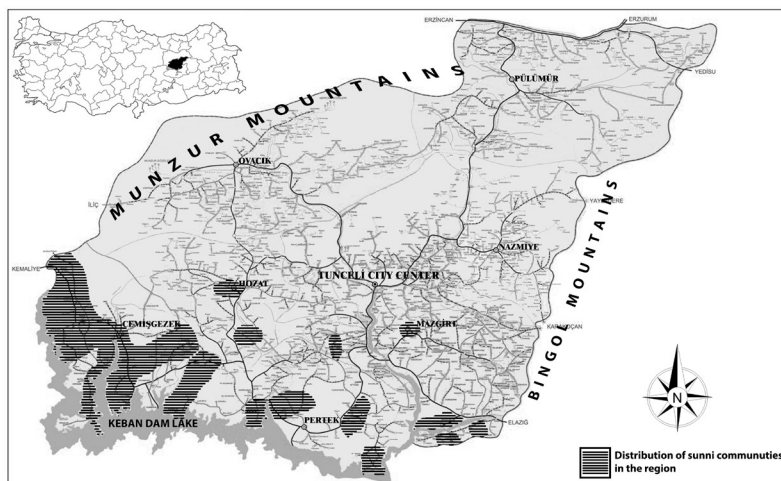
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13 Some researchers distinguish Kurds and Zazas as separate national identities when considering language, namely Kurmanci (Kurdish) and Kırmancki (Zazaki). For detailed ethnographic and historical information, see: Gezik and Gültekin, *Kurdish Alevis*, xx–xxiii.

14 The heated debate goes on between those who claim that Kurmanci and Kırmancki are different dialects of Kurdish, and those who believe them to be entirely different languages (Kurdish and Zazaki respectively). On one side of the debate there is the Kurdish nationalist position, which argues that Kırmancki is a dialect of Kurdish. On the other side, people who do not pursue a Kurdish nationalist agenda describe Kırmancki and its various dialects as Zazaki, and consider it to be a separate language to Kurmanci. Accordingly, Zazas (and the Alevis who speak Zazaki) are ethnically different from Kurds as well as Turks. For a brief overview of the respective debates, see: Michiel Leezenberg, “Kurdish Alevis and the Kurdish Nationalist Movement in the 1990s,” in *Turkey’s Alevi Enigma: A Comprehensive Overview*, ed. Paul J. White and Joost Jongerden (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2003); Paul J. White, “The Debate on the Identity of the Alevi Kurds,” in *Turkey’s Alevi Enigma: A Comprehensive Overview*, ed. Paul J. White and Joost Jongerden (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2003). Ultimately, all ethnic terms, such as *Türk*, *Kurd*, *Zaza* and *Kırmanc*, are directly related to *religious identities* in Tunceli and the surrounding regions. Being a *Sunni* or an *Alevi* determines ethnic definitions. For more information, see: Ahmet Kerim Gültekin, *Tunceli’de Sünni Olmak: Ulusal ve Yerel Kimlik Öğelerinin Tunceli Pertek’te Etnolojik Tetkiki* (Istanbul: Berfin Yayınları, 2010), 49–74; Erdal Gezik, *Dinsel, Etnik ve Politik Sorunlar Bağlamında: Alevi Kürtler* (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2014), 26–32.

15 Gezik and Gültekin, *Kurdish Alevis*, xix. See also: Keles, “The Politics of Religious and Ethnic Identity,” 189.

as inner-Dersim to emphasise that this is the core of the cultural geography of the Kurdish Alevi identity, constituting its historical and religious centre.<sup>16</sup> It is still the central reference point for their cosmology and their ritual practices. Inner-Dersim's other names are *Jaru Diyar* (*the Sacred Land*) or *Herdu Dewres* (*the Land of Saints*).<sup>17</sup> These terms refer to a cultural belonging to a specific region, which stems from ancestral ties and traditional religious knowledge. All *sacred lineages* of the Kurdish Alevi trace themselves back to this territory.



Map of Tunceli province, the only (Kurdish) Alevi-dominated province in Turkey. The distribution of local Sunni minority communities throughout the province is marked in black. Illustration by Ömer Akyüz.<sup>18</sup>

From the 16<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Dersim was the name of an Eastern Ottoman province. Until the Ottoman Empire was reorganised in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the large Dersim province encompassed today's Tunceli and some of the surrounding provinces. The residents of Dersim province, Kurdish

16 Gültekin, *Tunceli'de Sünni Olmak*, 30.

17 While such terms as *Kırmancıye Beleke* (emphasising a multi-cultured social sphere), *Hardu Dewres* (the Land of Saints) and *Jaru Diyar* (Sacred Land) are used to identify the cultural geography of Dersim, *Raa Haqi* (the Path of God/Truth), *Ewladê Haq* (the Children of God/Truth), *Ewladê Raye* (the Children of the Path) are used for self-identification. There is obviously a strong symbolic tie between geography, sacredness and socio-cultural belonging.

