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Understanding Current Alevism: A Field Research in Ankara, Turkey

Comprender el alevismo actual: una investigación de campo en Ankara, Turquía

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Resumen: Anthropology is a discipline that attempts to understand the human condition epistemologically. Concepts such as ethnicity or identity keep framing these studies. Alevism is one of those which is called ethnoreligious. However, Alevism has assumed different meanings according to regions and countries in the historical process. Discussions about what Alevism is have increased, especially in recent years. Different sources feed these discussions. Against the insistence on defining Alevism within the borders determined by the governments in Turkey and the discourse that ignores social diversity in general, Alevism feels the need to return to its resources, especially the historical and sociological studies of Alevi intellectuals, to seek a solution to this identity crisis. On the other hand, the organized Alevi movement, which has achieved various gains in Europe, expresses more confidently their demands for the rights of Alevis in Turkey, and they are also on the agenda in the country from time to time. The participants are Turks who do not have connections with Alevi organizations, do not have access to written sources of Alevism, and whose socialization spaces are usually their village associations in the city. Although their views sometimes show parallelism with the studies that seek the "essence/history" of Alevism, they also create unique ways of conveying the principles and philosophy of their beliefs and diversify their interpretations of Alevism. These interpretations sometimes have features that stretch the boundaries of traditional discourses.

Palabras clave: Alevism; Cultural Anthropology; Anthropology of Religion.

Abstract: La antropología es una disciplina que intenta comprender epistemológicamente la condición humana. Conceptos como etnia o identidad siguen enmarcando estos estudios. El alevismo es uno de los que se denominan etnorreligiosos. Sin embargo, el alevismo ha asumido diferentes significados según regiones y países en el proceso histórico. Las discusiones sobre qué es el alevismo se han incrementado, especialmente en los últimos años. Diferentes fuentes alimentan estas discusiones. Frente a la insistencia en definir el alevismo dentro de las fronteras determinadas por los gobiernos de Turquía y el discurso que ignora la diversidad social en general, el alevismo siente la necesidad de volver a sus recursos, especialmente a los estudios históricos y sociológicos de los intelectuales alevíes, para buscar una solución a esta crisis de identidad. Por otro lado, el movimiento aleví organizado, que ha logrado varios logros en Europa, expresa con más confianza sus demandas por los derechos de los alevíes en Turquía, y también están en la agenda del país de vez en cuando. Los participantes son turcos que no tienen conexiones con organizaciones alevíes, no tienen acceso a fuentes escritas del alevismo y cuyos espacios de socialización suelen ser sus asociaciones de aldea en la ciudad. Aunque sus puntos de vista a veces muestran paralelismo con los estudios que buscan la "esencia/historia" del alevismo, también crean formas únicas de transmitir los principios y la filosofía de sus creencias y diversifican sus interpretaciones del alevismo. Estas interpretaciones a veces tienen características que amplían los límites de los discursos tradicionales.

Keywords: Alevismo; Antropología cultural; Antropología de la religión.

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1. Introduction

After a century of debates affecting other social sciences, anthropology still epistemologically approaches studying the human condition with an open mind (Pina-Cabral, 2018, p. 19). Although its methodology has diversified, its principles, such as "being in the field," cultural relativism, and holistic perspective, continue to shed light on those who create data to understand this human condition.

This study approaches the debates on the origins of the Alevis, an ethnoreligious group living in Anatolia, with an anthropological perspective. These discussions and their reflections on the Alevis interviewed in the field encourage rethinking the issue of identity. As anthropologist Marc Auge (2021, p. 48) describes, we cannot give up ethno-analysis until we form an "earthling society." We still need places. Today, identity remains, as Stuart Hall said years ago, "an idea without which we would not be able to even think about key questions" (Hall, 1996). Although it does not refer to complete harmony or integrity, it still draws frames as a playmaker in representation and power relations. Since the first half of the twentieth century, "identity" has become a concept that has become popular among the study subjects of fields such as psychology, sociology, and anthropology. Gleason (1983, p. 46) argues that this is because identity refers to the relationship between "individual identity and the set of cultural and social characteristics that give a distinctive character to different groups, and promises to address the relationship between the two and to reveal a new conceptual link between the two elements of the problem in question." The issue of identity, which is still on the agenda today, continues to be a matter of discussion, with what it includes, what it leaves out, or what it covers.

2. Development

2.1. Why are we discussing alevism?

What is Alevism? Who is an Alevi? Why did the debate about whether Alevism is inside or outside Islam intensify? The question of where to locate Alevism's ethnic and religious origins continues to be highly contested. It comes to the forefront whenever the status of the Alevi community in Turkey is discussed, as Dressler emphasizes (2013, p. 12). He thinks that it is because of the laicism in Turkey, which establishes a state-controlled secular Sunni Islam as the quasi-official religion of the country. These discussions, which accompany a crisis, have been raised again recently, and they are fed mainly from three sources.

