

FORMULATION OF *SEMAHS* IN RELATION TO THE  
QUESTION OF ALEVI IDENTITY IN TURKEY

by

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## ABSTRACT

### FORMULATION OF *SEMAHS* IN RELATION TO THE QUESTION OF ALEVI IDENTITY IN TURKEY

*Semahs* are the ritual dances of the Alevis, a heterodox, ethnically diverse religious community in Turkey. This dissertation concentrates on different reformulations of *semahs* in relation to the reconstruction processes of the Alevi identity since the establishment of the Republic. While the religious belief of the community differentiated from the legitimate state religion, the ethnic/linguistic identity of the non-Turkish speaking Alevi groups contradicted the legitimate national identity as well. These factors pointed at a space where the identity question of the group would be contested and negotiated by intentional actors both from within and outside the community in the last eighty years. In this process, the *semah* appeared as a religious and/or cultural component of the Alevi rituals, which has been maintained, transformed and manipulated in relation to the reconstructed Alevi identities.

After an analysis of the history of the Alevi identity, this dissertation focuses on the texts and oral narratives about *semahs*, and the *semah* performances presented in the public sphere. Subjected to a critical-comparative analysis, the critical question emerged on how the *semah* appeared to represent the identity of the community, or have been reformulated together with the reconstructed Alevi identity. Since the essentialist approaches from which this study distances itself is appropriated in almost all of the narratives, their analysis paved the way for the conceptualization of how *semah* is utilized as a representative of the Alevi identity. On the other hand, in parallel with the conceptual framework that accepts the *semah* as a component through which the identity is constituted, these narratives and the popular *semahs* performances are re-analyzed to arrive at conclusions about the Alevi identity that has been constructed in each period. These periods are specified as 1920-1950, 1950-1980 and 1980-2000 in relation to the social, economic, political and cultural developments that took place in Turkey and affected the lives and the identity formation of the Alevis.

## ÖZET

### TÜRKİYE’DE ALEVİ KİMLİĞİ MESELESİYLE BAĞLANTILI OLARAK SEMAHLARIN FORMÜLASYONU

Semahlar, Türkiye’deki heterodoks ve etnik çeşitliliğe sahip bir dinsel azınlık grubu olan Alevilerin ritüel danslarıdır. Bu tez, Cumhuriyet’in kurulmasından bu yana, Alevi kimliğinin inşa süreçleri ile bağlantılı olarak farklı semah formülasyonları üzerine odaklanır. Alevi topluluğu dinsel inançları bağlamında mesru devlet dininden farklılaşırken, topluluğun içindeki Türkçe konuşmayan gruplar etnik/dilsel kimlikleri açısından da mesru ulusal kimlikle çatışırlar. Bu etkenlerin tümü, son seksen yıl içerisinde Alevi kimliği meselesinin konuyla ilgili grubun içinden veya dışından çeşitli aktörler tarafından mücadele ve pazarlık konusu haline getirildiği bir alana işaret eder. Bu süreçte semahlar, Alevi ritüellerinin bir dinsel ve/veya kültürel bileşeni olarak yeniden inşa edilen Alevi kimlikleri bağlamında sürdürülmüş, dönüştürülmüş veya manipüle edilmiştir.

Tez, Alevi kimliği tarihinin kısa bir çözümlemesinin ardından, semahlar hakkındaki metinler ve sözlü tanıklıklar ile kamusal alanda sergilenen semah gösterileri üzerine odaklandı. Bunların tümü eleştirel ve karşılaştırmalı bir analize tabi tutulurken, semahların topluluğun kimliğini temsil mi ettiği, yoksa yeniden inşa edilen Alevi kimliğiyle karşılıklı etkileşim halinde yeniden formüle mi edildiği konusunda kritik bir soru ortaya çıktı. Eleştirel olarak ele alınan özcü yaklaşımların yazılı ve sözlü anlatıların çoğunda benimsenmiş olması, semahların Alevi kimliğinin temsilcisi olarak nasıl kavramsallaştırıldığının ortaya çıkarılmasına neden oldu. Öte yandan, semahların kimlikle birlikte kurulduğu yolundaki kavramsal çerçeveye paralel olarak, bu anlatılar ve popüler semah gösterileri, incelenen dönemlerin her birinde inşa edilen Alevi kimliği hakkında bazı sonuçlar çıkarmak üzere yeniden analiz edildi. Bu dönemler, Türkiye’de yaşanan ve Alevilerin hem yaşamlarını, hem de kimliklerini etkileyen toplumsal, ekonomik, siyasal ve kültürel gelişmelerle bağlantılı olarak 1920-1950, 1950-1980 ve 1980-2000 olarak belirlenmişti.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### Presentation of the Research Topic

In the last two decades, while the question of *Alevilik*,<sup>1</sup> and the topics of “Alevi revival” and “Alevi identity” have emerged on the social and political agenda of Turkey, a significant development that regards the ritual dances of the Alevi community, namely the *semahs*, has taken place: The *semahs* have been introduced to the public sphere, and they have gained access and visibility via public *cem* rituals, open-air and stage performances, as well as popular media. It is quite an interesting development, first because that the Alevi rituals had been banned practically since 1925, with the abolition of all sect lodges. Second, the Alevi community, in former times known for screening itself off from the outside

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<sup>1</sup> In this study, the term *Alevilik* is used instead of Alevism or Aleviness, because it also covers its construction as a social identity.



world, did not really want the presentation of *semahs* in the public sphere, especially in the presence of non-Alevi people. For the Alevi, the *semah* was part of the Alevi ritual –to which only the Alevi people could attend, and it was considered not a dance, but a service (*hizmet*) within the ritual. The radical changes have taken place on the part of the *semahs* in the last two decades strongly confirmed the end of the invisibility of *Alevilik*.

Since the 1980s, in relation to the Alevi groups' struggle for ritual space and representation, the *semahs* became one of most important symbols of the "Alevi revival," which put a special emphasis on the Alevi culture. While becoming visible in the public sphere, the *semahs*, on the one hand, answered the question of "what *Alevilik* is" for the non-Alevi; on the other hand, they served as a means for those Alevis who had not had a close –or any– relationship with the Alevi culture for a long period of time. In this respect, it is necessary to mention those Alevis who had been living in cities for a long time, and especially the young among them. By learning about *semahs* and by participating in the rehearsals, they became acquainted with Alevi culture, and by performing them publicly, they claimed their right to live with the Alevi identity.

The Alevi is a heterodox religious minority which is ethnically mixed<sup>2</sup> and within itself diversely structured on the basis of religious centers (*ocaks*) and other communal ties, such as clans or tribes. They constitute about fifteen to twenty-five percent of the population in Turkey.<sup>3</sup> Though most of the Alevis consider themselves Muslims, the religious practices of the Alevis differ considerably from those of Sunnis, especially from the perspective of the “five pillars” of İslam.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Among the large *Alevi* group in Turkey, there are Turkish, Kurdish and Arab *Alevi* sub-groups. Linguistically, Bruinessen distinguishes four groups: “In the eastern province of Kars there are communities speaking Azarbayjani Turkish and whose *Alevilik* differs little from the “orthodox” Twelver Shi’ism of modern Iran. The Arabic speaking *Alevi* communities of southern Turkey (especially Hatay and Adana) are the extension of Syria’s Alawi (Nusayri) community and have no historical ties with the other *Alevi* groups. Like the first group, their numbers are small and their role in Turkey has been negligible.” Martin van Bruinessen, “Kurds, Turks and the Alevi Revival in Turkey,” *Middle East Report* 200 (Summer 1996): 7-10.

<sup>3</sup> It is difficult to establish the figures for the *Alevi* population in Turkey. Cemal Sener, cites a total of 20 million people in the late 1980s. *Alevilik Olayı: Toplumsal Bir Baskaldirinin Kısa Tarihçesi*. (Istanbul: Ant Yayinlari, 1993). Kehl-Bodrogi approximates the number of *Alevis* in Turkey to be about 15 million, which makes about the 20% to 25% of the population. She also indicates that *Alevis* in Turkey constitute the largest heterodox religious community in the Near and Middle East. In a recent study, David Shankland tentatively suggests that “perhaps 65-67 percent of the population are Sunni Turk, Sunni Kurds perhaps 12-13 percent, Alevi Turks perhaps about 14-15 percent [about 75 percent of the total *Alevi* population in Turkey], and finally Alevi Kurds about 45 percent [about 25 percent of the total *Alevi* population in Turkey].” “Integrating the Rural: Gellner and the Study of Anatolia,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 35,no: 2 (April 1999): 132-149, 136.

<sup>4</sup> They do not usually follow the “five pillars” of İslam. Although they perform the principle of *Sahadet* (the Islamic declaration of faith to the oneness of God and the prophecy of Muhammad), they add the principle of *Aliyyun veliyullah* to it: “Ali is the companion of God.” They do not pray five times a day, and they do not go to the mosques. *Zekat* (one fortieth of one’s income distributed as alms) and *hac* (pilgrimage) to Mecca are alien practices to most *Alevis*. However, sacred springs and mountains are visited quite often as pilgrimage spots. They do not fast during the month of Ramadan; instead, they fast

Basically, Alevi doctrine concentrates on the mystical ability to perceive the hidden spiritual order (*batin*). Instead of living according to the external (*zahir*) demands of the religion, the Alevis are faithful to a set of simple moral norms. The basic principle in daily life is “*eline, diline, beline sahip olmak*” (to control one’s hands, tongue and sexual needs). The principal ritual practice of Alevis is carried out in gatherings called *cem*, which traditionally take place in private houses<sup>5</sup> rather than mosques. The *dede* (holy man) appears as one of the most important figures who maintain the order of the community and lead the rituals. These rituals are organized around *On İki Hizmet* (Twelve Services), performed by twelve assistants. The *semahs*, which are included in those twelve services,<sup>6</sup> are the ritual dances of Alevis and are accompanied by religious poems, called *nefes*.<sup>7</sup>

The initial research on *semahs* and the following oral history interviews, fieldwork and critical analysis of the texts related to the topic implied a very close

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for a period of twelve days during the month of Muharrem, to commemorate Hüseyin's death in Kerbela. For most of them, the real pilgrimage takes place in one’s heart.

<sup>5</sup> Since the 1980s, the *camevis*, which have mostly been built in the metropolises of Turkey, also serve as houses of worship. At this point, the biggest difference is that not only local people who know each other attend those *cem*s in the *camevis*. The *camevis* welcome many people from all around the cities who have actually migrated from different localities.

<sup>6</sup> The *semahs* are not always considered among the twelve services. Yet on each text and for everyone that I interviewed, it is clear that the *semah* is a service—either one of the 12 services or another one by its own—which should be realized within the ritual in a prescribed order among the other services, usually after they are completed.

<sup>7</sup> *Nefes* is a general term that is used for religious poems. Yet some people, like the Alevis of Siran, prefer to use the term *deyis*, instead. On the other hand, today most people refer to them as “*semah*.” It is very common to use the term “*semah*” both for songs and dances.

relationship between the Alevi *semahs* and the Alevi identity. Although the popular appeal of the Alevis for *semahs* is a very recent phenomenon, it was possible to track this relationship in the *semah* narratives of the researchers, as well as in those of the community members, and in the attitude of the state representatives since the beginning of the modernization process in Turkey. Scholarly approaches to identity which try to conceptualize it in different historical contexts and among them especially those which focus on its construction processes in relation to cultural components –such as dance and music– indicated the importance of these initial observations and encouraged this study. By considering the historical quality of this relationship and in the wake of its significant occurrence, the relationship between the *semahs* and the Alevi identity is placed at the core of this study. The conceptual framework within which the Alevi identity will be analyzed in relation to the *semahs*, throughout the history of the Alevi, is presented in the next part.

## Conceptual Framework

### Modernism, Nationalism and Construction of Traditions

The paradigm of nationalism which has been so widely accepted until recently is “classical modernism.” According to the conception of classical modernism, nations and nationalism are intrinsic to the nature of modern world and to the revolutions of modernity. It achieved its canonical formulation in the 1960s, especially in the model of “nation-building.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> A. D. Smith, *Nationalism and Modernism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 3.

By the end of the decade and especially in the 1970s and 1980s, there emerged a series of critiques which have called into question the basic assumptions of the classical modernist paradigm and the model of nation-building. The most striking effect came from the approaches which stressed the invented or imagined nature of nations. As Ernest Gellner notes, nationalism invents nations where they do not exist, and most other nations, despite their appeal to an august and immemorial past, are of recent invention.<sup>9</sup> In his later book entitled *Nations and Nationalism*, Gellner argues that nations were the result of pressures created by the demands of the industrial revolution. As soon as people from widely different backgrounds began to converge on cities, it was necessary to create some form of common identity for them. Perhaps more importantly, the demands of capitalism, specifically the need for constant retraining, demanded that there be a common language among workers. These demands were met by creating a common past, common culture –created by turning “low” folk cultures into “high” state cultures– and requiring a common language.<sup>10</sup>

As noted in many texts concerned with modernism and/or nationalism, Benedict Anderson warns Gellner in his way of using the word “invention:” “The drawback to this formulation, however, is that Gellner is so anxious to show that nationalism masquerades under false pretences that he assimilates ‘invention’ to

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<sup>9</sup> Ernest Gellner, *Thought and Change* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson. 1964), p. 169; Anne McClintock, “Family Feuds: Gender, Nationalism and the Family,” *Feminist Review*, no. 44 (Summer 1993), p. 61.

<sup>10</sup> Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991 ). First printed in 1983.

‘fabrication’ and ‘falsity’, rather than to ‘imagining’ and ‘creation’. In this way, he implies that ‘true’ communities exist which can be advantageously juxtaposed to nations.”<sup>11</sup> Anderson, who from an anthropological point of view proposes that a nation “is an imagined political community –and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign,” argues that “in fact, all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even those) are imagined.” Therefore, in contrast to Gellner, he states that “communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness but by the style in which they are imagined.”<sup>12</sup> He places greater emphasis on the constructed nature of culture and on the role of print capitalism in the development of nations. According to Smith, what makes Anderson’s notion of an imagined community novel (with respect to others) is its link with representation. “For Anderson, ‘imagination’ implies ‘creation’ rather than fabrication’; in this vein he speaks of the ‘inventions of the imagination’, to include both national communities and their modes of representation in plays, novels, scores and newspapers.”<sup>13</sup>

The book entitled *The Invention of Tradition*, containing a number of essays related to the topic and revealing a variety of case studies, was edited by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger. In the introduction, Hobsbawm defines the “invented tradition” and puts forward some general propositions about it, together

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<sup>11</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London and New York: Verso, 1993), p. 6.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., pp. 5-6.

<sup>13</sup> Smith, pp. 136-137.

with national traditions and nation. “Invented tradition is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with the past.”<sup>14</sup> Hobsbawm denies neither the importance of old traditions, nor that traditions have been invented in the past. What he claims is that since there has been such rapid change in the modern age, one would expect to find the invention of tradition occurring most frequently: “A rapid transformation of society weakens or destroys the social patterns for which ‘old’ traditions had been designed, producing new ones to which they were not applicable, or when such old traditions and their institutional carriers and promulgators no longer prove sufficiently adaptable and flexible, or are otherwise eliminated.”<sup>15</sup>

Hobsbawm’s introduction and the following essays in the book assert that since the national traditions are one kind of invented traditions, by analyzing them, we can best understand the nature and appeal of nations. Here again, the paradigm of the classical modernism is questioned, where the term “invention” underlines the constructed nature of the nation.

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<sup>14</sup> Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 1-2.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., pp. 4-5.

Whatever the historic and other communities embedded in the modern concept of 'France' and 'the French' –and which nobody would seek to deny– these very concepts must include a constructed or 'invented' component. And just because so much of what subjectively makes up the modern 'nation' consists of such constructs and is associated with appropriate and, in general, fairly recent symbols or suitably tailored discourse (such as 'national history'), the national phenomenon can not be adequately investigated without careful attention to the 'invention of tradition.'<sup>16</sup>

In his *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*, borrowing from Gellner, Hobsbawm defines nationalism as “primarily a principle, which holds that the political and national unit should be congruent.”<sup>17</sup> He contends that nations are a modern construction and that they are not unchanging entities. For Hobsbawm, nations are made by nationalists. Like Gellner, he argues that more than a little artifact, invention and social engineering enter into the making of nations. He emphasizes that nations are the product of nationalism, conceptually and historically, yet he adds that nationalism's main characteristics and goal, as well as its sole claim to be treated seriously, is its drive to build a nation-state. Hobsbawm is distinguished from Gellner in using two kinds of analysis together in order to understand nations and nationalisms: One is top to down and elite-based, and focuses on official and governmental ideas; the other is from bottom to up. While Hobsbawm considers nations to be constructed essentially from above, he concedes that they must also be analyzed from the bottom up, in terms of the hopes, fears,

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., pp. 14.

<sup>17</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 9.



longings and interests of the ordinary people. In this respect, he criticizes Gellner that his modernization-from-above perspective makes it difficult for him to pay the necessary attention to the process going on among the ordinary people in relation to the formation of nations.<sup>18</sup>

Building on this idea, Hobsbawm introduces the concept of “proto-national” bounds to describe either supra-local regional, religious or ethnic communities, or political bounds of select groups linked to pre-modern states.<sup>19</sup> Hobsbawm does not regard any of them as the ancestor of modern nationalism because “they had or have no necessary relation with the unit of territorial political organization which is a crucial criterion of what we understand as a ‘nation’ today.”<sup>20</sup>

Second, he claims that (a) ideologies of states are not guides to how the people feel; (b) we cannot assume that most people place national identity above other identities which constitute the social being; and, (c) that national identification changes over time.<sup>21</sup> In being suspicious of the power and the sovereignty of nationalism and the national identity it produces, Hobsbawm is distinguished from Anderson and Gellner, who assumed that “the self-evident

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 47.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

success of nationalism means that nationalism is very strongly rooted in the thought or behavior of people.”<sup>22</sup>

In this study, it is not suggested that all these arguments should be imported wholesale and without translation into the specific subjects of *Alevi* identity and their religious traditions. For example, this study considers the warnings of Partha Chatterjee as quite valuable to the discussion of the particular case of the *Alevi*. Chatterjee, in *The Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*, values Anderson’s emphasis on the ideological creation of the nation as a central problem in the study of national movements, but concludes, “instead of pursuing the varied, and often contradictory, political possibilities inherent in this process, Anderson seals up this theme with a sociological determinism.” Chatterjee criticizes both Gellner and Anderson that they “see in the Third-World nationalisms a profoundly ‘modular’ character,” and he warns the social scientists who work on nationalism to pay attention to local experiences, the twists and turns, the suppressed possibilities and the contradictions still unresolved.<sup>23</sup>

However, it is important to note that Gellner, Hobsbawm and Anderson, together with Chatterjee, refuse to define nation by a set of external and abstract criteria, and introduced or developed new ways of analyzing and defining it.<sup>24</sup> They

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<sup>22</sup> John Bruilly, “Reflections on nationalism,” *Philosophy and Social Science*, 15, no: 1 (March 1985), p. 73. Revealed by Hobsbawm, p. 192n.

<sup>23</sup> Partha Chatterjee, *The Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World* (London: Zed Books, 1993).

<sup>24</sup> However, the presence and contributions of other thinkers and scholars who helped to shape the ideas on nation and nationalism cannot be denied. For example, Anderson, while citing Renan’s idea that asserts that the essence of nation lies in the fact that the members of it both possess many common things

are cited to indicate that they have contributed to a framework in which these subjects would be discussed. First, they indicate that neither the concept of nation, nor that of national identity deployed in this study are essentialist, but constructed ones. Second, they imply that the role of invention/creation of traditions/representations/ culture in the construction of a national identity is taken as a critical issue in the evaluation of the ritual dances of the *Alevi*s in relation to the construction of both national and the Alevi identity in relation to it.

Moreover, the above arguments are in use in questioning the position and affect of the national identity and those of others in the self-definitions of people/groups. Especially the contribution of Hobsbawm to the discussions summarized above is significant in questioning the validity of the national identity in the lives of people and in pointing at a “space” in which certain identities may be contested or negotiated.

Finally, as regards the specific features of the *Alevi* community, Hobsbawm’s concept of “proto-national bonds,” which include those of language, religion, ethnicity and consciousness of belonging (or having belonged to) a lasting political entity, have contributed to this study. Hobsbawm warns the reader that we know too little about what went on, or for that matter what still goes on, in the

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and that they also have forgotten many things together, comments that Renan underlines the imagined quality of nation. Hobsbawm also points to Renan's “Qu’est que c’est une nation?” conference and to the related chapters of John Stuart Mills’ work *Considerations on Representative Governments*. McClintock asserts that Anderson borrows from Walter Benjamin’s insight into the temporal paradox of modernity. In Benjamin’s insight, the mapping of ‘Progress’ depends on systematically *inventing* images ‘archaic’ time to identify what is historically ‘new’ about enlightened, national progress. p. 65.

minds of most relatively inarticulate men or women to speak with confidence about their thoughts and feelings towards the nationalities and nation-states which claim their loyalties. Therefore, he concludes that the real relation between proto-national identification and subsequent national or state patriotism must often remain obscure.<sup>25</sup> The *Alevi* community exhibits diversity in terms of language, ethnicity, religious centers and tribes/clans. Because of these characteristics, “The *Alevi* community,” despite its internal diversity, is a minority group of diverse and different peoples that come together on the basis of religion and thus forms a religious minority group in Turkey. Therefore, while examining *Alevi* community’s and *Alevi* individuals’ positioning against national identity, in terms of both the internal structure of *Alevi* community and its relation to a generalized *Alevi* identity, the bonds pointed out by Hobsbawm and the recent discussion proposed by Chatterjee provide tools/axes of analysis and thus add more depth to this study.

### Identity and Dance

In the previous section, while the discussions concentrated on nationalism and national identity, it was stated that the concept of identity adopted and employed in this study was not an essentialist, but a constructed one. This approach is valid for all the concepts related to identity, such as minority and ethnicity, which also have significance for this study. Thus, in this section, these concepts will be overviewed briefly, and then the main focus of this study, the *Alevi* identity

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<sup>25</sup> Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism*, p. 78.

in relation to Alevi rituals and more specifically the dances (*semahs*), will be discussed in order to provide the general framework constituted in this work.

As a first step, it is necessary to highlight the reasons why the Alevi in Turkey are considered a religious minority in this study. The concept of religious minority, similar to those of ethnic identity, ethnic group or indigenous peoples, is became prevalent, and more importantly, to some extent, redefined with the establishment of a nation-state system. This latter point is extremely significant, because the definitions of these concepts are tightly connected with the historical period, the world system and the socio-political context in which they went through a process of redefinition.<sup>26</sup> In a very general sense, the concept of minority, too, is about the official recognition of various social groups, whose features resided out of the criteria defined as “ethnic,” “religious,” “cultural,” etc., boundaries of a nation-state during the period of the establishment of a nation-state system.<sup>27</sup> Actually, the naming of a group as a minority is important in the context of law, for it is considered as a prerequisite for a group to attain certain rights and privileges within a state. As Aydin points out, “the existence of a legal framework for the

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<sup>26</sup> For example, if we take the term “ethnicity,” Thomas Hylland Eriksen points out that ethnicity’s earliest dictionary appearance was in 1972 (Oxford English Dictionary), and its first usage is attributed to the American sociologist David Riesman (1953). However, he continues that the word “ethnic” is older and derived from the Greek “ethos,” meaning heathen or pagan. While it was used in this context in England between the middle of fourteenth and the middle of nineteenth centuries, later on it began to refer to “racial” characteristics. *Ethnicity and Nationalism* (London and East Heaven, ct: Pluto Press, 1993), pp. 3-4.

<sup>27</sup> Suavi Aydin, “Azinlik,” pp. 107-114, in Kudret Emiroglu, Suavi Aydin, eds., *Antropoloji Sözlüğü* (Ankara: Bilim ve Sanat Yayinlari, 2003), pp. 107-108.

concept of minority, usually paved the way for it to be read as if it is the legal correspondence of ethnicity.”<sup>28</sup> Yet, there is an ambiguity on the concrete content of this concept; in other words, on who will be considered as a minority in a nation-state.<sup>29</sup> As Kirişçi and Winrow note “the failure to reach a consensus on what is meant by a minority weakens substantially the workings of these conventions.”<sup>30</sup> The procedures that deal with which groups to be recognized as a minority and in which state, and what will their legal rights be are still in process.<sup>31</sup>

In the Turkish nation-state no religious or ethnic minority is defined among the Muslim population. Therefore, in the legal framework, neither the Alevi nor the non-Turkish/speakers of non-Turkish languages are included within the status of a minority. The consideration of the Alevi as a religious minority in the context of

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 107.

<sup>29</sup> The main reason of ambiguity in defining the minorities is political. As Kirişçi and Winrow note, the problem of definition here is closely related to the highly sensitive and political implications of the recognition of a minority. Certain minority rights could be regarded by officials in some states as an infringement of state sovereignty and a possible threat to the integrity of a state and nation. In such cases, therefore, officials may deny the existence of minorities, or certain types of minority within their territory.” Kemal Kirişçi and Gareth M. Winrow, *The Kurdish Question and Turkey* (London and Portland, or: Frank Cass, 1997), p.33.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> For a detailed review, see Tom Hadden, “The Rights of Minorities and Peoples in International Law,” pp. 13-22 in Schulze, Stokes and Campbell, eds., *Nationalism, Minorities and Diasporas: Identities and Rights in the Middle East* (London, New York: Tauris, 1996); Patrick Thornberry, *International Law and the Rights of Minorities* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991); Brendan O’Leary and John McGarry, eds., *The Politics of Ethnic Conflict Regulation* (London, New York: Routledge, 1993); for a wide range of definitions for minority, see Will Kymlicka, *Politics in the Vernacular: Nationalism, Multiculturalism and Citizenship* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Kirişçi and Winrow.

this present study does not hold a legal claim. Rather, this identification, which includes a partial anthropological implication, is preferred here in order to highlight the socio-political status of the Alevi more clearly. Referring to the definition of minority as utilized by Schulze et. al., “it is a collection of persons in the population of a given state or a given region who are numerically inferior or politically powerless. They are identifiable, and indeed identify themselves through a shared language, culture or religion, or a combination of these factors.”<sup>32</sup> In a very broad sense, this definition helps to highlight the position of the Alevi in Turkey who identify themselves through a shared religion and culture. It is frequently mentioned that the concept of minority appears in a relational position to that of majority. In the conditions of the Third World, during the establishments of the nation-states, “the traditional religions were incorporated into rather than replaced by the new national states.”<sup>33</sup> This is similar to what had happened in the case of Turkey, where Sunni Islam became the “legitimate” religion and was placed in the governmental body.<sup>34</sup> Thus, within the context of this work and in the context of Turkey, the Alevi will be mentioned as a religious minority group.

When the people whose activities are observed or who are interviewed are considered, it is quite possible to assert that the Alevis in Turkey have a deep

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<sup>32</sup> Schulze, Stokes and Campbell, “Introduction,” pp. 1-12 in Schulze, Stokes and Campbell, eds., *Nationalism, Minorities and Diasporas: Identities and Rights in the Middle East*, p.1.

<sup>33</sup> Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis, *Racialized Boundaries* (London, New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 36.

<sup>34</sup> The details of this process and the legitimate inclusion of religion within the national identity will be discussed in Chapter 2.

awareness of belonging to a separate religious group, which is specifically different from the Sunni. However, when it comes to explain the ethnic diversity within the large Alevi community, the situation becomes very much blurred, especially in the case of Kurdish speaking Alevis –specifically when they reveal how they feel about their identity. Anthropological studies provide the means to determine fundamental aspects of ethnicity, precisely the *emic* (internal view of a group), the *etic* (the view of a group from outside) and the *mediating* (the effective balance established by the first two) views. The conceptualization of a group from inside is very important for this study and it aims particularly to arrive at some concluding remarks on how identity is claimed, mediated and formulated through a religious/aesthetic component.

However, the “emic” perspective is not the end of the identity process, because it is not possible to understand ethnicities or other diversities “outside the power relations in which they are embedded.”<sup>35</sup> While Stokes points to the most violent ethnic conflicts in Europe (“ethnic conflict” in the former Soviet Union, “ethnic cleansing” in Bosnia, or “ethnic violence” in British cities) as some significant examples, it is possible to reveal some different examples in the case of Kurdish speaking people or Alevis, as well as other Alevi groups in Turkey. Additionally, as a specific case, it must be mentioned that the history of the Alevi community makes it indispensable to approach the identity question of the Alevi without paying significant attention to the attitudes developed by the Sunni people

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<sup>35</sup> Martin Stokes, “Introduction: Ethnicity, Identity and Music,” pp. 1-27 in M. Stokes, ed., *Ethnicity, Identity and Music* (Oxford/New York: Berg, 1997), p.7.



at different periods. In this case, for example, it is necessary to overview their “etic” views towards the Alevi in order to understand an important dimension in their identity formation. Therefore, besides the personal views of the members declared at a historical moment, it is necessary to take a wider account of power relations into consideration throughout the history of those people in relation to their groups. As Barth notes, “the elements that determine belonging to an ethnic group are not those differences that are described as “objective”, but other differences that are produced in the social process.”<sup>36</sup>

Turning back to the special significance of the emic view adopted by the members of a certain diverse group, it must be strongly stressed that this study does not develop an approach of claiming an identity for a person or a group, one which s/he/the group does not claim or internalize. Rather, it takes different views together with what is represented as a common identity throughout the *semah* practices and performances of the Alevis as data in order to analyze them all together, but in relation to each other within a larger framework.

Hoping that this point is clear, it is now necessary to explain in a simple fashion what is meant by internal diversity of the Alevi in relation to ethnic terms, and also who are analyzed in relation to Kurdish *Alevilik*. Combining the data of the interviews and written texts, this study employs a rather wide definition that mainly concentrates on language, and includes all native speakers of *Kurmanci* and *Zazaki*, as well as those Turkish speaking people who claim that their parents use

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<sup>36</sup> Fredrik Barth, *Etnik Gruplar ve Sinirlari* (Ankara: Baglam Yayıncılık, 2001), p. 18.

those languages and thus claim descent from those groups.<sup>37</sup> It is important to note that here the term “claim” corresponds to a loose definition that it also includes those people who do not assert their relation to Kurdish identity to outsiders very strongly (for example, they may not reveal it in their first oral history interview with a researcher, but they may talk about it in the following interviews or the visits of the interviewer). In a study interested in the popular representation of the Alevi identity (or identities) and focused on certain groups in parallel to its topic, as will be more clear in the following sections, it seems that the diversity within the Alevi community does not hold a strong emphasis.

To sum up, the term ethnicity includes an ambiguity; it is dynamic and requires to be defined on fluid and fluctuating grounds.<sup>38</sup> Yet, in relation to the approaches developed in this study, at the level of a partial abstraction, it

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<sup>37</sup> See Martin van Bruinessen, “The Ethnic Identity of the Kurds,” pp. 613-621 in Peter Alford Andrews, ed., *Ethnic Groups in the Republic of Turkey* (Wiesbaden: Reichert Publication, 1989).

<sup>38</sup> The following explanation of Bruinessen sheds light on this topic and exemplifies the existing situation of Alevi and Kurdish identities: ‘ethnicity is a fluid thing and, to some extent at least, voluntaristic. It is not nature-given, one does not necessarily belong unambiguously to a specific ethnic group. Everyone has a number of partially overlapping identities, and it depends on the situation which ones she or he will emphasize or de-emphasize. A Sunni Zaza speaker is a Zaza, a Kurd, a Sunni Muslim and a citizen of Turkey. He also belongs to a specific social class and probably to a specific tribe, is an inhabitant of a specific village or valley, and may be the follower of a specific shayh or an active member of a political organization. Each of these identities is appealed to at one time or another. ... In areas where there have been many Sunni-Alevi conflicts, people define themselves primarily as Sunni or Alevi rather than Turk or Kurd. The emergence of Kurdish nationalism as a significant political force compelled many people to opt for an unambiguous ethnic identity. Many who had been partly or even entirely Arabized or Turkicized began to re-emphasize their Kurdish ethnic identity...’ “Kurdish Society, Ethnicity, Nationalism and Refugee Problems,” pp. 33-67 in Philip G. Kreyenbroek and Stefan Sperl, eds., *The Kurds. A Contemporary Overview* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 47-48.

contributes to a conceptualization of some social groups who exhibit certain distinctive features throughout the historical, social and political processes. Below, by pointing at a more general concept —the concept of identity, which includes ethnicity and minority as well— an effort will be made to overview the points of analysis for the construction of the Alevi identity in relation to *semah* performances. In addition to the approaches developed or utilized by certain researchers, those of Stokes (both in the general framework and in that developed in the specific case of the Alevi) and Hall (in the context of a more general framework) contributed a lot to the formation of this part. Additionally, the article of Barth (dated 1969)<sup>39</sup> that introduced the term ethnicity in the context of boundary construction and maintenance helped to the formulation of basic approaches.

First of all, it seems necessary to mention how the concept of identity is regarded in relation to the discussions presented above. By referring to Stokes, “identities are never unitary, pristine and untouched by the forces of history, but contextual, multiple, and often highly creative responses to adverse political and legal pressures.”<sup>40</sup> This concept will be clarified more in its relation with the *semahs* in the succeeding sections and chapters.

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<sup>39</sup> Fredrik Barth, ed., *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries. The Social Organization of Culture* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, Scandinavian University Press, 1969). See especially “Introduction,” written by Barth himself.