18 For more about Sunni communities of Dersim, see: Gültekin, *Tunceli'de Sünni Olmak*.

Alevi tribes, were famed for their warrior characteristics and religious heresy.<sup>19</sup> Following the Ottoman-Safevid wars, the Çemizşgezek principality (the south-western district of Tunceli province today) was granted autonomy.<sup>20</sup> This created relative autonomy for Kurdish Alevi tribes, who lived in the mountainous (inner-Dersim) areas. Within a few centuries, the tribes expanded their power and population (from the 16<sup>th</sup> century to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century) to other regions through their famous *plunder economy*. In contrast with their rising hegemony, Ottoman administrative reforms started restricting the tribes to inner-Dersim, and gradually cut their relations with other tribes from the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>21</sup> Due to the ongoing skirmishes between the state and tribes in the region, Dersim was defined by the Ottoman, and later the Turkish, bureaucracy as a place to *discipline, conquer, colonise* and *forcibly Sunnify*.<sup>22</sup> This was a hundred-year-long process, which culminated in the last rebellion in 1937 and the 1938 massacre.<sup>23</sup> Tunceli is the formal name of the province now, and was given by the Turkish government following the unsuccessful rebellion.

19 Yağın Çakmak, "II. Abdülhamid Döneminde Osmanlı Devleti'nin Kızılbaş/Alevî Siyaseti (1876–1909)," unpublished PhD Dissertation, Hacettepe University, 2018, 375–77.

20 Gezik, *Alevi Kürtler*, 67.

21 Gezik, *Alevi Kürtler*, 63–73.

22 Hüseyin Aygün, *Dersim 1938 ve Zorunlu İşkân*, (Ankara: Dipnot Yayınları, 2009). The Kurdish-Alevi-dominated population of Dersim was usually defined in Ottoman Turkish as *ahali-i gayr-i mutîa* ('disobedient people') and the people who lived near the Kurdish Alevi tribes were labelled *ahali-i mutîa* ('obedient people'), namely Turkish- or Kurmanji-speaking Sunnis. For reports on Dersim written by civil and military officials, see also: Faik Bulut, *Dersim Raporları* (Istanbul: Evrensel Basım Yayın, 2013).

23 The 1938 massacre was the main breaking point for the traditional socio-religious institutions of Dersim Alevism, and a foretaste of forced integration policies in the modern era. It has decisive consequences for the evaluation of today's ethnic identity politics and religious aspects of Kurdish Alevism. See: Özlem Göner, "Histories of 1938 in Turkey Memory, Consciousness, and Identity of Outsiderness," *International Review of Qualitative Research* 9, no. 2 (2016); Hayal Hanoglu, "Formation of Genocide Consciousness in Dersim Society," unpublished MA Thesis, University of London, 2015; Yıldız Yıldırım, "Cultural Memory in Post 1937–1938 Dersim Laments: Reflections On Trauma and Violence," unpublished MA Thesis, Istanbul Technical University, 2013; Özlem Göner, "A Social History of Power and Struggle in Turkey: State, Memory, Movements, and Identity of Outsiderness in Dersim," unpublished PhD Dissertation, University of Massachusetts, 2012; Hans-Lukas Kieser, "Dersim Massacre, 1937–1938," *Violence de masse et Résistance – Réseau de recherche*, 27 July, 2011, <https://www.sciencespo.fr/mass-violence-war-massacre-resistance/fr>; Martin van Bruinessen, "The Suppression of the Dersim Rebellion in Turkey (1937–38)," in *Genocide in Kurdistan? The Suppression of the Dersim Rebellion in Turkey (1937–38) and the Chemical War Against the Iraqi Kurds (1988)*, ed. George J. Andreopoulos (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994).

It means *bronze hand* and symbolises the ultimate victory of the republic over the tribes. The subject of identity in the region came to the forefront again in the 1990s with the Kurdish Alevi uprisings and military campaigns. It can be said that Dersim – both sociologically and spatially – characterises the Kurdish Alevs of Tunceli and a vast area inhabited by Kurmanci- and Kırmancki-speaking Alevs.<sup>24</sup>

### A Brief Summary of a Socio-Religious Organisation: *Raa Haqi*

*Raa Haqi*<sup>25</sup> (in Kırmancki, *the Path of Truth*) is the traditional name for the belief system of Kurdish Alevs. It is mostly called *Kurdish Alevism* today, a relatively new term that puts the focus on the ethno-religious identity.<sup>26</sup> The coherence of *beliefs of nature* and *hereditary kinship relations* are the unique features of *Raa Haqi*. In this system, the central role is held by *sacred lineages*. The obligatory religious relations between the sacred lineages, who are themselves organised as tribes, and follower (*talip*) tribes, structure the social, political, economic and religious spheres of Kurdish Alevism. The second major axis defining the peculiarity of *Raa Haqi* is the beliefs and practices shaped around *sacred places*, namely *jiare* (in Kırmancki). Similarly, the rituals of Kurdish-Alevi beliefs also have two main dimensions. One is related to sacred lineages and *talips*. Here, *cem* ceremonies<sup>27</sup> and visiting