The first of these takes its source from the atmosphere inside the country. In Anatolia, where the hostile attitude of the Ottoman Empire towards Alevis did not change much in the later forms of government, secularism was still seen as a guarantee of life by the Alevis. The dominant Islamist and secular governments' discourses caused them great concern. Moreover, the government's persistent efforts to define Alevism within the borders they want and their accusatory approach towards different views have increased the work of Alevis in an intellectual dimension. Most of these studies are done by researchers who do not hide that they are Alevis. On the other hand, against the polarization environment intensifying within the country, Alevism feels the need to turn to its resources and philosophy in the intellectual dimension and to put universal reconciliatory values against the conflict. This search is also expressed by some sources that make democratic politics apart from Alevism studies.

The outputs of Europe's relatively organized alevism practice are the second of these sources. The outputs of Europe's relatively organized alevinism practice are the second of these sources. Successful initiatives that allowed Alevism to gain religious status in Germany and cemevi (djem houses) to be recognized as places of worship allowed the Alevis in Germany to approach the events in

Turkey with greater calm and confidence. While these associations and the umbrella organization, the European Confederation of Alevi Unions (AABK), bring the rights and freedoms of Alevis in Turkey to the agenda, they are also on the agenda in Turkey from time to time.

The third source arises from the forms of struggle with the crisis that identity itself is experiencing at the global level. The capitalist world's impoverishment, new life, and working styles continue to shake economic and social life with new crises. Reactions to this crisis with new organizational forms will be examined in the context of Alevism. This third source has caused unique phenomena among Turkish Alevis, especially with the economic and political crises experienced within the country. Central Anatolian Alevis, who prefer to come together around village associations that are more closed than others, are trying to hold on to their "identity" against both the discriminatory policies of the state and the inequalities created by neoliberal policies by turning these small-scale associations into confederations for social assistance. As Stuart Hall stated, such concepts as "identity" and "race" are located in a series of social and economic relations and he expressed his discomfort when they are reduced to the idea that they are purely cultural and ideological (cited in Solomos, 2018, p. 24). Of course, identity construction presents us with meaningful cultural stories for every period. However, these constructs and opposing positioning often cover up an economic conflict. The increasing Alevi-Sunni conflict in the 70s accelerated the chaos process that allowed the military coup. With the coup, the class opposition groups were almost destroyed, and changes that enabled Turkey to engage in neoliberalism could be realized.

2.2. Debates on what alevism is

The concept of "Alevism" describes those who took the side of the prophet's cousin, Ali, during the uncertainty about the identity of the caliphate after the prophet Muhammad's death. In Arabic, Alevi means "belongs to Ali" or "pro-Ali." However, alevism has taken on different meanings throughout history depending on region and country (Ylmaz, 2005, p. 29). In Anatolia, the Alevis, called *Qizilbash*, belonged to the *Turkmen* (Turkoman) tribes who were *Safavid* supporters in the 15th and 16th centuries. This concept has been defined as irreligious or insurgent over the centuries due to religious-social uprising movements such as the *Celali* Rebellions. As of the 19th century, it is stated that the concept of Alevism began to be used to name a heterodox Islamic sect (Melikoff, 1994). The beliefs and practices of Alevis, who do not go to the mosque and pray with their specific dance (*semah*) in cem (*djem*), differ from the dominant Sunni Islam. They keep the mottos alive, such as equality, keeping one's essence clean, controlling their hands and their tongues, and taking sides with the oppressed.

Although not so during the foundation of the state, the Alevis were marginalized and subjected to discrimination policies when the state religion of the Ottoman Empire became Sunni Islam in a short period. With the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the Republic of Turkey was established based on secularism. During this period, the Alevis became an ethnoreligious group that adopted the new state. The dynamics, such as the formation and disruption of history, the emergence of other ethnic groups within itself, its division and becoming inclusive in this context, the ethnicization of clusters that are not an ethnic context in historical conditions, or the making of certain religious or cultural characteristics of an ethnic entity as the main source of attachment also allow us to see Alevism as an ethnoreligious category (Aydın, 2016, p. 13).

"Identity crises" accompany the periods when the relationship between the individual and society and where to stand is under question. The rapidly rising polarization in the last two decades in Turkey, the increasing authoritarianism of the regime without being too willing to gain the consent of society, and the stereotypical discourse that rejects and threatens social diversity also affect the pulse of social identities. The Alevis get their share of this tension and feel a vital threat because of the neo-Ottoman discourse that has been calling from their memories. Alevism, the target of the

Islamist government's effort to define it within acceptable borders, continues its identity struggle in this crisis. With quotes from some representative names, we can include the main views that vary between those who evaluate Alevism within the framework of Islam and those who see it outside of Islam.