<sup>40</sup> Stokes, “Ritual, Identity and the State: An Alevi (Shi’a) *Cem* Ceremony,” pp. 188-202 in Schulze et. al., eds., *Nationalism, Minorities and Diasporas*, p. 189. See also Stuart Hall who reveals a very similar definition and helps to cover the definition of identity in a wide scope: “Introduction: Who Needs

Until recently, academic studies on music and performance were grounded on the assumption that these forms were reflections or mirror images of the underlying social structures, cultural patterns or structures of social relations.<sup>41</sup> Therefore, around the issue of “homology,” a kind of “structural relationship” between these forms and the social groups who produce and consume it was formulated and analyzed.<sup>42</sup> Recently, the ethnomusicologists and the scholars of performance, as well as the anthropologists seem to be “less interested in [this] structural proposition.”<sup>43</sup> As Cohen points out, “the view that any event or process or structure somehow replicates the essence of a society’s culture has now...been discredited.”<sup>44</sup> As soon as the proposition that the identities are mobile and “always

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‘Identity’?” pp. 1-17 in Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay, eds., *Questions of Cultural Identity* (London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1996) , p.4.

<sup>41</sup> Stokes, “Introduction: Ethnicity, Identity and Music,” p.4; Richard Bauman, “Performance,” pp. 41-49 in R. Bauman, ed., *Folklore, Cultural Performances and Popular Entertainments* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 47.

<sup>42</sup> See Simon Frith, “Music and Identity,” pp. 108-127 in Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay, eds., *Questions of Cultural Identity*, p. 108.

<sup>43</sup> Stokes, “Introduction: Ethnicity, Identity and Music.” See also Bauman. On the history of approaches to dance between the end of the nineteenth century and the middle of the 1970s, see Anya Peterson Royce, *The Anthropology of Dance* (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1977). She overviews five approaches to dance in chronological order: evolutionary approach, culture trait approach, the culture and personality and culture configuration approach, the problem oriented approach in complex and plural societies, and the approach that focuses on dance as a unique phenomenon. Chapter 2: The Anthropological Perspective, pp. 17-37.

<sup>44</sup> A. Cohen, *Belonging: Identity and Social Organization in British Cultures* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1982), quoted in Stokes .

in the process of formation”<sup>45</sup> is accepted as a social phenomenon, then it will not be possible to assume a direct and unchanging relationship between identity of a group and the form it produces.

In parallel to recent approaches, this study does not take the new popular Alevi rituals and the *semahs* that have entered into public sphere as reflections of the essence of Alevi culture or identity, but analyzes what performances “do,”<sup>46</sup> how they produce the Alevi who ‘*take on* both a subjective and a collective identity.”<sup>47</sup> In other words, by trying to locate the identity processes of the community in the existing socio-political conditions and by keeping in mind the importance of its diverse structure (ethnicities/languages, *ocak* and tribal affinities) in the formation of the identities, it tries to conceptualize how these new forms of religious-cultural activities help them to construct their identity and what the outcomes are. This analysis also includes the question of why *semahs*, but not another aspect of *Alevilik*, appeared almost as the focus of the community’s representation in the public sphere.

As an initial step, the location of the *semahs* within the context of the national identity *vis à vis* the minority identiti(es) needs to be asked. On the one

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<sup>45</sup> Stuart Hall, “Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities,” pp. 41-68 in Anthony D. King, ed., *Culture, Globalization and the World-System* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000(3)), p. 47.

<sup>46</sup> Stokes, “Introduction: Ethnicity, Identity and Music,” p. 12. See also Gerard Béhague, “Music Performance,” pp. 172-178 in R. Bauman, ed., *Folklore, Cultural Performances and Popular Entertainments*, p. 177.

<sup>47</sup> Frith, p. 109.

hand, dance and music are “intensely involved in the propagation of dominant classifications and [have] been tool[s] in the hands of new states.”<sup>48</sup> On the other hand, “for regions and communities within the context of the modernizing nation-state that do not identify with the state project, music and dance are often convenient and morally appropriate ways of asserting defiant difference.”<sup>49</sup> In this respect, the situation of the Alevi identity and the *semahs* may be summarized as follows: None of the Alevi groups has been religiously in accordance with the national identity constructed in Turkey. Additionally, the Kurdish and Arabic speaking Alevis have not displayed harmonious characteristics with it in ethnic terms, either.<sup>50</sup> Therefore, this study focuses on the religious ceremonies, music and especially the dances of a group which did not properly fit into the modern state project, but which stayed at a point on which the attitudes of the official representatives and the minorities in question have contested for a long period of time.

In Turkey, the *cems* and *semahs* were outlawed with the abolition of all religious brotherhoods and sect lodges in 1925, just a few years after the establishment of the Republic, but continued as an underground religious activity,

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<sup>48</sup> Stokes, “Introduction: Ethnicity, Identity and Music,” p. 10. Here, what Stokes has proposed for music is utilized for dance as well. It is not contradictory to the general framework of the cited article, but more importantly, the history of the folk dances and the *semahs* in Turkey affirm this proposition. On the history of folk dances in relation to nationalism in Turkey, see Arzu Öztürkmen, *Türkiye’de Folklor ve Milliyetçilik* (Istanbul: İletisim Yayınları, 1998).

<sup>49</sup> Stokes, p. 12.

<sup>50</sup> See Chapter 2 for details.

though losing their affect and frequency of repetition in time. The initial steps of *semahs*' occurrence in the public sphere were not taken by the Alevi groups as part of their own struggle for recognition. Rather, it seems to be realized at the end of some kind of a consensus achieved between some Alevi groups and official organizations or personalities who were engaged in folk dance activities in Turkey.<sup>51</sup> As a result of this initial process, the *semahs* were presented in the form of secular folk dances that reinforced the dominant ethnic identity in Turkey. In other words, they provided no space for the religious dimension and ethnic diversity of *Alevilik*.

The first entrance of *semahs* into the public sphere through the Alevis' own efforts that required a certain struggle happened in the 1960s. This development, which was realized on some special occasions and the celebration of the Haci Bektas Festival, was in the most part supported by the leftist activism in Turkey. In this period, too, the formulation of *Alevilik* as a religious system was disregarded on a large scale and in parallel to the socio-cultural developments, the basic emphasis was observed on the formation of an oppositional identity.

The developments of the 1980s are completely different from the ones that occurred in the previous periods. The Alevis' recent demand to enter the public sphere with their religious identity is associated with their new request for representation. In other words, gaining visibility within the public sphere as defined today with a religious content –at least to some degree– does not acquire the meaning of regaining a previous right, but rather amounts to forming a quite

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<sup>51</sup> See the last section of this chapter for details.

recent demand in the new cultural and socio-political context. Hall's approach of "struggle of the margins to come into representation," reclaiming "some form of representation for themselves"<sup>52</sup> highlights this new process.

The final condition, which has sometimes encountered official problems, but actually has gained some sort of a legitimate ground for itself may be summarized as follows: The *cemevis* established in the cities are a new phenomenon; the *cems* organized in these places and to which the Alevis (and also other people) who do not know each other at all or very well attend regularly or rarely are a new phenomenon; and the *semahs* performed in these *cems* or on the stage that rest on a choreography, require formation of a regular group, and include a spectacle dimension are a new phenomenon.<sup>53</sup> In short, the Alevis have redefined their community in relation to the world in which they live. "In this particular process of relocation, the places, boundaries and identities involved are of a large and collective order."<sup>54</sup> In this respect, the significance of two questions –why the *semahs* emerged as a significant focus after the 1980s, and how they affected the processes of Alevis' identity formation— will be pointed out below.

While discussing the formation process of the ethnic identity, Barth emphasizes that usually the cultural and historical traditions are revitalized and

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<sup>52</sup> Stuart Hall, "The Local and the Global: Globalization and Ethnicity," pp.19-39 in Anthony D. King, ed., *Culture, Globalization and the World-System* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000(3)), p. 34.

<sup>53</sup> For detailed information, see Chapter 4.

<sup>54</sup> Stokes, p. 3.



certain preferences are demonstrated at the selection of the cultural elements.<sup>55</sup> After 1980, the Alevis displayed a serious rule of progress, for example, in the field of publication, too. Yet it needs to be remembered that their public rituals and *semahs* establish a more direct relationship with traditions, they are more participatory, and their scope of influence seems to be wider. Additionally, the *semahs* have not totally been forgotten in the last six decades; in addition to the secret community meetings, by interweaving with folk dance activities at different levels, they became a candidate to be presented in the public sphere with a potential of making *Alevilik* and Alevi identity widely recognizable.

Moreover, when the effects of Sunni-ism –as being the dominant religious system– on Alevis’ identity formation is considered, it may be pointed out that the idea of a dance with religious content holds a partial<sup>56</sup> rebellious feature. Therefore, since the *semah* functions almost as the fundamental component of *Alevilik* on which the identity is constituted today, in this work it will be evaluated as one of the significant data related to the boundaries that the Alevis draw between themselves and the outside. However, it is also necessary to think about the fact that the *semahs* started to display certain characteristics very much associated with those of folk dances in more than half a century. Their almost “identical”

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<sup>55</sup> F. Barth, p. 38.

<sup>56</sup> Although many people of Sunni background participate or watch dances and folk dances, a dance which holds religious features is not acceptable in orthodox Sunni theology. However, utilization of the term “partial” is also related to the characteristics of present *semahs*, as well as the relationship formed between the Sunni and Alevi religious practices. These issues will be analyzed in a greater scope and in relation to each other in Chapter 4.

appearance to folk dances –for example, people who without much connection with *Alevilik* are not able to tell much or any difference between them– and the background understanding which supports this form require an investigation into the dimension of their rebellious character as opposed to Sunni-ism and the official ideology, and moreover, a detailed questioning of the so-called boundaries.

A similar investigation needs to be conducted inside the Alevi community. For example, it is difficult to argue that the Alevi identity in relation to its ethnic diversity is mobilized through *semahs*. However, what makes *semahs* socially meaningful is associated with the construction and mobilization of identities through the acts of listening, performing, discussing and thinking about them.<sup>57</sup> In Chapter 4, which includes the fieldwork, the effects of *semahs* on the construction of the Alevi identity, the one with which we are familiar in the public sphere, will be discussed in detail by utilizing the approaches discussed in this section. The *semahs*' historical transformations, their features that are being emphasized today and the places where the performances are organized will be included in the analysis.

### The Significance of the Research Topic

This present study arose from the questions related to the relationship between Alevi identity and the *semahs*, which the research/publications dealing

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<sup>57</sup> Stokes, p. 5.

with *Alevilik* or Alevi rituals have left untouched or filled in only partially. The basic reason for the formulation of these questions today was the *semahs*' appearance on the stage (as well as their upward mobility observed in public rituals) in close association with the proclamation of the Alevi identity in the public sphere in the post-1980 period. However, it is not possible to find published texts that directly question this relationship before after 1980. Therefore, the basic significance of this present study is closely related to its subject matter: this study may be considered as an initial attempt to deal with a quite recent development (together with its historical background), which did not appear within the main framework of the existing research.<sup>58</sup> Second, the Alevi studies in Turkey have often been carried out in the context of the "village study" and have focused on the internal dynamics of Alevi society.<sup>59</sup> When the high rate of migration that started in the 1950s is taken into consideration, *Alevilik* can no longer be evaluated as a "purely rural phenomenon."<sup>60</sup> In that sense, the studies which limit themselves to specific rural localities cannot help to understand the daily life of the majority of Alevis who live in cities and negotiate a complex social order. Therefore, the field-

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<sup>58</sup> The research of M. Stokes appears as exceptions. As will be mentioned below, this study refers to and makes use of the arguments and findings of Stokes. However, instead of music, this study mainly concentrates on the dance component of the *semahs*.

<sup>59</sup> Stokes, "Ritual, Identity and the State: An Alevi (Shi'a) *Cem* Ceremony," pp. 188-202 in K. Schulze, M. Stokes, C. Campbell, eds., *Nationalism, Minorities and Diasporas: Identities and Rights in the Middle East* (New York: Tauris Academic Studies, 1996), p. 193.

<sup>60</sup> Karin Vorhoff, "Academic and Journalistic Publications on the Alevi and Bektashi of Turkey," pp. 23-50 in Olsson et al., eds., *Alevi Identity* (Istanbul: Swedish Research Institute, 1998), p. 28.

research of this study is directed towards the popular rituals in the urban context and the religious attitudes of Alevi people who have lived in Istanbul for more than twenty years. It must be added that in order to understand *Alevilik* in Turkey or to propose any hypothesis on this subject, in contrast to what had been done for a long period of time in Turkey, it is very important not to neglect the presence and situation of the Kurdish speaking Alevi people. Therefore, as a final point it may be pointed that in this study efforts have been made to take this issue into consideration in the historical overview, in the evaluation of the written sources and in the fieldwork.

One of the main problems faced during the preparation of this study was the scarcity of scholarly works within a very large scope of texts that are related to the Alevi identity or rituals. However, all of the texts accessed during this process served in importing a certain meaning to this survey. They all contributed to the composition of the background of this study, either by arguments that they have proposed and facts that they have illuminated, or by reflecting the social, political and cultural inclinations of both their writers and the historical period during which they were published. The latter situation is especially valid for those texts that include Alevi rituals. Because even if the subject of the Alevi identity is not placed at the core, in each of them it is reconstructed in several ways on the basis of rituals and dances. This observation paid the way for the creation of one of the chapters of this study: In Chapter 3, the texts related to *semahs* and Alevi rituals and written by authors from Turkey are critically analyzed in order to understand the basic motives that surround the popular perceptions of the Alevi identity in Turkey. On the other

hand, some of those texts contributed to the formation of certain images related to *semahs* in different historical periods, and after a critical analysis they provided a basis to use for comparison in the analysis of today's public rituals and *semah* performances. While the criticism of these texts in their socio-political and cultural context is provided in Chapter 3, some of their findings are used in Chapter 4. Below, the texts that were not written by authors from Turkey and from which this present study deploys certain perspectives will be overviewed. However at the beginning, the research of several scholars who are well-known by people interested in the Alevi/Bektashi topic will be mentioned.

While research on heterodox religious communities living within the borders of the Ottoman Empire was initiated during time of the Party of Union and Progress, by its own efforts, most of the earlier ethnographic information is provided by the geographers, travelers, missionaries, orientalist and archeologists.<sup>61</sup> That kind of research continued until the 1960s. According to Vorhoff, who conducted a detailed study on Alevi and Bektashi literature, "they frequently offer not much more than the superficial observations of outsiders who were not specialists in the field," and they have "often been biased by the desire to trace vestiges of Christianity or the heritage of antiquity in heterodox Islamic

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<sup>61</sup> For example, Vorhoff notes George E. White, "Alevi Turks of Asia Minor," *Contemporary Review* 104 (1913): 690-698; and "Saint Worship in Turkey," *The Moslem World* 9/1 (1919): 8-18; Rensselaer Trowbridge, "The Alevis," *The Moslem World* 11/3 (1921): 253-266; Felix von Luschan, "Wondervölker Kleinasiens," *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 18 (1886): 167-171.

groups.”<sup>62</sup> Although most of them can not be considered scholarly works, like the ones published in Turkey, they deserve attention at least for two important reasons: They reflect the aim and inclination of their writers (in association with the writers’ own community) and after determining those characteristics of the texts, through a critical analysis, they may serve to fill some of the gaps about the early life-style of some heterodox religious communities. This is especially valid for those living (or lived) in the eastern and southeastern part of Anatolia and Mesopotamia, about whom not much data was collected in Turkey until the 1990s.<sup>63</sup> In this study, for the discussions of the rituals of the Kurdish Alevis, while some of those surveys are overviewed, more recent publications dealing with the Alevi, *Kızılbas*, Yezidi and Ehl-i Hakk communities, which try to locate their questions within the contexts of contemporary developments, were more utilized.

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<sup>62</sup> Karin Vorhoff, p. 26. Vorhoff’s *Zwischen Glaube, Nation und neuer Gemeinschaft: Alevitische Identität in der Türkei der Gegenwart* (Berlin, 1995) where she provides a comprehensive study on the Alevi-Bektashi literature is also important for an in-depth review of the contemporary situation of these communities.

<sup>63</sup> For example while discussing the identity question of the Kurdish Alevis, Bruinessen extensively deploys the texts of the writers who conducted their surveys through the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He also points out some questions which need additional surveys. “‘Aslini inkar eden haramzadedir!’: the debate on the ethnic identity of the Kurdish Alevis,” pp. 1-23 in Krisztina Kehl-Bodrogi, Barbara Kellner-Heinkele and Anke Otter-Beaujean, eds, *Syncretistic Religious Communities in the Near East*. (Leiden: Brill, 1997). Some of the texts of missionaries, geographers, travelers, etc. are translated to Turkish and printed in M. Bayrak, *Alevilik ve Kürtler* (Özge Yayınları, 1997). As an example of missionaries’ notes on some *Kızılbas* groups, see A. Karakaya-Stump, “Alevilik Hakkındaki 19. Yüzyıl Misyoner Kayıtlarına Eleştirel Bir Bakış ve Ali Gako’nun Öyküsü,” *Folklor/Edebiyat* 2002/1: 301-324.

Before revealing those surveys which were deployed in this study, it is necessary to overview the works of three Western researchers, whose works though not widely used in this present study are, referred to in many texts dealing with Bektashism and *Alevilik*, including most of the more scholarly ones that are published in Turkey. Among the early period researchers, Hasluck and Birge, whose studies are acknowledged in Turkey by scholars, as well as other researchers interested in this subject, require attention. Based on his personal travels and researches in Balkans and Anatolia, Hasluck started to publish his research notes in 1911. A collection of his writings was translated to Turkish in 1928,<sup>64</sup> a year before their composition in two volumes with detailed additional investigation under the name of *Christianity and Islam under the Sultans*.<sup>65</sup> Although similarities between the religious practices and sacred places of Christians and Islamic communities were of great interest for him, he provided a geographic distribution of *Kızılbas* and Bektashi groups living in those areas.

Birge started his research with the aim of studying the Bektashi order objectively, and with a second hand interest in showing its relations with Islam and

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<sup>64</sup> *Bektasilik Tedkikleri* (Istanbul, 1928). Translated to Turkish by Ragıp Hülûsi from vols.19-21 of the Annual of British School in Athens. It is reprinted in 2000 with the transcription of Kamil Akarsu (Ankara: MEB). Hasluck's studies is also partially published in Turkish under the title of *Anadolu ve Balkanlarda Bektasilik* (Istanbul, 1995), transcribed by Yücel Demirel.

<sup>65</sup> William Frederick Hasluck, *Christianity and Islam under the Sultans*, 2 volumes edited by Margaret M. Hasluck (New York: Octagon Books, 1973). These two volumes are actually published by his wife after his death in 1929.

other religious origins.<sup>66</sup> Although it is possible to identify certain imprints of his interest in the recognition of Christian elements in Bektashism,<sup>67</sup> he offered a systematic evaluation of this order together with a synthesis of its history, literature, belief system and practices. Birge's survey mostly focused on the Albanian Bektashis and was based on a wide range of oral and written native sources. It must be added that it is usually signified as a key work of reference on the Bektashi order by the scholars working on this subject. These surveys contributed to the present study during the initial steps, in the composition of the items to be sought, because, more than illuminating the early history of the Bektashi and Alevi communities, as well as the origins of their rituals practices, this study focuses mainly on the present situation of the Alevi communities and rituals in the big cities of Turkey in relation to their history during the Republican period. In that case, however, besides its initial contribution, Birge's narrative of the religious practices of the Bektashi order, although it is limited in geographical scope,<sup>68</sup> is also utilized in making comparisons with today's *semah* performances.

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<sup>66</sup> John Kinsley Birge, *The Bektashi Order of Dervishes* (London: Lusac and Co; USA: Hartford Seminary Press, 1937), p. 21.

<sup>67</sup> For example Vorhoff also notes that even this study concentrates "perhaps too much on the influence of Neoplatonism had, in his opinion on Bektashi doctrine." Vorhoff.

<sup>68</sup> Birge's narrative of the religious practices was limited to those of Bektashis living in a rather close structure and in Albania. This study on the other hand focuses on the urban experiences of no more close communities of the Alevis, who migrated from many different places of Turkey to Istanbul —but instead of the Balkans they mostly migrated from the eastern part of Istanbul.



A more recent Western researcher who has earned a high respect in academic circles as well as by Alevi intellectuals is Mélikoff. From the late 1970s she has published many articles related to folk Sufism and the *Kizilbas* and Bektashi communities; their history, beliefs, ritual practices, the mythical and historical character of Hacı Bektas, and Bektashi literature.<sup>69</sup> She has spent long intervals in Turkey among the Bektashi and Alevi communities and has attended their festivals. Her surveys also include certain Alevi groups in the Balkans (for example, she conducted a study among the *Kizilbas* group in Deliorman [Bulgaria]), as well as those living in Iran (especially Iran-Azerbaijan) and Central-Asia. She supplemented her investigations in the field by a detailed reading and examination of written texts in addition to her personal or academic dialogues with well-known scholars in academic circles. Therefore, the articles and books of Mélikoff offer the researchers in this field a wider scope to utilize in their investigations.

While Mélikoff is among the leading researchers who heavily emphasizes the Alevi-Bektashi syncretism, her interest in providing clues about the origins of Alevi-Bektashi religious beliefs and practices mainly through Turkish elements that can be traced back to Central Asia produces contradictions in the conceptualization of the subject. Moreover, many writers of *Alevilik*/Bektashism in Turkey refer to her

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<sup>69</sup> Most of her articles on the topic are published in *Turcica*, founded by her in 1970. Some of the articles that she wanted people in Turkey to read were published as a book: Irène Mélikoff, *Uyur Idik Uyardılar* (Istanbul: Cem Yayınevi, 1994(2)). Translation of four of her articles were published in *Tuttum Aynayı Yüzüme Ali Göründü Gözüme* (Istanbul: Ant Yayınları, 1997; trans. by İlhan Cem Erseven). Recently she wrote her first book on the subject: *Hadji Bektach: une mythe et ses avatars* (Leiden: Brill, 1998) which is translated to Turkish as *Hacı Bektas Efsaneden Gerçeğe* (Istanbul: Cumhuriyet Kitap Kulübü, 1999(2) First 1998).

research in order to provide more “scientific” basis for their own approaches if they are trying to construct a strong relationship between Turkishness and *Alevilik*. Considering the subject matter of this present study, it is true that Mélikoff’s surveys provide a masterly overview of the past and present state of Alevi/Bektashi beliefs and rituals.<sup>70</sup> Yet again, the emphasis of shamanistic (Central-Asian and by implication Turkish) elements in the description of the rituals is very strong.<sup>71</sup> Although Mélikoff is aware of the similarities between *Alevilik*, *Ehl-i Hakk* and *Yezidilik*, and reveals them in certain topics, her attitude of leaving the latter two belief systems aside in the explanation of (the origins of) *Alevilik* and Bektashim (or even connecting them to Central Asia)<sup>72</sup> leaves the reader with some questions marks if s/he wants to explain the contemporary developments concerning the Alevi/Bektashi identity and rituals.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> In the case of this present study, it needs to be noted that the Alevi and Bektashi communities with whom Mélikoff is interested primarily are among the least Islamized side of the Alevi-Bektashi community at large. Therefore, the case study of this work, together with its additional arguments seems to remain outside of her surveys, and in return, her surveys help this study in a very general sense.

<sup>71</sup> For example, according to Mélikoff, while the *ayin-i cem* resembled a traditional Turkish *toy*, the *sema[h]s* are originated as part of shamanistic rites. See for example: “Bektasî-Alevî Senkretizmini Meydana Getiren Ögeler Üzerine Arastirmalar,” pp. 117- 138 in *Uyur Idik Uyardilar*, p. 127; *Hacı Bektas Efsaneden Gerçeğe*, pp. 156, 177, 189.

<sup>72</sup> For example, see “Anadolu’da Cemaat Dis i Islâmlik,” pp. 101-116 in *Uyur Idik Uyardilar*.

<sup>73</sup> Vorhoff indicates that especially the French among the Western scholars have worked on the Turkish elements. In addition to Mélikoff she presents Gökalp and Roux as examples.

This last problem, however, has been partially overcome since the late 1980s, as a great effort of redefining *Alevilik* and the Alevi identity has developed both in and out of Turkey –especially where Alevi diaspora is located.

At this point, a few of the surveys which have been produced in relation to this recent trend and from which this study deploys certain perspectives, or puts emphasis on some common arguments or on similar subjects, will be mentioned. Bruinessen's articles and books provide comprehensive information on the historical and socio-political aspects of Kurdish *Alevilik*.<sup>74</sup> Although Turkey appears as one of the most investigated fields, his surveys transcend the borders of Turkey and includes the Shabak community in Iraq and Ehl-i Hakk community of the Guran district.<sup>75</sup> On the other hand, while focusing on one of the least investigated dimensions of *Alevilik* in Turkey, the *Alevilik* of Kurdish speaking people, his research has included a broader evaluation of *Alevilik* in this region. Additionally, he continues to study the religious beliefs and practices in the Turco-Iranian world as a whole. Therefore, the surveys of Bruinessen and in a conceptualization of

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<sup>74</sup> "Kurds, Turks, and the Alevi Revival in Turkey," *Middle East Report*, no. 200 (Summer 1996), 7-10; "‘Aslîni inkâr eden haramzâdedir!’: The Debate on the Ethnic Identity of the Kurdish Alevis," pp. 1-23 in: Krisztina Kehl-Bodrogi, Barbara Kellner-Heinkele and Anke Otter-Beaujean, eds., *Syncretistic Religious Communities in the Near East* (Leiden: Brill, 1997); *Kürtlük, Türklük, Alevilik: Etnik ve Dinsel Kimlik Mücadeleleri* (Istanbul: İletisim Yayınları, 2000).

<sup>75</sup> "The Shabak, a Kizilbash community in Iraqi Kurdistan," *Les Annales de l'Autre Islam* 5 (1998), 185-196; "When Haji Bektash still bore the name of Sultan Sahak. Notes on the Ahl-i Haqq of the Guran district," pp. 117-138 in Alexandre Popovic & Gilles Veinstein, eds., *Bektachiyya: études sur l'ordre mystique des Bektachis et les groupes relevant de Hadji Bektach* (Istanbul: Éditions Isis, 1995); "Haji Bektash, Sultan Sahak, Shah Mina Sahib and various avatars of a running wall," *Turcica* XXI-XXIII (1991): 55-69.

*Alevilik* within a broader geography and system of beliefs, and more specifically, provide comprehensive information to further investigate the *Alevilik* of Kurdish speaking people. Bumke is another researcher who has conducted research in a Kurdish speaking Alevi region. Yet, the results of his survey have not been published totally.<sup>76</sup>

German anthropologist Kehl-Bodrogi has worked on Alevi groups in Turkey and in Germany since the 1980s.<sup>77</sup> She conducted field research in southern and central Anatolia for her dissertation, and southwestern Anatolia for a project on socio-economical transformations among Tahtaci community. In the beginning of the 1990s she visited Istanbul, Ankara, and in different Alevi villages in Turkey to investigate Alevi revitalization. More than her village studies and evaluation of Alevi poetry, her recent work dealing with this last topic is utilized more in this work in order to develop a more in-depth evaluation of the present situation of the Alevi communities.

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<sup>76</sup> Peter J. Bumke, "The Kurdish Alevis. Boundaries and Perceptions," pp. 510-518 in *Ethnic Groups in the Republic of Turkey*, Peter Alford Andrews, ed., *ibid.*; "Dersim'de Kizilbas Kürtler," pp. 119-140 in *Tuttum Aynayi Yüzüme Ali Göründü Gözüme*.

<sup>77</sup> "Tahtaci Dini Geleneklerinde İslam Disi Ögeler," pp. 107-115 in *1. Akdeniz Yöresi Türk Toplulukların Sosyo-Kültürel Yapısı* (Ankara: T. C. Kültür Bakanlığı, 1995); "Tarih Mitosu ve Kollektif Kimlik Aleviliğin yeniden insası," *Birikim* 88 (1996): pp. 52-64; "On the Significance of musahiplik among the Alevis of Turkey: The Case of the Tahtaci," pp. 120-137 in K. Kehl-Bodrogi, B. Kellner-Heinkele, A. Otter-Beaujean, eds., *Syncretistic Religious Communities in the Near East* (Leiden: Brill, 1997); "Introduction," pp. XI-XVII in *ibid.*; "Kurds, Turcs, or a People in Their Own Right? Competing Collective Identities among the Zazas," *Muslim World* 3-4 (1999): 439-454; "The New Garments of Alevism in Turkey," *ISIM Newsletter* 5 (2000): 23; "Alevism in Germany: On the Way to Public Recognition?" *ISIM Newsletter* 8 (2001): 9.

David Shankland is a social anthropologist with a special interest in modern Turkey, particularly on social change, religion and politics in the Republican period.<sup>78</sup> He has conducted a fieldwork among Turkish speaking Alevi and Sunni communities (the initial survey was done between 1988 and 1990) and as a result of a comparative study, he has tried to formulate why Alevi villages have more difficulty in moving to a more modern world. Modernization (and the problems that it brings about) is a very important but a very complicated issue that appears on the agenda of all the Alevi circles after moving into the public sphere. It requires more surveys and more importantly a long practical process to arrive at solution(s).

Seufert is another scholar who works on the Alevis, but he focuses on Kurdish *Alevilik* in a big city. He has conducted a survey in Istanbul, among the members of the Koçgiri tribe. His case study provides some means to conceptualize the new interest in a religious culture under the pressure of modernity. He argues that in modern and urban conditions, the tension between atomizing social relations and the individual's self-understanding in religious concepts leads to the discovery of modern and individualist values in traditional creed.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> David Shankland, *Islam and Society in Turkey* (Huntingdon : Eothen, 1999); D. Shankland, ed., *The Turkish Republic at Seventy-five Years: Progress, Development, Change* (Huntingdon, Cambridgeshire, England: Eothen Press, 1999); "Alevi and Sunni in Rural Anatolia," pp. 46-64 in *Culture and Economy: Changes in Turkish Villages*, Paul Stirling, ed. (Huntingdon: Eothen, 1993); "Anthropology and Ethnicity: The Place of Ethnography in the New Alevi Movement," pp. 15-22 in *Alevi Identity*.

<sup>79</sup> Günter Seufert, "Between Religion and Ethnicity: A Kurdish-Alevi Tribe in Globalizing Istanbul," pp. 157-176 in Ayşe Öncü and Paul Weyland, eds., *Space, Culture and Power in Globalizing Cities* (London and New York: Zed Books, 1997).

As revealed earlier, the texts of the writers from Turkey are not handled here, but discussed in detail in Chapter 3. However, it must be noted here that some observations and evaluations of Ocak were important in the analysis of existing texts. Additionally, his recent publications criticizing the Bektashi-Alevi literature or the ones questioning the socio-cultural problems of the Alevis and *Alevilik* provide some important topics to discuss in order to develop an in-depth conceptualization of the Alevi-Bektashi problems in Turkey.<sup>80</sup> Though not much deployed in this study because of its own scope, his philological studies of *menakibnâme* and his historical evaluation of Turkish Sufism provide scholarly material on these fields.<sup>81</sup>

Finally, as discussed in the previous section of this chapter, the studies of Stokes have a specific significance for this research in that they provide some basic concepts for its framework. Additionally, in one of the case studies, Stokes calls for attention to the relationship between Alevi identity and music.<sup>82</sup> Therefore, among

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<sup>80</sup> Most of his works on these topics are collected in *Türk Sufîliğine Bakışlar* (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 1996). See also Ahmet Yasar Ocak, *Türkler, Türkiye ve İslam* (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 1999).

<sup>81</sup> *Bektasi Menâkıbnamelerinde İslam Öncesi İnanç Motifleri* (Istanbul: Enderun Yayınları, 1983); *Kültür tarihi kaynağı olarak menâkıbnâmeler: metodolojik bir yaklaşım* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, 1992); İsmail E. Erünsal, A. Yasar Ocak, eds., *Elvan Çelebi, Menâkıbu'l-kudsiyye fî menâsibi'l-ünsiyye: Baba İlyas-i Horasânî ve sülâlesinin menka-bevât tarihi*, (Istanbul: İstanbul Üniversitesi Edebiyat Fakültesi, 1985); *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nda marjinal Sûfîlik: Kalenderiler: XIV-XVII. Yüzyıllar* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 1992); *Osmanlı toplumunda zindıklar ve mülhidler : yahut dairenin dışına çıkanlar (15.-17. yüzyıllar)* (Istanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, 1998); *Babailer İsyani* (Istanbul: Dergâh Yayınları, 1996).

<sup>82</sup> Stokes.

the studies mentioned above, this work has certain affinities with those of Stokes, but as a field study it specifically concentrates in detail and in depth on the Alevi dances, rather than music.

## Methodological Approaches

### Texts

Textual analysis formed an important part of the research carried out for the present study. The texts —books, articles, serial articles— that directly focus on *semah*, or devote a large space to Alevi rituals were analyzed in their relation to the Alevi identity. In specifying the ones to be used at the level of discourse analysis, the following three features played an important role: First, in relation to the period on which this study focused, the texts written or published between 1920 and the present were considered. Second, texts written by Alevi and Sunni laymen, folklorists and some scholars which could be considered to be popular texts and/or which utilize essentialist approaches were included in order to conceptualize the dominant discourses that framed the Alevi identity through out the Republican period. Third, in accordance with the specific interests of the present study, only those texts written by authors from Turkey were analyzed, texts produced and consumed in Turkey, influencing the processes of construction of Alevi identity in Turkey.