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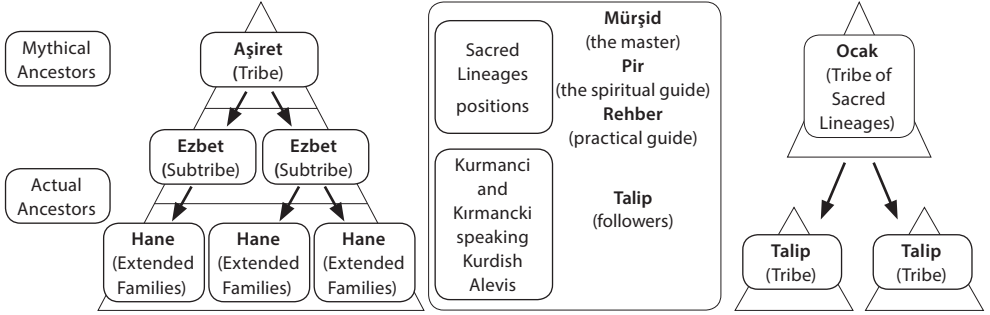
24 It is worth noting that, until 1915, Dersim was home to a large number of Armenians. As a result of the Armenian Genocide, the population in the region decreased dramatically. See: Raymond Kevorkian, *The Armenian Genocide: A Complete History* (London, New York: I.B.Tauris, 2011). See also: Dressler, *Writing Religion*, 106–12.

25 See: Dilşa Deniz, “Kurdish Alevi Belief System, ReyaHeqi/Raa Haqi: Structure, Networking, Ritual and Function,” in *Kurdish Alevs and the Case of Dersim: Historical and Contemporary Insights*, ed. Erdal Gezik and Ahmet Kerim Gültekin (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2019); Erdal Gezik and Hüseyin Çakmak, *Raa Haqi – Riya Haqi/Dersim Aleviliği İnanç Terimleri Sözlüğü* (Ankara: Kalan Yayınları, 2010); Erdal Gezik, “Rayberler, Pirlar ve Müşidler,” in *Alevi Ocakları ve Örgütlenmeleri*, ed. Erdal Gezik and Mesut Özcan (Ankara: Kalan Yayınları, 2013); Hüseyin Çakmak, *Dersim Aleviliği: Raa Haqi* (Ankara: Kalan Yayınları, 2013).

26 For a brief insight into such new terms that aim to explain the uniqueness of the ethnic identity as well as the belief system of Kurdish Alevs, see: İmran Gürtaş, “Dersim Alevilerinde Kimlik İnşası ve Travma,” in *Kızılbaşlık, Alevilik, Bektaşılık Tarih-Kimlik-İnanç-Ritüel*, ed. Yalçın Çakmak and İmran Gürtaş (Ankara: İletişim Yayınları, 2015), 309–27.

27 *Cem* ceremonies are the fundamental social and religious practices of Kurdish Alevi communities, which follow a particular procedure, though there may be some differences

the *ocaks* of sacred lineages are the main characteristics of the socio-religious aspect. The second is worshipping nature-based sacred places such as trees, mountains, rocks, caves, rivers, lakes, fountains, the sun and the moon. Each *jiare* is connected with a particular semi-deific being. They may be either male or female and may have a kind or malicious character. Some of them are related to sacred lineages.



Tribal structures and religious positions among Kurdish Alevi tribes.

The socio-religious formation of Kurdish Alevism can be likened to a caste system. Starting at the bottom and working upwards, first, there are *talips*. They are *the followers* of sacred lineages. *Talips* mostly speak Kirmancki, but there are also Kurmanci- and Turkish-speaking *talips* and *ocaks* in Dersim.<sup>28</sup> To better understand current religion-making process,

between the *cem* ceremonies of different Alevi communities. They are performed according to a religious calendar or on special occasions. All men, women, elders and children can participate in the ceremony, and it must be conducted under the strict religious and social authority of the *pir* (this title may also be called *baba*, *dede* or *seyit*). During these gatherings, ritual practices are performed, and socio-political matters are discussed to make communal decisions. There may be punishment, yet violence (in the sense of killing) is strictly forbidden. The utmost punishment is ex-communication. See: Çakmak, *Dersim Aleviliği*, 66–113; Deniz, “Kurdish Alevi Belief System,” 45–75.

28 *Ocaks* are usually associated with missionary saints, such as Hacı Bektaş-i Veli, from the 9<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> century. According to this point of view, some pioneer Alevi creeds and their founders were turned into *veli* (*saint*) *beliefs* as well as *socio-religious organisations* in time. This process is reflective of demographic, economic and political factors which continue to affect the formation of the socio-religious sphere of Alevism. For more information on processes of Islamisation of non-Turkish speaking communities such as Kurds, Armenians, Anatolian Greeks etc., see: Ahmet Karamustafa, “Anadolu’nun İslamlaşması Bağlamında Aleviliğin Oluşumu,” in *Kızılbaşlık Alevilik Bektaşilik – Tarih Kimlik İnanç Ritüel*, ed. Yalçın Çakmak and İmran Gürtaş (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2015); Ahmet Karamustafa, “Yesevilik, Melametilik, Kalenderilik, Vefailik ve Anadolu