Ahmet YaşarOcak still constitutes one of the most important sources on the subject. He wrote to show that Alevi and Bektashi beliefs are the product of a certain ethnic or religious origin and culture and a wide geography stretching from Central Asia to the Balkans. Although the author sees the Bektashi and Alevi (*Qizilbash*) communities as the historical heirs of the religious and cultural syncretism of all these beliefs, he states that predominantly the influence of Islam is observed (2002, pp. 103, 111).

The work of AyferKarakaya-Stump (2016), one of the writers who see Alevism in Islam, is important primarily in eliminating an ongoing hierarchical problem in Alevism literature. Accordingly, Sunnism was categorized as written, pure, orthodox, and high Islam, while Alevism was seen as oral, syncretic, heterodox, and folk Islam. However, "all belief systems are built on and intertwined with what came before them" (2016, p. 7) requires us to accept that they are all syncretic. On the other hand, the Alevis also have written sources, both transmitted by their institutions and created by the state. Therefore, according to the author, it is more correct to think "in the studies of Alevism-Bektashism, instead of the orthodoxy-heterodox opposition, to think through the differentiation of mutual (shari'a) Islam and mystical/esoteric Islam" (9). The author, who categorically and originally separated Alevism from the dominant paradigm and placed Iraq and its surroundings instead of central Asia, continues to position Alevism about Islam. This former sovereign paradigm had placed Alevism as an interpretation of the Turkmen who migrated from Central Asia to Anatolia, thus combining Central Asian Shamanism and Islam. This claim, which rose in the last period of the Ottoman Empire, was also the source of the Turkish nationalism thesis. This thesis, shaped by Fuat Köprülü (1890-1966) and centering on "a folk Islam spread by Ahmet Yesevi" (Melikoff, 2015, p. 19), also influenced important names from Alevism studies for a long time.

Some Alevis claim that Alevism is not only a sect that should be seen within Islam but the "essence of Islam." The court records, which are claimed to belong to an Alevi *dede (opinion leader of Alevis* -HamdullahChelebi), who was tried and tortured in 1826, are still presented to the readers with new editions. In the records cited, Hamdullah Chelebi is charged with heresy and invited to follow Sunnah. HamdullahChelebi, on the other hand, claims that he is the one who believes in the truly right way, that those who took power from the ahl al-bayt (Mohammed Profit's relatives) pursue other and cruel purposes, that their followers are just as cruel and perverted as they are. He does not turn away from his way despite the torture he has suffered (Özmen, Koçak, 2007). Some Alevi institutions, such as the HaciBektash Veli Foundation, also embraced this view and passed it on to their followers.

FaikBulut (2011, p. 13), who says that seeing Alevism in Islam is a method of brainwashing, claims that Alevism is shaped by its struggle with Islam. According to this, Hz. Ali is a sharia figure used to dissolve Alevism in Islam by turning it into Shiite. His concept of "*Alevism without Ali*" is used several times by the head of the government to accuse Alevis of being a traitor. The fact that these discussions can be held freely on the platforms provided by Alevi organizations in Europe, which make statements about the rights of Alevis in Turkey, also places these organizations on the government's target board. Dressler (2013, p. 273) emphasizes that in the assimilation of Alevis, the nationalist thesis uses the definition of "Turkishness and a secular interpretation of Islam" to include them in the discourse of dominant identity. Therefore, any attempt to place Alevis outside this framework has to face these accusations and intolerance.

Another researcher, ErdoğanAydın (2013), who examines the relationship of Alevis with Ali, clearly states that the figure of Ali, especially before the prophet Muhammad's death, does not fit with the philosophy of Alevism. According to Aydın, Ali, mentioned by Alevis, is "a concept that includes divinity, not in the sense of cousin-groom Ali, but in the sense of a transcendent being" (2013, p. 24). The "God *(Haq),* Muhammad, and Ali" trilogy in Alevi idioms "pretends to talk about three separate personalities, but expresses the unity of the body in the sense of a single divine being" (25). Behind this way of saying it lies the fact that Alevis have to engage in deception against systematic oppression. The author, unlike the others, connects this trilogy of Alevis to the influence of the approach of Eastern churches such as Christianity, especially Armenian and Syriac, which considers "father, son, and holy spirit" not as three separate gods but as different aspects of the same God. He compares Ali more to Jesus (p. 27).

This places the origin of Alevism differently from the dominant historiography that connects the origins of Alevism to Central Asian Shamanism and raises the question of the ethnic identity of Alevis, which is mostly accepted as Turkish. Because another field that associates the existence of Alevis with the periods before the Turks came to Anatolia is Kurdish nationalism. For the first time, Cemşit Bender (1991) claimed that Alevism is an element of Kurdish civilization, an extension of Kurdish religions that lived before Islam, such as Zoroastrianism or Mazdeism.