Three chronological categories have been created in terms of the publication dates of these texts: 1920-1950, 1950-1980, and 1980-present. This categorization is based both on the characteristics of the texts written in the specified periods, and on the changes/transformations which the Alevi community, as well as Alevi identity went through in Republican history. More specifically, what most authors do is to construct a two-way relationship: the definition of Alevi identity through *semahs*, and the definition of *semahs* through a(n) assumed/defined/constructed Alevi identity. Thus, an important part of the textual analysis was devoted to the conceptualization of the specific ways in which this mechanism operated in each specific text. In Chapter 3, all of the trends observed in the texts will be analyzed with references to the socio-political, economic and cultural determinants of the periods during which they have written.

The earliest texts included in the analysis have been prepared by researchers who have been charged, in the mid-1910s, by the Party of Union and Progress, with studying various religious and ethnic groups in Turkey. This period, during which Alevis still organized their rituals in a close community structure, is characterized by the construction of a national identity in Turkey. The *semah* texts published until 1950s were mainly based on fieldworks conducted by folklorists, ethnographers, and collectors, whose dominant tendency was to present the Alevi identity within the framework of Turkish culture, especially with reference to Shamanism or Central Asian roots. In this period there are very few explanations on the religious and ethnic affiliations of the writers.



The years between 1950 and 1980 were characterized by disintegration in the Alevi population, due to the internal migration and politicization of Alevi youth and a large number of urbanized Alevi workers within the framework of socialist ideologies. As regards the texts written in this period, there is an increase in the number of Alevi authors, and a slight diversity in the reformulation of the Alevi identity. In a very broad sense, it may be asserted that there is a shift towards defining Alevi identity within the framework of Turkish-Islamic synthesis, where the Turkish element is still heavily stressed.

By the 1980s, Alevi identity, and Alevi rituals and *semahs* went through a process of reconstruction in parallel to becoming visible in the public sphere. This ongoing period is also characterized by a serious increase in the number of texts written by Alevi authors, and more significantly Kurdish-Alevi authors among them. While it is possible to observe the main tendency of constructing the Alevi identity within the framework of Turkish-Islamic synthesis and Turkish origin, there are others which try to conceptualize it in reference to Kurdishness or the mystical characteristics of Islam.

In general, it may be argued that the literature on this topic is characterized by a common interest in defining the Alevi identity, through focusing on *semahs*, and on the basis of attributing it certain characteristics by which they can be related to a specific “essence”. Therefore, these texts have been most useful in terms of the ways in which they construct the relationship between *semah* and Alevi identity, rather than the data they provide on the issue. In this respect, the texts have been

subjected to a critical-comparative analysis, through a categorization at two different levels:

One of the major aims of this study is to determine the differences among the sub-groups within the Alevi population, in terms of the ways in which they construct the Alevi identity and present it to the outer world. Thus, first of all the texts have been categorized, in terms of the ethnic/religious identity of the authors—that is, texts written by Alevi authors and those written by non-Alevis have been analytically separated from each other. A further division was made within the former group, between the texts written by Kurdish Alevis and those by Turkish Alevis.

Second, the texts have been analyzed not only in themselves, but also in comparison to each other, mainly on the basis of the definitions of the term “*semah*,” the descriptions of *semah*; evaluations on the relationship between *semah* and ritual; various religious, ethnic, and linguistic origins to which *semah* is tied; the motifs associated with *semah*. Additionally, the texts have been compared in terms of the period in which they have been written, as well as the ethnic and religious identity of the author.

### Fieldwork and Oral History Interviews

**The fieldwork carried out for this study between 1996 and 2002 consists of oral history interviews, some shorter, more spontaneous interviews conducted at various occasions, participant observation in Alevi rituals (mainly**

*cem* ceremonies) and festivals, and critical observation of visual and audio records.<sup>83</sup>

Although efforts were made to document traditions, rituals, *semahs* (performed in the rituals and on the stage), kinship and *ocak* relations of the Alevi individuals and communities throughout the fieldwork, they did not in and of themselves serve as the main items which constitute the basic questions and explanations of this study. Rather, this study, in general, concentrates on the construction, or shaping, and transformation processes of the Alevi identity in the public sphere and more subjective identities of the individuals and subgroups.<sup>84</sup> This construction process was analyzed in relation to the conditions and socio-cultural and political systems with which the Alevis are associated. As will be discussed in the following chapters, the nation-state, the

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<sup>83</sup> Oral history interviews were conducted with eleven first-generation Turkish Alevis from the village of Kirinti (6 women), 7 Kurdish Alevis (2 women) from Sifon (Yedibölük). They were lower-middle class people. The interviews took an average of two hours. Two interviews were conducted with 6 of these people. Some interviews were conducted in the presence of 23 informants. Totally 25 hours of visual records were watched. Detailed information about the sample groups, their activities and the fieldwork is provided in Chapter 4.

<sup>84</sup> Markus notes that within the present conditions of the global world, anthropologists have a renewed interest in topics such as ethnicity, race, nationality and colonialism. He adds that while certain primordial phenomena continue to be documented, “they can no longer serve as the grounding tropes which organize ethnographic description and explanation.” Within the new trend of ethnographies, the shaping and transformation of identities acquire more attention. “When change and its character as a process become the predominant theoretical and empirical concern of social scientists, how identities at different levels of organization take shape also seems to be the goal of the study.” George Markus, “Past, Present and Emergent Identities,” pp. 309-330, in Scott Lash and Jonathan Friedman, eds., *Modernity and Identity* (Oxford U.K. and Cambridge USA: Blackwell, 1998), pp. 311-312.

dominant religious culture and the recent Sunnification process in Turkey, together with political, economic and social developments that are closely associated with Alevi communities, emerged as the items with the greatest impact on the identity formation of the Alevis.

However, in Chapter 4, which is devoted to the analysis of the fieldwork, the most recent developments, namely the Sunnification process and the new motivation for the proclamation of the Alevi identity in the public sphere, appear to have been the most determinate factors in the reformation of the Alevi identity in the last two decades. Among the other components which are shared in many Alevi communities, *semah* is significant in that it symbolizes the Alevi identity in the public sphere, and therefore rested at the core of the fieldwork. Therefore within the framework of this study, the fieldwork, which includes formal oral history interviews as well as more spontaneous ones, may be read as part of an analysis which indicates the recent transformation process of the publicly acknowledged Alevi community and identity.

It is frequently argued that oral history provides historians an opportunity to collect data that will illuminate particular subjects or groups who are generally invisible in historical documentation or about whom not much data or information is gathered from other sources.<sup>85</sup> As will be observed in Chapter 3, many books and articles written on the Alevi communities and some data have been collected on the

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<sup>85</sup> Trevor Lumnis, "Oral History," pp. 92-97, in Richard Bauman, ed., *Folklore, Cultral Performance and Popular Entertainments* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 94; Michael Frisch, Alistair Thomson and Paula Hamilton, "The Memory and History Debates: Some International Perspectives," *Oral History* 22, no. 2 (Autumn 1994): pp. 33-43, 36.

Alevi rituals over the last century. Yet those texts can not be considered as part of conventional historical writing and, more importantly, as will be discussed, most of those texts fall within the realm of popular publications and include significant biases, mostly related to the ideological frameworks of the writers (even most of those with what can be considered an anthropological tendency can be considered here). Additionally, the texts published in the last two decades, in parallel to the revival of the Alevi community, mostly have lacked fieldwork (as a continuation of the previous thirty years) and rather have reflected the ideological partition of their writers. Therefore, the method of oral history has significance for this present study, which explores the meaning of the ritual and *semah* experiences of the Alevi for different members of the community (in relation to their identity construction), about which not much data have been available especially in the last fifty years. However, besides some quotations given in the related chapter, the fieldwork conducted for this study will not be documented, but will be analyzed in relation to the recent developments that have taken place in Turkey and affected the Alevi communities. It is necessary to add that this study accepts the experiences of individuals as providing, as Lumnis puts it, “a partial account of historical change and a great deal of power is exercised beyond the individual level of groups and institutions.”<sup>86</sup> Therefore, the oral history interviews in this study are evaluated as one type of evidence in establishing a wider account about the social process.

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<sup>86</sup> Lumnis, p. 95. Lumnis indicates that the most popular versions of oral history works are based on interview extracts with very little comment and little attempt to synthesize various experiences of the narratives into a historical account. He warns the reader that although this approach carries a

This methodology of conducting oral history interviews or the fieldwork as a whole may be considered as part of an effort to reconceive history from “the bottom to up,” to use the terminology of Hobsbawm. However, one point must be clarified here: The deepest layers of the Alevi community included in this research are limited to those that correspond to the popular Alevi identity. In other words, the data analyzed in Chapter 4 include neither those *cems* which still take place in small rural localities, nor the individuals who take part in them. The same is true for the clandestine *cems* that take place in the metropolises apart from the open and visible ceremonies, together with their participants. Within its limits, this survey focuses on the “urban visibility” of the *semahs*. The significance of the fieldwork and interviews lie in their representational potential to reflect the predominant trend in the Alevi revival.

It must be indicated that there is an ongoing controversy on the credibility or trustworthiness of oral sources. However, the prejudice of accepting the factual credibility of only written texts must be questioned, too.<sup>87</sup> In this study it is accepted that instead of debating whether the oral sources are credible or not, the evaluation of the narratives in relation to their credibility must be defined. As Portelli asserts, “the importance of oral narratives may not lie in its adherence to fact, but rather in its departure from it, as imagination, symbolism, and desire

“radical/democratic impulse in allowing the ordinary people to speak with their own voice,” their “result may be quite conservative,” because of leaving the social and economic processes that shape them aside.

<sup>87</sup> See Chapter 3 as an example of questioning the credibility of the written sources.

emerge.”<sup>88</sup> Instead of retaining the facts, the memory actively creates meanings. Therefore, “the specific utility of oral sources for the historian lies, not so much in their ability to preserve the past, as in the very changes wrought by memory.”<sup>89</sup> These changes reveal the narrators’ imagination of the events, through which the identity is constructed. Additionally, oral communication is richer in communicative power, containing inflections, hesitations, expressions and nuances which are not easily produced in written forms.<sup>90</sup> For example, on a certain issue, the narrators tell us not just what happened, but also what they wanted to do, how they felt, and what they now think about it now. In the narratives of the informants included in this study, the feelings of the informant –which were derived not just from their words, but from the body language and expressions they used– toward the past and prevailing *semah* traditions were of significant value in order to reveal what they feel about them, or about their own speeches on those topics.

In this study, each informant was interviewed several times because oral testimony is never the same twice. As the informant and the researcher get to know each other better, the formality in their relationship fades away. Actually, the informants usually awaken long dormant memories on the specific issues of the study. More or less consciously they select the topics they will talk about according to how they perceive the purpose of the interview, “their definition of what it is permissible to say in this context.”<sup>91</sup> Thus, several interviews with the same informant provided an opportunity to make comparisons between the same topics which were discussed in

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<sup>88</sup> Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), p. 51. On the trustfulness, truthfulness and credibility of oral sources, see also Elizabeth Tonkin, *Narrating Our Pasts*, especially Chapters 5-7 (Great Britain: Cambridge, 1995).

<sup>89</sup> Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories*, pp.51-52.

<sup>90</sup> Lumnis, p. 96.

<sup>91</sup> Yvette J. Kopyn, “The Oral History Interview in a Cross-Cultural Setting,” pp. 142-159, in Mary Chamberlain and Paul Thompson, eds., *Narrative and Genre* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 151.

different interviews. Additionally, the narrators' relationship with the interviewer, how s/he defines her/him, is quite important. This subject appears with more importance in the case of an outsider, whether she is a foreigner, or someone outside the community, among other parameters, which were all valid in my case. Therefore, several interviews with the same narrator also implied the varieties in the construction processes of identity, towards an outsider. As the relationship between the narrator and the interviewer becomes relatively intimate, the narrations reflect the new image of the relationship, too. However, it must be noted that in this research the variations occurred within the limits of a relationship established with an outsider. In this case, it is very important to note that the principal aim of this study was to analyze the popular identity of the community, where being an outsider helped in some cases.<sup>92</sup>

In this research, before the interview, a thematic framework is prepared, and during the interviews, open-ended questions on several themes<sup>93</sup> were asked with minimum interference —only to control the flow of the interview when distracted. A space was provided for the informant to form a narrative that s/he preferred. In other words, while a one-way questionnaire was used on specific occasions, usually “thick dialogue” was preferred, which allowed more space for the speech of the informant and where some questions were produced according to the answers.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> However, another research that deals with more intimate and secret venues of a community may need even more interviews and a much longer time spent in the community.

<sup>93</sup> Examples for the most repeated ones: their self-biography, especially in relation to migration, *ocaks*, tribes, ethnic and/or linguistic affiliations of the informants; their practical acquaintance with both the former and prevailing the rituals and *semahs* and their views about them; technical features of the *semahs*, relations among the diverse groups in Alevi community at large —different *semah* genres and variations about the rituals. Several myths and legends; and relations with the Sunni population are usually not asked, but put forward by the informants themselves.

<sup>94</sup> Portelli states that “neither form is ‘better’ than the other; rather, they are suited to different ends: comparability and factuality in the questionnaire, individuality and subjectivity in the thick, open-ended dialogue.” Alessandro Portelli, “Oral History as Genre,” pp. 23-45 in *Narrative and Genre*, p. 30.



Sometimes, the narrators seem to talk about some very irrelevant topics, or private matters. Yet this experience showed that it is important to know to how to listen and wait before making any judgments. The accounts sometimes form a remote connection with the subject matter, sometimes giving clues about the identity of the narrator or how s/he wants to reflect it, or showing that the narrator does not want to talk about that subject and/or wants to reveal her/his ideas on another subject. In this study, care was taken to analyze each of these kinds of narrations within its own context. The issues and themes that the informants brought up during the interviews by themselves were given great importance as they implied the means by which the informant preferred to reflect her/himself or her/his own community. For example, one part in Chapter 4 (“The Relationship between *Alevilik* and Islam”) was produced by following the topics and issues that the informants preferred to tell by themselves. This provided an important aspect of the popular trend within the transformation process of the Alevi identity.

Finally, it must be added that the interviews in this study are considered as narrative sources and that a discourse analysis of the narratives was carried out. In this process, in addition to what has been summarized above, the duration between the sentences or phrases, the accented words, and the expression in the voice are all included to get a sense about the meaning of the narrative. On another level, the “facts/events” referred to in the narratives are analyzed using a comparative method that operates at two levels: First, between the different narratives of the same informant; second, between the narratives of different informants, from different Alevi groups (like Turkish or Kurdish Alevi; or belonging to the *ocak* of Dervis Cemal or Cemal Abdal). However, at both of the levels, certain features of the informant (like, age, sex, occupation, economic condition, world view, acquaintance with the religious traditions, time spent in the urban culture, etc.) are all taken into

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Although what is stated by Portelli is utilized here where the questions shifted from one to the other technique through out the interviews, within the framework and approach of this research, the “thick dialogues” were also subjected to discourse analysis, meaning that they were also evaluated within, but also besides their subjectivity, in their relation to the popular Alevi identity.

consideration. Additionally, if those facts/events were commonly known ones (such as through the media, written texts or participant observation) another level of comparison between them and the narratives took place. Since this study focuses on the identity question of the Alevi, the oral sources are evaluated on the basis of the informants' preferences' about their self-reflection.

The analysis of the fieldwork and interviews are presented in Chapter 4, which includes two basic parts. While both parts analyze the Alevi identity, the first one focuses on the oral history interviews, and the next part concentrates mainly on the public performances of the *semah* groups, while leaving some space for interviews of the informants.

### **A Brief History of the Alevi Rituals before their Emergence in the Public Sphere**

The history of the Alevi community goes back to the beginnings of the sixteenth century, to the political and religious struggle between the Sunni Ottoman Empire and the Shi'i Safavids. *Alevilik* emerged in the same period from the numerous heterodox groups of Asia Minor, who, mostly in connection with the Safavids, participated in the *Kizilbas*<sup>95</sup> upheavals of the period. After then, Alevis were marginalized socially and politically. On the other hand, while most of the Alevis considered themselves as Muslims, their religious practices differed considerably from those of Sunnis, especially from the perspective of the "five

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<sup>95</sup> The term *Kizilbas* was replaced by Alevi in the nineteenth century. See I. Mélikoff, *Uyur Idik Uyardilar (Alevilik-Bektasilik Arastirmalari)* (Istanbul: Cem Yayınevi, 1994).

pillars” of Islam. In relation to that, Alevis had long been considered as non-believers (*Rafizi*<sup>96</sup> or *lâdini*) by the major religious authorities of Islam. In the Ottoman Empire, although a certain autonomy was maintained for the non-Muslim minorities, since the Ottoman Sultan was the Caliph, the defender of the Sunni faith, no deviations Islamic would be tolerated.

When the Republic of Turkey was founded in 1923 as a secular nation-state, the Alevis hoped that their position would improve. In reality, however, this would not to be the case. At the beginning of the Republican period, the regime considered the dominant Sunni culture as the main obstacle for modernism, and tried to take some radical measures to curb its power. These measures included the Alevis, as well. Most significantly, in 1925, a law was enacted abolishing all religious brotherhoods, banning all ceremonies and meetings of the orders, and closing all sect lodges (*tekke*), as well as tombs and shrines.

The Alevis, however, neither lost their belief in the secular government, nor completely abandoned their religious practices; they practiced them, albeit secretly, as they always had. The initial surveys of the Republican Period demonstrate that despite the ban on the religious gatherings, the Alevis were able to conduct their rituals in their partially closed community structures for a fairly long time.

The Alevis have managed to survive as a community in unfriendly environment through the construction of strong social and religious group ties. Organized into tight-knit communities in which recruitment into the sect was

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<sup>96</sup> On the topic of *Rafizilik*, see P.J. Bumke, “The Kurdish Alevis -Boundries and Perceptions,” pp. 510-518, in Peter Alford Andrews, ed., *ibid.*

depended on the blood lineages,<sup>97</sup> the strong social solidarity was strengthened by certain social mechanisms and a system of checks and balances and support systems that ensured a long-standing commitment to the institution of Alevi community.<sup>98</sup> Within this religiously marginalized, closed community, the boundaries drawn between the inside and the outside appeared as religious taboos. For example, marriage with non-Alevi or establishing economic ties, as well as appealing to secular courts, were all forbidden.<sup>99</sup> Alevi communities formed their own mechanisms which made it possible for them to live in accordance with such taboos, and thus apart from the rule of the central authorities.

In the maintenance of a community structure, the *cem* gathering is the most significant mechanism. The *cems* could be conceived as public gatherings of individuals who have not been able to express themselves and their identities within the framework of the prevailing social order, and have come to live outside that order. Koçgirili asserts that the *cem* gathering function, for the Alevi masses, as a mechanism of justice, of education, of ordering of social relations, and of channeling the spiritual problems of the society.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Irene Markoff, "Musics, Saints and Ritual: Sama' and the Alevi of Turkey," pp. 94-110, in Grace Martin Smith and Carl w. Ernst, eds., *Manifestations of Sainthood in Islam* (Istanbul: ISIS Press, 1994), p. 97.

<sup>98</sup> Mardin, "Transformation of Religious Symbols," p. 120.

<sup>99</sup> Kehl-Bodrogi, "Tarih Mitosu ve Kollektif Kimlik", *Birikim* 88 (August 1996), pp. 52-63.

<sup>100</sup> Cafer Koçgirili, "Alevilik Inancında Cem Törenleri," *Yeni Zülfikar* 1 (June 1996), pp.30-31.

Those *cem* gatherings are structured as a ritual around a set of practices called “the twelve services,” performed by twelve assistants: 1) *dede* (religious leader), 2) *rehber* (guide), 3) *gözcü* (eye-keeper who holds the order of the ritual), 4) *çeragci* (light-keeper), 5) *zakir* (*semah* singer), 6) *süpürgeci* (sweeper who marks the ritual space), 7) *sakka* (water-keeper), 8) *sofraci* (cook), 9) *pervane* (guard surveilling the inside and the outside) 10) *peyik* (caller who invites people to the ritual), 11) *iznikçi* (cleaning-person), and 12) *bekçi* (doorman).<sup>101</sup> The ritual begins with a prayer recited by the *dede* who then invites the twelve assistants. Each assistant does his/her own job and the last services are those of singing and dancing. A *cem* ceremony can be held only if all of the twelve services can be performed.

In the 1940s and 1950s, a significant approach to Alevi *semahs* was developed by folklorists, who took the *semah* as a relatively separate category from that of ritual. The *semahs* were included in the surveys organized for recording local dance and music experiences throughout Turkey. Additionally, the Alevis

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<sup>101</sup> The twelve services listed here may be considered as the most frequently revealed ones among the community members who were interviewed, and also revealed/performed during the public *cems*. However, there are slight differences among those services between different texts. Those differences seem to depend upon different axes, such as the time the text was written/published, and the region from which the data was collected. Additionally, certain differences among the services as well as their naming appear between the Alevi and Bektashi sources. For different accounts, see J.K. Birge, *The Bektasi Order of Dervishes* (USA: Hartford Seminary Press, 1937); E.B. Sapolyo, *Mezhepler ve Tarikatlar Tarihi* (Istanbul: Türkiye Yayınevi, 1964); Nejat Birdogan, *Anadolu'nun Gizli Kültürü Alevilik* (Istanbul: Berfin Yayinlari, 1994); Mehmet Eröz, *Türkiye’de Alevilik ve Bektasilik* (Ankara: Kültür Bakanlığı Yayinlari/234, Basbakanlik Basimevi, January 1990). Alevi publications like *Nefes*, *Cem*, *Zülfikar* also provide some articles on this subject.

were invited to participate in the folk dance and music festivals of the 1950s. In the early years of the Republican period, in accordance with the modern cultural project of the new regime, the *semah* were declared a component of the Turkish culture originated from the Shamanic dances of the Central Asian Turkish communities. In other words, attempts were made to conceptualize it within the framework of the folk dance genre with no necessary connection to a specific community structure, apart from that of nation. The account by Yönetken on the cultural activities of *Türk Halk Oyunlarını Yasatma ve Yayma Tesisi* (Foundation for the Perpetuation and Spread of Turkish Folk Dances)<sup>102</sup> actually signifies that the Alevi adopted a peculiar attitude towards those efforts that invited *semah* to the stage. From the information that Yönetken provides on the participants of those events, it seems that Alevis participated in or allowed the presentation of only those secular genres of *semahs* –namely the *mengi*– not the ones that are performed specifically in their sacred rituals, the *ayin-i cems*.

Both the Alevi literature and the oral culture accept that the urban migration process that accelerated in the 1950s had a serious impact upon the Alevi community. This social change marked the beginning of a process through which the inner structure and the religious practices of the community, as well as the Alevi sense of identity, were radically transformed. Through a structural transformation, the influence of the communal order and the religious institutions upon the individuals decreased and sometimes disappeared. Among others, there were two main reasons for such a development: First of all, through migration to

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<sup>102</sup> “Türk Halk Oyunlarını Yasatma ve Yayma Tesisi,” *Orkestra* (1 November 1964), pp. 4-9.

the urban areas, the local Alevi communities started to disintegrate, and the Alevi people began to share the same social sphere with the Sunni people. In this process, for the Alevis, the practice of dissimulation (*takiyye*) took on a continuous character. Second, in the political conditions of 1960s and 1970s, most of the Alevi youth, as well as a considerable number of middle-aged Alevi laborers, politicized very quickly (mostly with leftist emphasis) and chose to identify themselves with their political inclinations, rather than the religious communal ties.

While the older generation still considered the *semah* not as a dance, but as a service which should be performed within the context of the ritual, for those who adopted oppositional positions in politics, *semahs* served as a means to demonstrate their protest. In the 1960s the Alevis demanded a legitimate ground for communal gatherings at which the *semahs* would also be performed. In 1964, the Hacı Bektaş Festival was organized for the first time, by the Alevis. Yet the ban on Alevi rituals was still in effect and the *semah* performances of the time were not welcomed fully by the security forces, mostly because they symbolized an oppositional position in the public sphere. During this period, some kind of an association was formulated between *Alevilik* and socialism, which did not include, but rather opposed, religious institutions and symbols.

Finally, in the 1980s, the *semahs* were introduced into the public sphere within the context of the Alevi resurgence. They gained access and visibility via public *cem* rituals, open-air and stage performances, as well as popular media. This was the first instance in history that the *semahs* had appeared in the public sphere with a religious connotation. It seems to have been a very important moment in the

Alevis' rediscovery of their marginalized religious identity, a moment which would pave the way for the rediscovery of their past, the reformulation of their present activities and the reconstruction of their identity.



## CHAPTER 2

### THE IDENTITY QUESTION OF THE ALEVIS WITHIN THE TURKISH NATION-STATE

The Alevis, who had long suffered as a religious minority of Islam under Ottoman rule, hoped to improve their position with the foundation of the Turkish Republic, which was characterized as a secular nation-state. Their wide support for the new regime was mostly due to its secularist premises. Today, most of the Alevis still have deep belief in Mustafa Kemal, the Turkish Republic and secularism. The following question is a basic one, related to the representation of the Alevi identity and the notion of secularism in Turkey: “Did the Alevis start to manifest their religious identity freely under the new regime?” Since the law (1925) which interdicted all religious brotherhoods and all of their activities included the Alevis, the answer to this question cannot be “yes”. On the other hand, what the Alevis accept as an improvement is a relative one, measured by the decreasing effects of Sunni dominance. How is the relativity related to the nature of secularism in Turkey?

#### Secularism in the New Nation-State and the Identity Question of the Alevis

## The Concept of Secularism in Turkey

From the middle of the nineteenth century, the terms “secularism” and “laicism” were used in the West “in connection with the problems of duality, opposition, or separation of church and state.”<sup>103</sup> In Turkey, most of the comparisons on the subject of secularism have referred to the case of France, where the concept emerged from the constitutional practice in the nineteenth century and led to a definitive separation of church and state at the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>104</sup> Although the relations of the two institutions and authorities, and their attitudes to one another have varied over time, and from one political regime to another, keeping them apart has become a more or less established principle in Western Europe and North America.<sup>105</sup>

In the case of Turkey, as Niyazi Berkes writes, “two myths have sprung up and become established concerning the nature of the secularism emerging from the Kemalist revolution. One is the belief that this secularism meant the separation of

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<sup>103</sup> The word “secularism” was derived from the Latin *saeculum*, meaning “age” or “generation”. In the Christian Latin, it acquired the meaning of “the temporal world” and started to be used with that meaning in all the major Protestant countries. On the other hand, the word “laicism” was derived from the Latin *laos* (the people) and *laikes* (the lay). “The policy of secularism in Catholic countries is more often expressed by the term ‘laicism’.” Niyazi Berkes, *The Development of Secularism in Turkey* (London: Hurst & Company, 1998), p.5.

<sup>104</sup> Serif Mardin, “Religion and Secularism in Turkey,” pp. 347-374 in Albert Hourani, Philip S. Khoury and Mary C. Wilson, eds., *The Modern Middle East* (London, New York: I. B. Tauris & Co. Ltd. Publishers, 1993), p. 347.

<sup>105</sup> Berkes, pp. 5-6.

religion and state after the fashion of French Laicism; the other is the belief that it was a policy of irreligion aimed at the systematic liquidation of Islam.”<sup>106</sup>

I would agree with Berkes at the point that none of these myths can explain the nature of secularism in Turkey. As a response to the first myth, it is worth mentioning that the case of Turkey was not in exact correspondence to that of France. It is true that the secularism in Turkey has been inspired by the French model. In line with this, the absence of a state religion was preferred (1928), and the principle of secularism was included in the Constitution (1937). However, these legislative measures did not develop into an institutionalization of religion independent from the state apparatus. “Although many institutions of the Turkish Republic were modeled on the West, including wholesale acceptance of various Western codes, no attempt was made to create an autonomous structure for Islam that would be comparable to the Christian Church.”<sup>107</sup> Quite apart from the Western examples, especially France, in this case, a governmental body was established under the control of the state for the regulation of the religious affairs. The Directorate of Religious Affairs was created in 1924 and attached to the Undersecretariat of the Prime Ministry. Second, in addition to such a critical institutional difference, Sunni Islam remained as the state religion, not legally, but implicitly.<sup>108</sup> Actually, as will be discussed below, according to the nature and the

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid, p. 479.

<sup>107</sup> Binnaz Toprak, “The Religious Right,” in *The Modern Middle East*, Albert Hourani et. al eds. (London & NY: Tauris, 1993), p. 627.

<sup>108</sup> Nilüfer Göle, “Secularism and Islamism in Turkey: The Making of Elites and Counter-Elites,” *Middle East Journal* 51, no.1 (Winter 1997): 46-58, 49.

practices of that newly invented governmental body, it would not be misleading to use the term “legitimate state religion” for Sunni Islam.<sup>109</sup>

In connection with the developments pointed out above, it would be an oversimplification to accept the second “myth” that Berkes reveals. It seems that instead of irreligion, “state control of religion” would better characterize the aims of the Kemalist secularization program. However, it is important to note that whenever the institutional organization of Islam is questioned, usually its theology is held partially responsible for the impossibility of establishing an independent religious institution, as, based on its “unitary” nature, Islamic theology insisted on the incorporation of the political realm within the religious one.<sup>110</sup> However, the solution of locating the religion within the government did not mean the incorporation of the political within the religious realm. On the contrary, in a specific way, religion was incorporated within the political realm, and controlled by it in a very strict way. Therefore, the placement of religion within the government structure cannot be considered as being loyal to Islamic theology.

It is a historical fact that just as in the Christian world, secularization attempts in Islam were closely associated with the modernization processes. Berkes underlines the fact that secularism within Christendom came in its real sense, not

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<sup>109</sup> This is one of the most critical issues that the Alevis face today. See also Kemal Kirişçi, “Disaggregating Turkish Citizenship and Immigration Policies,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 36, no: 3 (July 2000): 1-22. In the discussion of the immigration policies of Turkey, Kirişçi states, “the actual practice reveals a striking preference for the admitting of immigrants with a Sunni and Hanefi background.” (p. 3) He adds that the same preference was also apparent in the concept of citizenship, not in the law, but in the actual practice.

<sup>110</sup> On the subject of the unitary nature of Islam and its political and social consequences, see Binnaz Toprak, pp. 626-627.

with the separation of state and church, but with the collapse of the medieval society. In a similar manner, after discussing the similarities between the monotheistic and scriptural religions (Christianity, Judaism and Islam),<sup>111</sup> Nikki Keddie argues that all of them have been resistant to secularization. In contrast to the sudden attempts realized in most of the Islamic countries, the modernizing trends, including the changes on the part of the church and religion, began earlier and have been more gradual in the West.<sup>112</sup> The case of Turkey is not an exception in this sense. In addition, Turkey appeared as one of the first modernizing countries that took radical steps in order to become secularized.<sup>113</sup>

In the history of Turkey, the attempts toward secularization emerged during the nineteenth century Ottoman Empire (the Tanzimat Period, 1839-1876), in parallel to the early attempts at modernization. It is particularly worth mentioning the Tanzimat period, when new secular regulations were introduced and very

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<sup>111</sup> First, all those religions were monotheistic and scriptural, “implying a basic minimum of common belief and practice among believers.” Second, in all of them, “education, law and social practice had strong religious elements, involving both considerable control by religious institutions and a set of beliefs guiding ideology and activity.” Finally, “Christianity and Islam had religious institutions with considerable economic and political power. Such cultural, political, and economic power in the hands of religious institutions was tied to traditional ways of doing things in which affected both economic and political structures.” Nikki R. Keddie, “Secularism and the State: Toward Clarity and Comparison,” *New Left Review*, no. 226 (Nov-Dec. 1997), p. 26.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., p.27.

<sup>113</sup> cf. Bobby Sayyid, “Sign O’Times: Kaffirs and Infidels Fighting the Ninth Crusade,” pp. 264-286 in Ernesto Laclau, ed., *The Making of Political Identities* (London, New York: Verso, 1994). Sayyid emphasizes that Kemalist project of constructing Turkey as a modern national state found resonance in many other Muslim societies. By referring to the modernizing experience of Turkey, he defines “Kemalists” as follows: “Those Muslims who rejected the use of Islam as a political signifier and who sought to bring, however mediated, a reconstruction of society in which the role of Islam would be analogous to the role of Christianity in post-reformation Western Europe; all those Muslims who rejected the use of Muslim metaphors, who felt that Islam should not interfere with the state—all those people I will call Kemalists.” p. 269

specific targets for the implementation of administrative, financial, and educational policies were set.<sup>114</sup>

At this point, I want to refer to Berkes' interpretation of the Kemalist secularism and state why I do not agree with him. Berkes considers the developments of the Ottoman modernization process as the bifurcation of religious and secular spheres and states that the Kemalist secularism first aimed at putting an end to that bifurcation,<sup>115</sup> and second at producing a more modern and rational Islam.<sup>116</sup> Instead, I would agree with Keddie that this description cannot capture the essence of the new regime. It is more important to underline the establishment of the "state control of religion", which is related to the questions of control and power.<sup>117</sup> In history there have been different ways of adopting secularism. However, state separation from religion and state control over religion have never been the absolutes either, and do not exhaust all the political meanings of secularism, which is a contested and changing concept.<sup>118</sup> In any country with

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<sup>114</sup> Mardin, "Religion and Secularism in Turkey," p. 35 2.