it is crucial to understand the social roles and the flexible characteristics of relations between *talips* and *pirs*. *Talips* represent the majority of the community. They live in tribal organisations and have sacred bonds to *ocaks*, which they gain through birth (and which are unalterable). Deniz<sup>29</sup> defines this relational system through the notion of *receiving as well as providing a religious service*.<sup>30</sup> She emphasises that while *talips* receive the religious service, *raybers*, *pirs* and *mürşids* both receive (among themselves) and provide. *Pir-talip* relations could create a *non-spatial element*, which can be re-produced anywhere and at any time. In fact, they have already been re-produced in the metropolises of Turkey and in Europe in recent decades.<sup>31</sup> Second, there are *raybers*, who can be considered as *local, practical guides* as well as *consultants* on religious issues. If the symbolism of *Raa Haqi* is considered a *path* to follow, guides are needed. A *rayber's* duty is to arrange meetings of *pirs* and *talips*. He collates crucial socio-political issues to be discussed during the *cem* ceremonies. He teaches religious ethics, informs about social rules and also holds a religious authority as a *consultant* for socio-religious matters. Third, there are *pirs* (who need to be *seyits*). *Pirs* are the spiritual guides of their followers, as well as the embodiment of the *sacred lineage*. They are believed to perform *miracles (keramet)* and to possess magical, mystic healing powers, as did their mythological forefathers. Some *ocaks* are especially well-known for their *pirs*, who fall into a trance during *cem* ceremonies. They are also the *keepers* of certain *holy objects*<sup>32</sup> that mostly belong to the mythological ancestors of *sacred*

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Tasavvufunun Kökenleri Sorunu,” in *Osmanlı Toplumunda Tasavvuf ve Sufiler*, ed. Ahmet Yaşar Ocak (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Yayınları, 2005). We must question how some Kurdish tribes converted to Alevism, while others followed Sunni sects, with both groups viewing their socio-religious organisations as being shaped by the sacred lineages, who claim to have blood ties with the prophet’s household. It should also be noted that this claim is the main bond between Islamic cosmology and Kurdish Alevism.

29 Deniz, “Kurdish Alevi Belief System,” 55.

30 The service, traditionally, was carried out annually by *pirs*, who travelled (on foot) from village to village to visit their *talip* communities in different regions. At every stop, a *cem* ceremony was held under the *pir's* leadership. These meetings are still essential for practising the religion, as well as maintaining social relations between *talips* and *pirs*.

31 See: Annika Törne, “Dedes in Dersim: Narratives of Violence and Persecution,” *Iran and the Caucasus* 16, no. 1 (2012); Annika Törne, “On the Grounds Where They Will Walk in a Hundred Years of Time: Struggling with the Heritage of the Past in post-Genocidal Tunceli,” *European Journal of Turkish Studies*, no. 20 (2015); Tina Hamrin-Dahl, “The Alevi and Questions of Identity, Including Violence and Insider/Outsider Perspectives,” *Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis* no. 19 (2006).

32 There are different kinds of sacred objects in Dersim. They could be a cup, a glove or a



*lineages*. They visit their followers annually and these journeys are sacred, too. It is a true reflection of *following the path* for both *pirs* and *talips*. *Pirs* have the right to collect *çiralık*<sup>33</sup> on these journeys. There is also a constant population increase of *sacred lineages* and *talip* tribes, which is a direct result of the growing population, as well as migration to different regions and re-establishing the same socio-religious organisation. Finally, there are *mürşids* (or the *pirê piran*, *pir* of the *pirs*), who hold a superior position with judicial authority among the *ocaks*. *Ocaks* also have similar obligatory relations between one another, as is the case between *talips* and *pirs*.<sup>34</sup> The four positions (*talips*, *raybers*, *pirs* and *mürşids*) symbolise *four doors and forty levels*<sup>35</sup>, which should ideally be passed during a lifetime. This path can only be followed with the help of a member (*pir*) of a sacred lineage for *talips* and *pirs*, too. Therefore, practically every member of this system is a *talip*, and should have a *rayber-pir-mürşid* network to *follow the path*. This is where the *ikrar* (*sacred loyalty* or *sacred contract*)<sup>36</sup> comes in. It creates crucial religious and social bonds between individuals and *ocaks* as well as tribes. Some

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piece of parchment. Some famous ones are called *tarix*. These are thin wooden sticks, each one featuring a unique anthropomorphic character and each having a special name. They are capable of special miracles and can transform into a snake (or dragon) during *cem* ceremonies. They are also called *jiare*, the name that is also given to sacred places. Accordingly, not only are they highly valuable, but also dangerous, mystic objects that have to be kept by *raybers* or *pirs* and *mürşids*. They are used to heal, and are commonly employed to treat people who are paralysed or suffering from psychological problems. For more information, see: Gezik and Çakmak, *Raa Haqi – Riya Haqi*, 193.

33 A material or financial contribution to the *pir*, given by his *talips*. Sometimes *talips* pay this contribution by undertaking work for *pirs*.

34 See: Gezik and Gültekin, *Kurdish Alevis*, xv–xxvii; Gezik, “Rayberler, Pirlar ve Mürşidler,” 11–78.

35 *Dört Kapı Kırk Makam (Four Doors and Forty Levels)* is a metaphor for the spiritual path. It refers to the four specific stages (*şeriat*, *tarikât*, *marifet*, *hakikat*) of the divine path, and ten separate sub-stages for each one which must be passed under guidance of a *pir*. *Şeriat* defines ten strict rules, defining orthopraxy to the believers. *Tarikat* defines a sacred brotherhood, which means being a member of a creed. *Marifet* refers to mystical knowledge about *God/Truth*, and finally *Hakikat* refers to being one with the ultimate *Truth*. The aim of an Alevi individual is to follow the path, and try to reach the final point, *insan-ı kâmil* (a person who is united with the ultimate truth). However, in the case of Kurdish Alevism, all individuals pass the first, second and third *Kapıs* by right of birth. Afterwards, by entering the *ikrar*-based sacred relationship *musahiplik* (see footnote 38), they automatically reach the fourth stage. For more information, see: Gezik, *Alevi Kür-tler*, 38–41. See also: Gezik, “Rayberler, Pirlar ve Mürşidler,” 19.