As the most extreme point in the claim that Alevism is different from Islam, we can point to the writer ErdoğanÇınar (2018). He claims that in the millennium before Islam, Alevis concealed their true beliefs to escape Christian oppression and that they were regarded as a heretical branch of Christianity in the past, just as they are seen as a heretical sect of Islam today. As such, Alevism became an independent belief and an ancient way for thousands of years, not a belief or sect whose main body is Islam. (2018, p. 24). The author associates a group called the Paulicians, quoted in various sources, with the Alevis, a group of Christianheterodoxes (heretics) influenced by Mani, who lived in Iran between 216 and 277. This theory seems not to be easily verifiable and has been criticized by other researchers.

Another outstanding name in Alevi literature lately, Turan (2021), who published his research that Alevism is fed by Sufism rather than Central Asian Shamanism, sees Alevism not only as a belief but as a "political opposition movement." He claims that the Safavid influence, which included Ali in the belief of Alevism, harmed its essence. Shah Ismail, with his contradictory ideology, tried to combine anti-authoritarian Alevism with the Jafari sect of authoritarian Shiism; according to the author, "While the Safavid State was being established, he used Alevism for getting the support of Turkmens (2021, p. 204). He draws a thick line between Alevism and Islam, not only with some sects that seem close. Because first of all, Alevism rejects the "God-servant" duality, which is the source of most monotheistic religions. Again, symbols such as Heaven and Hell do not have any place in the sources of Alevism. They are often mocked. He gives examples (2021, p. 106) of this by quoting Yunus Emre (1240-1321), a reputable Alevi dervish: *What they call a paradise/A few hours in a house/Give them to whoever wants/I only need you at all...* His insistence on explaining Alevism's essence stems from his concerns about eliminating the potential for political opposition; in this way, the author thinks that Alevism will be "emancipated" (2021, p. 11). The effort to corrupt and degenerate Alevism has almost become an official policy since the Ottoman Empire. Again, starting from an example given by the author (2021, pp. 53–71), the name and date of birth of Hacı Bektaş Veli, who lived in Anatolia in the thirteenth century and is known as the person who institutionalized Alevism, have been changed by official sources in order to distance him from his true identity and link him to other sects. Some of the books presented as his written works were originally written by Ottoman officers on the orders of the Sultans. Thus, Hace (Hodja) Bektaş was transformed into a Haji who fulfilled the requirements of the Sunni sect, even though he had never been to Mecca. Today, his name is "Hacı Bektash Veli" on the monument where he lived

before. The author's work is significant in shedding light on Alevism's socio-political history with a critical view. However, it is not enough to understand how Alevism is defined and lived today as a target of this study to reach.

Finally, the work of Marcus Dressler (2013) criticizes the studies that see the origins of today's Alevism centuries ago, even within the framework of the continuity of the Babai and Bektashi movements. The author, who claims that this pursuit of continuity and homogeneity contains a hidden tendency of "nationalism," argues that Alevism is a modern structure that took shape at the beginning of the 20th century. Accordingly, the project of modernization and westernization is the most important factor that gives Alevism its current form. Sunni Muslims have also been affected by this Westernization and modernization project in their cultural, economic, political and social life areas, but judging from their historical narratives and reinterpretations of their cultural and religious traditions; Alevism is a comprehensive example of the reinterpretation of a religious tradition within a political project such as nation-building. (2013, p. 18). The most effective initiative that gave Alevism its current form seems to be this nation-building process, which "assimilates the *Qizilbash* by turning them into Alevis" (2013, pp. 272-278). The concept of Alevism began to be used in the 19th century and was aimed to soften the disobedience that the word *Qizilbash* evokes. On the other hand, Alevism was replaced by *Qizilbash,* which had insulting uses, and provided the opportunity to redefine Turkishness.

2.3. Alevism in the life of Alevis: outcomes of the field study

Shankland (2003, pp. 21-31) is right in warning that none of the statements claiming true Alevism will be empirically correct in practice, that Alevis are a large community with different elements, and that Alevism takes on the Anatolian Alevis are interesting in this sense. The field research conducted between 2020 and 2021 includes in-depth interviews with 35 Alevis originally from different places in Ankara, Yozgat, Çankırı, Çorum. They live and attend the activities of their village associations in Ankara.

The views of the participants on Alevism vary, as do the intellectual sources. Similar to the Alevi literature, some think Alevism has nothing to do with Islam and those. They see Alevism as a more libertarian and egalitarian way of life within Islam than other sects. The approach of some of the interviewees to Alevism is "the essence of Islam" or "a sect in relation with Islam": *"Alevism is the essence of Islam. It is the exact equivalent of it. If you ask when Alevism started, it has existed since 632" (p. 23). "Alevism is a unique belief that has synthesized Islamic culture and all the beliefs it has been in for centuries" (p. 18).* Some of the participants think that Alevism is a "culture" or a "lifestyle" separate from Islam: *"I define myself as Alevi. But I must state that Alevism was not taught to me as a religion. Alevism nourishes me in terms of moral and human values. Culturally, I see the Alevism culture as close to me. Of course, there are also religious elements in it" (KK.17). "According to our grandfathers, it is Islam. However, it can continue as a lifestyle without being related to Islam. I think it is correct to do so…" (p. 15).* It should even be noted that Alevism is not a religion is voiced among Alevis: *"Alevism is a separate culture. It is tried to be done and promoted, which the saints and the Pir Sultans continue; it has nothing to do with religion" (p. 11)*. Although there are hints that identify Alevism with Turkishness in the comments of some of the participants*["We say, learn and teach these (requirements of our faith) in Turkish, that is, in the language we understand" (p. 34), "If you look at its essence, the real Turks are Alevis; they come from the Oghuz tribe" (p. 15), "We can say that Alevism is the Turkish interpretation of Islam" (p. 28)]*, we can say that the information that there are Alevis from different ethnic origins is generally accepted."