<sup>115</sup> Berkes, pp.482-483. cf. Serif Mardin, *ibid.*, pp. 348-363; and Serif Mardin, "Center-Periphery Relations: A Key to Turkish Politics," *Daedalus* 102, no.1 (Winter 1973), pp. 175-181.

<sup>116</sup> Berkes, pp. 483-500.

<sup>117</sup> Keddie, p. 32. See also Ümit Cizre Sakallıoglu, "Parameters and Strategies of Islam-State Interaction in the Republican Turkey," *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 28 (1996).

<sup>118</sup> A recent study by John Ruedy examines this fact in detail: "Secular is a term used to distinguish the temporal or worldly from the spiritual, while secularism has come to denote a philosophy that privileges the domain of the temporal and diminishes that of the spiritual. The former grows to cover civil affairs of education, while the latter is increasingly restricted to the areas of private belief, worship and conduct. While secularism as a philosophy is central to the Western experience, it should be borne in mind that the concept has evolved historically and that it is still doing so. What was considered the proper province of human rational decision was different in the fifteenth century than the late twentieth. Secondly, it should be stressed that the struggle over frontier between the secular and religious is one characterized by continuous tension and that, up to now, the exact line of frontier between the two has never been agreed upon. One must also recognize that in the West there has seldom been an agreement among secularists as

strong religious institutions that formerly controlled much of law, education, and social welfare, in order to introduce modernizing changes, the state is usually involved in a power struggle with these institutions. In the case of Turkey, it was even a more difficult project –and the struggle was quite intense– because, the modernizing changes, including the secularizing ones, were introduced radically (1) by a small group of intellectual elites, (2) in a very short period time, and (3) in a country in which society was based on religion.

Although the secularizing attempts increased significantly in the decades following the Tanzimat period, Islam continued to be the principal component in the ideology of the Ottoman regime until its demise.<sup>119</sup> With the founding of the Turkish Republic, a new way of organizing religion was formulated in relation to the new concept of “nation-state”, according to which Islam would no more serve as the principle component in the ideology of the new regime. However, it was not an easy task to change people’s identifications in a very sudden attempt and without facing any resistance. Therefore, although extreme measures were taken against religion in order to introduce modernizing and secularizing changes, the religion was not completely destroyed, but efforts were made to keep it silent in one place as a reserved power. In this respect, Islam was institutionalized in the form of a government agency and was integrated into the government structure quite in keeping with the Ottoman pattern of including the *ulema* within the state. It

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a group, nor among the religious as a group, as to where exactly that frontier should be.” “Introduction,” in John Ruedy, ed., *Islamism and Secularism in North Africa*, New York, 1994, p. xiv. Quoted in Keddie, p.24, note.8.

<sup>119</sup> Feroz Ahmad, “Politics and Islam in Modern Turkey,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 27, no.1 (January, 1991): 3-21, 3.

was however, stripped of its original meaning in the Ottoman bureaucracy and reduced to a subservient role.<sup>120</sup> According to Sakallioğlu, in this way, it was “designed for the interpretation and execution of an enlightened version of Islam – which could be termed as ‘state Islam’ – through its civil service personnel, notably imams.”<sup>121</sup> The state control of religion is a very critical issue in this respect: it is then that religion acquires a subservient position and a function that is quite strange to its nature.

### The Adoption of Secularism in Turkey and the Question of Freedom of Faith

Secularism could have been inclusive of all non-Muslims, as well as the Alevis. It could have brought greater security and opportunities to all religious groups by allowing freedom of faith. Yet the strict state control over religion produced a problematic relationship between secularism and freedom of faith. The timing of the institutional changes that occurred after the foundation of the Turkish Republic is significant to provide hints about this peculiar relationship.

In March 1924, the Caliphate was abolished, but the Constitution of 1924 continued to hold the article stating that “Islam is the religion of the state.” This article (no.2) was dropped from the Constitution in 1928, that is, four years after the abolition of the Caliphate. In 1931, the principle of secularism was accepted by

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<sup>120</sup> Sakallioğlu, p. 234. See also Binnaz Toprak, p. 627.

<sup>121</sup> Sakallioğlu.



the Republican People's Party, the single party through which Republican policies were channeled. The statutes of the Party defined secularism as a condition in which the state took no role in religious life since religion was a matter of conscience.<sup>122</sup> Finally, the doctrine of secularism was crystallized and introduced in the Constitution in 1937, nine years after the removal of the Article 2. Although all of the Kemalist reforms assumed the maintenance of secularism, in the case of the institutional changes at the legislative and executive levels, which are directly related to the establishment of secularism, one is forced to ask why the intervals between those steps were so long, and what happened in between?

The first delay of four years (between 1924 and 1928) is a very critical one in its relation to the Seyh Said uprising and the events that followed. The uprising, which took place in February 1925 in the East, was a rebellion combining ethnic Kurdish and religious concerns,<sup>123</sup> launched and sustained in religious terms.<sup>124</sup> As a response to the uprising, an extraordinary law, *Takrir-i Sükun Kanunu* (the Law for the Maintenance of Order), was passed in March 1925. The law gave the government absolute powers for the next two years and on other occasions, until March 1929.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Mardin, "Religion and Secularism in Turkey," p. 365.

<sup>123</sup> Sakallıoğlu, p. 235; for a detailed analysis on the uprising, see Martin van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaiks and State* (London and New Jersey: Zed Books Ltd., 1992), pp. 265-305; Lale Yalçın-Heckman, "Ethnic Islam and Nationalism Among the Kurds in Turkey," in Richard Tapper, ed., *Islam in Modern Turkey* (London & New York: Tauris, 1991), pp. 103-106. For a detailed summary of the uprising and the period of *Takrir-i Sükun*, see Mete Tunçay, *T.C.'inde Tek-Parti Yönetimi'nin Kurulması* (Istanbul: Cem Yayınevi, 1992), pp. 127-175.

<sup>124</sup> Bruinessen, *ibid.*

<sup>125</sup> Ayşe Kadioglu, "The Paradox of Turkish Nationalism and the Construction of Official Identity," *Middle Eastern Studies* 32, 2 (April 1996), p. 187; Mardin, "Center-Periphery Relations," p. 182.

This power was also used to take radical measures against religious groups and their activities. In 1925, Law No. 677<sup>126</sup> was passed by the Grand National Assembly, closing all *tekkes* (sect lodges) and *zaviyes* (small sect lodges). All the religious brotherhoods were abolished, all ceremonies and meetings of the orders were banned, and all tombs and shrines as well as other places of pilgrimage were closed. The use of religious titles as *seyh*, *baba*, *seyit*, *mürsid*, *dede*, *çelebi*, and *halife* was forbidden. This law was followed by another one outlawing religious dress.

Thus, the Article No. 2 was dropped from the Constitution, just following the period of the *Takrir-i Sükun*. However, in December 1930 a minor, but critical incident would occur in Menemen.<sup>127</sup> The significance of this event lay in the fact that among the 18 uprisings that had been studied by the Historical Division of the Turkish General Staff (*Genel Kurmay Harp Tarihi Baskanligi*), it was the only one realized in western Turkey.<sup>128</sup> It was a reaction to the secularist aims of the Republic from the most advanced region of the country. Feroz Ahmad emphasizes that this incident showed the ruling party that “the secular reforms had not taken root and the state’s liberal approach to the practice of personal Islam had proved a failure.” He adds that it was after this tragic incident that a more militant form of

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<sup>126</sup> *Resmi Gazete*, no. 243.

<sup>127</sup> It was lead by Dervis Mehmet, a member of the Naksibendi order.

<sup>128</sup> Tunçay, *T.C.’inde Tek-Parti Yönetimi’nin Kurulmasi*, pp. 127-128.

secularism was preferred and became the policy of the 1930s.<sup>129</sup> Finally, near the end of the decade, the principle of secularism was introduced to the Constitution.

Therefore, the “delays” (four years and then nine years of delays between the radical steps of the Republican elites in terms of the institutionalization of secularism), could also be interpreted as long intervals which include critical governmental measures taken to limit or ban the existence and activities of some religious groups, and to establish strict control over the opposing groups in order to introduce the principle of secularism in the Constitution of Turkey. In this respect, a paradox lies between the concept of secularism and freedom of conscience. Instead of providing freedom for the expression of beliefs for all religious groups, the secularism in Turkey, in contrast, seems to manifest itself in the suppression of beliefs, at least in the public sphere.

Here, we may fall into the trap of oversimplifying the situation if we ignore the distinction between individual conscience and collective conscience brought by the official ideology of the Republic. Although the degree of the state’s control of religion varied in different historical contexts, this distinction formed the basis of the religious approach in modern-secular Turkey. According to this distinction, Islam would no longer interfere in temporal affairs and would not serve the function of social cohesion; instead, it would become a matter of individual conscience. Sometime after accepting the principle of secularism, the leaders of the RPP were careful to underline the idea that they did not consider secularism to be “synonymous with atheism (*dinsizlik*), since the performance of religious ritual

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<sup>129</sup> Ahmad, “Politics and Islam in Modern Turkey,” p. 8.

(*ibadet*) was protected by the Constitution.”<sup>130</sup> However, in relation to the legal limitations placed upon religion<sup>131</sup>, it was clear that “religion was guaranteed freedom and protection so long as and insofar as it was not utilized to promote any social or political ideology having institutional implications.”<sup>132</sup>

Therefore, the meaning of secularism in Turkey can be best understood by reference to the goals of the new regime and the prevailing historical context in which the secularizing reforms were implemented. The aim of adopting secularism was to create a rational and modern state, which would adapt itself to the requirements of the contemporary civilization.<sup>133</sup>

#### The Case of the Alevi Identity in Relation to Secularism in Turkey

In contrast to what had been expected from secularism, within the secularization process in Turkey, a paradox occurred between secularism and freedom of faith. The claims and activities of religion were limited to the individual

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<sup>130</sup> Mardin, “Religion and Secularism in Turkey,” p. 365.

<sup>131</sup> Article 9 of the Law of Associations of 1938 was concerned with the formation of associations on the basis of sect and order (*mezhep* and *tarikât*). “In consequence, to form a society of Sunnis, or Alevis, or a Ticani or Bektashi sect or order was to invite lawful prosecution and sentence according to the criminal code.” Second, political associations or parties seeking particularist religious support were prohibited. “The third restriction concerned a fundamental prohibition given clarification in the 1949 revision of the Penal Code and in the latter-day secularist attitude towards the Republican legal system as a whole. This restriction, stated in Article 163 of the aforesaid law, provided punishment for acts contrary to the principle of secularism enunciated in the Constitution and that aim at adapting, even if partially, the basic social, or economic, or political, or legal orders of the State according to religious fundamentals and beliefs.” Berkes, p. 499.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 498-499.

<sup>133</sup> Ahmad, “Politics and Islam in Modern Turkey,” p.3; Mardin, “Religion and Secularism in Turkey,” p. 365.

faith. In accordance with that, all religious symbols, metaphors and activities were expected to disappear from the public places. Thus, no religious group<sup>134</sup>, including the Alevis, would be able to express its religious identity in the public sphere.<sup>135</sup>

In the case of the struggle for power and control, the most apparent target of the new regime was Sunni Islam, and related religious orders, classes and groups. The Kemalists did not want religion to be used as a barrier to their modernization project and they were involved in a struggle with the strong Sunni religious institutions and the related classes that formerly had controlled much of law, education, and social life. However, the ban or limitations that were put upon the religion were impartial to the religious groups and included the Alevis as well. The law for the abolition of all religious sects and brotherhoods (No. 677, 1925), which did not leave many options for the Alevis, is the best example of this case: If they would insist on continuing with their faith and religious practices not as individuals, but as a community, they would have to go underground.

Although the measures taken against religion in the name of secularism did not provide a secure atmosphere for the Alevis to live with their religious identity in the public sphere, most of the Alevis to this day still have a deep belief in

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<sup>134</sup> The only exception being the non-Muslim religious minorities whose rights were recognized in the Lausanne Treaty of 1923. However, in contrast to the Ottoman period, their numbers in Republican Turkey was significantly small.

<sup>135</sup> For detailed discussions on the subject of disappearance of religion from the public sphere, see several works of Nilüfer Göle, such as *İslam ve Modernlik Üzerine Melez Desenler* (Istanbul: Metis Yayinlari, November 2000); "The Quest for the Islamic Self within the Context of Modernity," pp. 81-94 in Sibel Bozdoğan and Resat Kasaba, eds., *Rethinking Modernity and National Identity in Turkey* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1997); *Modern Mahrem: Medeniyet ve Örtünme* (Istanbul: Metis Yayinlari, 1991); "Secularism and Islamism in Turkey: The Making of Elites and Counter-Elites"; *İslamın Yeni Kamusal Yüzleri* (Istanbul: Metis Yayinlari, January 2000). See also Bobby Sayyid, "Sign O'Times: Kaffirs and Infidels Fighting the Ninth Crusade."

secularism, and there is even a significant tendency that identifies *Alevilik* with secularism.<sup>136</sup> This is a critical paradox that provides some valuable clues about the identity formation of the Alevis in modern secular Turkey. The Alevis who compare their previous position (in the Ottoman period) with the latter one (in the secular Turkey) favor the secular governments as well as their secularizing actions. In this comparison two variables are involved: the attitude of the former and latter governments toward the Alevis, themselves, and the attitude of the former and latter governments toward the Sunnis, the major religious group in both periods, who had an apparent political power in the Empire.

In the Ottoman Empire, the Alevis had always been a source of concern for the state. They were often considered as descendants of the rebellious groups that were closely associated with the Safavids and therefore, to be a dangerous group ready to undermine the Ottoman hegemony. On the other hand, while trying to consolidate the empire to avoid its fragmentation due to its mosaic structure, the Ottoman bureaucrats tried to impose orthodox Sunni Islam, and locate heterodox groups to the far corners of the empire.<sup>137</sup> In this case again, Alevis faced problems like being considered non-believers (or, rather *Rafizi*<sup>138</sup>) by the major religious authorities of Islam and being marginalized geographically. Additionally, a great

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<sup>136</sup> For a detailed analysis and criticism of this tendency, see Ahmet Yasar Ocak, "Alevilik ve Bektasilik Hakkındaki Son Yayınlar Üzerine (1990) Genel Bir Bakış ve Bazı Gerçekler," *Tarih ve Toplum* (July-August 1991), pp. 20-25. Ocak focuses on the paradox and anachronism of considering a sect or a religion as secularist.

<sup>137</sup> Mardin, "Religion and Secularism in Turkey," p. 349.

<sup>138</sup> On the topic of *Rafizilik*, see P.J. Bumke, "The Kurdish Alevis - Boundries and Perceptions", pp. 510-518 in P.A. Andrews, ed., *Ethnic Groups in the Republic of Turkey* (Wiesbaden: Reichert Publication, 1989).

majority of the Sunni population shared the attitude of the religious authorities. Therefore, the Alevis were marginalized socially, as well.

It was after the foundation of the Republic that the Alevis felt a greater sense of security and gradually acquired equal legal rights as individual citizens of Turkey. However, more than being favored as a distinct religious group, this development was closely associated with the modernization project of the Kemalists. In order to build up a non-religious national identity, it was necessary to grant relatively equal treatment to all religious groups. On the other hand, as mentioned above, it has been the scriptural monotheistic religions which have been typically more resistant to secularization. The Alevis, a heterodox, minority group, for whom politics does not have much relevance for the attainment of salvation and, who “traditionally had been left out, if not persecuted,”<sup>139</sup> favored the new secular governments, in spite of their “partly or wholly autocratic actions”.<sup>140</sup>

The next most important factor in the Alevis’ feeling safer was that the new regime would not be based on religion. This factor gained more relevance with the exclusion of a state religion (1928). That is to say, although *Alevilik* was itself a belief system, the Alevis would not be conducted by the principles of another belief system, namely orthodox, Sunni Islam. They would not be left out or they would not face heavy measures because of not identifying their religious faith with the state religion. In this respect they hoped that the Sunni population’s widespread prejudices against them would come to an end. Therefore, the power of Sunni Islam

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<sup>139</sup> Kirişçi, p. 17.

<sup>140</sup> Keddie, p. 34.

and the position of Sunni groups were taken as a “reference point” and that the dislocation of Sunni Islam within the Republican regime contributed to the Alevis’ sense of security.

The final point may be summarized as follows: Although the emphasis on secularism would suggest an equal freedom of faith and expression for all religious groups, within the secularization process in Turkey, in the case of the different Muslim groups, an equality among them was achieved –although partially– not on the grounds of freedom of faith and expression, but with the suppression of heterodox Islam and non-orthodox Sunni Islam, together with the establishment of strict state control over the orthodox Sunni Islam. Therefore, the overall improvement in the position of the Alevis during the Republican period was a “relative” one, which could be defined in terms of a comparison with their position during the Ottoman period. However, it must be added that this comparison usually involved another comparison that deals with the position of Sunni Islam. In other words, the relative decline in the power of Sunni Islam during the Republican period is often considered as a factor that contributed to the relative improvement of the position of the Alevis.

Consequently it may be pointed out that, as a distinct religious group, the position of the Alevis within the conditions of the secular Turkey is defined in terms of certain “relativities”, and those relativities did not provide the Alevis safe grounds to survive with their religious identity. It was closely associated with the policy of “state ‘control’ of religion”, where the term “control” did not express a standard quantity and/or quality. The degree of control, as well as the way in which



it was operated changed significantly in different historical contexts. In order to point out its peculiar reflection on the Alevi identity, I want to stress two points: First, the Alevis constitute a religious group and any restriction on religion and religious groups has consequences for them just like the Sunnis. Second, since religion would not be the principle ideology in the new regime, it is expected that the Sunni Islam and the Sunni groups should no longer serve as a “point of reference” for the Alevis. However, this is not what happened.

First of all, in the Republican period, it was, in general, the lack of actual freedom of faith and expression in the public sphere and, in particular, the positioning of Sunni Islam within the government structure that made the Alevis feel insecure with respect to the Sunnis. In Sakallioğlu’s words, in the Republican model “rather than being banished from the public political sphere, Islam came to rest at the center stage of politics, and secularism became a politically charged concept.”<sup>141</sup> In this model, if one reason for keeping Islam within the government structure was to cope with the resistance against the modernization project of the new regime, the other was the lack of sufficient independent measures to construct the new identity, the national identity. While the religious identity would be replaced by the national one, the preference of locating Sunni Islam within the government structure provided the means for the state apparatus to manipulate and to absorb the religious component in the national identity. As will be discussed below, the history of modern Turkey includes many cases in which religion has been functionalized in times of social, economic or political crises. It must also be

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<sup>141</sup> Sakallioğlu, p. 236.

added that in certain periods, particularly in the 1950s, some privileges were accorded to the Sunni population, like the construction of new mosques, setting up *Imam-Hatip Liseleri* (prayer-leader and preaching schools) or establishing *İlahiyat Fakültesi* (Faculty of Theology). Such situations created anxiety among the Alevis.

Secondly, although the secularization of Turkey provided ground for the gradual emancipation of the Alevis, “it did not bode the end of the widespread Sunni prejudices against the Alevis, who, like heterodox groups anywhere, are commonly accused of sexual licentiousness and other immoralities”.<sup>142</sup> As will also be discussed below in this section, this would become a serious problem with the gradual integration of Alevis into the wider society (from the 1950s onwards). In this respect, it is important to note that the practice of *takiyye*, the concealment of the religious identity, was widely used until the 1980s by the Alevis, and has not been abandoned completely in the last two decades, either.

When the implicit use of Sunni Islam as the “legitimate state religion” is added to these two situations, Sunni Islam and the Sunnis continued to be a point of reference for the Alevis in the process of identity construction. In other words, in formulating *Alevilik* and the Alevi identity, The Alevis have taken into consideration the Sunni religious practices and principles, including such things as the various views of the Sunni groups about the Alevis (including the widespread prejudices about the Alevis), and various kinds of social, economic or political developments that seemed to or actually did favor the Sunni groups, Sunni-ism. As

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<sup>142</sup> Bruinessen, “Kurds, Turks and the Alevi Revival in Turkey,” *Middle East Report* 200 (Summer 1996), pp. 7-10.

will be clear in the following parts of this work, although the preferences of the larger Alevi community or different segments of it on various notions of *Alevilik* and Alevi identity have varied in different historical contexts, Sunni-ism, the Sunnis, and their socio-political situation have played a significant role in their formulation.

Finally, the impact of secularism in Turkey in relation to the Alevi identity may be summarized as follows: First of all, there appeared a widespread tendency among the Alevis for the preference of secular governments. Second, in the Republic of Turkey, the Alevis have continued to take Sunni Islam and Sunni populations as points of references in conducting their lives and in the formulation of their identity.

However, whatever the reasons were their “relative” preferences for the new secular regimes, as the religion was suppressed, the Alevis’ sense of identity was suppressed, too. In this respect, it is crucial to note that whatever roles were provided separately to Sunni Islam and *Alevilik* in different historical contexts within the Republic of Turkey, these two groups’ disappearance from as well as reappearance in the public sphere with their own religious symbols and metaphors, etc. were realized synchronically. This is a significant point that apparently makes it necessary for the Alevis to re-question their points of references in the formulation of their identity, and shows that the identity problem of the Alevis within the context of the secularism adopted in Turkey is more complex than it seems.

Secularism was one of the most important ideological tools of the new regime in the creation of a modern Turkey as a nation-state. It was shaped and executed in relation to the history and the actual conditions of Turkey in that time. Since the Alevis are a religious group, in this part of the work, the framework of the Alevi identity in relation to the secularization process in Turkey has been examined. However, to achieve a fuller comprehension of the Alevi identity, it is not sufficient to analyze it just in the context of secularization because, as religion would be dismissed from the role of providing coherence among people, the notion of nation would come to the forefront and would have a deep impact on the identity of the Alevis, an ethnically mixed religious group.

#### Nationalism in the New Nation-State and the Identity Question of the Alevis

In the second half of the nineteenth century, nationalism appeared as an important ideology throughout the world, providing a basis for the establishment of the new nation-states, with an efficient means of legitimizing them.<sup>143</sup> Yet although the appearance of nationalisms in different states/societies had a connection with what was happening in the outside world, history has proved that the development of nationalism in each state/society followed a specific route depending on different factors. In this part, after mentioning the conditions in which the question of national identity appeared on the agenda of the Ottoman state elite, some of the

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<sup>143</sup> Çağlar Keyder, "Türk Milliyetçiliğine Bakmaya Başlarken," *Toplum ve Bilim* 62 (1993): 7-17.

factors, which had an impact on the formation of the Alevi identity in relation to the national identity will be discussed.

The Ottomans lived in a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-religious empire. Although the administration was based on the principles of Sunni Islam, the multi-cultural societal structure was managed through the *millet* system. The Ottomans did not try to impose a cultural homogeneity neither on the peoples of the conquered lands, nor on the *millets*. In that respect, the Ottoman Empire could be distinguished from the other pre-modern empires.<sup>144</sup>

The identity question came to dominate the agenda of the ruling elites in the nineteenth century. The European influence and expansion through the Ottoman Empire, and the emergence separatist of nationalisms especially in the Balkans spread a feeling among the Ottoman ruling class that they “were at a loss in constructing their identity for themselves.”<sup>145</sup> Up until the early 1910s, the Ottoman ruling elites identified themselves with Ottoman-ness, an identity that was contrary to the concept of national identity.<sup>146</sup> The first momentum of modernization in the Ottoman period could not be described in the context of nationalism. In relation with that, since the ruling class was trying to save the empire as a whole, nationalism would be contradictory to what they were doing. In consequence, the

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<sup>144</sup> Feroz Ahmad, “Osmanlı İmparatorluğu’nun Sonu.” In *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu’nun Sonu ve Büyük Güçler*, edited by Marian Kent. (Istanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, 1999): 6-35. p. 23.

<sup>145</sup> Çağlar Keyder, “The Dilemma of Cultural Identity on the Margins of Europe,” *New Left Review* 16, 1 (Winter 1993), pp. 19-33, 20.

<sup>146</sup> See Çağlar Keyder, “1990’larda Türkiye’de Modernliğin Doğrultusu,” pp. 29-42 in Sibel Bozdoğan and Resat Kasaba, ed., *Türkiye’de Modernleşme ve Ulusal Kimlik* (Istanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, February 1999(2)). See also Masami Arai, *Jön Türk Dönemi Türk Milliyetçiliği* (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2002 (2)).

Ottoman State was slow in creating a nationalism peculiar to itself.<sup>147</sup> It was after the First World War that the ruling elite became oriented toward the option of “Turkish nationalism”. Actually the war had played a critical role in the rise and establishment of nationalisms throughout the world.<sup>148</sup> In the Ottoman case, the developments showed the ruling class that there was still a chance for the establishment of sovereignty over some parts of the former territory of the Empire.

In consequence it may be pointed out that, in line with the earlier Ottoman modernization process the questions of adopting nationalism and national identity were responded to by a group of ruling elites, and basically due to the multi-cultural structure of the empire, these questions appeared on their agenda quite lately and were handled in their relation to the problem of saving and defending the state. (However, shortly after that, it would no longer be the Ottoman state, but the Turkish nation-state.) Therefore, more than being rooted in the actual conditions of society, nationalism was adopted in Turkey as a derivative form. The involuntary preference and belated experience of nationalism would pave the way for critical identity problems during Republican period.<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> Keyder, *ibid.*, p. 34. See also İlber Ortaylı, *İmparatorlugun En Uzun Yüzyili* (Istanbul: Hil Yayın, 1987(2)). Ortaylı states that “*Osmanlıcilik* has born into the world of nationalism as a dead body.” p. 121. On the subject of 19<sup>th</sup> century Ottoman nationalism, see İlber Ortaylı, “Osmanlı’da Ulusalcılık,” *Sosyalizm ve Toplumsal Mücadeleler Ansiklopedisi* (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, Vol. 6, 1988), pp. 1798-1799.

<sup>148</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalisms since 1780: Program, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997{2} 2), especially Chapter 5 (The Apogee of Nationalism).

<sup>149</sup> On the history of Turkish nationalism, see Berkes, especially Chapters 11 and 12.

## The Process of Adopting Nationalism and National Identity in Turkey

Although the modernization attempts began during the last century of the Ottoman Empire, the Turkish Republic could not simply be considered as the reorganization of what was inherited from the Empire. In description of Mardin, “the watershed appears not only in the radicalization of the attitudes of the founding fathers of the Republic, but also in the very conception of the Turkish Republic as a nation-state.”<sup>150</sup> It was in the Republican period that nationalism became the ideological tool of modernization<sup>151</sup> and functioned within the nation-state. In this respect, it is important to underline the fact that it was the ideology of nationalism which had the greatest impact on the form of the modernization that took place in Turkey, as well as the modern construction of identity. In relation to the conditions of adopting nationalism in Turkey, Mardin quite rightly continues to assert that “neither the Turkish nation as the foundation head of a ‘general will’ nor the Turkish nation as a source of national identity existed at the time he [Mustafa Kemal] set out on this task.”<sup>152</sup> Thus, the paradox lay in the fact that while the dominant motive of the new regime was to solve the problem of modernization through nationalism, neither nationalism nor national identity had roots in the society and thus, both had to be constructed to an important extent.

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<sup>150</sup> Mardin, “Religion and Secularism in Turkey,” p. 363.

<sup>151</sup> Keyder, “The Dilemma of Cultural Identity on the Margin of Europe,” p. 24; Ahmad, “Politics and Islam in Modern Turkey,” p. 3.

<sup>152</sup> Mardin, *ibid.*

The question of constructing a new identity seemed to have at least two aspects: the transition from the existing identity (religious identity) to the new one (national identity), and the process of constructing the national identity, itself.

#### The Transition from the Religious Identity to the National Identity

The Ottoman legacy provided religion-based identities for different components of the populace, which determined their relations with each other, as well. First, while the non-Muslim subjects in the Ottoman Empire were identified with their own religions, their religious communities were administrated through the religiously-based *millet* system; second, Islam was the only provider of a common identity for the majority of the society; and third, Islam provided the only link between the majority of the society and the ruling elites.

In the first case, the non-Muslim (Christian and Jewish) subjects were identified with their own religions and religious communities. In the Ottoman Empire, there existed a tolerance for them and through the *millet* system both the non-Muslim and the Muslim subjects of the Empire were organized in religious-ethnic communities,<sup>153</sup> each with its own distinct legal and administrative system. The history of the *millet* system goes back to the reign of Fatih Sultan Mehmet. However, it was based on the Muslim law and practice that “the relationship

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<sup>153</sup> In the *millet* system, ethnicity appeared as a sub-category within the religious community.



between the Muslim state and the non-Muslim communities to which it extended its tolerance and protection was conceived as regulated by a pact called *dhimma*.”<sup>154</sup>

Second, notwithstanding the importance of the non-Muslim communities, Islam was the only provider of a common identity for the majority of society.<sup>155</sup> On the contrary, nationalism was such a state-making ideology that in order to create a modern nation-state, it was ready to undermine, or even to take a rival position against, the religion-based socio-political and economic ties and religious identities. While it was due to a variety of reasons, in the context of Turkey, it is important to mention that nationalism –as a modernizing ideology– demanded a shift in the understanding the order of the universe from divine law to positivist and rational thinking. On the other hand, as already considered in detail in the discussions of secularism, the ideology of the nation-state required a struggle for control and power: It demands the transition of the authority and control from the traditional ruling classes (the *ulema*, traditional bureaucracy, etc.) to the ruling elites of the new nation-state. Moreover, it necessitates the disintegration of the local and/or communal and/or religious groups in order to integrate all people for the good of the nation. Securing the loyalty of the people to the nation was one the most important issues in the nation-building process. Because of these reasons, the

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<sup>154</sup> Benjamin Braude and Bernard Lewis, “Introduction” pp. 1-36 in B. Braude and B. Lewis eds., *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire, Vol. I: The Central Lands* (New York and London: Holmes and Meier Publishers, Inc, 1982) p.5. Although the discussion of the paradoxes inherent in the *millet* system exceeds the limits and aims of this work, I would like to mention the one that Kemal Karpat emphasizes: “The *millet* system brought the non-Muslims within a Muslim principle of organization while recognizing their religious and cultural freedom.” “Millets and Nationality: The Roots of the Incongruity of Nation and State in the Post-Ottoman Era,” pp. 141-169 in Braude and Lewis eds., *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire*, p. 149.

<sup>155</sup> Keyder, “The Dilemma of Cultural Identity on the Margin of Europe,” p. 20.

pre-existence of religion as the principle component in the identities of the people may provide a problematic ground for the construction of the national identity, especially if the national identity was not rooted at all.

Hobsbawm states that the “religion is a paradoxical cement for ... modern nationalism, which has usually (at least in its more crusading phases) treated it with considerable reserve as a force which could challenge the ‘nation’s’ monopoly claim to its members’ loyalty.”<sup>156</sup> This had been the case in Turkey, for several reasons. Besides the fact that religion was deeply rooted in the society, in contrast with the national identity, the direct imposition of secularism with no concessions was also effective in the rise of popular discontent against nationalism.

The third point, that Islam provided the only link between the majority of the society and the ruling elites, is important in this respect. After the abandonment of the ideology of Ottomanism, this link between the two groups diminished, or at least was weakened to a great extent. The sudden implementation of secular policies from above, in line with the sudden adoption of nationalism as an ideology, intensified the alienation of the two groups from each other and paved the way for popular discontent.<sup>157</sup>

Nationalism cannot be considered as an ideology which produces the same results or reproduces the same models in every society.<sup>158</sup> For it to be successful, it is important that a consensus emerges between the ideology that is produced at the

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<sup>156</sup> *Nations and Nationalisms since 1780: Program, Myth, Reality*, p. 68.

<sup>157</sup> See Serif Mardin, “The Just and Unjust,” *Deadalus*, vol: 120, no: 2 (Summer 1991): 113-129.

<sup>158</sup> See the “Introduction,” especially the part concerned with different approaches of modernization, specifically the discussion of the nationalism approaches of Anderson and Chatterjee.

top and the local values. This point underlines the importance of the question of the relationship between the society and the ruling elites. In other words, in the early Republican period, the attempts of the elites that are concerned with the construction of nations and national identities needed to be based on the relevant pre-existing social and cultural networks. In the case of Islam, it does not seem that this end was ever achieved. As discussed in the previous section, Islam became a politically charged issue –including its position in the construction of the new identity– in the Republic of Turkey.

#### The Process of the Construction of the National Identity

The 1920s and the 1930s were critical decades in the making of the nation-state (Republic of Turkey), as well as the national identity (the emergence of the “Turk”) because, first, this period included the most critical uprisings as well as the counter-measures which affected the relationship between the ruling elite and different sections of the society. This relation in turn, affected the nature of the identity that would function for the cohesion of the society in the nation-state. Second, the concrete steps for the construction of the “Turkish identity” were taken in this period, especially in the 1930s, with the gradual consolidation of the single-party regime of the Republican Peoples’ Party (1923-1945).

The imposition of secular/national/modernist policies from above was met with the uprisings of different groups in society, which at the end faced with extraordinary governmental measures. As mentioned in the previous section, the study of the Historical Division of the Turkish General Staff includes eighteen uprisings

that occurred in this period. Three points on the nature of the uprisings are worth to mention in order to have a deeper understanding of the process of identity construction in Turkey: Except the final one, which occurred in 1938 in Dersim, seventeen of them took place between 1924 and 1930; only one of them did not take place in the Eastern part of Turkey (the Menemen incident); and only in two of them were the Kurdish people not directly involved.<sup>159</sup>

First of all, the “timings” of the uprisings is significant. It helps us to see why the most radical attempts for the construction of the new identity<sup>160</sup> were undertaken at the beginning of the 1930s. As mentioned in the previous section, the uprisings were responded to with severe punishments and extra-ordinary legislations. It was only after the establishment of firm control over the uprising groups –as well as other potential opposition groups– that the more decisive attempts toward constructing a completely new identity were made.