36 For a more extensive explanation of the term *ikrar*, see: Deniz, “Kurdish Alevi Belief System,” 45–75.

religious institutions, such as *kirvelik*<sup>37</sup> and *musahiplik*<sup>38</sup>, which show the social and religious aspects of *ikrar*.

To summarise, *Raa Haqi* depends on a religious and socio-politically enclosed tribal organisation, which emerges through real and fictional kinships in relation to a tribe and an *ocak* (sacred lineage). The belief system also has strong symbolic and functional institutions, such as *kirvelik* and *musahiplik*. Interestingly, the social relations between *talips* and *pirs* seem flexible. Taking socio-religious relations as a whole, the *Raa Haqi* belief system can be examined within two main dimensions in the sense of practising religion: *ikrar*-based obligatory religious relations, and the worship of sacred places. *Ikrar*-based obligatory religious relations establish social relations between *pirs* and *talips*, as well as some obligatory relations between *ocaks*. The worship of sacred places could be said to provide more space for individual piety given the fact that worshipping nature-based sacred objects does not require any religious guidance or authority.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Kurdish Alevis faced two major incidents that had a catastrophic impact on their social organisation. The first was the 1938 massacre. Almost all sacred lineages were severely affected: most were killed and the survivors were exiled. This was the main breaking point for the traditional socio-religious institutions of Dersim Alevism. Until the 1990s, Kurdish Alevis were able to re-organise the religious order, even though it was not quite the same as before 1938. Despite criticism from

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37 *Kirvelik* is a crucial fictional kinship among Kurdish Alevis and also a common tradition within other Kurdish-speaking religious communities. It may be considered as a god-father relationship between two families. It is also a vital institution for social solidarity in the region. It is based on male circumcision. See: Gültekin, *Tunceli'de Sünni Olmak*, 173–95. *Kirvelik* is also a way of establishing social, economic and even political alliances among different religious (Sunnis, Alevis, Christians, etc.) communities throughout the Middle East, especially Kurmanci- and Kirmancki-speaking Kurdish communities. See: Martin Strohmeier and Lale Yalçın-Heckmann, *Kürtler: Tarih, Siyaset, Kültür* (Istanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, 2013); Ayşe Kudat, *Kirvelik: Sanal Akrabalığın Dünü Bugünü* (Ankara: Ütopya Yayınevi, 2004).

38 In *Raa Haqi*, the institution of *musahiplik* has a central importance. It is a fictional kinship, similar to *kirvelik*, and the most important way of establishing *ikrar*. One can only be *musahip* to another Kurdish Alevi individual. Choosing a *musahip* from outside of the community is forbidden. It is an *obligatory ritual brotherhood* for all Kurdish Alevis. Every *talip* or *rayber*, *pir*, *mürşid* must have a *musahip* to be able to follow the divine path. It is created through a ritual brotherhood of two young male members of the community. Its actual purpose is to strengthen solidarity through strict social, religious and economic obligations. See: Deniz, “Kurdish Alevi Belief System,” 45–75; Gezik and Çakmak, *Raa Haqi – Riya Haqi*, 123–28.

the new generations who were greatly involved in armed socialist struggles during the 1970s, *pirs* and *talips* (who survived the 1938 massacre) were still in contact. In 1994, after clashes between armed guerrilla groups and the Turkish state intensified, almost the entire area occupied by Kurdish Alevis was forcibly evacuated. This was the second incident and seems to have had a detrimental impact on traditional *pir* and *talip* relations.<sup>39</sup> Nonetheless, sacred places remained unchanged. Shortly after the turn of the century, they became instruments for reinventing Dersim cultural identity. This time, *talips* – who have always practised rituals at sacred places – have taken on a major role in recreating the socio-religious sphere, and managing the politics of cultural identity.

### Creating New Ways of Maintaining Religion

Many Kurdish Alevis are still heavily involved in multi-sided political movements, which are mostly related to socialist views and Kurdish nationalism. In recent decades, some Kurdish Alevi intellectuals have taken a different approach, which could be termed *Dersim ethnicism*. They argue that *Dersim Alevism* or *Raa Haqi* seems to be a *unique cultural system* with unique religious, linguistic, historical, sociological and anthropological elements. They point to rare rituals, cosmological discourses, mythical narratives and the unwritten historical past of Kurdish Alevi tribes.<sup>40</sup> This new ethno-cultural discourse has been welcomed primarily by younger generations and popularised through popular cultural materials such as *ethnic Dersim music* rather than through political arguments.<sup>41</sup>

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39 Forced evacuations and environmental destruction have played a specific role in the historical development of Kurdish Alevi communities. See: Martin van Bruinessen, *Forced Evacuations and Destruction of Villages in Dersim (Tunceli) and Western Bingöl, Turkish Kurdistan September-November 1994* (Utrecht: Utrecht University Repository, 1995); Joost Jongerden, “Resettlement and Reconstruction of Identity: The Case of the Kurds in Turkey,” *The Global Review of Ethnopolitics* 1, no. 1 (2001); Jacob van Etten et al., “Environmental Destruction as a Counterinsurgency Strategy in the Kurdistan Region of Turkey,” *Geoforum* 39, no. 5 (2008); Joost Jongerden, “Village Evacuation and Reconstruction in Kurdistan (1993–2002),” *Études Rurales* 2, no. 186 (2010).