However, a philosophy that unites all these different perspectives also manifests itself: Alevism is identified with concepts such as "freedom, freedom of conscience, justice, taking the side of the

oppressed." *"A teaching that does not marginalize, accepts, and unites" (p. 17). "I am an Alevi... I am not racist, I do not discriminate people, I am in favor of right, law, and justice" (p. 13). "You will not be cruel once, and you will not stand on the side of the oppressor. In summary, "This" is it for me" (p. 3).* Some interviewees summarized Alevism's philosophy through some historical figures considered sacred to Alevism: *"A lifestyle that allows people to be honest, have good morals, and have a conscience... Had he said, 'Have control of your hands, your waist, and your tongue,' HaciBektash, there is no need to say something else" (p. 15). "Let what happened to Ali and his sons not happen again, let there be no cruelty, do not stand for the oppressor, do not forget about morality by putting other things forward (making a money sign) (p. 2). "Alevism says what universal human rights say." We can even add animal rights. I remember HaciBektash sitting among the animals from his pictures" (p. 1).*

For those who say they are Alevis, basic principles such as "being with the oppressed," "seeing seventy-two nations as equal Alevis," "freedom," "having conscience, hands, waist, and tongue," "from of conscience,," "keeping the essence of oneself clean" are considered indispensable in defining Alevism. Even though Alevism's traditional institutions and rituals are absent from the lives of the people interviewed, these principles are considered sufficient for them to define themselves as Alevis.

The most crucial factor that diversifies the interpretation of Alevism is the transformation of traditional institutions with the "urbanization" process. We can say that this process is as essential a breaking point as the modernization period. Some Alevis who have adapted to urban life and have been uneasy about revealing their identities for a long time cannot resolve their legal and social issues in djem ceremonies, as they did in village life. While institutions and practices such as *"companionship"* (Musahip, as the interviewees call *kahamlık*-Yozgat, Çorum- or *Kardaşlık[brotherhood]*-Ankara, Çankırı) disappear from the lives of these people, in some places, *djem*s can only be practiced as ceremonies where sacrifices are made, and *dede*s give information about Alevism.

Some of the Alevis interviewed stated that they had never attended *djem* worship before, and their children were not interested in it. Although this situation sometimes causes concerns about keeping Alevism alive, it is also stated that Alevism can be adapted to current conditions, and the new generation assimilates Alevism philosophically or culturally. *"You change strict rules, your lifestyle. It is not possible to fast today without having a shower if you work. Day, month, year force people to compliance. A more flexible lifestyle" (p. 25). "There was a dede in the past, he used to play his instrument (baglama). I've never been here, no one called me... My children do not know about djem, fasting, but they pride themselves on being Alevis" (p..31).*

Younger participants, on the other hand, state that they have adopted Alevism by learning within the family and through sayings and songs: *"I learn Alevism from what I heard from my parents and actually from folk songs. I went to the baglama course with my brother when I was little. We still play and sing. If your essence is crooked, you will hurt the road, says Shah Hatayi, " Alevism is to keep your essence clean" (p. 1).*

In the big cities, "marriage with someone from another sect," which was previously considered an "abjection" and resulted in exclusion from society, has also become more common, and this has begun to be accepted by the Alevi community, interviewed. *"My husband is not Alevi, but if you look, he is more Alevi than me. He does not miss any events of the village association; he has more conversations with my relatives than I do... One of my children is little, but I tell the older one I am an Alevi. I describe it as seeking equality and justice, not discriminating against people, self-discipline" (p. 12).*

Therefore, like Martin van Bruinessen (2013, p. 26), "ethnicity is fluid and, at least to some extent, *alevism." Alevism."* Alevism." *Everything about me is free in Alevism. I understand my freedom."*