Second, “the groups that took part in the uprisings” are significant. I would agree with Mardin’s approach that “the fear that Anatolia would be split on primordial group lines ran as a strong undercurrent among the architects of Kemalism trying to establish their own center, and it remained as a fundamental,

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<sup>159</sup> The uprisings and operations were as follows: (1) Nasturi Uprising: September 12-28, 1924 (2) Seyh Said Uprising: February 13-May 31, 1925 (3) Raçkotan and Raman *Tedip* (Chastening) Operation: August 9-12, 1925 (4) Sason Uprisings: 1925-1937 (5) Agri Uprising-I: May 16-June 17, 1926 (6) Koçusagi Uprising: October 7-November 30, 1926 (7) Mutki Uprising: May 26-August 25, 1927 (8) Agri Operation-II: September 13-20, 1927 (9) Bicar *Tenkil* (Repressing) Operation: October 7-November 17, 1927 (10) Âsi Resul Uprising: May 22-August 3, 1929 (11) Tendürük Operation: September 14-17, 1927 (12) Savur *Tenkil* Operation: May 26-June 9, 1930 (13) Zeylân Uprising: June 20-beginning of September, 1920 (14) Oramar Uprising: July 16-October 10, 1930 (15) Agri Operation-III: September 7-14, 1920 (16) Pülümür Operation: October 8-November 14, 1930 (17) Menemen Incident: December 23, 1930 (18) Dersim *Tedip* Operation: 1937-1938. Tunçay, T.C. *’inde Tek-Parti Yönetimi’nin Kurulması*, pp. 126-127.

<sup>160</sup> Turkish History Thesis (*Türk Tarih Tezi*) and Sun-Language Theory (*Günes-Dil Teorisi*), which will be explained below, might be given as examples.

although latent-issue of Kemalist policy to the end of one party rule in 1950.”<sup>161</sup> At this point, it is important reveal that ethnicity –especially Kurdish ethnicity– was among the most sensitive issues that were handled in the process.

Finally, the “locations” of the uprisings were significant. They took place in Eastern Turkey, where it was possible to find more powerful ethnic, religious and other kinds of tribal bonds than in the West. On the other hand, in economic terms, it is possible to make a comparison between East and West. For example, the Menemen incident was the most shocking of the 18 uprisings because it took place in the West, the most advanced part of the country, where it was supposed that traditional and ethnic bonds were looser.

At the beginning of the 1930s, it became apparent that the Republican reforms had not taken root.<sup>162</sup> During the same period, the new regime’s attitude toward the religious and primordial groups and group ties had almost settled. Thus, the period of a more militant secularism had started and accompanied the further process of social engineering. Within this process, two ideologies which were expected to promote national identity emerged in the 1930s: the so-called “Turkish history thesis” and the “sun-language theory”.<sup>163</sup> Among other policies or ideologies directed toward the construction of the national identity, these two theories deserve attention because of their potential to signal that although at the beginning the Turkish identity was formulated with regard to the concept of

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<sup>161</sup> Mardin, “Center-Periphery Relations”, p. 177.

<sup>162</sup> Ayse Kadioglu, “The Paradox of Turkish Nationalism and Construction of Official Ideology,” p. 187.

<sup>163</sup> Mardin, “Religion and Secularism in Turkey”, p. 366.

citizenship, in the history of the Turkish Republic, it was not conceived completely apart from its ethnic connotations.<sup>164</sup> The Turkish history thesis and the sun-language theory are formulated by Mardin as follows:

The Turkish history thesis was built on the idea that Turks had contributed to civilization long before they had been incorporated into the Ottoman Empire. They had originated an urban civilization in Central Asia from which many other civilizations had sprung. They had maintained their cultural identity even after becoming a minority in a multi-national empire. It was from this fund that an identity could be drawn for the citizens of the Republican Turkey... The sun-language theory was an attempt to rationalize a development which had been taking place in Ottoman literature since the middle of the nineteenth century, namely the increasing use of the vernacular instead of the flowery and allusive language of the Ottoman officials. It was now proposed that “pure” Turkish was an ancient language of central importance in the history of languages.<sup>165</sup>

These two theories have been criticized very often since the end of militant secularism (late 1940s); however, this criticism is beyond the scope of this study. For the purpose of this work, they are important in showing the newly attached basis for the promotion of the national identity. Among the other proto-national bonds, it was mainly ethnicity, and secondly language that constituted a ground for the basis of the new national identity.<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> See Kemali Saybasili “History, Politics and Historical Formations,” pp. 13-36 in Günay Göksu Özdoğan and Gül Tokay eds., *Redefining the Nation, State and Citizen* (Istanbul: Eren, 2000), p. 34. Saybasili argues that the new state was formed within the context of a war of liberation before the foundation of the Republic and that the forced choice of nationalism in their specific historical situation led the Republicans to define the concept of citizen in terms of a concept that had ethnic connotations, yet which included a cultural, not a racial approach.

<sup>165</sup> Mardin, *ibid.* On this subject see also, Büsra Ersanli, *Iktidar ve Tarih* (Istanbul: İletisim Yayınları, 1996 (2)).

<sup>166</sup> As discussed in Chapter 1, the concept of the proto-national bonds is important in understanding nationalisms. In *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780*, Hobsbawm discusses that only the memories of

### The National Identity and the Concept of Citizenship

Citizenship is a very central issue in understanding national identity and other types of identities found in Turkey. In order to arrive at such an understanding, it seems necessary to examine the legal criteria as well as the way they are established and put into effect. In this part, we are going to deal with the notion of citizenship, both in legal and practical terms, in order to point out how it is related to the position of the Alevis, while keeping in mind that the Alevis are an ethnically and linguistically diverse group.

According to the Constitution of 1924, the formal formulation of Turkish citizenship makes no distinction between different ethnic, linguistic or religious groups within the boundaries of the Turkish Republic. On the one hand, it may mean that every citizen is considered equal regardless of his/her cultural (ethnic, religious, linguistic, etc.) differences. On the other hand, it might also signify a desire to build a unified, standardized notion of national identity which is not blind to differences among people/groups, but which wants that there will be no differences among them. These two derivations from the same legal principle cannot be used interchangeably. Legally, the first interpretation must be the real intension. However, it is the practice which makes the second interpretation more actual than the first one. At this point, it seems necessary to go over the legal

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earlier statehood can be extended to the masses and provide the basis for later nationalisms and states. See especially Chapter 2: Popular Proto-Nationalism.

formulations of the notion of citizenship in Turkey and to see how they contradict with the actual governmental practices.

The legal instruments that are concerned with the notions of citizen and citizenship are as follows. At the beginning, it must be mentioned that the process of institutionalizing the status of citizenship had started during the period of Ottoman modernization. Dated 23 January 1869, the first legal regulation on the issue of Ottoman citizenship was called the *Tabiiyet-i Osmaniye dair Nizamname* (Regulation on the Ottoman Subjection). The Regulation regarded all subjects living in the Ottoman Empire as Ottoman, without any distinction.<sup>167</sup> However, the title of this first piece of law (*Tabiiyet-i Osmaniye*) for the institutionalization of the status of citizenship is very interesting in the sense that there was no reference to the term “citizen”. As the name of the regulation underlined, according to it, everybody was subjected to the Sultan.

In the Constitution of 1876, the approach to the concept of citizenship was the same: Article 8 stated that “All subjects of the Empire are called Ottomans without distinction, whatever faith they profess, the status of an Ottoman is acquired and lost, according to conditions specified by law.”<sup>168</sup> In this Article, no distinction was made between the religious and ethnic communities. However, Article 11 stated that “Islamism is the State religion,” and the position of the other groups were described in the continuation of the same article: “But, while maintaining this principle, the State will protect the free exercises of faiths

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<sup>167</sup> For more information, see Ergin Nomer, *Vatandaslik Hukuku* (Istanbul: Filiz, 1997).



professed in the Empire, and uphold the religious privileges granted to various bodies, on condition of public order and morality not being interfered with.”<sup>169</sup>

In short, the two regulations before the foundation of the Republic tried to institutionalize the status of citizens in the Ottoman Empire in parallel to the modernization process. They were mainly based on descent, only those born to Ottoman parents were considered as Ottoman citizens. Yet “territorial understanding was exercised in a limited manner, for those born in the territory of the Empire after they reached maturity.”<sup>170</sup> They could also be considered as urgent responses to certain developments. The first regulation was designed to prevent the non-Muslims from changing their nationality in order to benefit from the capitulations. The second one was developed by the political elite of the time, and also was an outcome of foreign pressure. Therefore, like many other developments discussed above, the idea of including the concept of citizenship in the constitution was developed by a group of elites in relation to the requirements of the period. However, the concept of the citizen in the modern sense, as well as the term itself, was missing.<sup>171</sup>

The early attempts to develop the concepts of citizen and citizenship in the modern sense in relation to the notion of nation were realized during the Young

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<sup>168</sup> Suna Kili, *Turkish Constitutional Developments and Assembly on the Constitutions of 1924 and 1961* (Istanbul: Mentes Matbaasi, 1971), p. 150. Taken from Turkey, no: 2: 123-130.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid., pp. 150-151.

<sup>170</sup> Ahmet İçduygu, Yılmaz Çolak and Nalan Soyarik, “What is the Matter with Citizenship? A Turkish Debate,” *Middle Eastern Studies*, 35, 4 (October 1999): pp. 187-208, 193.

<sup>171</sup> On the subject that the term citizen was itself missing, see Artun Ünsal, “Yurttaşlık Anlayışının Gelisiimi,” pp. 436 in *75 Yılda Tebaa’dan Yurttaşla Dogru* (Istanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yayinlari, December 1998), p. 13.

Turk period (1908-1918). However, it was introduced to the legal documents after the foundation of the Republic. In the Constitution of 1924 (*Teskilat-i Esasiye Kanunu*), citizenship in the Turkish Republic was defined in Article 88, as:

The people of Turkey, regardless of religion and race, are Turks as regards citizenship. Any person born of a Turkish father, in Turkey or elsewhere, as well as any person born of an alien father domiciled in Turkey and, who residing in Turkey, formally assumes Turkish citizenship upon attaining his majority, as well as any person granted Turkish citizenship by law, is a Turk. Turkish citizenship may be lost under circumstances defined by law.<sup>172</sup>

This kind of formulation of citizenship has persisted through the 1961 and 1982 Constitutions.<sup>173</sup> The legal regulation dated 23 May 1928 and numbered 1312 (*Türk Vatandasligi Kanunu*- Turkish Citizenship Law) was again based on descent, but territorial understanding was exercised as complementary. Finally, the law in use today, dated 11 February 1964 and numbered 403, is also descent-based, and “territorial understanding is exercised as complementary in order to avoid statelessness among foreigners in the country.”<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> Suna Kili, p. 170. Kili notes that the English translation is from *The Turkish Constitution*, published as No.11 of the series “Turkey Today” by the Turkish Informal Office, New York. Taken from Helen Miller Davis, *Constitutions, Electoral Laws, Treaties of States in the Near and Middle East* (Durham. N. C.: Duke University Press, 1953), pp. 452-464. See also Suna Kili and Seref Gözübüyük, *Türk Anayasa Metinleri* (Istanbul: Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, May 2000 (2)), p. 138.

<sup>173</sup> In the 1961 Constitution, Article 54 is as follows: Every individual who is bound to the Turkish state by ties of citizenship is a Turk. The child of a Turkish father or a Turkish mother is a Turk. The citizenship status of a child of a Turkish mother and a foreign father shall be regulated by law. Citizenship is acquired under the conditions provided by law and is lost only under conditions provided by law.” Kili, p. 180. Also see Kili and Gözübüyük, *Türk Anayasa Metinleri*, p. 188. The content of this article is repeated in the 1982 Constitution, in Article 66. Kili and Gözübüyük, *Türk Anayasa Metinleri*, p. 283.

<sup>174</sup> Ahmet İçduygu, Yılmaz Çolak and Nalan Soyarik, “What is the Matter with Citizenship? A Turkish Debate,” p. 193.

Therefore, when legal documents that are concerned with the notions of citizen and citizenship are taken into consideration, it looks as if these terms preserved the same content throughout the Republican period. It seems that the single-party period is significant in the sense that it marked the first time that the notions of citizen and citizenship were explicitly reflected in the constitution. It was during this period that the Republican elite decided that the time had come to convert the Ottoman “subjects” into Turkish “citizens”. Coinciding with the problematic stage of the search for the national identity, a strong link was established between the notion of citizenship and national identity. This fact would be best observed from the assembly debates on the 1924 Constitution, where serious discussions were generated on Article 88.

The draft of Article 88 stated that “The people of Turkey, regardless of their religion and race, are Turks.”<sup>175</sup> Several deputies started a discussion on this article, arguing that nationality and citizenship were not the same. Hamdullah Suphi Bey (Istanbul deputy), stated that:

To call all those people living within our political borders as ‘Turks’ might be an ideal for us... In France there are Jews. They go to French schools. Their language is French... These men are French in spirit... In England, there are people who are not English by origin. But the language they speak is English; they are educated in an English school. They are culturally English.<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> Seref Gözübüyük and Zekai Sezgin, *1924 Anayasası Hakkındaki Meclis Görüşmeleri* (Ankara Üniversitesi Siyasal Bilgiler Fakültesi, Fakülte Yayın no: 78-60), p. 436. For the following discussions from the debates, see pp.436-441; and Suna Kili, *Turkish Constitutional Developments and Assembly on the Constitutions of 1924 and 1961*, pp. 59-60.

<sup>176</sup> Gözübüyük and Sezgin, p. 437-438; Kili, 59.

However, according to Hamdullah Suphi Bey, the Jews, Armenians and Greeks in Turkey had chosen to act to the contrary. Therefore, they could not be considered as Turks until they accepted the Turkish culture. He concluded his statement in that respect:

By passing an article which states that they are Turks, are we going to be able to remove the differences, and which one of us will really be content that they are Turks? To the man who asked me a question (on this matter), I said it is possible for you to be Turks... close your schools, abandon being Armenians. Accept Turkish culture. Then we shall call you Turks.<sup>177</sup>

Celal Nuri Bey (Gallipoli deputy), after declaring his general agreement with the statement of Hamdullah Suphi Bey, said that he could not see what term other than “Turkish” could be used to refer to Christians and Jews. He gave as examples that a Turk living in Greece was considered a Greek and a Turk living in Bulgaria was considered a Bulgarian. Thus, he concluded:

We formerly used the adjective “Ottoman” and this adjective applied to all. Now, we are deleting it. There is the Turkish Republic in place of (the Empire). All the people in Turkey are not Turkish and Muslim. What shall we call these?... If we do not apply to them the adjective “Turk” how else can we call them?<sup>178</sup>

Celal Nuri Bey’s statement was interrupted by the voices of some other deputies, suggesting that the term “*Türkiyeli*” (someone from Turkey) could be

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<sup>177</sup> Gözübüyük and Sezgin, p. 438; Kili, 59.

<sup>178</sup> Gözübüyük and Sezgin, p. 439; Kili, 60.

used. Celal Nuri Bey insisted that this term was nonsense and that the non-Muslim groups could be called Turkish, too.<sup>179</sup> Finally, Hamdullah Suphi Bey's proposal, that "as regards their citizenship they are considered Turks", was accepted.

From this debate, we can first derive that the concepts of nationality and citizenship were not completely developed at the time when the article concerned with the issue of citizenship was introduced to the constitution. Second, this difficulty shows that although finally the nation-state was founded, nothing was clear about the way that the national unity and national identity would be established on the remnants of the Ottoman society, a multi-religious, multi-cultural, multi-ethnic one. However, third, it was apparent that in determining the Turkish citizenship and Turkish nationality, religion would still be a significant element. It is interesting to note that during that long debate, the deputies were mostly involved in the problem of the new status of the non-Muslim communities, but not much is mentioned about other ones that were not ethnically Turk, or were non-Turkish speakers. Additionally, the non-Sunni and non-*Hanefi* Muslim communities were not referred to at all.

The last two points are very important in the position of the Alevis within the nation-state. The foregoing effect of religion in shaping the national identity could constitute a threat for the Alevis. The general viewpoint is summarized in Celal Nuri Bey's words: "the real citizens of Turkey are Hanefi Muslims, speaking Turkish."<sup>180</sup> Second, in addition to a small group of Arab Alevis, 20-25 percent of

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<sup>179</sup> Gözübüyük and Sezgin, pp. 439-440; Kili, 60.

<sup>180</sup> Gözübüyük and Sezgin, p. 439.

the whole Alevi population consisted of Kurds. Although the concept of citizenship as it appeared in the constitution promised equality for all people living in Turkey, when the nature of *Alevilik* and the internal diversity of the Alevi community are considered, the actual formulation of the national identity seemed to bring potential problems for the Alevis.

On the other hand, as revealed in the previous section, the problems related to the issue of ethnicity were apparent by the 1930s, especially in relation to the uprisings that took place in the same period. The theoretical definition of the nation, together with the concept of citizenship, seem to have been thought of as an appropriate solution to the problem of converting the existing multi-cultural, multi-ethnic society into one nation. This definition may be followed from the 1931 program of the Republican Peoples' Party and the declaration of the Party members. In the program, the nation was defined as a "social and political whole formed by citizens that are united by a common language, culture and objective."<sup>181</sup> In his analysis of the program, Recep Peker, the General Secretary of the Party, declared that "in today's political and social community of the Turkish nation, we consider of our own those citizens whose minds have been inculcated by the ideas of Kurdish, Circassian or even Laz or Pomak ethnicity." He added that the Party included in its understanding of a nation Christian and Jewish citizens as long as they accepted a "common language and objective".<sup>182</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> Taha Parla, *Türkiye'de Siyasal Kültürün Resmi Kaynakları, Cilt-3: Kemalist Tek Parti İdeolojisi ve CHP'nin 6 Ok'u* (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 1995), p. 128, quoted in Kemal Kirişçi and Gareth M. Winrow, *The Kurdish Question and Turkey* (London and Portland, Or: Frank Cass, 1997), p. 97.

<sup>182</sup> Parla, p. 110.

Both on the Party program and in Mustafa Kemal's own formulations on the construction of the national identity, the main emphasis was on the common language, common culture and common objective. It is important to note that there was no reference to religion.<sup>183</sup> However, as seen in Celal Nuri Bey's summary of the 1924 Assembly debates, the actual practice showed that implicitly, religion appeared as a significant element together with ethnicity.

The contradictions between the actual practice and the formal definition of national identity and citizenship were also apparent in the Turkish immigration and refugee policies. Kirişçi, who analyses them in detail, asserts that "Turkish immigration and refugee policies have been biased in favor of people of 'Turkish descent and culture' and then only as long as such persons were of Sunni-Hanefi background."<sup>184</sup> He shows that "the immigration practice developed in such a manner that non-Turkish speaking ethnic groups from Balkans such as Albanians, Bosnians, Pomaks and Tatars as well as Turkish speaking Romans were included,

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<sup>183</sup> In this respect, it is important to note the book of *Medeni Bilgiler* which was designed by Mustafa Kemal himself to be taught in a compulsory course called *Malumat-i Vataniyye* (Information about the Homeland). The course started in 1924. In the book, Mustafa Kemal had defined "natural and historical" facts, which affected the formation of the Turkish nation. While the unity in language was emphasized heavily, there was no reference to religion. The six factors included was as follows: (1) *Siyasi varlikta birlik* (unity in political entity); (2) *Dil birliği* (unity in language); (3) *Yurt birliği* (unity in homeland); (4) *İrk ve mense birliği* (unity in race and origin); (5) *Tarihi karabet* (historical kinship); (6) *Ahlaki karabet* (ethical kinship). A. Inan, *Medeni Bilgiler ve Mustafa Kemal'in El Yazıları* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 1969), quoted in Ergun Özbudun, "Milli Mücadelede ve Cumhuriyet'in Resmi Belgelerinde Yurttaşlık ve Kimlik Sorunu," pp. 151-158 in *75 Yılda Tebaa'dan Yurttaşına Doğru* (İstanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yayınları, December 1998), p. 156.

<sup>184</sup> Kirişçi, "Disaggregating Turkish Citizenship and Immigration Policies," p.4.

while Turkish speaking Christian Gagauz Turks, Azeris and Kurds were excluded.”<sup>185</sup>

In consequence, it may be pointed out that in Turkey the national identity was constructed within the process of conceptualizing citizenship. This construction was based on one culture, called Turkishness, and its components were determined again in the process. Whatever the definition of citizenship was in legal terms, practices and policies showed that there was a great emphasis on cultural ethnicity and language, while the importance of religion (orthodox, Hanefi-Islam) was never lost. In this respect a paradox faced by the new nation-state in the construction of national identity and citizenship came to the forefront: there were severe problems about situating non-Muslim communities in the newly constructed identity, as well as the way that the Islamic identity would be incorporated to it.<sup>186</sup> It must also be added that the immigration and refugee policies show that “states prefer admitting persons that are likely to strengthen a country’s national identity and cohesion and, in turn, enhance its national security.”<sup>187</sup>

I want to put emphasis on the last point –the question of national security– which seems to be closely associated with the issue of the survival of the state. As mentioned above, within the belated experience of nationalism in Turkey, the state elite took up the mission of constructing the national identity. The measures taken

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<sup>185</sup> Ibid. For example: “During the course of Republic’s history, according to official data more than 1.6 million immigrants have come from the Balkans compared to less than 30,000 from ‘Turkistan’ and ‘other countries’.” p. 14.

<sup>186</sup> Fuat Keyman and Ahmet İçduygu, “Anayasal Vatandaşlık ve Demokratik Açılım Olasılığı,” pp. 169-180 in *75 Yılda Tebaa’dan Yurttaşla Doğru* (İstanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yayınları, December 1998), p. 177.

<sup>187</sup> Kirişçi, “Disaggregating Turkish Citizenship and Immigration Policies,” p. 3.



in the process of establishing a modern, secular nation intensified the gap between the state elites and the periphery. These factors paved the way for the process of drawing the boundaries of the center-periphery conflict according to the question of the survival of the state. Thus, any group which perceived itself at the margins or outside of the official national identity was considered as a threat to the existence of the state.<sup>188</sup>

This point is especially important in the case of the Alevis. At the first glance, they had a negative reputation based on their history. They were often considered as descendants of the rebellious groups that were closely associated with the Safavids and therefore ready to undermine the state hegemony. Additionally, during the Ottoman period, their religious identity had not overlapped with that of the official one. On the other hand, within the Republic of Turkey, most of the aforementioned components of the national identity (like common culture and common language) did not seem to overlap with those of the large Alevi community, which could not be conceived as one homogenous group. Second, the Alevi group, mostly consisted of nomadic or newly settling tribes. As the Law on Settlement shows, the nomadic tribes were considered as insecure elements. Third, certain bonds, other than –or in addition to– the national one were present among the different Alevi communities. At least the religious-communal bonds were very much alive and valid for all of the Alevi communities. In consequence, all of these factors would contribute to the suspected position of the

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<sup>188</sup> cf. Ayse Kadioglu, “Devletini Arayan Millet: Almanya Örneği” *Toplum ve Bilim* 62 (Winter 1994): 95-112.

Alevis. The fact that all of those points mentioned above did not affect all of the diverse Alevi groups in the same way would in consequence intensifies the differences between these groups within the Alevi population in Turkey.

### The Impact of National Identity on the Alevi Identity

Turkey's Alevi community is composed of different ethnic groups, who hoped to improve their position with the arrival of the Republic, but who have realized identity problems in relation to the official formulation of the Turkish national identity. Bruinessen observes that linguistically four groups may be distinguished: In the eastern province of Kars there are communities speaking Azerbaijani Turkish. Their *Alevilik* differs little from the "orthodox" Twelver Shi'ism of modern Iran. In southern Turkey (especially Hatay and Adana), there are the Arabic speaking Alevi communities, who are the "extension of Syria's Alawi (*Nusayri*) community and have no historical ties with the other Alevi groups". Like the first group, their numbers are small. The significant Alevi groups appear as Turkish and Kurdish speakers ("the latter still to be divided into speakers of Kurdish proper and of related Zaza"<sup>189</sup>). However, it is difficult to establish the figures for the population of these groups.<sup>190</sup> In his recent study, based in part on general observation and in part on extrapolation of his detailed fieldwork,

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<sup>189</sup> Bruinessen, "Kurds, Turks and the Alevi Revival in Turkey."

<sup>190</sup> One of the reasons is that ethnic and religious groups are not allocated as separate categories in the state census. Shankland adds that "research that would allow verification of local claims and counterclaims has not been encouraged." David Shankland, "Integrating the Rural: Gellner and the Study of Anatolia," *Middle Eastern Studies*, 35, no: 2 (April 1999): pp. 132-149, 136.

Shankland “extremely tentatively” suggests that “perhaps 65-67 percent of the population are Sunni Turk, Sunni Kurds perhaps 12-13 percent, Alevi Turks perhaps about 14-15 percent [about 75 percent of the total Alevi population in Turkey], and finally Alevi Kurds about 4-5 percent [about 25 percent of the total Alevi population in Turkey]”.<sup>191</sup>

Since the Turkish national identity was primarily based on “Turkish descent and culture”, on the one hand, the greater proportion of the Alevi community seemed to be favored on the basis of their ethnic affiliation. While it was not easy to find people of pure Turkish origin, a larger proportion of the Alevis (about 75 percent) was either Turk or ethnic Turk, and that provided the Turkish Alevis a privileged position within the new Republic. Berkes asserts that “the secularist historiography brought to attention also a fact that ... the Turkish national spirit had shown itself at its best within Islamic religiosity not through orthodoxy, but through the unorthodox varieties of Islam. This could be judged from the survivals of the national culture wherever and whenever non-orthodox Islam prevailed among the Turks and from the extinction of any trace of national tradition where and when orthodoxy reigned.” Additionally, he argues that such things as the mystic literature, heterodox sects, and heretical movements, became areas of interest “for the recovery of the national culture.”<sup>192</sup>

On the other hand, while the Turkish Alevis still suffered an identity problem, due to the diverse structure of the Alevi community, the official

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<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

formulation of the national identity had a divisive impact on them. One basic example is the preference of calling themselves “Alevi” instead of *Kizilbas* (or hesitating to use the term *Kizilbas*): Many Alevi people, both Turkish and Kurdish, believe that the term “*Kizilbas*” creates a “false” connotation of linking them with Kurds.<sup>193</sup> As will be examined in Chapter 4, while most of the Kurdish Alevis prefer to use the term “Alevi” in their self-identification, the Turkish Alevis use either “Turk” or “Alevi”; but they have a greater preference for the former one. In this respect, the identity question of the Alevis cuts across the lines of religion and ethnicity. The “preference” for the domination of one constituent of their identity at the expense of the other seems to create a basis for future identity problems for either groups, as well as the construction of the Alevi identity.

#### The History of the Alevis and the Development of the Alevi Identity in Turkey

In the former sections of this chapter, how after the foundation of the Republic of Turkey, the “secularism-from-above” and the strict control of religion by the state affected harshly all religious groups –whether majority or minority– was discussed. Additionally, there were other problems, stemming from the conceptions of Turkish nationhood and citizenship. While it was continuously proclaimed that the Turkish nation extended to all its citizens, the underlying

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<sup>192</sup> Berkes, p. 501. The initial surveys on Alevi and Bektashi groups in relation to the process of construction of the national identity will be discussed below.

ideology of Turkish nationalism, as well as some of the policies and practices, proved a different perspective. In practice, it appeared a difficult task to overcome the established understanding that “the real citizens of Turkey were Hanefi Muslims, speaking Turkish.” The concept of nationalism in Turkey, not unlike that of most other nations, excluded most religious and ethnic minorities, due to their largely diverse background. Furthermore, the predominance of Sunni Islam –but in a strictly controlled fashion– led to a de-facto identification of Sunni Islam as a defining characteristic of the Turkish national identity.

It was also mentioned above that under these circumstances, the position of the Alevi, as a heterodox, ethnically diverse religious minority, was a vague one. It was clear that as a group, they did not fully suit the legitimate definition of Turkish citizenship. Yet, like many heterodox groups elsewhere, they favored the secular policies and constitutions of the Turkish Republic, in spite of its partly or wholly autocratic actions. However, it was apparent that as long as religion was strictly controlled, they were not able to manifest their identity as a religious group, especially in the public sphere. Moreover, they continued to identify themselves for the large part in reference to the religious majority, the Sunni. These two factors showed that they continued to suffer from their religious identity, which made them distinct as a group.

On the other hand, some groups within the Alevi community at large were at an advantage with respect to the ethnic dimension of the Turkish national identity. Certain Alevi groups who were ethnically Turks or Turcomans, in contrast to other

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<sup>193</sup> Irène Mélikoff, *Uyur Idik Uyardılar* (Istanbul: Cem Yayınevi, 1994).

Alevi groups like the Kurds and Arabs, were among the most prominent minorities. It has also been noted that whatever the underlying ideology or legitimate concept of Turkish citizenship and nationhood were, both religion and ethnicity have always been strictly controlled and politically charged concepts throughout the existence of the Republic. Consequently, the position and the identification of the Alevis as a large religious group consisting of diverse ethnic groups have been closely related with discussions and practices that are concerned with the concepts of religion and ethnicity throughout the history of Republic of Turkey.

### The Single-Party Period

As mentioned above, in Ottoman society, the Alevi community was marginalized socially, politically and geographically from the sixteenth century. By constructing strong social and religious group ties, the Alevis managed to survive as a community in spite of an unfriendly environment. Within this religiously marginalized, closed community, the boundaries drawn between the inside and the outside appeared as religious taboos. For example, marriage with non-Alevis or establishing economic ties, as well as appealing to secular courts were all forbidden within the community.<sup>194</sup> Alevi communities formed their own regulating mechanisms, which made it possible for them to live in accordance with such rules and apart from the directives of the central authorities. Yet, the foundation of the Republic of Turkey, together with its secularization and modernization policies,

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<sup>194</sup> Kehl-Bodrogi, "Tarih Mitosu ve Kollektif Kimlik".

brought about great changes in the socially, politically and geographically marginalized position of the Alevi communities.

The early Republican period saw the building of roads across the formerly isolated areas, the introduction of compulsory education, and improvements of communications. These developments started to change the isolated position of the Alevis and drew them into active and direct contact with the other sections of the community in Turkey.<sup>195</sup> Although relatively limited at the beginning, these changes started to have an impact on the closed community structure of the Alevis, where religion and religion-based organizations regulated the lives of the people. In this respect, a process which would change the religious practices as well as the inner organization of the community was activated. This process would become more visible and would have deeper consequences in the following periods.

As discussed above, it was during the single-party period that secularism was adopted in Turkey and as a heterodox religious minority the Alevi supported this process and hoped to improve their position. During the War of Independence and afterwards, they supported Mustafa Kemal in his efforts to establish a modern secular republic, “one that would not base governmental authority on religion and would not align itself with any one religious group.”<sup>196</sup>

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<sup>195</sup> The direct contact of the Alevis with the Sunnis would be realized more concretely especially after 1950s within the massive migration process.

<sup>196</sup> Sencer Ayata and Ayse Günes Ayata, “Religious Communities, Secularism and Security in Turkey”, Chapter 5, pp.107-125 in Lenore G. Martin ed., *New Frontiers in Middle East* (New York: Macmillan, 1998), p. 121. It is worth mentioning that the relationship of Mustafa Kemal to the Alevi/Bektashi people through the *tariqa* of Bektashi during the period of the War of Independence has been discussed especially by recent Alevi publications. For example Cemal Sener, *Atatürk ve Aleviler* (Istanbul: Ant Yayinlari, 1993 (3)); Baki Öz, *Kurtulus Savasi’nda Alevi-Bektasiler* (Istanbul: Can Yayinlari, 1994 (5)); Riza Zelyut, *Öz Kaynaklarına Göre Alevilik* (Istanbul: Yön Yayinlari, 1992 (6)).

However, this period paved the way for several developments, at least two of which were not quite parallel to what the Alevis expected from secularism. First, the strict control and pressure on religion and religious groups, especially following the Seyh Said upheaval, and second, the foundation of the Directorate of Religious Affairs.

It has been argued that the position of Alevis improved gradually in the Republican period and in legal terms, they did acquire equal rights with other citizens. Yet, the measures taken against religion and religious groups affected the Alevis as well, and required their disappearance from the public sphere. It was only after the 1980s that the Alevis would reappear with their cultural markers. Furthermore, the foundation of the Directorate of Religious Affairs, which represented Sunni Islam, would cause disappointment for the Alevis as it would be taken as a symbol representing the legitimate religion of the state, that is, Sunni Islam.

On the political position of the Alevis during the single-party period, it may be argued that for the first time in their history, the Alevis had direct contact with the state. Yet, although they were actively represented in the Parliament, they were not able to generate a powerful opposition against the legislation that defined secularism in a constricted way and so contradicted with what they hoped from secularism. Consequently, more than suggesting a solution to the identity question of the Alevis, this period provided the means for the Alevis to feel more secure; in other words, it helped to solve their question of existence, but not that of identity.