40 See: Gürtaş, “Dersim Alevilerinde Kimlik İnşası ve Travma,” 309–27.

41 On the role of music and media as identifiers of Dersim ethnic identity during the Alevi Renaissance/Awakening, see: Leyla Neyzi, “Zazaname: Alevi Renaissance, Media and Music in the Nineties,” in *Turkey’s Alevi Enigma: A Comprehensive Overview*, ed. Paul J. White and Joost Jongerden (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2003). Erdemir points out several

After the millennium, *sacred places* also gained very wide popularity in line with the rise of *Dersim ethnicism*<sup>42</sup> among Kurdish Alevis. They became powerful indicators of cultural identity and symbols of Kurdish Alevism. The practices surrounding sacred places also have strong political implications. For example, the most influential argument against planned dam projects on the rivers of Dersim in the mid-2000s<sup>43</sup> drew on the idea of *defending sacred lands*. With rural life in Dersim already destroyed, Kurdish Alevis regarded the dam projects as another threat to the survival of sacred land. Tunceli therefore became the only city where almost every inhabitant marched to protest against the dam in 2014 – the largest march seen in Turkey to this day in defence of the environment.

The aspect of social transformation in Kurdish Alevism that has attracted the most attention is the increasing social and political role of lay individuals (*talips*) compared to the members of sacred lineages. *Talip* activities seem to be reshaping some conventional cultural institutions and obligatory religious relations, such as being member of the boards of the Alevi associations, which are also acting in the name of Alevism as a religion. This reveals that, under certain conditions, individual social agency may have contributed to a new type of religion-making process. It should be acknowledged that members of sacred lineages are also trying to use political activities to take advantage of their socio-political status for the purpose of re-establishing their religious prestige. For this to be achieved, *pirs* are instrumentalising sacred places via the *cemevis* that have been built in the region in recent years.

*Cemevis* gained importance among political Alevi movements after they migrated to the metropolises of Turkey and Europe.<sup>44</sup> *Cemevi* is the name for

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historical and social events to analyse increasing attention on Alevism among politicians and intellectuals, which took place in the 1990s. The Alevi Awakening has also been described as a process of discovery, enlightenment, innovation, coming out, revival, re-making, re-politicisation and the explosion of Alevism. See: Aykan Erdemir, "Tradition and Modernity: Turkey's Ambiguous Terms and Turkey's Ambivalent Subjects," *Middle Eastern Studies* 41, no. 6 (2005); see also: Mehmet Ertan, *Aleviliğin Politikleşme Süreci – Kimlik Siyasetinin Sınırlılıkları ve İmkânları* (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2017).

42 Some researchers refer to this as 'Dersim revival'; see: Besim Can Zırh, "1980'ler Alevilik, 2000'ler Dersim: Uyanışı Anlamak," *Alevilerin Sesi* 161 (2012), with reference to Alevi Awakening.

43 See: Celal Cahit Agar and Steffen Böhm, "Towards a Pluralist Labor Geography: Constrained Grassroots Agency and the Socio-Spatial Fix in Dêrsim, Turkey," *Environment and Planning* 50, no. 6 (2018).

44 At the turn of the century, *cemevis* became the main argument used by Alevi organisations to claim equal constitutional rights and official recognition from Turkey and the

the associations and buildings that have been established by almost all Alevi communities since the 1990s to bring the community together to practise the most important Alevi ritual: *cem* ceremonies. They are also used for social events, such as funerals and weddings. However, their political symbolism implies much more than the provision of social services. Re-forming Alevism as a modern religion with a view to gaining official recognition requires certain systematic rituals to be established, spatially redesigned sacred places and rewritten theology and history, too. Various definitions of Alevism in annual EU Commission reports on Turkey have played an important role for Alevi associations – both in Turkey and the EU – and impacted their political and religious discourses.<sup>45</sup> The question of *Cemevi* has taken the central position within these heated debates, explicating political stances and thus revealing different faces of multi-Alevism.

*Talips'* socio-religious interpretations are creating a new socio-religious sphere. *Talips* are also using sacred places as signifiers of cultural identity. Moreover, *cemevis* – whether as *legal* (EU) or *de-facto* (Turkey) institutional spaces of Aleviness in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – at sacred places create historical and social continuity and give *talips* the chance to be a religious, political authority which they had never been. In the following, I would like to shed light on *how sacred places became a determining factor for increasing the societal, political and religious roles of talips*.