I understand how to express myself as a person. I ache and cry when Ali is mentioned until all my bones are broken. I shudder when I listen to the sayings about him. I cry for their suffering and injustice " (p. 25). "The moon is Ali; the sun is Muhammad. "Alie is our light, he is tourguide" (p. 3); "Ali is a mentor, a guide, his scales never weigh wrong, God is with Ali, to remember him is the greatest worship in my opinion. This is what we heard from our , 1996). However, what these narratives mean to Alevist today, and their role in conveying the Alevi philosophy symbolically cannot be underestimated. The anthropologist Geertz (1973, p. 91), who sees religion as a system of symbols, defines the concept of symbol as "any object, action, event, quality, or relationship that serves as a tool for understanding." Ali is like a teacher of a solidarist society model in which power is shared for Alevis. According to the Alevis, the prophet Muhammad benefited from the guidance of Ali until his death. Again, a narrative that shows the bodies of the prophet Muhammad and Ali and is included in the Commandment of Imam Cafer can be understood as the symbol that best expresses the meaning of the institution of "companionship" (*musahiplik*). Alevis; while they are transferring their philosophy that brings equality instead of the separation between Muhammad and Ali to the next generations, they paint a picture that will place companion institution on the ground of a society based on social solidarity. Although companionship (*musahiplik*) cannot be kept alive as an institution, the perception of "equality," which identifies Ali and the prophet Muhammad, continues to be conveyed as the most basic motto by Alevis. They do not allow duality to exist between a prophet and Ali.

As another example of demystification, Dressler (2013, p. 11) sees the perception that Alevis collectively support Atatürk. Some of the interviewees said, *"Atatürk was also an Alevi!" (p. 29), "If I knew I was going to die, I would not vote for anyone other than Atatürk's party (CHP), he is Alevi" (p. 25)* or who defined themselves as "Atatürk nationalists" confirms this perception. Today, Atatürk's picture is featured with Ali figures in djem houses and village associations. On the other hand, Atatürk is like the symbol of secularism, which they see as a guarantee of life for Alevis, scientific education, and freedom, which they attach importance to. *"It is more important for us that our children, especially our girls, can get a scientific education." We have moved far away from the republic of Atatürk "(p. 16). "The Alevi is someone who believes in democracy, defends secularism, and stands up for Atatürk's principles." In short, the insurance of the country is Alevis" (p. 22).* Therefore, for Alevism, where oral sources come to the fore, the symbolic meanings of historical figures are essential in terms of their role in the cultural transmission rather than their reality. This has changed historically. For many Alevis today, like Ali and HaciBektash, Atatürk is an important figure. Just as the Alevis, who were in interaction with the leftist worldview, brought forward HaciBektasVeli as a revolutionary figure in the 1970s (van Bruinessen, 2013), in the face of the rising Islamist discourse since the 2000s, Atatürk has become a personality that Alevis have held on to more tightly because of his "secular" and "enlightening" attitude.

An anthropological viewpoint, which views culture as "a dynamic output of lived interactions" (Moore, 2015, p. 411), deals with today's world of meaning, taking into account aspects that essentialist efforts overlook. Historically, Alevism has taken on an eclectic structure with new personalities and ideas like all religions and sects. Ignoring the influence of Shah Ismail or Jafarism makes it difficult to understand Alevism. Although some writers think it has damaged the "road." As a result, the effect of a figure that the Qizilbash called the name of demanded justice and equality and turned it into a symbol of self-expression cannot be ignored. Pir Sultan Abdal, one of the seven nobles of the Alevis, not only expresses the philosophy of Alevism emphasizing the formal feature of the sharia (like praying and ablution) is not necessary for them (because the sharia gate is already opened for Qizilbash); but also objecting to the injustices and inequalities of his period, when he said, "*If they force the ablution done again if they lead the praying made again, if they kill the one who says Shah, I will go to the Shah from this region*"; he keeps the imagination of another world alive. Today, the attitude of Alevis towards inequalities and the lifestyle imposed on them is

similarly identified with the saying "Yetişya Ali" (Help us Ali). Ali becomes the symbol of the call for justice for these people who pay the price and face discrimination because of their identity. An Alevi *dede* from Çankırı (p. 23), interviewed in the fieldwork and invited to the Djems in Ankara, emphasizes that Islam has become cruel because of Ali's elimination. However, his narrative on the origin of Alevism is within the framework of Islam:

> Alevism is the essence of Islam. It's the exact equivalent. Islam is love, egalitarian, against slavery, against arrogance… We pray to five names in Alevism. Mohammed, Ali, Hasan, Hüseyin, and in the middle of the door is Fatima. She is the mother because she is the creator... If you ask when Alevism started, it has been around since 632. The Prophet tells us not to look for a guardian after him at his end times. He raises Ali's hand. The first to pledge allegiance was Omer bin Khattab. After the prophet's death, Ömer raised Abu Bakr's hand and pledged allegiance to him... I think Omar has only become a Muslim, not an Alevi or something, because he has reneged on his confession. An Alevi is also one who does not relinquish his confession, one who does not return despite being killed, hanged, cut, or flayed... Allah is one, Muhammad is the prophet of the end times, and Ali is his guardian. Ali is honest… "Muawiya and his successors did the worst things for Islam."