One last point that needs to be mentioned within the context of this period is related to the ethnic diversity of the community. This period witnessed the construction of “the Turk”, and there was a wide appeal for Turkish ethnicity, Turkish language and Turkish culture. The Alevi groups who were considered to be of Turkish descent became important targets of this appeal. It is especially important to note that the survival of the Turkish language owed much to Alevi traditions, rituals and *deyis*. The Turkish language, which was belittled in the earlier decades, was kept alive and was given importance by a considerable number of Alevi communities. If we add the fact that the *Alevilik* is based on oral tradition, the position of the Turkish language for many Alevis becomes more clear. Thus in this period, the Turkish Alevis were given importance by the authorities because of their relation to Turkish culture, especially language. There was even an effort to conceptualize *Alevilik* as the original Turkish religion. However, instead of being a belief system, it was considered more as a cultural element. Thus, the Turkish Alevis, who almost make up three-fourths of the Alevi community at large, faced the question of assimilation to Turkish culture with the Republic.

On the other hand, the single-party period witnessed important Kurdish upheavals, one of which was directly related to the Kurdish Alevis. In this period, religion seems to have played a greater role than ethnicity in the actions of the groups. The significant Kurdish rebellion of 1925 (the Seyh Said uprising) had a strong Sunni religious content and the Kurdish Alevi tribes actually attacked the those who rebelled. Additionally, in 1920 and 1937-38,<sup>197</sup> there were “rebellions of

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<sup>197</sup> See above, “The Process of the Construction of the National Identity”.

Kurdish Alevi against the Kemalist movement and the Republic, but at no time until the present did Kurdish Alevi in significant numbers join forces with Sunni Kurds against the Kemalist regime.”<sup>198</sup> However, it should be noted that, while the Turkish Alevi started to manifest their primary identity as Turks, it was usually the Alevi identity that gained importance in the case of the Kurdish Alevi.

In summary, the various radical social and political changes during the single-party period introduced a gradual opening of the Alevi Community. The Alevi welcomed the new nation-state, considering the basic principles of secularism, as Kehl-Bodrogi calls it, as a means to eliminate “their religious discrimination.” It seems that Kehl-Bodrogi is right to assert that “they were willing to accept the fact that they were still denied official recognition as a religious community, as long as the state generally banned religion from the public sphere and therefore also radically curtailed Sunni religious activities and institutions.”<sup>199</sup> The Alevi were then able to progress “on the social, economical and political level on condition that they did not make a public issue of their religious and social identity.”<sup>200</sup> Therefore, it is not surprising that under the new conditions, the custom of *takiyye* became an appropriate means of participating within social affairs.

Last, while the notion of secularism has played the key role in the improvement of the Alevi’ attitude toward the state, in the state’s appeal for the

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<sup>198</sup> Bruinessen, “Kurds, Turks and the Alevi Revival in Turkey.”

<sup>199</sup> Kehl-Bodrogi, B. Kellner-Heinkele, A. Otter-Beujean eds., *Syncretistic Religious Communities in the Near East*, p. xii.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid.

Alevi, the Turkish ethnicity became a significant factor where religion was absorbed into culture.

As indicated above, secularism paved the way for most of the Kurdish Alevi to identify themselves more with their religious identity and the state, rather than with their ethnic identity. It seems that in favoring secular governments, both the Turkish and Kurdish Alevi acted in a similar vein during the single-party period. However, since radical secularism did not permit the manifestation of religious identities, what would be left in the identity of the Kurdish and Turkish Alevi in the absence of the religious component? At this point, Bruinessen may be right to assert that, “by and large, Kurdish as well as Turkish Alevi were supportive of the secular and populist ideals of Kemalism; many Kurdish Alevi voluntarily assimilated to Turkish culture and came to identify themselves as Turks rather than as Kurds.”<sup>201</sup>

#### 1950-1980 Period

The multi-party period started in 1945, but settled in 1950 when competitive politics gained momentum. As Ahmad writes, it “ended the phase of militant secularism in Turkey in deed, if not in word.”<sup>202</sup> Although the phase of militant secularism did not permit the Alevi to manifest their religious identity, especially in the public sphere, the end of this period contributed to the Alevi’s previously

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<sup>201</sup> Bruinessen, “Kurds, Turks and the Alevi Revival in Turkey.”

<sup>202</sup> Ahmad, “Politics and Islam in Modern Turkey,” p. 10.

established fear of Sunni Islam. The Democratic Party (DP), a new center-right party, came to power in 1950 and claimed to represent the periphery. The “party shared the commitment of the republican state elite to modernization and progress via secularization, and aimed to achieve this by keeping a tight reign on Islam through civil-military bureaucracy.”<sup>203</sup> Yet, the DP’s populism and the liberal attitude toward Islam “throughout the fifties encouraged an Islamic reassertion which was essentially cultural in nature”<sup>204</sup> and posed neither a major nor a political challenge to the system.

While in power, the DP introduced voluntary religious courses into primary schools; it re-established religious radio broadcasts and the call to prayer in Arabic;<sup>205</sup> it set up *Imam-Hatip* Lycées parallel to the secular schooling system; and it established the Faculty of Divinity at Ankara University.<sup>206</sup> Between 1950 and 1960, 15,000 new mosques were built. Although these could be hardly considered as challenges to the secular nation-state, they disappointed the Alevis, who took them as a sign of Sunni Islam’s growing power.

It is frequently asserted that the strict control of Islam paved the way for the strategic use of religion to normalize the situation –for example, after military

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<sup>203</sup> Sakallioglu, p. 237.

<sup>204</sup> Ahmad, *ibid.*

<sup>205</sup> The return to Arabic in the call for prayer during this period was one of the issues that disappointed the Alevis. It is worth to mention that when the Alevis reveal their differences from the Sunnis, they put an emphasis on the fact that their prayers are not in Arabic. They add that even when they read the Koran, they prefer the Turkish translation for the people to understand what they believe. For the discussion of this issue, especially in the case of non-Turkish Alevi communities, see Chapter 4, which is based on recent fieldwork.

<sup>206</sup> Sakallioglu.

interventions or during times of economic, political, or social unrest.<sup>207</sup> While the religious policies of the DP were mainly discussed in the context of populist politics and the economic problems of the period, they also paved the way for political discontent. The attitude of the military regime in the 1960s toward religion was considered a way of securing the political and moral legitimacy of the regime, as well as to check against any reactionary movements that used Islam. It was argued above that since secularism in Turkey appeared with the strict control of religion, neither the Sunni majority, nor the Alevi minority, was provided the actual means to live with their religious identities in the public sphere. On the other hand, since the legitimate state religion appeared to be Sunni Islam, the Alevis considered any tolerance shown towards it as a threat to themselves. This contributed to their anxiety, as well as their need to conceal their identity.

It is important to mention the political inclination of the Alevis during this period. In contrast to the mainstream belief that throughout the Republican period, the Alevis as a block supported the RPP (or the ones that followed it), at the beginning of the multi-party period, a large proportion of the Alevis supported the DP, who claimed to represent the periphery.<sup>208</sup> However, some of the policies and

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<sup>207</sup> Kevin Robbins, "Interrupting Identities: Turkey/Europe," pp. 61 -86, in Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay eds. *Questions of Cultural Identity* (London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage Publications: 1996); Sakallioğlu; Ahmad, *ibid*.

<sup>208</sup> It is not quite possible to give specific numbers on the political inclinations of the Alevis, because as indicated above, the Alevis have not been considered as a distinct group in Turkey in the censuses, or their religious attitude does not appear on the identity cards. However the following sources contain information about Alevi voters: Ayhan Yalçinkaya, *Alevilikte Toplumsal Kurumlar ve İktidar* (Ankara: Mülkiyeliler Birliği Vakfı Yayınları, 1996), especially Chapter 3, pp. 99-196; Fuat Bozkurt, *Çagdaslasma Sürecinde Alevilik* (Istanbul: Dogan Kitapçılık, April 2000), pp. 74-79. On the subject of Alevis and social democratic parties in Turkey, see Herald Schöler, *Particilik, Hemsehrilik, Alevilik* (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 1999).

the practices of the DP –especially the return to the call to prayer in Arabic– disappointed the Alevis and alienated them from the central-right parties. Yet, this did not mean that they all turned back to the RPP. For example, in 1965, a significant number of the Alevis supported the Workers Party of Turkey (*Türkiye İşçi Partisi*).<sup>209</sup>

This period also witnessed the foundation of an Alevi party, called the *Birlik Partisi* (1966, Union Party; 1973, Union Party of Turkey). Politically, it was situated somewhere between the social democratic RPP and the socialist Workers Party.<sup>210</sup> In its program, the party emphasized freedom of faith and religion, and demanded the free exercise of religious practices which were not contrary to the public order, general ethics, or the law. In the general elections of 1969, it had eight deputies with the 2.8% of the votes. In 1970, the Party lost its base. It was never fully supported by the Alevis and, in the general elections of 1977 when it gained 0.4% of the votes,<sup>211</sup> it became apparent that most of the Alevis had gone back to supporting the RPP. Several reasons were put forward on the limited success of the Alevi Party, like not being able to provide radical or convincing

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<sup>209</sup> It is interesting to note that among the voting regions where the Workers Party who sent fifteen deputies to the Parliament had great success were several regions where Alevi communities lived in large numbers. For example: Tunceli (5.8%), Kars (6%) and Yozgat (5.3%). Yalçinkaya, pp. 190-196.

<sup>210</sup> Bozkurt, *Çagdaslasma Sürecinde Alevilik*, p. 81.

<sup>211</sup> Yalçinkaya, pp. 191-193.

solutions to the urgent problems of Turkey,<sup>212</sup> or like the transfer of some of the party members to the Justice Party (JP).<sup>213</sup>

On the other hand, in the context of the Alevi identity, the foundation of this party, as well as the way it was recognized by the Alevi community, deserves attention. First of all, it is important to note that at a time when the Alevi community at large continued to exercise the *takiyye*, this party was founded without concealing its *Alevilik*.<sup>214</sup> Although we do not have enough data on the reasons for the establishment of this party in relation to the Alevi identity, its mere existence shows that at least some people in the 1960s started to manifest their Alevi identity in the political sphere. Second, after the unexpected success of the Party in the 1969 elections (winning eight seats in the Parliament), the failure came very quickly. It is clear that at no time in its history was the party able to take the votes of the Alevis as a block, and actually, the Alevis who did support the party did so for only a very short period of time. These factors may suggest that during this period, “the efforts to mobilize *Alevilik* on a communal basis were fruitless.”<sup>215</sup> The reasons for such an unwillingness of the community to act collectively may be found in the breaking off of their communal ties due the effects of modernization and secularization.

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<sup>212</sup> Ibid.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid., p. 192.

<sup>214</sup> At this point, it is interesting to note that up to the foundation of the party, the general head of the party, who was a retired general, concealed his Alevi identity even from his wife. See Fuat Bozkurt, *Çagdaslasma Sürecinde Alevilik*.

<sup>215</sup> Kehl-Bodrogi, “Introduction,” *Syncretistic Religious Communities in the Near East*, p. xiii.

As mentioned above, as the Alevi community opened up to the outside world after the foundation of the Republic, it underwent a structural transformation. In time, the influence of the communal order and the religious institutions upon the individuals decreased and even disappeared. This process was accelerated with the migration from the rural to urban areas starting in the 1950s. This social change marked the beginning of a process through which the inner structure and the religious practices of the community, as well as of the Alevi sense of identity would be radically transformed.<sup>216</sup>

As Sencer Ayata and Ayşe Güneş-Ayata indicate, the early migrants of the Alevi communities were able to find work in the factories and large-scale formal organizations due to the rapid industrialization and the growth of public sector in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>217</sup> In the big cities, they started to gather in the same neighborhoods, mostly in squatter's houses, and in the working place they joined trade unions. They participated in the strikes and protest movements while the same period witnessed the rise of leftist working class politics. Actually, it was a time when the working population benefited significantly from rises in real wages. "The Alevi thus consolidated their position both in politics, as a modern working-class people, and in economy as modern consumers."<sup>218</sup>

In this period educational opportunities raised the Alevis' group expectations and it appeared as an important means which the Alevi used

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<sup>216</sup> Kehl-Bodrogi, "Tarih Mitozu ve Kollektif Kimlik".

<sup>217</sup> Ayata and Güneş-Ayata, "Religious Communities, Secularism and Security in Turkey," pp. 121-122.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid., pp. 121-122.



successfully in order to achieve social mobility. Additionally, education had a further impact on the structure of the Alevi community. A new Alevi middle-class appeared as a result of new educational opportunities. This group, who began to question the Alevi doctrine and Alevi way of life in this period, would take a leading role in the reorganization of the *Alevilik* after the 1980s. The educated youth was among the first group of the Alevi to politicize within the politically polarized conditions of the 1960s and 1970s.

As Kehl-Bodrogi asserts, the Alevi youth took up the non-conformist tradition of the community devoted themselves to egalitarian-revolutionary ideologies. “This development was accompanied by a shift in the collective definition of identity from a religious to an ideological level. By means of a remarkable reinterpretation of history and traditions, *Alevilik* was now declared as the ideological source of socialism as such.”<sup>219</sup> Thus, the importance of *Alevilik* as a religious doctrine, as well as the Alevi traditions, had declined in the eyes of the youth. They were questioned very radically and did no more provide a basis for the communal life –actually the community itself was about to dissolve, or at least was taking another form in the conditions of the modern big cities.

Finally, it must be mentioned that through migration to the urban areas, the Alevi people began to share the same social sphere with the Sunni people. As mentioned in the previous sections, secularization did not end the widespread Sunni prejudices against the Alevis. As Bruinessen points out, the Alevis’ gradual integration into the wider society by means of migration, growing educational

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<sup>219</sup> Kehl-Bodrogi, “Introduction,” p.xiii.

opportunities and careers in public service, brought them into closer contact, and sometimes in direct competition, with Sunnis, from whom they had remained socially separated for centuries. This situation caused growing tension, especially in ethnically and religiously mixed towns. Later immigrants from the villages started to cluster together with other people of the same backgrounds, so that there emerged, more or less, distinct Alevi and Sunni neighborhoods.<sup>220</sup>

Bruinessen adds that, “the political polarization that began in the 1970s exacerbated the situation. The radical left, defining the Alevi rebellions of the past as proto-communist movements, considered the Alevis as its natural allies. The fascist and religious extreme right, on the other hand, concentrated their recruiting efforts on the conservative Sunni Muslims of the mixed regions, by fanning their fear and hatred of the Alevis and provoking violent incidents.”<sup>221</sup> For example, they spread rumors that Alevis had bombed a mosque or poisoned its water supply. By using this method, many Sunnis were drawn into the extreme right camp. The 1970s ended with a series of bloody Sunni-Alevi clashes in anti-Alevi pogroms in Malatya (1978), Kahramanmaras (1979) and Çorum (1980). While the local police, infiltrated by the extreme right, did little to protect the Alevis, which resulted in the increasing alienation of Turkey's Alevis from the state.<sup>222</sup>

In summary, under modernization –including secularization and urbanization– the traditional socio-religious organization of the Alevis with its

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<sup>220</sup> Bruinessen, “Kurds, Turks and the Alevi Revival in Turkey.”

<sup>221</sup> Ibid.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid. On the details of the incidents, including several witnesses, see Fuat Bozkurt, *Çagdaslasma Sürecinde Alevilik*, pp. 91-117.

specific forms of religious life started to collapse. The practice of *takiyye* took on a continuous character. The *dedes* largely lost their authority and oral transmission of knowledge was interrupted. The new generations, especially the migrated ones, grew up without being initiated into the Alevi doctrine. Towards the end of 1970s, even those scholars familiar with the Alevi community, such as Kehl-Bodrogi, expected that “*Alevilik* was secularized to such an extent that its disappearance as a distinctive community appeared to be simply a question of time.”<sup>223</sup> However, the next two decades witnessed the rise of the *Alevilik* and Alevi movement.

#### 1980s- The Present

As pointed above, at the beginning of the 1980s, “the existence of *Alevilik* in the public consciousness of Turkey was nearly forgotten.”<sup>224</sup> However, a radical change occurred in the course of the developments that took place after the military coup in 1980. The following two decades witnessed a resurgence of Alevi identity. The press and publishing houses entered the arena. A considerable number of books on the Alevi identity were written by Alevis, and a number of Alevi periodicals were published. Series of articles on *Alevilik* appeared in almost all of the big newspapers and journals; a great number of books were published by different publishing houses. A similar boom was observed in the music sector.

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<sup>223</sup> Kehl-Bodrogi “Introduction,” pp. xi-xvii in Krisztine Kehl-Bodrogi, B. Kellner-Heinkele, A. Otter-Beujean eds., *Syncretistic Religious Communities in the Near East*, p.xiii.

<sup>224</sup> Reha Çamuroglu, “Some Notes on the Contemporary Process of Restructuring *Alevilik* in Turkey,” pp. 25-33 in *Syncretistic Religious Communities in the Near East*, p. 25.

Cassettes and CD's of traditional and reinterpreted Alevi music appeared on the music markets. Many Alevi associations were established in and out of Turkey. Among other developments, the publication of an "Alevi Manifesto" in February 1990 in one of the largest daily newspapers symbolically put an end to the "invisibility" of *Alevilik*. As Kehl-Bodrogi suggests, "by demanding the *de jure* acknowledgement as a distinct religious community and thereby the freedom to practice their religion they once and for all came to the fore. In the course of this process they also proclaimed the abandonment of secrecy."<sup>225</sup> Thus, the Alevi declared themselves openly not only as a political force, but also as a "religious community claiming the right of self-determination and official recognition."<sup>226</sup>

The developments on the part of the Alevi revival owe much to the economic, social and political developments of the period. Many researchers point to the Islamicization policy of the government and the rise of political Islam as the main motives which led to the revitalization of *Alevilik*.<sup>227</sup> As will be discussed below, it is true that these factors have had critical importance, especially when the centuries old Alevi-Sunni problems and especially the fact that the new policies of the government in the 1980s that hurt the Alevi people are taken into consideration. Yet, in order to analyze the general character of the Alevi revival and the new Alevi identity, it seems necessary to underline several other factors in addition to those of the governmental Islamicization policies and the rise of political Islam.

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<sup>225</sup> Kehl-Bodrogi, *ibid*, p.xiv.

<sup>226</sup> Karin Vorhoff, "Academic and Journalistic Publications on the Alevi and Bektashi of Turkey," in *Alevi Identity*, p. 31.

<sup>227</sup> Kehl-Bodrogi, "Introduction."

The general reasons for the revival of *Alevilik* will be discussed below. However, it is necessary to point out that the terms “revivalism” and “radicalism” will be used separately. The former will be used to refer to the general processes which led to the recognition of *Alevilik* on the social and political scenes after 1980. The latter one will be used in relation to the radicalization of the Alevi people, especially the youth, particularly after Sivas and Gazi Osman Pasa incidents.

The first reason for the revival of *Alevilik* was the Sunnification policies of the government and the rise of Sunni political Islam. After the coup of 1980, religion again occurred within the strategies of normalizing the situation. While intending to stand against fundamentalist Islam, the military was active in fostering a version of Sunni Islam. The Turkish-Islamic Synthesis, a confused doctrine combining fervent Turkish nationalism and Muslim sentiment, was “first formulated by a small group of right-wing intellectuals as an answer to socialism, was virtually elevated to the status of official ideology.”<sup>228</sup> As Ahmad asserts, religion has become an instrument of social control.<sup>229</sup> Obligatory religious courses were introduced by the state into the primary and secondary schools. The Directorate of Religious Affairs, which controls the major mosques in Turkey and abroad, was strengthened. A great number of mosques were built and prayer leaders (*imam*) appointed, not only in Sunni towns and villages, but also in Alevi

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<sup>228</sup> Bruinessen, “Kurds, Turks and the Alevi Revival in Turkey,” p.8. See also Binnaz Toprak, “Religion as State Ideology in a Secular Setting: The Turkish-Islamic Synthesis”, in: M. Wagstaff ed., *Aspects of religion in secular Turkey* (University of Durham, Centre for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, 1990), pp. 10-15; Feroz Ahmad, “Islamic Reassertion in Turkey”, *Third World Quarterly* 10 (1988), 750-69.

<sup>229</sup> Ahmad, “Islamic Reassertion in Turkey”, p. 757.

communities. “All these measures could be interpreted as government endorsement of efforts to bring the Alevis into the Sunni fold.”<sup>230</sup>

Under these circumstances, because of their considerable historical inheritance, the Alevi were put on alert. According Çamuroglu, the “establishment and rapid expansion of Alevi organizations lies in the defensive instinct of the Alevi against the rise of Islamism, which led to various efforts by the merging organizations to create political unity.”<sup>231</sup> Many researchers agree that the fear of the Alevi was justified by the event in Sivas (1993),<sup>232</sup> which ended with the death of thirty-seven Alevi artists and/or intellectuals and caused a “deep trauma in the consciousness of the Alevi.”<sup>233</sup> It also paved the way for the “radicalization of the Alevi movement.”<sup>234</sup> In two years, another event took place in the Gazi Osman Pasa district of Istanbul. Gazi Osman Pasa is a poor new neighborhood which is dominated by Alevi inhabitants. On March 12 1995, unknown gunmen in a stolen taxi drove through this neighborhood and fired guns into five teahouses, killing one Alevi and wounding numerous people. The murders triggered bloody clashes between Alevi youth and the police that lasted three days.<sup>235</sup>

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<sup>230</sup> Bruinessen, *ibid.*

<sup>231</sup> Çamuroglu, “Alevi Revivalism in Turkey,” pp. 79-84 in Olsson, et al., p. 80.

<sup>232</sup> A group of Alevi authors and prominent artists were staying in a hotel at the center of the city that was attacked by Islamic fundamentalist groups. They set the hotel on fire and provoked a huge Islamist crowd, who shouted religious slogans as the hotel burned.

<sup>233</sup> Ayata and Günes-Ayata, “Religious Communities, Secularism and Security in Turkey”, p. 123.

<sup>234</sup> Ayhan Kaya, “Multicultural Clientalism and Alevi Resurgence in the Turkish Diaspora: Berlin Alevis,” *New Perspectives on Turkey* 18 (Spring 1998), pp. 23-49, p. 37.

<sup>235</sup> Bruinessen, *ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

Therefore, the increased Sunnification of the state was a very important factor in the Alevi revival. While the new governmental measures could be interpreted as a threat to their identity, the clashes that took place at the beginning of the 1990s could be conceived as a threat to their existence and radicalized the Alevi movements, at least in the case of some of the Alevi youth. Finally, the Alevi focused on their own organizations and on other ways of proclaiming their identity.

However, the organizing attempts of the Alevis, besides the repossession of their identity, affected other political trends in Turkey, too. Although after the 1980 coup the formal Islamic discourse basically followed the lines established and developed during the multi-party period, “the military regime, despite its claim to restore “true Kemalism” –which would mean enforcing strict secularism– was also willing to use religion to arrest politicization among the young. Therefore, it permitted religion to be taught more widely in the schools and allowed the influence of the Sufi orders to expand through their Quranic schools and students’ hostels. Only when there were reports that some orders were even penetrating military schools were there crises of alarm.”<sup>236</sup> At this point, it is necessary to mention that the timing of the Alevi revival occurred at the peak of the political struggles to preserve the secularist legacy of Kemalism. In such a situation, the Alevis were in a position to organize themselves as a counterforce against the rising Sunni Islam, defending Kemalist principles, together with secularism.<sup>237</sup>

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<sup>236</sup> Ahmad, “Politics and Islam in Modern Turkey,” p. 18.

<sup>237</sup> Tahire Erman and Emrah Göker, “Alevi Politics in Contemporary Turkey,” *Middle Eastern Studies*, 36, no.4 (October, 2000): 99-118, p.99; Kehl-Bodrogi, “Introduction,” p. xiv.

When the close encounter of the Alevis with Kemalism and republican principles are taken into consideration, this development does not seem to be coincidental.

On the other hand, the relation between the rise of political Islam and the Alevi revival is a more complicated issue than it seems to be. Although they are usually considered as “rival or even antagonistic movements,” it is necessary to point out that they also, in Çakir’s words, “reinforce each other.”<sup>238</sup> More than any other reasons, I would suggest that this is closely associated with the new developments concerning the Turkey’s identity politics. In Turkey, the last two decades have witnessed a great change in the identity politics. For the first time in the history of the Republic, the official identity has been questioned deeply. In relation to that, the public visibility of different ethnic and religious groups, including Sunnis and Alevis, has become realized in this period. Therefore, the new identity politics, or those developments that affected the recognition of difference in the society, brought about changes in the understanding of secularism in Turkey, too. Parallel to this idea, Catherina Raudvere claims that, “Islamism has challenged the Kemalist project of modernity and opposed secular conceptions of religion as a private matter; the idea that religion belongs ‘at home’, separated from public life, labor and production.”<sup>239</sup> The rise of political Islam has had some affects on the Alevi revival different from those on the Sunnification policies of the government.

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<sup>238</sup> Rusen Çakir also points out this issue and according to him, “to explain the religious revival among Alevi and Sunni only in terms of politics will be a mistake, even though (...) the political aspects easily get the upper hand over the religious.” “Political Alevism versus Political Sunnism: Convergences and Divergences,” pp. 63-67 in Olsson, et al., p. 67.

<sup>239</sup> Catherina Raudvere, “Urban Visions and Religious Communities: Access and Visibility,” pp. 185-197 in *Alevi Identity*, pp. 188-189.



In the case of the political Islam, it is also possible to talk about its interaction with the Alevi movement, which can be followed from the identity politics in Turkey, especially after the 1990s.

The second reason for the revival of Alevilik was the collapse of Socialist block in the Eastern Europe at the end of the 1980s. This development affected those Leftists who were close to *Alevilik* and “resulted in the redefinition of *Alevilik* as an alternative social movement or an ideology.”<sup>240</sup> Many of the former Leftists began to redefine themselves as Alevi. “In the 1970s most of the young Alevis had completely rejected religion as nothing but ideology and had only taken pride in *Alevilik* as a democratic social movement.”<sup>241</sup> However, the failure of the left movement in Turkey made many reflect on *Alevilik* as a cultural and then as a religious identity. When they reinterpreted their past, “they regarded the neglect of *Alevilik* in favor of socialism as a failure.”<sup>242</sup> As Bruinessen points out, in the 1970s some of the radical left movements found a measure of support throughout the country, but by the late 1980s they had lost most of their non-Alevi supporters. “Having thus practically become non-religious Alevi movements, they could not help but taking part in the debates on Alevi identity.”<sup>243</sup> He adds that there was a strong reaction among all generations of Alevis to the previous closeness with left

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<sup>240</sup> Erman and Göker; Çamuroglu, p. 80.

<sup>241</sup> Bruinessen, *ibid.*, p.8.

<sup>242</sup> Çamuroglu, “Some Notes on the Contemporary Process of Restructuring *Alevilik* in Turkey,” p.26; See also Kehl-Bodrogi, “Tarih Mitosu ve Kollektif Kimlik.”

<sup>243</sup> Bruinessen, *ibid.*

radicalism, which expressed itself in a desire to know more about their religious traditions.<sup>244</sup>

The third reason for the revival of Alevilik is related to the rise of the Kurdish movement and the military confrontation between the PKK (the Kurdistan Workers Party) and the Turkish forces. This situation has affected Alevis in different ways. In the first place, it has given rise to the questioning of the official identity and the politicization of the ethnic groups. Second, since an important portion of Alevis are Kurds (20-25%), they have become aware through this conflict of the fact that, “nationalist tensions directly affected their community.”<sup>245</sup> After verifying that, “many if not most of the Kurdish Alevis define themselves as Alevis first, and only in the second place, or not at all, as Kurds,” Bruinessen argues that “the events in Sivas and Gazi reinforced and radicalized the Alevi revival... Alienation from the state inevitably brought many Alevis closer to the PKK. Whereas until the early 1990s most Kurdish Alevis had little sympathy for the PKK, among other things because of its flirt with Sunni Islam, by 1994 it appeared to have gained considerable support among them.”<sup>246</sup> Based on his fieldwork among the members of Koçgiri tribe in Istanbul, Seufert also reveals that among the younger generation of Alevi Kurds, who grew up in the city, there are

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<sup>244</sup> Ibid.

<sup>245</sup> Çamuroglu, p.27.

<sup>246</sup> Bruinessen, *ibid.*

those who tend to bring their Kurdishness to the fore to criticize strongly the Sunni-Turkishness emphasis of the state.<sup>247</sup>

As mentioned above, the Alevi revival received encouragement from secular elements in the political establishment, who had always considered the Alevis as their natural allies against the rise of political Islam. Within the context of the rise of the Kurdish movement, a similar position was again offered to the Alevis. “The growing influence of the PKK among Turkey's Kurds, by the late 1980s increasingly also among Alevi Kurds, gave the authorities another incentive to allow and even stimulate the development of *Alevilik* as an alternative “ethnic” identity.”<sup>248</sup> In the early 1990s, the state began to publicly support *Alevilik*, for example, the official sponsoring of the Hacı Bektas annual festival is significant in this case.<sup>249</sup> In sum, it seems that as was the case in the rise of political Islam, the effects of the rise of Kurdish movement on *Alevilik* has also been manifold.

Finally, the revival of *Alevilik* is related to economic developments in Turkey. After 1980, the regime “became identified with orthodox policies counseled by the International Monetary Fund and applied in the hope of

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<sup>247</sup> Günter Seufert, “Between Religion and Ethnicity: A Kurdish-Alevi Tribe in Globalizing Istanbul,” pp. 157-176 in *Space, Culture and Power in Globalizing Cities*, edited by Ayse Öncü and Paul Weyland (London and New York: Zed Books, 1997), p. 172.

<sup>248</sup> Bruinessen, *ibid.*

<sup>249</sup> This festival, celebrated for the first time in 1964, became the country's major left-wing cultural festival during the 1970s, was depoliticized during the 1980s, and received government patronage in the 1990s. Politicians of all parties now put in appearances in order to show how much they like the Alevis. On a specific example of this case (the Hacı Bektas Festival in 1998) and its criticism, see Ahmet Yasar Ocak, “Türk Müslümanlığı Tartismalari, Resmi Ideoloji, *Alevilik*, Sosyolojik ve Tarihsel Gerçek,” pp. 147-156 in A. Y. Ocak, *Türkler, Türkiye ve Islam* (Istanbul: Iletisim Yayinlari, 1999).

restructuring the economy toward greater openness and liberalization.”<sup>250</sup> The second half of the 1980s witnessed a boom in the Turkish economy as it became export-oriented. Yet, “the export-led strategies of the 1980s, the declining significance of the state in the economy, and the negative consequences of global competition for the workers have dramatically altered the relative positioning of, and relations among, social classes, ethnic groups and religious communities, as well as relations of these groups with the state.”<sup>251</sup> This was also the case with the Alevis, who experienced downward mobility from the beginning of the decade. As Ayşe Ayata asserts, as the significance of the unionized working class has declined parallel to the decline in the real wages, the Alevis became economically worse off as a social group. “Now a new dimension has been added to this downward mobility trend; since a large number were employed by Social Democratic municipalities, their jobs are often threatened or taken away by the new right wing incumbents.”<sup>252</sup> Thus, the worsening of the economic situation of most of the Alevis also contributed to their recent repoliticization.

In summary, it can be said that in the last two decades, an irreversible turn has been realized in Turkey. It is possible to see this turn on economic, social, political and ideological levels and it is certain that in all of those levels, important developments have in some way affected the recent Alevi revival. In the above

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<sup>250</sup> Çağlar Keyder, “The Setting,” pp. 3-28 in Çağlar Keyder, *Istanbul: Between the Global and the Local* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers: 1999), p. 13.

<sup>251</sup> Ayata and Güneş-Ayata, “Religious Communities, Secularism and Security in Turkey”, p. 123.

<sup>252</sup> Ayşe Ayata, “The Emergence of Identity Politics in Turkey,” *New Perspectives on Turkey* 17 (1997), p. 67.

part, we tried to review the most important and direct factors which affected this process. It seems safe to say that each factor has had a manifold effect on *Alevilik* and deepened the question of Alevi identity.

In the meantime, although it seems as if the economic factor is the least important one among the others, actually, the contemporary repoliticization of *Alevilik* may also be read as a “reconstructive, modern and urban response to deepening class inequalities.”<sup>253</sup> However, the recent Alevi revival and repoliticization had taken on a new character. I agree with Erman and Göker, that “the repoliticization of *Alevilik* in the 1990s is qualitatively different from the pre-1980 politicization of Alevis as part of a socialist movement.”<sup>254</sup> The main binding force activated in the expression of the new Alevi identity has been more other than class. As Kehl-Bodrogi argues, rapidly urbanizing Alevi communities have come to mark their identities more with cultural and religious definitions, many of them criticizing the strong class emphasis of the pre-coup era; while those who do not, and they are a minority, have felt the need to suppress the class dimension for now.<sup>255</sup> For the first time in their history, the Alevi have declared themselves openly also “as a religious community claiming the right of self-determination and political recognition”<sup>256</sup>, where religious and cultural components of *Alevilik* come to the fore.

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<sup>253</sup> Erman and Göker, “Alevi Politics in Contemporary Turkey,” p. 100. It must also be added that the Gazi event in Istanbul had a class-based dimension, too.

<sup>254</sup> Ibid.

<sup>255</sup> “Tarih Mitosu ve Kollektif Kimlik,” also referred in ibid.

<sup>256</sup> cf. Karin Vorhoff, ibid.