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EU. *Cemevis* were presented by Alevism as undeniable proof of the religious uniqueness of Alevism. This policy quickly yielded results in the 2000s in some European countries (first in Germany) but not in Turkey. For the first time, Alevism was officially recognised as an independent religious community. Despite Turkey's negative attitude towards Alevism, the official status of Alevism in Europe had a large-scale sociological and political impact among all Alevi communities. Looking into *Cemevis* may provide potential perspectives on religion-making processes in secularist contexts in the EU. For further information on these processes and debates, see: Murat Es, "Alevist Politics of Place and the Construction of *Cemevis* in Turkey," unpublished MA Thesis, Boğaziçi University, 2006; Elise Massicard, "Alevi Communities in Western Europe: Identity and Religious Strategies," in *Yearbook of Muslims in Europe*, ed. Jorgen S. Nielsen et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2010); Martin Sökefeld, "Alevism in Germany and The Politics of Recognition," *New Perspectives on Turkey*, no. 28–29 (2003); Derya Özkul, "The Making of a Transnational Religion: Alevi Movement in Germany and the World Alevi Union," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 46, no. 2 (2019); Ali Çarkoğlu and Nazlı Çağın Bilgili, "A Precarious Relationship: The Alevi Minority, the Turkish State and the EU," *South European Society and Politics* 16, no. 2 (2011); Besim Can Zırh, "Euro-Alevism: From Gasterbeiter to Transnational Community," in *The Making of World Society: Perspectives from Transnational Research*, ed. Remus Gabriel Anghel, Eva Gerharz, Gilberto Rescher, and Monika Salzbrunn (Bielefeld: transcript, 2008).

45 See: Besim Can Zırh, "Euro-Alevism," 103–30.

Firstly, as a consequence of forced modernisation as well as political conflicts in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the socio-religious relations between *talips* and *pirs* fell apart. Sacred places, however, remained. They had always played a crucial role in *providing* a space for *everyday religious practices*. Kurdish Alevi go to sacred places frequently as individuals or with household groups. These practices play a significant role in everyday religious life in Dersim. All religious needs are supplied through such nature-based worship. While the socio-religious organisations, which depend on the caste system of *talips* and *pirs*, cover the collective ritual sphere, the sacred-place practices give more independence to individuals, creating a shared sense of practising religion without religious authorities. There was therefore no essential need for cultural institutional relations between *pirs* and *talips* to practise rituals at sacred places. For 21<sup>st</sup>-century *talips* seeking to strengthen their social position, sacred-place practices thus opened up the possibility of independence from religious authority. In addition to this, sacred places gained decisive importance for the enculturation of new generations. While rituals were being practised at sacred places, constituent elements of cultural identity were reshaped in line with the *talips*' perspective. Their everyday social cultures, political attitudes and religious tendencies started to fill the gaps that had opened during the absence of the representatives of the sacred lineages.

The lack of traditional religious knowledge among the new generations of Kurdish Alevi as well as the political activities of some *pirs* affected this process. Increasingly, *talips* started to demand well-organised, systematic, functional *cultural knowledge* of Alevi identity in terms of history, theology, linguistics and even sociology. In addition, heated debates and political tensions surrounding Alevism and the Kurdish issue in Turkey resulted in a need to re-organise cultural heritage, re-positioning it in accordance with contemporary transnational circumstances. This socio-political context put substantial pressure on the *pirs*. In order to maintain their religious prestige, they had to adjust to the political positions of their *talips*' organisations or at least felt obliged to follow the political tendencies of their *talips*. In addition to widely heterogeneous, complex social tribal as well as individual networks among *ocaks* and their *talips*, multiple views regarding Alevi politics developed. These diverse religio-political trends are evident in the activities of associations, political parties, journals, etc. *Pirs* thus face many challenges that they have to overcome if they want to obtain a political voice.

In the new context of post-1990 transnational Kurdish Alevism, *pirs* were no longer the only representatives of the socio-religious cultural sphere. New actors had emerged as a consequence of the politicisation of Alevism in the 1990s. These were *talips*, who had become involved in re-inventing Kurdish Alevi identity. In addition, leading Alevi associations engaged in negotiations with Turkish and European state authorities on behalf of the Alevis. Thus, the *religious part of Alevism* (for example, the *pir* and his duties), in the sense of acting and leading rituals, became more and more separated from social and political aspects. This could be interpreted as a kind of mutually beneficial agreement between *talips* and *pirs*.

Alevi associations' numbers have increased as a result of politicisation. At the same time, the *pirs*' social and religious role has been reformulated with their authority restricted to religion. Some *pirs* have chosen to focus on *religious service* only, and started to build their own *cemevis* at particular sacred places or in their villages.

Secondly, following the main break-down of socio-religious relations between *talips* and *pirs*, sacred places remain as places where one can practically experience Kurdish Alevi cultural identity. Given that sacred places always played a key role in everyday life, the *pirs*' service was not necessarily required, except for *cem* ceremonies. Consequently, even Kurdish Alevis living in places like Western Europe did not find it difficult to continue their daily religious practices. Today, many Kurdish Alevis in Europe use churches or even their own homes to light candles if they have no opportunity to go to a *cemevi*. Besides, being a member of a *cemevi* community can depend more on political than on religious positions.

Thirdly, there has always been a hidden tension between the *sacred place beliefs* of *talips* and the religious authority of sacred lineages.<sup>46</sup> This tension could be interpreted as a way in which the *talips* justify their occasional resistance to their *pirs*' decisions. There is therefore competition between *pirs* and *talips* over religious prestige and authority. In some cases, *talips* have rejected *pirs*' decisions, while legitimising their own practices based on their own mystic interpretations of sacred places. Today, *ocak* members are beginning to use popular sacred places in order to re-establish their religious authority vis-à-vis their *talips*.