This narrative also parallels the content of the Alevi compilation Rza Yldrmwith (2018, pp. 139, 153) made from the interviews he had with the Alevi *dede*s in and around Tokat. Narratives and traditional songs about Ali are still important for Alevis. With their Ali narratives, the Alevis, on the other hand, managed to keep their distance from the Sunni Islamic framework. For example, the theory that formal conditions are not necessary because the door of sharia was opened to them, together with the claim that Ali was killed in the mosque in practice, constitutes the defense of some Alevis against pressure to go to the mosque: "*We have become Alevis for the sake of Ali; we do not worship at the place where Ali was killed while praying; we do not pray either" (p. 29); "They do not accept the djem houses, but what should the Alevis do in the mosque? Did they not stab Ali there?" (p. 2).*

Another controversial issue regarding the figure of Ali, as in the stories of Ali and his sons, is that the prevailing perception of victimization in Alevi history tends to reduce Alevi history to a history of suffering inflicted on the righteous by oppressive others. Dressler (2013) argues that this prevents historicizing their relations with their environment as passive history subjects without real agency. The understanding of asceticism is a phenomenon observed among some Alevis. You can witness that, especially when the older adults talk to each other about what they have suffered competitively. Since Karbala, the perception that the good and the righteous are always suffering has remained alive by some old members of the community as proof of being "good." Today, this memory is updated with interventions that cost the lives of young people, especially after the Gezi events ("*Alevis went against the wrongs without fear" p. 12, "They chose and killed our youth in the Gezi Events" p. 2*). However, the effect of this perception on Alevis' taking a political position also brings a form of "taking sides" that can pave the way for new relations. In this context, the fact that Selahattin Demirtaş (former leader of the Kurdish opposition) has been in prison for years after his opposition to the presidential system is perceived as an example of suffering; it makes them question the distance between them and the Kurds, whom they consider to be extremists and whom they criticize for their relations with the PKK (armed organization of Kurdish opponents). Most participants see the Kurdish opposition (HDP) in parliament as their second option. *"The HDP is a despised party, a victim of fate. We do compulsory military service; we pay taxes. But we do not get a share of the wealth. We give the imam's salary, yet we are humiliated " (p. 22).* The Alevis' understanding of "asceticism" is transforming the understanding of "unity," this time with the empathy felt for the Kurds. The limits of nationalism, which are described as the founding element of Alevism, are thus overcome. *"I find what Selahattin Demirtaş does very valuable. I think that (Ale-*

vis too) feel close to the established understanding of protecting the oppressed and the persecuted from the Alevi tradition" (p. 21). I can vote for HDP instead of CHP. The rest are the same... I trust Demirtaş completely " (p. 11). "I look forward to HDP because of Selahattin Demirtaş. Otherwise, I am against all forms of violence, including the actions of those who say negative things. On the other hand, they are content to follow the work of other associations from afar and sometimes participate in some of their activities (like concerts and *Ashura days*). This situation keeps them away from Alevis, who are diversified in terms of ethnic and political views, and therefore causes them to withdraw into themselves.

The main socialization places for these people are the "village associations," where they come together with their community. In addition to funeral rituals, they communicate and get together through these organizations on special days (such as Ashura) for Alevis. In recent years, purposes such as social assistance have been added to the activities of this association due to the unending economic crisis and the impoverishment increased by the pandemic. Although they do not follow the discussions in the Alevi literature, it can be said that the identity crisis is also visible in these Alevis as the position of being the "other" of an Islamist regime. While their participation in economic life is restricted, the rapid enrichment they observe around them forces them to reorganize. In this sense, an umbrella association such as YDDF (Yozgat Democratic Associations Federation) was established in Ankara in 2011. With the increasing interest in recent years, most 85 Alevi villages in Yozgat province became members of this union as of 2021. It tries to build a solidarity network among Alevis on many issues, such as finding a job, helping each other, socializing, solving legal issues, providing educational support to children, producing projects to support farmers, and agreeing with institutions that will provide discounts to its members. There is neither a discussion of who Alevis are nor an effort to announce the identity demands of Alevis in the political arena at their meetings. Although all political figures who visit the association are accepted, their demands remain within the framework of increasing support for the association to maintain its operability. In the interview with the association's president (18 August 2021), it was also emphasized that they tried to stay away from politics. The reason for this was the strict legal regulations of the associations and their priority to establish a network of solidarity, which they needed a lot. However, it has been stated that in the following years, the association will also include studies on Alevism in its agenda. They have already started to give *semah* and *baglama* courses for children. As it can be understood from the Alevi literature and the interviews in the field, Alevis are living in an age that is very enthusiastic about "making words," which is not tolerated by oppressive regimes.

3. Conclusions

In recent years, there has been an increasing interest and discussions about the origin and history of Alevism carried out by different written sources. New studies should follow Alevis' connection with these sources. While some address Alevism within the frame of Islam or even the core of Islam, others see this ethnoreligious identity as independent outside Islam. The government of Turkey's attempt to place Alevis close to the borders of the Sunni sect and the workshops it held for this reason between 2009 and 2010 also triggered these discussions. It is difficult, and in fact, it is wrong, to make a single definition of Alevis.