## CHAPTER 3

### REPRESENTATION OF THE ALEVI IDENTITY IN *SEMAH* TEXTS IN THE REPUBLIC OF TURKEY

The Representation of the Alevi Identity in the *Semah* Texts of the  
1920-1950 Period

#### General Presentation of the Publications

In Turkey, the publications dealing with the Alevi-Bektashi belief and cultural pattern and focusing on *semahs* in this context, are almost as old as the Republic itself. The initial surveys were organized by the Party of Union and Progress (*İttihat ve Terakki Partisi*) shortly before the establishment of the Republic, during the time when the Party was in power (1908-1918). While the leader of the Party, Talat Pasha, in the first days of his office as the *sadrâzam*, pointed out the fact that Anatolia was untrodden territory for them, Ziya Gökalp, who was working in the party center, emphasized the importance of cultural revolution. Several researchers were appointed to work on the various religious beliefs, sects, orders and tribes in

Anatolia.<sup>257</sup> Another important goal of the research started in this period during which the problem of “national identity” was awaiting solution was to provide a basis upon which it could be built. Thus, data on various Anatolian communities about whom little had been known previously was started to be accumulated, especially through fieldwork.

As a matter of fact, the Ottoman administration was late in taking action to solve the identity question, and when the above-mentioned studies were begun, the Party of Union and Progress was already following a nationalistic policy. Therefore, while it was still necessary to collect information about the communities in question, “Turkishness” appeared as a more or less agreed-upon basis, and upon which the construction of national identity had already begun to be and was taken as a point of reference in the process of defining these communities. One of the most remarkable features of the texts published in the period 1920-1950 is that both the social organization forms, i.e. the *cem* ceremonies where *semah* is performed, and the religious and cultural patterns of the Alevis were considered in relation to the Turkish (especially Central Asian) way of life and culture.

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<sup>257</sup> “...the counselor of the general affairs, Ziya Gökalp said: “We have achieved a radical political change. We changed shape by establishing the constitutional monarchy. However, the real revolution would be on everyday life. The revolution done in the cultural sphere will be the greatest and the most fruitful one. And this is only possible by knowing the physiological and morphological sociology of the Turkish society. And these are institutions that belong to everyday life sphere. Most important of these are the various Anatolian religious sects, orders and Turkmen tribes... To explore these institutions and communities, and to bring it to light, we should send friends who have scientific expertise,” Enver Behnan Sapolyo, *Mezhepler ve Tarikatlar Tarihi* (Istanbul: Türkiye Yayınevi, 1964) pp. 2-3.

In fact, during the construction process of the national identity, the Alevis and Bektashis were attributed “privileged” positions in terms of both their ethnic characteristics and their particular relationship to Islam. According to the available data, about seventy percent of these communities were connected to various Turkish and Turkmen tribes.<sup>258</sup> Additionally, Bektashism functioned as a religious order helping colonization in the newly acquired lands during the expansionist period of the Ottoman Empire and served the spreading of Turkish culture and of a mild form of Islam.<sup>259</sup> Moreover, as a reflection of the Turkism, especially with the influence of the sociology of Ziya Gökalp, Islam started to be seen and discussed in a different light in this period.<sup>260</sup> A. Yasar Ocak points out that, in this respect, some of the scientists and thinkers who argued that Islam should be purified of

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<sup>258</sup> David Shankland, “Integrating the Rural,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 35, no. 2 (April 1999):132-149, p. 136. See also Chapter 1

<sup>259</sup> For a full discussion of this subject, see Ömer Lütfi Barkan, “İstîlâ Devirlerinin Kolonizatör Dervişleri ve Zaviyeler,” pp. 279-386 in *Vakıflar Dergisi II*, (Ankara: 1942); Irène Mélikoff, *Uyur İdik Uyardılar* (Istanbul: Cem Yayınevi, August 1994 {2}), especially Chapter XIII: Bir Kolonilestirici Dervişler Tarikatı: Bektasiler. Sosyal Yönleri ve İlk Osmanlı Sultanlarıyla Bağlantıları; Suraiya Faroqhi; “The Tekke of Hacı Bektas: Social Position and Economic Activities” *Journal of Middle East Studies* 7 (1976): 183-208.

<sup>260</sup> Ziya Gökalp, inspired by the sociology of Durkheim, sees nation formation as the outcome of a three-step process. According to this, from the tribal community that is based on a shared language and race it passes on to “*umme*” which is based on religion, and then from there on to “nation” that is based on culture and civilization. See *Türklesmek, İslamlasmak, Muasirlasmak* (Ankara : Ayyıldız matbaası, 1963). Thus, the emergence of a Turkish nation out of the Ottoman Empire would be realized by passing over the previous step, not with strict secularization but with the transformation of Islam into a national religion, with the appropriation of the international civilization, and finally with the improvement of the national culture. pp. 36-37. Mete Tunçay, “Siyasal Tarih (1908-1923),” pp. 27-81; in Sina Aksin (ed), *Türkiye Tarihi 4, Çağdaş Türkiye 1908-1980*.



Arabic and Persian influence and put into a form peculiarly Turkish, concluded that this form was best represented by the Alevis and the Bektashis. Led by M. Fuat Köprülü, a group of people including Baha Said, Hâmid Sâdi, and Hâmid Vehbi, who were gathered around the *Türk Yurdu* (Turkish Homeland) Journal, published a series of studies.<sup>261</sup> Thus, Bektashis and various Alevi groups, about which little was known, and who, just in line with the paradigm of national identity of this period, were considered as constituting a form of Islam that is peculiarly Turkish became the subject of research.

Although *Alevilik*/Bektashism was considered as a peculiarly Turkish form of Islam, on the basis of the *semah* texts we examine here, it cannot be said that the way of life and religious practice of the Alevis and Bektashis were recommended to society in general. When we consider the facts that although strictly controlled, Sunni Islam was perceived as the “official state religion” and that all the dervish lodges were abolished in 1925, it becomes clear that such a claim cannot be put forth. It seems that the reason why these communities were considered important was not because they represented an alternative form of faith and worship, but because it is assumed that they symbolized, to some extent, the old/Central Asian Turkish culture and beliefs. Thus, a very important clue derived from the study of the *semah* texts belonging to the period 1920-1950 as to the ways in which the Alevi identity was being shaped/constructed is that rather than religious beliefs, the Alevis were regarded within the framework of ethnic features of the community.

Before evaluating these texts in detail, the publication dates of these texts and information on the ethnic and religious identification of their authors will be

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<sup>261</sup> Ahmet Yasar Ocak, *Türk Sufîliğine Bakışlar* (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 1996) pp. 194-195. These articles can be given as examples: Köprülüzaade Mehmet Fuat, “Bektasîliğin Menseîleri,” *Türk Yurdu* 7, no.1341 (1925); Hamid Sadi (Selen), “Tahtacılar,” *Türk Yurdu* 4, no. 21 (September 1926): 211-217; Fikri Süleyman, “Teke Vilâyetinde Tahtacılar,” *Türk Yurdu* 19, no. 29, May 1927: 477-489.

noted, because our observations on these two points seem to be related to the process of the formation of the Alevi identity in Turkey in the period of 1920-50. The publication dates, as well as the identity (religious and ethnic) of the writers of the publications which include *semah* texts deserve a critical approach to understand the Alevi identity of the period. Below, these two factors will be discussed separately.

#### Critical observations on the dates of the publications:

As stated earlier, research on Bektashism and various Alevi communities were initiated by the government in the mid-1910s. Within the program set up by the Party of Union and Progress, the first researcher to study Bektashism and various Alevi groups was Baha Said Bey (1914-1915). It is doubted, however, that his work and the work of other researchers in the same period on these communities were published in their entirety.<sup>262</sup> Baha Said Bey stated that, upon the request of Hamdullah Suphi Bey, the leader of *Türk Ocagi* (Turkish Hearths), in December 1916, he lectured a group of young people in the Beyazit *Türk Ocagi* on the Tahtaci, who lived in Anatolia, and observed with surprise that the Turkish intellectuals had no knowledge on this subject at that time. This conference did not receive cognition as news in the *Türk Yurdu*. He added that most probably influenced by the palace, some people claimed that “the infidel sons of the collapsing Türk Ocagi were now promoting *Kızılbaşlık*.” As a result of the discussions, the censorship committee abolished his writings.”<sup>263</sup> Baha Said was able to publish some of his writings in 1915, 1918 and 1919,<sup>264</sup> and

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<sup>262</sup> Zekeriya Sertel’s claim strengthens this suspicion: “At that time, they established the *Muacirin ve Asair Umum Müdürlüğü* (Central Office of Immigrants and Tribes). The director of this establishment was Sükrü Kaya.... And I was appointed the director of the Tribes branch. Sükrü Kaya told me that the first thing to do was to do a scientific study on tribal communities.... During my office in this establishment, I prepared two comprehensive files, one on tribes, the other on religious orders. Most of the tribal communities were Alevi. Thus, it was necessary to explore *Alevilik* and the orders. For this reason, I conducted research on both of the branches. However, I do not know what was done with the outcome of these studies. If they had been published, now we would have two valuable works on the subject.” Z. Sertel, *Hatırladıklarım* (Istanbul: Gözlem Yayınları), pp. 81-82.

<sup>263</sup> Nejat Birdogan, *İttihat-Terakki’nin Alevilik Bektasilik Arastirmasi* (Istanbul: Berfin Yayınları, October 1995(2)), p. 11.

<sup>264</sup> Baha Said Bey, “Ehl-i Hakk ve ‘Atam Gök, Anam Yer’,” *Muhibbân Mecmuası* (May 1, 1330/1915): 2-3; “Anadolu’da İçtimâî Zümreler ve Anadolu İçtimâiyâtı,” *Milli Talim ve Terbiye Mecmuası* 5 (August 1934/1918): 18-32; “Memleketin İçyüzü: Anadolu’da Gizli Mabetler-I; II; III; IV; V;

was able to publish most of the rest again in *Türk Yurdu*, but only in 1926.<sup>265</sup> The importance of this example is that it shows clearly that there is a very close relationship between the first studies on the beliefs and cultural pattern of *Alevilik* (and which included *semah* texts) and the political circumstances and cultural policies of the period. The researches were conducted mostly with the aim of providing geopolitical/strategic data for the process of becoming a nation-state, and probably since the themes were considered ‘improper’ for open debates, a covered censorship took place.

It is remarkable that the publication of the early studies, including the later part of Baha Said’s work, was realized after 1925. Other folklore and popular publications that would include the *semah* texts, which will be discussed below, would also be published one after another, after 1925. It is possible that this “coincidence” is related to the fact that in the second half of the 1920s, the new Republican regime clarified its position on two important issues and took important steps accordingly. First, on the issue of ethnicity, the “one-nation-state” policy was adopted with strong political –and military- measures and it was put in such a supreme position that did not allow any uncertainty. Second, in contrast to the timidity and mild attitude of the transition period, the regime started an open fight with Islamic thought and movements, which were considered the most important obstacle before modernization. In 1925, the Seyh Said riot was suppressed and all the dervish lodges were closed. Up to this time, it had always been the Sunni sect

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VI,” *Memleket Gazetesi* 2 (26 Cemâzî-yel-evvel 1337/ February 11, 1335/1919); 18 (26 Cemâzî-yel-evvel 1337/ February 27, 1335/1919); 46 (24 Cemâzî-yel-âhir 1337/ March 27, 1335/1919); 48 (26 Cemâzî-yel-âhir 1337/ March 29, 1335/1919); 71 (20 Recep 1337/ April 21, 1335/1919); 72 (21 Recep 1337/ April 22, 1335/1919).

<sup>265</sup> Baha Said Bey, “Türkiye’de Alevi Zümreleri,” no. 21 (September 1926); “Sofıyan Süreği- Kizilbas Meydani,” no. 22 (October 1926); “Sofıyan Süreği- Kizilbas Meydanında Düşkünüklük,” no. 23 (November 1926); “Anadolodu’da Alevi Zümreleri,” no. 24 (December 1926); “Nusayriler ve Esrâr-i Mezhebiyetleri,” no. 25 (January 1927); “Bektasiler,” nos. 26, 27, 28 (February - March- April 1927.)

which had been fought against in the political arena, and this particular act also targeted the Sunni orders. Within this process, the attitude of the new Turkish state towards religion was started to be clarified.

However, the Bektashi order and *Alevilik* were also influenced by the act that abolished the dervish lodges. Although it is less important, we should still note that *Alevilik* and Bektashism officially ended with this act. In a way they were no longer living orders and would be considered as “a matter of history.” For example, Ismail Hakki Baltacioglu’s statement that “it should be appreciated that this tribe, which is Turkish by essence and has totally preserved their traditions, eventually ended their communal organization”<sup>266</sup> is quite remarkable. What is more remarkable is that Tevfik Oytan, who was himself a Bektashi, also considered Bektashism a religious order of the past. On the other hand, the real situation was not like this, and the Alevis and Bektashis still continued their religious practices secretly. The Bektashis and Alevis responded more conveniently than Sunni groups to the new demands in religious issues. Their answer would be given by highlighting some of the characteristics of *Alevilik* and Bektashism while disregarding some others. Thus the identities of the Alevis and Bektashis started to be shaped even with the first studies in accordance with the necessities of the general cultural and political circumstances of the period rather than with internal organic processes.

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<sup>266</sup> Ismail Hakki Baltacioglu, *Çepniler Balıkesir’de* (Balıkesir, Vilayet Matbaası: 1935), p. 4.

Critical observations on the religious and ethnic identities of the writers:

Among the writers of the texts that will be studied here, only Oytan<sup>267</sup> and Salci<sup>268</sup> disclosed their Bektashi/Alevi identities in their writings. Taking only this into consideration, it would not be a scientific approach if it were concluded that none of the other writers was *Alevi*. For example, it has been claimed that Yilmaz, who worked on the Tahtaci community, was himself a member of this group.<sup>269</sup> Similarly, Serif Firat, the writer of a book titled *Dogu Illeri ve Varto Tarihi*,<sup>270</sup> (Eastern Provinces and the History of Varto) was a native of this region, where the population was almost exclusively composed of Alevis. It is also understood from this study that the Alevis –at least most of them- who lived in Varto spoke Kurdish. However, the author rejects the Kurdish identity, arguing that they were Turkish people speaking Kurdish. Thus, among the writers of the 1920-50 period whose work will be studied here, no other ethnic identity besides Turk was disclosed by the writers about themselves.

The fact that the Bektashi/Alevi writers of the 1920-1950 period were reluctant to disclose their identity is an important question that should be

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<sup>267</sup> M. Tefvik Oytan, *Bektasiligin İcyüzü-Dibi-Kösesi-Yüzü ve Astari Nedir?* Istanbul: Maarif Kütüphanesi ve Matbaası, 1962 (5). The first publication must have been in 1945. The 5<sup>th</sup> edition is used in this study.

<sup>268</sup> Vahit Lutfi Salci, *Gizli Türk Dini Oyunlari* (Istanbul, Numune Matbaası, 1941); “Anadolu Türk Halk Oyunlarından Alevi Sema’ları”, *Folklor Postası* 1, no. 4 (January 1945).

<sup>269</sup> Mustafa Desterci (ed), *Yusuf Ziya Yörükan ve Tahtacılar* (Istanbul, Avrasya Etnografya Vakfı Yayınları, 1998).

<sup>270</sup> Serif M. Firat, *Dogu Illeri ve Varto Tarihi* (Istanbul: Kamer, 1998). First publication in 1945.

considered in a larger framework. Within the limits of this study, it can be claimed that these studies were conducted in the process of the construction of national identity were in fact conducted with the presumption of fulfilling a “national mission” independent of the personal identity of the researchers. The facts that the field studies were inaugurated by the state, that they received support from the *Türk Ocakları* and *Halkevleri* (People’s Houses) and that most of them were written by high state bureaucrats, military-origin people, and teachers in primarily popular publications<sup>271</sup> draw attention to this possibility.

Going back to the matter of the Bektashi/Alevi writers in the 1920-1950 period who were reluctant to disclose their identities, four main reasons and/or conditions why Oytan, Salci, and Firat did disclose their religious (and/or ethnic) identities in their publications can be stated. One of the most important of these reasons/conditions is how the Bektashi/Alevi identity was defined in these studies and to what extent these definitions contradicted and diverged from the mainstream definitions. However, to arrive at a correct evaluation of it, further discussion will be made in the following sections, in which discourse analysis will be made. The other three reasons/conditions are as follows:

(i) The works of the three writers named above were the first attempts to display the long disguised learning of the Alevi/Bektashi communities to the outer world by people from within these communities. It is remarkable that most of the

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<sup>271</sup> For example, Cemal Bardakçı and Ali Kemali were governors in this period. Baha Said Bey was an important person appointed by Mustafa Kemal. He worked in *Irsad Heyeti* (directing board) and traveled throughout Anatolia to get support from the public for the National Struggle. Sevgen retired from the Gendarmerie Office. Yilmaz and Firat were teachers. Other examples will be mentioned later.

studies published in the 1920-50 period belong to Sunni writers. In their texts, the Alevi/Bektashi-Sunni fraternity is brought onto the agenda, the rumors about *Alevi*s/Bektashis are denied and it is stated that the Alevi/s/Bektashis are Turks. However, as will be discussed later in detail, these studies show that there is both an uncertainty about the place and identity of the Alevi/s and Bektashis in Turkey and even a lack of trust towards them. It is understood that both the uncertainty and the mistrust about them in terms of religion and ethnicity made the Alevi/s and Bektashis feel discriminated against and thus feel the need to reply.

Oytan, in the “preface” to his book, states that his aim is to transmit exactly and correctly the long hidden learning of Bektashism. Salci chose a more specific subject and aimed to describe the Alevi *semahs* correctly and in a detailed way because, according to him, Mevlevi *semahs* were given priority in Turkish folk dances just because Alevi *semahs* were not known properly. The writer, who claims that Alevi *semahs* deserved a privileged position in Turkish folk dances, discusses the role of the Alevi/s in Turkey through the study of *semahs*. The focus of Firat’s study, on the other hand, is the position of the Alevi/s who lived in the eastern part of Turkey and especially in Varto, or in his own expressions, *Alevi*s who spoke Kurdish. He states that the problem of these communities, to which he himself belonged, is that “they spoke with *Kurmanç* and *Zaza* tongues.” He aims to clear these communities who, he claims, are “Turks by essence that carry noble Turkish blood”<sup>272</sup> of the charges put on them throughout history. All of the three writers the goals which have been mentioned here, take on the position of the spokesman of

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<sup>272</sup> Firat, pp. 19-20.

the Alevis and/or Bektashis in Turkey, claim that they are working to clarify the uncertainties or lack of knowledge about them in society, and discuss their social position around several themes (the real nature of Bektashis, *semahs*, Kurdish-speaking Alevis, etc.). All of the discussion is centered around the goal of answering the prejudices about their religious and ethnic peculiarities and clarifying the uncertainties.

Thus, one of the most important reasons of how the Alevi/Bektashi writers in the period 1920-50 overcame their worries about disclosing their identities is the need Alevis and Bektashis felt to overcome the uncertainties, prejudices, and mistrust about their religious and ethnic origins and the feeling of discrimination created by them. However, it should be kept in mind that compared to the need they felt, at least in the texts studied here, a very limited number of answers are produced in response.

(ii) The second reason/condition is that the dervish lodges had been already, abolished by the time when their studies were published. The attempts to clear the Alevis/Bektashis historically, which had become a religious order of the past, would be a more acceptable action than trying to defend a surviving community. This attitude becomes especially remarkable with the study of the works of Oytan and Firat. Oytan, who claims that *Alevilik*-Bektashism has become a matter of history,<sup>273</sup> uses the past tense throughout his narration. Although the closing of the dervish lodges was an important reason that made the publications of such studies

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<sup>273</sup> Oytan, *Bektasiliğin İç Yüzü*, p. 6.



possible, it was not sufficient alone because the works of Alevi/Bektashi writers came out not immediately after 1925 but after 1940.

(iii) It is necessary to note that the works of Alevi/Bektashi writers were published in the 1940s. The 1940s was the decade during which the “militant secularism” period came to an end and the first steps were taken towards popular state policies. The insistence by these writers on their religious identity while writing about Bektashism/*Alevilik* also seems related to the political and economic developments in Turkey. Also the fact that most of the works of the Alevi/Bektashi writers published in the 1920-50 period came out only in the last decade explains why their number was limited.

Thus the works of Oytan, Salci, and Firat could be read as the initial -though not very strong ones- examples of claiming the identity of the Alevi/Bektashi groups in Turkey. The point to which we will pay attention in the analysis of the texts is in what ways the discourse of these writers on the Bektashi and/or Alevi identity both coincides with and diverges from the discourse of other writers.

Here, first of all, the studies that include the texts we will be studying within the framework of rituals and *semahs* will be discussed briefly in three main groups according to their primary subjects of research: publications about specific Alevi communities; popular publications concerned with *Alevilik*/Alevi in general; and, the texts in which *semah* is considered as a dance. After that, the *semah* texts that appear in these publications (*semahs*, the Alevi rituals that include *semahs* and various other elements related to *semahs*) will be discussed in general, and their references related to the Alevi identity will be evaluated referring to the writers' discourses.

### The Alevi Identity and *Semah* Discourse in the Publications About Specific Alevi Communities

Among the studies that were initiated during the time of Party of Union and Progress, the ones about specific Alevi communities resulted from field studies and most of the writers seemed to adopt an ethnological approach. To get correct information about a community about whom very little is known, it is important to get into the community and to live with them for a certain period of time. This way of study was commonly practiced during the first years of the Republic, especially in the single-party period, and some of these studies were supported first by the *Türk Ocakları* and then by the *Halkevleri*.

As stated earlier, some of the important scientists and thinkers who thought that a peculiarly Turkish form of Islam was represented by *Alevilik* and the Bektashism gathered around the *Türk Yurdu*. These people, most importantly Mehmet Fuat Köprülü and others like Baha Said, Hamid Sadi, and Süleyman Fikri, started to publish a series of studies and research in the journal.<sup>274</sup> The first person who worked on Bektashism (1914-1915) within the framework of the program started by the Party of Union and Progress and whose work on *semahs* is very important for the present study is Baha Said. The article in which the most extensive use of *semahs* is made by the writer who studied not only many Alevi communities and *ocaks* in and around Turkey but also various people related to Alevis is “*Sofıyan Süregi/Kızılbas Meydani*”. What is lacking most in this article is that the writer, while using field work, participant observation, and interviews, did not provide any information as to which community the ritual and *semahs* he discusses belonged, and thus, we can say, made generalizations. On the other hand, as one of the most detailed works on *cem* rituals and *semahs*, this article has been made use of –most of the time without giving credit to it as the source- in most of

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<sup>274</sup> A. Y. Ocak, *Türk Sufîliğine Bakışlar*, p.104. For the articles of Baha Said Bey, see footnotes 8 and 9.

the *semah* texts we will be studying under different periods and publication categories.

These first texts that used field work as the main source of information reflect the two main needs and worries of the period: The influence of the Turkism movement is clear, as will be seen, in every step of the work including the rituals and *semahs*. Also, the need to collect information about these communities was pressing. Therefore, some of these works are precious sources of ethnographic data on *semahs*. Thus, although they clearly carry the mark of the dominant ideology of the period and the influence of the Turkism movement, these works stand out with their differences from later works, even considering that within the context of the works that have survived to our times, in that they make use of field studies and report to the reader more or less the real outcome of the observations and thus keep their important place among the surviving texts. For example, some of the *semahs* Baha Said Bey reported on are not even mentioned today, and they appear in some of the oral history reports only when the interviewee has complete trust in the interviewer. As an example, we can cite the *Üryan Semahi*, as a *semah* which the Alevis would not like to mention to avoid the “*num söndü*” charges put on the Alevis. Also, in these early period works which depended on field studies, there is almost no –or at least very little- complicity or desire to hide the findings from the readers. The methodology adopted in these studies is to report the data as they are observed, with each one additionally interpreted by the writer within the context of the cultural and political paradigms of the period. In addition, the data which could

not be interpreted in a meaningful way within this framework are also provided, emphasizing that further research on them is needed.

In the 1920s, the studies published in the *Türk Yurdu* were followed by other studies like that of Yusuf Ziya, published in *Hayat* and *Istanbul Darülfünunu İlahiyat Fakültesi Mecmuası* (The Faculty of Theology Journal of Istanbul University).<sup>275</sup> A. Y. Ocak states that these articles, which are based on serious and accurate observations on various Alevi communities in Turkey are still valuable sources of information.<sup>276</sup> Yörükan's works should be emphasized as distinguished ones not only for their extensive discussion of rituals and *semahs*, but also for bringing to the foreground the religious aspects of the Alevis rather than claiming that they are ethnically Turkish. Three parts of the series of articles he published in *IDİFM*, under the title of “*Tahtacılar-Tahtacılarda Dinî ve Sırrî Hayat* (The Tahtaci and their Religious and Mystique Life) are devoted to the study of the beliefs of the Tahtaci community and the ways in which they practiced them.<sup>277</sup> In these articles, the religious practices of the Tahtaci -all types of rituals and which *semahs* were performed in which one and in what ways, and what they meant to the community- are discussed and reported to the readers in detail. Yörükan was also

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<sup>275</sup> Yusuf Ziya Yörükan, “Tahtacılar,” *Darülfünun İlahiyat Fakültesi Mecmuası*, nos. 12-19 (1929-1931); Y. Z. Yörükan, “Anadolu’da Alevi İtikatları,” *Hayat Mecmuası*, nos. 59-60, 1928.

<sup>276</sup> Ocak, *Türk Sufiligine Bakışlar*, p. 195.

<sup>277</sup> Yusuf Ziya Yörükan, “*Tahtacılar-Tahtacılarda Dinî ve Sırrî Hayat*” *DİFM*, Nos: 15-17 (1930-1931). The page numbers that will be given here refer to the following book published in 1998 that includes the entire series of study: Mustafa Desterci, ed., *Yusuf Ziya Yörükan ve Tahtacılar*. (Istanbul: Avrasya Etnografya Yayınları, 1998)

the first person to record the terms “*agirlama*” and “*yeldirme*” which are used in the *semah* texts of later periods and are also accepted in the contemporary practice of *semah* writing.

The compilation surveys on some *Alevi* communities like the Tahtaci and other tribal communities, like the Çepni and Türkmen, which included some *Alevi* groups, continued in the 1930s and they were published either as articles<sup>278</sup> or as books.<sup>279</sup> However, in contrast to the studies conducted prior to the 1930s, most of these studies were carried out by people who were not experts on the subject. In some of them, the writers tried to collect data from outside because they could not or did not penetrate the community. Consequently, as Vorhoff also points out, although they provide information about the (now-forgotten) material and spiritual aspects of various cultures, it seems impossible to claim that these studies

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<sup>278</sup> For instance, Abdülkadir Inan, “Gaziantep’te Aleviler ve Muhtelif Inanmalar,” *Halk Bilgisi Haberleri*, vol.10, no. 10 (December 1940): 37-40; Naci Kum Atabeyli, “Antalya Tahtacıları’na Dair Notlar,” *Türk Tarih, Arkeologya ve Etnografya Dergisi*, no. 4 (1940): 203-212; Atabeyli, “Türkmen, Yürük ve Tahtacılar Arasında Tetkikler ve Görüşler,” *Türk Folklor Arastırmaları*, no: 5, 6, 8, 10, 11 (December 1949; January, March, April, May, June 1950); Ziyaeddin Fahri Findikoglu, “Tahtaci Asiretleri Arasında Geçirdiğim Birkaç Saat,” *Folklor Postası*, vol.2, no: 14 (March 1946):3-4; Nazmi Sevgen, “Tahtacılar,” *Cografya Dergisi*, 1, no.: 4 (March 1951): 303-309.

<sup>279</sup> Ali Rıza Yalgin’s *Cenupıa Türkmen Oymakları* (İstanbul: Bürhaneddin Matbaası, 1932); Hasan Resit Tankut’s *Nusayriler ve Nusayrilik Hakkında* (1933); İsmail Hakkı’s *Çepniler Balıkesir’de* (1935); Taha Toros’s *Toroslar’da Tahtaci Oymakları* (Mersin: Mersin Halkevi Nesriyatı, 1938); Kamil Su’s *Balık esir ve Civarında Yürük ve Türkmenler* (İstanbul: Resimli Ay Matbaası, 1938); and, A. Yılmaz’s *Tahtacılar’da Gelenekler* (Ankara : C.H.P.Halkevi, 1948) are some of the works published in this period.

themselves are sufficiently analytical to be taken as points of reference in the discovery and understanding of the social dynamics of these communities.<sup>280</sup>

The most important works for our study about the religious life of the Alevis and *semahs* are A. Yilmaz's *Tahtacilar'da Gelenekler*, Naci Kum Atabeyli's two articles on the Tahtaci communities and Nazmi Sevgen's article "*Tahtacilar*". Yilmaz, in the introduction to his study, which was published by RPP *Halkevleri* Publications in 1948, repeats the aim which had been stated years earlier by Ziya Gökalp and which is the aim of many other publications: The real nature of the form of *Alevilik* in Tahtaci group, which had up to then been a mystery and which had caused many rumors and accusations, would be scrutinized and attempt would be made to solve the puzzle.<sup>281</sup> A very important aspect of this study, which provides a wide variety of *semahs* and records the various rituals of the Tahtaci, from everyday life rituals (wedding ceremonies, births, circumcision ceremonies, etc.) to religious rituals, is that it provides evidence for the claim that *semahs* were a part of the everyday life rituals of the Tahtaci community. The main point where this study differs from the studies of Yörükan and Baha Said Bey is that in this there is almost no attempt to relate the different elements of the study to each other. From this point of view, this study, which was published four years after the death of its writer, does not constitute a firm ground for further research in this field

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<sup>280</sup> Although agreeing with Karin Vorhoff's opinion in general, we should state that we disagree on some points with the researcher depending on our own observations. Especially Yörükan's works is still valid. He lived with the Tahtaci groups for a long time as an Alevis dede, and used witnesses and various texts to clarify the points which had remained in the dark.

<sup>281</sup> Yilmaz, p. 7.

although it gives a general idea of the theology and religious practices of the Tahtaci community.

The same problem is valid for the studies of Atabeyli and Sevgen, which include a wide variety of Tahtaci *semahs*. Tahtaci communities live in the western and southern parts of Anatolia, spread in a wide region stretching from Çanakkale and Balıkesir to Adana and İslahiye. It is known that Yılmaz, who spent most of his life in Bergama, conducted his field studies in Narlıdere, where the *Yanyatır Ocagi*, one of the two religious centers (*ocak*) to which the Tahtaci community belonged, was located. Atabeyli, on the other hand, focused in his study on the Tahtaci groups who lived in Antalya. Sevgen's observations were also based on the Tahtaci groups who lived in Narlıdere, Antalya, and Isparta. Considering that Baha Said Bey worked on the Tahtaci groups in Çanakkale, and Yörükan's work was based on many Tahtaci communities living in various regions in Anatolia, despite the problems in the evaluation of the data, we should note that a big repertoire of information was accumulated on the Tahtaci community and Tahtaci *semahs* during the 1920-50 period. In some of these studies there is also information on the rituals and *semahs* of the Abdal communities. In these texts too, the double structure is clear; the sections where the observations and data are recorded are clearly separated from the sections which include the writer's personal evaluation of them and general speculation about the Alevis.

In contrast to the above-mentioned studies on the Alevi communities which lived in the western and southern parts of Anatolia and who belonged to Turkish or Turkmen tribes, Hasan Resit Tankut's study *Nusayriler ve Nusayrilik Hakkında*

(On Nusayries and *Nusayrilik*),<sup>282</sup> was based on scientific research about an *Alevi* community called the Nusayri<sup>283</sup> who were known as Syrian Alevis or Arab Alevis but who also lived in southern Anatolia, especially around Hatay.<sup>284</sup> Tankut, who was a linguist, historian, and politician,<sup>285</sup> was among the champions of the Sun-language theory. In this study too, he frequently refers to this theory and claims that the Nusayri community is of Turkish origin.

In contrast to the general tendency in studies about a certain Alevi community, this study makes only a very limited use of fieldwork. He mostly makes use of written texts (especially academic texts about Old Turkish and Anatolian communities) and frequently refers to them in the discussion of his personal observations of *cem* rituals. The writer was invited to a *cem* ritual organized on the plains of Bingöl in 1928. Instead of trying to understand in depth the nature of these rituals, he is content with a simple comparison of it with an urban practice common to city life which he himself leads: “Towards the end of the

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<sup>282</sup> Hasan Resit Tankut, *Nusayriler ve Nusayriler Hakkında* (Ankara: Ulus Basimevi, 1938).

<sup>283</sup> See Marianne Aringberg-Laanatza, “Alevis in Turkey-Alawites in Syria: Similarities and Differences,” in *Alevi Identity*, Olsson et al., eds.: 151-165; Tord Olsson, “Epilogue: The Scripturalization of Ali-oriented Religions,” in *Alevi Identity*, Olsson et al., eds.: 199-208; Peter A. Andrews, *Ethnic Groups in the Republic of Turkey* (Wiesbaden: Reichert Publication, 1989); Martin Kramer, “Suriye Alevileri ve Siilik I-II,” *Nefes*, nos. 1-2 (November-December 1993): 42-52.

<sup>284</sup> Baha Said Bey published an article on the Nusayri. However, since it does not deal with *semahs*, we will not be discussing it here. “Nusayrîler ve Esrâr-i Mezhebiyeleri,” *Türk Yurdu*, no: 25 (January 1927): 7-27.