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46 For some ethnographical data regarding the issue, see: Ahmet Kerim Gültekin, "Bir Derleme ve Bazı Notlar: Ahmet Dede ile Görüşme," *Munzur – Dersim Etnografya Dergisi*, no. 19 (2004).

*Pirs* are also trying to provide *religious services* not just to their own *talips*, who have to follow their *ocak* according to the cultural ideal, but also to other *talips*. There is thus a transformation of obligatory hereditary tribal religious relations with institutions being re-interpreted in line with new organisational standards as well as changing socio-spatial contexts. In other words, the religious institutions which used to depend on hereditary *talip-rehber-pir-mürşid* relations, are being abandoned and replaced by voluntary membership in an Alevi association. Today, many Kurdish Alevi *talips* can choose to be a member of any of the Alevi associations, or *ce-mevi*, and participate in activities regardless of who their inherited *ocak* is.

The information above is commonly outlined by academics writing about societal change in Alevism. Below, I will briefly evaluate some preliminary outcomes of my project.

Fourth, *talips'* new secular, political and social spheres, which have especially developed in Western European countries, have started to reshape sacred places spatially as well as socio-religiously. *Pirs* had to *follow talips* within this new religious-spatial context. As an example, owing to the Turkish authorities' continued discrimination against Alevis, the only way of gaining planning permission to construct *cemevis* near to sacred places in Dersim is to establish them as legal associations. The boards of management of these associations are comprised of both *talips* and *pirs*, something that would have been unthinkable in the hierarchical order of traditional Alevism. At the same time, the growing prestige of sacred places and increasing numbers of *cemevis* has led to competition between different *pirs*, who seek to attract followers' attention in order to strengthen their religious authority.

The *talips'* relatively autonomous religious sphere has gained new features in Western Europe. Following their successful efforts to gain formal recognition in Europe (in contrast to their counterparts in Turkey), Alevi associations were eager to take advantage of opportunities that opened up to them. This quickly resulted in a situation that might be described as *multi-Alevism*. Each association, as a *religious-political agent*, started to create its own Alevi discourse, in terms of history and even theology. The social-political heterogeneity of Alevi communities – with local differences such as customs, languages etc. – undoubtedly fed the competition between them.

Fifth, the socio-cultural backgrounds of *talips* have changed almost completely. This is closely related to the new generations who were born



in Western Europe and educated about religion following Western secular notions. Knowledge concerning the distinction between *religious* and *non-religious* spheres has strongly influenced all ritual-related aspects. For example, the construction of *cemevis* near sacred places is intentionally related to re-shaping these sacred places. According to the new way of thinking, if Alevism (*Raa Haqi*) is a religion, it should have buildings of worship that can reflect the sacredness of the Alevi cosmology. If not, sacred places should be spatially well-organised and should have a *proper religious* appearance.

The tensions between Alevi and other Islamic communities in Europe and in Turkey also need to be considered as factors in the transformation of Alevism. Most Alevi want well-organised *sacred places* to represent their religion to *others*. It is important to remember that the spatial planning of sacred places began long before the establishment of *cemevis*. It was with the increasing effects of modern religious contexts on Alevism that new constructions – such as *cemevis* – began to appear on sacred places. This was mostly a societal and political necessity resulting from a new understanding of Alevism.

## Conclusion

The significance of the role played by sacred places in contemporary Kurdish Alevism comes to the fore when *talips* obtain a position where they can be considered as the carriers of the religion. As a result of conventional caste relations falling apart during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the members of sacred lineages started following their *talips* all around the world and began to adhere to their *talips*' new social, political and religious tendencies. The *secularisation* process can be understood as a *re-conceptualisation of the Kurdish Alevi's cultural identity*. Within this transformation process, the re-organisation of sacred places plays a crucial role.

Kurdish Alevi sacred place practices have never required a religious guide. They depend on personal or communal practices without any written rules or systematic instructions. In view of the disintegration of conventional caste relations, sacred places have served more and more as *personal religious spaces*. With the politicisation of Kurdish Alevi communities in Turkey and Western Europe, these spaces have become increasingly

suiting to new actors, namely *talips*. Different Alevi associations have used the spaces as symbols of Kurdish Alevi cultural identity.

*Talip*-dominated Kurdish Alevi socio-political practices and discourses about sacred places appear to be a relatively recent phenomenon. An example of *religion making from below*,<sup>47</sup> this transformation appears to serve to secure cultural continuity and create a strong socio-political position for the subordinated Kurdish Alevi identity. By instrumentalising sacred places, *talips* seem to be able to influence *pirs* and use *cemevis* to practise religion in a new way. Thus, while it should be acknowledged that *pirs* are also trying to gain political capital from the described transformation, one of the most important outcomes of this era is *talips*' increasing domination of Kurdish Alevism. The transformation of Kurdish Alevism can be understood as a reconceptualisation of cultural identity linked to sacred places, which reflects a new socio-religious order between *pirs* and *talips*.

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47 Dreßler, "Modes of Religionization," 12.

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