Moreover, the motto of Alevism ("one path and thousand and one practices") is like a summary of the fact that, eventually, religion cannot be evaluated independently from how it is practiced. Finally, religion cannot be judged apart from how it is practiced. To grasp the current Alevism, field research was conducted between 2019-2021 with the Alevis who live in Ankara and who are originally from cities (like Yozgat, Çorum, Çankırı) close to Ankara. However, it is impossible to claim that this study represents all Alevis. It has some limitations, like ethnicity, because all interviewees are Turks from Middle Anatolia. They are also not members of associations related to Alevism, usually considered representatives of Alevis and where discussions and informing on Alevism take

place. Their primary places for socialization are their village associations, making them a relatively closed community. Nonetheless, it is possible to see various interpretations of Alevism even within this community.

Most of them consider themselves within the definitions of Islam and have adopted the basic principles of Alevism. They claim that there are only little nuances different from the other Muslims. The Alevism narrative of the modernization and nation-building project, which argues that Alevism was shaped in the 19th century, remains valid for some interviewees. Some people see Alevism as the "essence of the Qur'an and Islam." This idea parallels the Alevi literature that became popular in the 90s. The approach of these people is remarkable, especially in terms of including criticisms that will force the dominant discourse within Islam.

On the other hand, due to the urbanization process, moving away from traditional practices that have become difficult to fulfill under threat, the tendency to see Alevism as a "culture" and "lifestyle" is increasing, especially among young people. While accepting Alevism's religious content, some principles' importance in shaping life and thinking is prioritized. On the other hand, the basic elements of Alevism philosophy (unity, equality) continue to move through the figures (Ali, Hacı-Bektaş, Pir Sultan Abdal, Shah) symbolized by the sources of the oral tradition (*dede*s' narrative for those who can reach them, family transfer and *sayings* for others). The participants did not adopt the Alevism interpretations, in which Ali was excluded as a figure. However, it should be noted that they were not very aware of the discussions on the subject.

In line with Alevism's historical adventure, identity characteristics have always interacted intensely with the political area. In today's political conjuncture, this situation maintains its validity. Alevis interviewed in this context are more sympathetic to political organizations that place "secularism" and "social democracy" at the focus of their discourse rather than organizations that put Alevism as "identity" at the center. While the phenomenon of "oppression," which is claimed to pacify Alevis, reshapes Alevis' beliefs about different identities, these convictions change the boundaries of their understanding of "unity." They feel empathy towards Kurdish opponents, for example. As a result of their discomfort with the neo-Ottoman rhetoric of the government, they see themselves as part of a wider opposition network. "Others" of Alevism as an identity are expanding as those who ignore the segments they consider to be disadvantaged while taking advantage of the opportunities of changing socioeconomic conditions are more likely to be "Sunni."

After defining the relationship between their political positions and their beliefs, the socioeconomic aspects of their institutional relations, which they updated in the face of the rising global economic crises and the compulsion of discriminatory policies, were also reviewed. This community, which socializes by coming together mostly through the associations of relatives and nearby villages, has attempted to use their associations for social aid and to create or become a member of a wider federation against the economic difficulties. These institutions mostly aim to find solutions to economic problems and provide solidarity. Keeping the identity of Alevis alive and announcing their demands for rights are on their agenda to be carried out in a more democratic environment.

As a result, the identity crisis experienced by Alevis today stands as an indicator of the pains of the country's political and economic turning point and the effort to produce words to construct a more just order. Examples of Alevis interviewed in this process have also shaped the boundaries of traditional discourses of Alevism according to new conditions. The limits of the "unity" discourse exceed the Alevis, the nationalist discourse is stretched, and hope can be generated from the "victimization" tradition.

Beyond the origin debates, the principles of Alevism that include specific, common, and universal values can be agreed upon. "The specificity of Alevism stems from its freedom of conscience or its liberal side, even its "secularism," which allows Muslims to reconcile with the conditions of

modernity, says Massicard (2017, p. 110). And "the operations of identity games break up the Alevi movement," he adds (158). Alevi philosophy, which has a common motto of seeing seventy-two nations as equal and not being cruel even if they are oppressed a thousand times, should be brought to the fore with these universal values. Discussions on intra-Islamic, non-Islamic, and Turkish-Kurdish distinctions have exclusionary characteristics as they are conducted over "identity." Although being Turks, the participants in the field are improving that crossing the borders of identity is possible. In fact, in the face of many injustices experienced today, Alevis can develop a common stance within the framework of their universal values.

Author contributions

Hülya Doğan Elibüyük: Conceptualization, Supervision, Visualization, Investigation, Writing The Original Draft, Review, and Editing.

Conflicto de intereses

The author admits that this study has no conflicts of interest

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