<sup>285</sup> Tankut served as *kaymakam* (official charged with governing a provincial district) in the Police Head Quarters, Civil Service Supervisor (1919-1928) and deputy for a long time (1931-1940; 1957-1960). Sükran Kurdakul, *Sairler ve Yazarlar Sözlüğü* (Ankara: Bilgi Yayınevi, 1973).



ceremony, the candles were put out for a moment and then lit again. It was not very different from our practice of switching off the lights for a few minutes on the New Year's Eve and then switching them on again.”<sup>286</sup> The last study to be discussed in this section is M. Serif Firat's work *Dogu Illeri ve Varto Tarihi* (Eastern Principalities and the History of Varto), which, although not about a particular Alevi community, includes the rituals and *semahs* of the Alevis living in Varto. Firat's work constitutes a unique example among the studies we have been discussing up to now in that it deals with an Alevi community which lived in eastern Anatolia and spoke Kurdish, and to which the writer himself belonged. This work has been published five times since its first publication in 1945, and its second edition was published in 1961 with a preface written by Cemal Gürsel, the president and prime minister of the state at that time. In his book, Firat tries to explain “the historical origins of the Alevi and Bektashi communities living in the eastern parts of Turkey, from whence these Turkish people came to this particular geographical location, under what kinds of forces they forgot their mother tongue, Turkish, and came to be speaking the *Kurmanç* and *Zaza* languages, what *Alevilik*,

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<sup>286</sup> “*Toplantinin sonlarına doğru bir an için mumlar söndürüldü ve yeniden yakıldı. Bu bizim yilbasi gecelerinde ve yeni yıla girerken senenin ilk dakikalarında ampülleri söndürüp yakmamızın aynı idi.*” Tankut, *Nusayriler ve Nusayrilik Hakkında*. p. 49. The superficial/ideological approach in the book makes it obligatory to develop a critical approach towards the narrative of the ritual in question. Furthermore, the resemblance between the *cem* ritual described in the “Zazalar Hakkında Sosyolojik Tetkikler” (Sociological Researches on Zazas; a study of the author which has been finished in 1935, but not published) and the one described in the *Nusayriler ve Nusayrilik Hakkında* leads us to suspect seriously about the attribution of a single and the same observation of the *cem* ritual to two different social groups.

Bektashism and *Kizilbaslik* mean, and how these doctrines were adopted by Turkish people.”<sup>287</sup>

Firat’s narrative about rituals and *semahs* is based on his personal experiences and observations. These subjects are discussed not under the large subsection of “Alevi, Kizilbas and Bektashis in Eastern Provinces,” but under the subsection of “Ancient Rituals of the Religious Order of the Alevis in the Eastern Provinces and Varto”. The names of the subtitles show that Firat also favored the general practice of referring to *Alevilik*, Bektashism and Kizilbaslik as matters of history. The particular attention he pays to prove that the Alevis living in the eastern provinces and in Varto were Turkish people becomes especially clear in the *deyis* (sayings) section of the discussion of the elements of *semahs*.

To sum up, in most of the works we have discussed here in relation to their subject matter, methodology, and the religious and ethnic origins of their authors, use is made of field study and most of the writers try to adopt an ethnological approach to their subject matter. These works provide a wide variety of *semahs* and inform us as to how they were performed during the period 1920-50, their most important drawback of arises from the fact that only a very limited section of the Alevi communities who live in Turkey were studied. A large number of the studies that were published in this period are about the Tahtaci. They are followed by other Turcoman Alevi communities and Bektashis. Sunni writer Tahir Harimi Balcioglu states, in his study published in 1940, that, “The eastern principalities of Harput, Erzurum, Kurdistan and others around these are still an unsolved puzzle to us in

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<sup>287</sup> “...dogu illerinin cesitli bölgelerinde oturan Alevi ve Bektasi Asiretlerinin tarihi soylarini ve Türklerin bu yakin çagda nerelelerden dogu illerimize geldiklerini ve bunlarin hangi zorlamalar altinda öz Türkçe dillerini karmakarisik edip Kurmanç ve Zaza lisanini öğrendiklerini, Alevilik, Bektasilik ve Kizilbaslik’in ne demek oldugunu ve bu akidelerin Türklere nasil asilandigini...” Ibid., p.19.

terms of the various isolated sectarian communities like *Alevilik*, Bektashism, *Kizilbaslik*, *Hurufilik*.”<sup>288</sup> Actually, the Alevis who live in the eastern parts of Turkey and the Arab Alevis are the ones who have been studied least. Among the studies discussed above, Firat’s work on the Alevis living in Varto, which made limited use of field study, and Tankut’s work on the Nusayries are the ones that will be helpful in widening our analysis of these works. It should be added that of these two studies, in which the emphasis on the claim that these communities are ethnically Turkish is stronger than in other studies, Firat’s work on the Varto *Alevis* has, to some extent, the quality of self defense as he himself belonged to this community, while the possibility that Tankut’s study was based on the Kurdish speaking Alevis who lived in Bingöl, rather than on the Nusayries. Also, the double structure which in other works distinguishes the factual data and personal evaluation from each other clearly, is not marked in these two works.

The fact that in the period 1920-1950, the Tahtaci, Turcoman and Bektashi groups were given priority in research gives us clues about with which Alevi communities communication was made and on which grounds: First of all, for practical reasons, it was very difficult for someone who did not belong to these communities to get in contact with the members of these communities, to be accepted by them and to collect data based on observation. Balcioglu’s statement above also seems to be referring to this difficult situation. Second, in the 1920-50 period in which the Alevis were considered not in terms of their religious practices but in terms of ethnicity, emphasizing their ethnically Turkish origins, it is possible that in the eastern and southeastern regions where Kurdish and Arabic (we should especially include the Nusayri here) speaking Alevis lived, the question of on which grounds these Alevis were to be considered created a major problem. This suggestion is also supported by the fact that the two works on Zaza and Kizilbas

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<sup>288</sup> “Anadolu’daki Alevilik, Bektasilik, Kizilbaslik, Hurufilik gibi mütedahil Batini subelerinin yayildiklari muhitlerden Harput, Erzurum, Kürdistan vilayetleri ile daha buralara bagli olan vilayetler hakkindaki bilgiler kalin bir perde altinda kalmaktadir.” Tahir Harimi Balcioglu, *Türk Tarihinde Mezhep Cereyanlari* (Istanbul: Kanaat Kitabevi , 1940). p. 189.

communities –dating to 1935 and 1945, respectively- were not published when they were written.<sup>289</sup> We also get supporting evidence when we compare, in terms of the communities in question, the works of Baha Said published before 1925 (actually until 1919) and those published after 1925. His first articles show that he conducted field study on communities like the Ehl-i Hakk, the Dersim Alevis and the Yezidis, who were related to the Kurds. However, in his works published after 1925, these communities were not mentioned at all. The fact that these communities are not mentioned in the latter group of works, which are more comprehensive and rich in terms of data since they were published long after the field studies were conducted, also suggests that some valuable data have been lost about the Ehl-i Hakk, the Dersim Alevis and the Yezidis.

The problems created by the tendency to evaluate the Alevis in terms of their ethnic origins and also the insufficient data on the Alevis living in eastern Turkey seems to have influenced most the publications that are concerned with *Alevilik*/Alevis in general, which will be discussed in the next section. In these texts, an attempt of redefining *Alevilik* and Alevi identity that would be counted as valid for all of the Alevi communities in Turkey and would also be based on a legitimate ground is developed.

#### The Alevi Identity and *Semah* Discourse in Popular Publications that are Concerned with *Alevilik*/Alevis in General

Especially after the 1940s, along with the publications dealing with general aspects of *Alevilik* and Bektashism, the number of studies that refer to *Alevilik* and/or

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<sup>289</sup> Hasan Resit Tankut, “Zazalar Hakkında Sosyolojik Tetkikler,” pp. 409-490 in Mehmet Bayrak ed., *Kürdoloji Belgeleri* (Ankara: Öz-Ge Yayınları, 1994). Considering the writer’s letters to İnönü (1935) and to the Turkish Language Institute (1937) for the publication of this book, we see that the book was finished in 1935. Nazmi Sevgen, *Zazalar ve Kızılbaşlar* (Ankara: Kalan Yayınları, August 1999). On the first page of the original manuscript, we first see “İstanbul 1945” and then it is noted as “İstanbul 1946.”

Bektashism as important themes while discussing various sects and religious orders in Turkey also increased. Most of these studies are popular publications prepared by people who were not experts in the field.<sup>290</sup> Most of them were written by Sunni writers and it should also be noted that some of them had been in office (especially as high level bureaucrats) in places where Alevi/Bektashi communities lived in large numbers.

In this group of publications, contrary to the publications in the other two groups, the attempt was made to define *Alevilik* “in general” or the general characteristics that are true for “all” of the Alevi communities living in Turkey. The definition of *Alevilik*/Alevis is seen as an important step on the way to establishing a common ground for communication for the Sunni and Alevi communities in Turkey. Thus, these definitions had to have elements which would be acceptable to the whole society. Because of these characteristics, the group of popular publications that are concerned with *Alevilik*/Alevis in general is the most in providing information as to how the discourse of the “legitimate” Alevi identity was constructed on the level of popular culture.

One of the two most important problems confronted in the process of making general definitions about *Alevilik*/Alevis is, after the dervish lodges were abolished, is whether Alevis and Bektashis should be considered as living communities or communities that lived in the past. The second problem is that the

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<sup>290</sup> Compare, A. Y. Ocak, “Alevilik ve Bektasilik Hakkındaki Son Yayınlar Üzerine (1990) Genel Bir Bakış ve Bazı Gerçekler,” in A. Y. Ocak, *Türk Sufiliğine Bakışlar*, pp. 191-223, p. 195. Ocak points out that, especially after the 1950s, “with the recent developments towards a more democratic state, both Alevi/Bektashi and Sunni writers and amateur researchers started to publish popular publications.”

wide Alevi community is not homogeneous and show differences in terms of social organizations, ethnic characteristics, *ocaks*, and tribal and religious qualities. As will be seen in the following sections, in some of these publications all of these communities are treated as a homogeneous community under the name of Alevis or Bektashis. In some other works, on the other hand, they attempt to divide the vast Alevi population into subcategories. However, the categorizations in this group of publications are not made in terms of *ocaks*, etc., but in terms of their relationship with other Turkish communities or sometimes with Islam.

Excluding the work of the Bektashi writer Oytan, the importance of the works in this group of publications, which spare the least space to data on *semahs*/rituals, for our study is that *semahs*/rituals become important measures in defining Alevis as a homogeneous group or in evaluating the differences between various Alevi communities because the quality of the Alevi rituals and whether *semahs* are performed in these rituals are important points in defining the exact nature of the relationship between the Alevis and “Turkishness” and/or Islam. Thus, the relationship between the *semah* texts published in this group of publications that define “legitimate” Alevi identity on popular grounds and attempt to reconstruct it is very strong. At this point, the *semah* texts in the narratives of Sunni and Alevi writers that appear in popular publications within a general framework of *Alevilik* and Alevi identity will be examined.

The narratives of Sunni writers:

The works that will be studied in this section are: Cemal Bardakçı's *Kizilbaslik Nedir?* (What is Kizilbaslik?), Tahir Harimi Balcioglu's *Türk Tarihinde Mezhep Cereyanlari* (Sectarian Movements in Turkish History), Kemal Samancigil's *Bektasilik Tarihi* (History of Bektasilik).<sup>291</sup>

The former governor Cemal Bardakçı who was looking for an answer to the question “What is *Kizilbaslik*?”, considers the Alevi and the Bektashi as a single homogeneous group. He not only rejects that *Kizilbaslik* is a sect or order, but also tries to persuade the head of the Bektashi order, Çelebi Mehmet, of it.<sup>292</sup> According to the writer, who emphasizes the concept of “secularism,” The Kizilbas are a group of Turkish people who tried to preserve and practice their traditional beliefs and codes of culture in secret meetings, to escape from the reaction of the sultan and the religious fanatics, after the office of the caliphate was taken over by the Ottomans.<sup>293</sup> Bardakçı attended an Alevi ritual in 1921 in a village between Mecedözü and Alaca. In the texts where he talks about this ritual and the *semahs* performed in it, he has an attitude which makes us suspect that he really took this ritual seriously and tried to understand the nature of the community. Reporting the greeting part at the beginning of the *semahs*, after citing whom and what were

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<sup>291</sup> Cemal Bardakçı, *Kizilbaslik Nedir?* (Istanbul: Isik Matbaasi, 1945); Tahir Harimi Balcioglu, *Türk Tarihinde Mezhep Cereyanlari* (Istanbul, Kanaat Kitabevi, 1940); Kemal Samancigil, *Bektasilik Tarihi* (Istanbul, Tecelli Matbaasi, 1945).

<sup>292</sup> Bardakçı, *Kizilbaslik Nedir?*, p.53. It is not stated when this meeting took place. However, from the information in the text, we can infer that it took place at the latest in 1921, before the dervish orders were abolished.

<sup>293</sup> Ibid., pp. 99.

greeted in order, he adds that “who knows, maybe they greeted the cupboard, too.”<sup>294</sup> This attitude is in line with the writer’s claim that “*Kızılbaşlık* is not a sect or order. Naturally it does not have the rituals that sects and orders have.”<sup>295</sup>

Kemal Samancıgil, on the other hand, who states that Bektashism had its origins in the Turkish traditions and that “although performed with men and women together (Bektashi rituals) are very decent,” clearly keeps his distance from *Alevilik* because inferring from the qualities of these rituals, he concludes that *Alevilik* goes back to Iran (*Zerdüstlük* and fire worshipping) in its origins: “*Alevilik* is an ostracized branch of Shi’ism” and in fact, “except for their literature there are great differences between them in terms of traditions and principles.”<sup>296</sup> However, it is not clear what the writer takes as his point of reference when he classifies *Alevilik* as a branch of Bektashism, describing it as the “Turkish form of *Alevilik* in Bektashism”<sup>297</sup> while he primarily claims that *Alevilik* and Bektashism are totally different from each other in their origins. In addition, it is also unclear whom exactly (which tribe, geographical location, etc.) these two separated groups are composed of or whether the communities mentioned are urban or rural Bektashis (Alevis).

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<sup>294</sup> “*Kim bilir belki de büfeyi selamladılar.*” Ibid., p. 69.

<sup>295</sup> “*Kızılbaşlık bir mezhep, bir tarikat değildir. Tabiatı ile onun diğer tarikatlerde olduğu gibi ayinleri de yoktu.*” Ibid., p. 88.

<sup>296</sup> (Bektasi törenleri) “*erkekli-kadınli olmasına rağmen çok temizdir.*” “*Alevilik Sia’nın manfur bir koludur*” and “*aralarında edebiyat harici, adet, erkan bakımından çok farklar vardı.*” Samancıgil, *Bektasilik Tarihi*, pp. 137-141.

<sup>297</sup> Ibid., p. 141.



Tahir Harimi Balcioglu's work, *Türk Tarihinde Mezhep Cereyanlari*, constitutes a different example in that it is based on a more comprehensive study of publications and has a more objective method than the others in approaching various Alevi and Bektashi communities. According to the writer, who takes up Baha Said thesis that the sects and orders in Anatolia are not originated from the ones in Iran, and that they are related to the old Turkish beliefs and traditions, Turkish society has been trapped in the political conspiracies of Iran, has been wounded deeply by the sects and orders that are gathered under the general rubric of Shi'ism, have been kept backward and distanced from the true and pure faith and doctrines of Islam.<sup>298</sup> The writer also claims that the reason why the Turkish tribal communities have a genuine faith in the *Babalar* (fathers) is that they use the authentic Turkish language.<sup>299</sup>

On the other hand, Balcioglu emphasizes that generally all systems of faith and religious practices vary regionally, stating, "the system of faith of each community is merged with its identity." For example, Islam in Iraq is different from Islam in Iran.<sup>300</sup> From the same premise, Balcioglu objects to the general practice of attributing the various elements in Anatolian sects to shamanism: "We do not know for sure that the concept of *melamet*," one of the most important

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<sup>298</sup> Balcioglu, *Türk Tarihinde Mezhep Cereyanlari*, pp. 18-19 and 226.

<sup>299</sup> Ibid., p. 186. The writer who opposes Köprülü and Yörükkan on the ground that they try to relate *Tahtacilik* and *Kizilbaslik* to Shamanism (pp. 265-266, footnote no.15), stands closer to Ziya Gökalp's thesis that the Turks' religion should be called "Tuyonism" (p. 109).

<sup>300</sup> Ibid., p. 107.

elements of Anatolian mysticism, was present in Shamanism too.”<sup>301</sup> This attitude of the writer is also clear in his naming and classification of various *Alevi*/Bektashi communities in terms of their geographical location. Although he does not refer to a certain classification or categorization system in his work, he still uses terms like the European form of Bektashism or *Alevilik* in Kurdistan.

The narratives of Bektashi writers:

Two works written by Bektashi writers in this period are especially important: Vahit Lutfi Salci’s *Gizli Türk Dini Oyunlari* (The Secret Religious Games of Turks), which was published in 1941, will be discussed in the next publication category. M. Tevfik Oytan’s two-volume work *Bektasiligin İçyüzü-Dibi-Kösesi-Yüzü ve Astari Nedir?* was written on account of the need for a “truthful/faithful” report by someone from within the community, the teachings of the Alevis/Bektashis, which have been misunderstood because they have been kept hidden for ages by the Alevi/Bektashi communities. Tevfik Oytan had attended *cems* and participated in religious practices from his early childhood. In this work, which he started to write after he retired from his official post, he dealt with all kinds of organizations and practices in the Bektashi culture and faith, and also described in detail the *semahs* with which he was acquainted. *Bektasiligin İçyüzü* is an important work referred to very often by researchers who work on *semahs*. It has also been utilized, without receiving credit, since it was first published, in the popular studies of *Alevilik*. The double structure of the first group of publications,

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<sup>301</sup> Ibid., p. 266.

which differentiated the data and observations from the personal evaluations of the writer, can be seen in this work, too. The writer admits in general that Bektashis are both Turkish and Muslim people and adopts a simple and clear way of discussion. For example, in describing the rituals, *semahs* and various other elements related to these, he does not try to establish connections between “Turkishness” and Islam.

As stated earlier, in this group of publications, the *semah* narratives are also strongly related to the constructed the Alevi/Bektashi identity. The only exception from this point of view is Oytan, who also differs from other writers in religious identity. Although he does not disagree with the attempts to establish a connection between the Bektashism/*Alevilik* and “Turkishness” and Islam, Oytan does not commit himself to establish these connections either. This is also in line with his aim of explaining the real nature of Bektashism/*Alevilik*. He tries to introduce the kind of Bektashism/*Alevilik* he himself knows.

The last group of publications of the period 1920-1950 that will be studied include those publications that consider *semah* a dance. Below, this group will be introduced briefly.

#### The Alevi Identity and *Semah* Discourse in Publications that Consider *Semah* a Dance

An important tendency that especially marked the 1940s was the study of *semahs* by folklorists. The most important difference of the studies in this group of publications, which again used field studies as the main source of information, is that they treated *semahs* as a form of folkdance separate from rituals. Halil Bedi

Yönetken's articles and Vahit Lutfi Salci's book *Gizli Türk Oyunlari* can be given as examples. These are also the works which have been referred to in every kind of studies on *semahs*. Salci's work is especially deemed important by every researcher in this field.

Yönetken participated in fourteen of the official collections compiled by the Ministry of National Education during 1937-1952 (1937-38, 1941-1952) for the Folklore Archives of the Ankara State Conservatory, and published some of his notes as articles in the same period. Some of these articles are directly on *semahs*. In addition, in the notes to compilations about regions like Tunceli, Tokat, where the *Alevi*s population was quite dense, he gives extensive space to *semahs*.<sup>302</sup>

Salci's knowledge on *semahs*, depends not on similar compilation studies but on research and personal experience. The writer, who was also a folklorist and himself was Bektashi, focused on the *semah* dances and music, especially of the Bektashi communities living in Thrace. Since he was a member of the community, he had access to the *semahs* that were not shown to foreigners. Thus, his study is a rich source of information in terms of the different kinds of *semahs* and their technical elements. However, although he came from within the community, his treatment of *semahs* only as a form of folkdance limited the discussion of the relationship between *semahs* and rituals.

It is interesting that the folklorists who studied *semahs* in the 1920-50 period treated *semahs*, which were not yet known by the public, as relatively

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<sup>302</sup> The writer republished these articles together under the title *Derleme Notlari-I* in 1966 (Istanbul: Orkestra Yayinlari).

separate from rituals.<sup>303</sup> However, such treatment weakened the ties between *semahs* and the religious practices of the Alevis. As a result of this, *Alevilik* started to be accepted by the public because its marginality was reduced and had undergone a degeneration of identity. *Semahs* kept folklorists busy for a long time during this period when the nationalistic motives were very strong, as an important branch of “Anatolian Turkish Folk Dances.” Having made this generalization, it should be pointed out that the two writers, one Sunni one Bektashi, show differences in their approach to the definitions of *semahs*. These differences, which have important implications in the discussion of Alevi-Bektashi identity, will be mentioned in the following section.

Up to this point, we have tried to introduce briefly in three main groups the publications that included the texts we will be dealing with in the analysis of the discourses related to the rituals and *semahs*. In the following sections of this study, we will try to explore the *semah* texts (*semahs*, the Alevi rituals that included *semahs* and various other elements related to *semahs*) in these publications, discussing the discourse of the writers and evaluating their references to Alevi identity.

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<sup>303</sup> The first example of the public *semah* performances is started in Hacı Bektas (Hacı Bektas, Karacahöyük) commemoration ceremonies (second half of the 1960s). However, the audience is still composed of Alevis and *semahs* are an important part of this Alevi ceremony. For example, in the same period, *semahs* were forbidden in the folk dance contests and performances. The organization of *semah* dance groups and the performance of *semahs* as shows is a very recent phenomenon, starting only in 1990, although they had a few prior examples. *Semahs* are still forbidden to participate in contests but it is also clear that they have become more tolerated by the public.

### Analysis of the Narratives that Refer to the Origins of the *Semahs*

Two questions will be dealt within this section. The first and main question is how the *semahs* were interpreted and on what religious doctrines they were based by the Alevis. However, the ritual/*semah* texts published in the period 1920-50 seems to be looking for an answer to another question: Generally, the ethnic origins of the Alevis are emphasized and the rituals and *semahs* are mentioned in relation to the general religious and/or cultural practices of the Alevi communities. In the publications of the period 1920-50, the ethnic origin in question was sought in the Central Asian roots of Turks. This attitude, which is pervasive in the works written during this period, will be returned in the following section, where the narratives about the ethnic origins of the rituals/*semahs* will be discussed. It can be argued that Yörükan and partially Yılmaz are exceptions from this point of view. Yörükan is more interested in explaining that the Tahtaci community used a name which is unrelated to its racial origins and which is different from not only the ones other tribal communities used but also the ones the Alevi communities used. For this reason, he deals with how the Tahtaci and Alevi groups defined themselves and interpreted their rituals. How *semahs* and rituals were interpreted by Alevis will be discussed below in the section on the texts about the religious origins of *semahs*/rituals. Although most writers who published in the period 1920-50 state that Alevis are essentially Islamic people, we should point out that the relationship between *Alevilik* and Islam is not a point that was given importance or sufficiently explored.

### The *Semah* Narratives that Refer to the Ethnic Origins of Alevis

We should first of all point out that ethnicity (Turkishness) was not emphasized to the same degree in all the works on *semahs* and rituals published during the period 1920-1950. The question of ethnic origins gained importance in the works where the data/observations on *semahs* overlapped with discussions on the ethnic origins of the Alevis, while it was given relatively less importance in works in which the two were kept separate. Therefore below, the texts will be analyzed according to how the data and evaluations are related.

(i) The texts in which the data/observations on *semahs* were kept separate from the discussions about the ethnic origins of Alevis: Among the publications we have been studying, in the first (publications on specific Alevi communities) and third groups (publications that consider *semah* a dance), a double structure is generally clear: Only in one or in a couple of sections of these texts, the writer discusses the claim that Alevis are Turkish people, or only gives his personal opinions on the subject. In the rest of the study, the discussions about rituals/*semahs* are provided separate from the former, mostly based on field studies and observations. There is not a strong motivation to bring together these two separate threads of the narrative in these texts. The works of Yörükan, Yılmaz, Atabeyli, and Sevgen from the first group of publications and those of Yönetken and the Alevi writer Salci from the third group can be cited as examples of this point. The work of the Bektashi writer Oytan, which was discussed among the

popular publications that are concerned with Alevilik/Alevis also carries this characteristic.

On the other hand, claims like Sevgen's, "Since they do not crossbreed with other peoples, they (the Tahtaci) have preserved the nobility and beauty of the Turkish race"<sup>304</sup> should be noted, too. Atabeyli, who also worked on the Tahtaci groups, puts emphasis on their ethnicity, not in the discussion of the rituals but when generally defining them generally. According to the writer, the rituals of the Tahtaci "are the practices of Shamanist or older idol-worshipping *totemizm* of Turks, which seem to have been assimilated by Islamic principles under the cover of *Alevilik*."<sup>305</sup> The other two writers, Yörükan and Yılmaz, who also worked on the Tahtaci, do not go beyond simply generally admitting that they are Turks. The Bektashi writer Oytan, who tries to avoid referring to their ethnic origins, on the other hand, still defines Bektashis as a group of people "who, instead of worshipping in churches, praying in mosques or performing rituals in *tekkes*, had converted to Islam while preserving their original Turkish traditions and beliefs"<sup>306</sup>

The Sunni folklorist Yönetken uses a completely technical approach while reporting his compilation notes on the *semahs* of the *Alevi* communities like the Tahtaci, the Abdal, and the Alevis of Ankara. He adopts a different approach in his narrative on the *semahs* of the Kurdish speaking Alevi communities who lived in Tunceli and Mus. Considering all of his articles, we see that while he pays special attention to the regional variations of *semahs* (also, the songs and the rhythm of the music in *semahs*, etc.), he simply makes generalizations in his narrative on the Kurdish speaking Alevis on the grounds of *Alevilik*. It should also be noted that he

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<sup>304</sup> Sevgen, "Tahtacilar," p. 307.

<sup>305</sup> Atabeyli, "Antalya Tahtacilarina Dair Notlar," p. 206.

<sup>306</sup> Oytan, *Bektasiligin İç Yüzü*, p. 59.



emphasizes not only their connection to Turkishness but even their loyalty to the Turkish state:

As we all know, an important percentage of people living in Tunceli is Alevi as in some parts of Anatolia. Thus, there is no great difference between a Hozat, Ovacik or Kalan *semah* melodie and one from Sivas or Tokat. Once, all the *asiks* called *Seyyid* and *Sazbend*, with their authentic ‘Anatolian Turkish’ instrument the *baglama*, used to play and sing the purely Turkish sayings of ‘Anatolian Turkish’ poets like Hatai, Nesimi, Pir Sultan, Kaygisiz Aptal, Harabi, Verani. They used to call these “*Dej*” which clearly means *deyis* (sayings).<sup>307</sup>

“Among all these melodies, the ones that talk about the loyalty of the Mus people to Turkishness, the Republic and the military deserve special attention.”<sup>308</sup>

According to these narratives, the Alevis living the Kurdish speaking regions are considered Turkish “on the basis of *Alevilik*” and it is emphasized that thus they do not constitute a major threat to the regime. Yönetken, in contrast to Firat (who is from Mus-Varto), who claims that Kurdish was acquired later by these communities, does not even mention the fact that they speak Kurdish, and even tries to explain some of the terms like “*dej*”, which are peculiar to this

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<sup>307</sup> “*Bilindigi gibi Tunceli halkinin mühim bir kısmi, Anadolu’nun diger bazı yerlerinde oldugu gibi Alevi’dir. Bu bakımdan bir Hozat, bir Ovacik veya bir Kalan ezgisinin, bir Sivas veya bir Tokat ezgisinden pek farki yoktur.*” “*Vaktiyla bütün Seyyidler ve Sazbend denilen asiklar, sazları hakikî ‘Anadolu Türk’ bağlamaları ile Hatai, Nesimi, Pir Sultan, Kaygisiz Aptal, Horabi, Verani ... gibi ‘Anadolu Türk’ sairlerinin halis Türkçe deyişlerini çalar ve söylemiş. Onlar bunlara “Dej” diyorlar ki tamamen deyiş demektir.*” “Tunceli” *Varlık Dergisi*, no: 276-277 (1944); Yönetken, *Derleme Notları – I*, p. 101.

<sup>308</sup> “*Bütün bu ezgiler arasında Mus’un Türklüğe, Cumhuriyet’e ve orduya bağlılığını terennüm eden ezgiler dikkate sayandır.*” “Mus” / *Varlık Dergisi*, no: 280-281 (1944); Yönetken, *Derleme Notları – I*, p. 108.

regions, as if they are original Turkish words without bothering to find their etymological origins.

The other folklorist, Salci, separates his technical discussion of *semahs* from the section in which he argues that *semahs* are Turkish folk dances. However, Salci, who is a member of the Village Bektashis who lived in Thrace, is more assertive than Yönetken in his claim that the Alevis are Turkish people. Yönetken's insistence on the Turkic roots of the Alevis becomes clear in his notes on Kurdish speaking Alevis. Salci, on the other hand, had motives that are based on his Alevi origins: The rejection of giving priority of to the Mevlevi *semahs* among the Turkish folk dances that originated from Shamanism is an important aspect of Salci's work. It is very important for him to prove that "our national folk dances depend not on Mevlevi dances"<sup>309</sup> but on Alevi *semahs*. Salci seems to be in search of a more privileged position in the secular Turkish state for Alevis that is beyond their own attempts to overcome their inferiority complex. *Semahs* are represented as the national folk dances of Turkey, rather than just the ritualistic dances of the Alevis. However, it should also be pointed out that Salci also stresses the religious aspects of the *Alevilik* and thus has a different attitude from that of the Sunni writer Yönetken. The different approaches of the two folklorists will be discussed later in the following section, on the "*semah* narratives that refer to the religious origins of the Alevis".

To sum up, it can be argued that in the texts in which the data/observations about *semahs* and the discussion on the ethnic origins of the Alevis are kept

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<sup>309</sup> Salci, *Gizli Türk Dini Oyunlari*, p. 44.

separate, there are references to the ethnic origins of the Alevis in relation to *semahs*, sometimes only in a covert way, other times quite obviously. However, it does not change our previous observation that the issue of ethnic origin is emphasized more in the texts in which the data/observations about *semahs* and the discussion on the ethnic origins of the Alevis are not kept separate. Before going on with the discussion of the texts in this second group, we should make it clear that we owe most of the information we have now of the *semahs* performed in the period 1920-50 to the first group of texts in which the data gathered in field study are kept separate from the writers' evaluation.

(ii) The texts in which the data/observations about *semahs* and the discussion on the ethnic origins of Alevis are not separated: Three of the texts that have been discussed in the first group of publications which are concerned with a certain Alevi community can be counted as examples of this group: Baha Said Bey's article "Sofiyân Süregi," in which he discusses the *cem* ritual in general, and Tankut's study on Nusayri community and Firat's work on Varto *Alevis*. The works of the Sunni writers Bardakçi and Samancigil that were discussed above as part of a group of popular publications dealing with Alevis in general also show the characteristics of this group of works.

The first writer to be mentioned from this point of view is Baha Said whose work has been utilized by other writers in the field. The writer who admits that there is no other way but attributing the Alevi and Bektashi rituals (*cem* ceremony) to the Oghuz and Shaman traditions, puts each element of the ritual in correspondence with the Oghuz traditions. In his works, the emphasis on Islam is not very strong although present because, according to him, the Anatolian Alevis

are a people who try to preserve the Oghuz rules and traditions “under the cover of religion.” According to the writer, “both Bektashis and *Sofiyans* openly adopted the *Caferi* sect... However, neither Bektashis nor *Sofiyans* conform to the doctrines of the *Caferi* sect or praying their rituals in accordance with it. Their seeming practice is only a curtain covering their true aims.”<sup>310</sup>

Baha Said’s attitude towards the Alevis and the “curtain” metaphor he uses have appeared frequently in publications, especially in popular ones. It seems that Bardakçi’s description of *semahs* and rituals are directly taken from Baha Said. Samancigil too claims that “the roots of Bektashism are in the Turkish traditions”<sup>311</sup> and defines Bektashism as “a version of our old religion Shamanism.”<sup>312</sup>

Firat, who also uses the metaphor of “curtain” in his narrative on the Kurdish speaking Alevis of Varto, repeats the words “Turk” and “Turkish” more than any other writer does:

Although the *Alevis* who have been distanced from the Turkish culture and national feelings and had to start speaking *Zaza* or *Kurmanç* still consider the Turkish language, faith and rituals as sacred, and have preserved the various sayings and songs which are present in Bektashi culture now, the organization of *cem* rituals, and many Turkish traditions that came from Shamanism, ... from foreign words influence.<sup>313</sup>

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<sup>310</sup> Baha Said Bey, “Sofiyân Süreği-Kızılbaş Meydani,” and also Nejat Birdogan, ed., *İttihat-Terakki’nin Alevilik Bektasilik Arastirmasi*, pp. 30-31.

<sup>311</sup> Samancigil, *Bektasilik Tarihi*, p. 11.

<sup>312</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>313</sup> Firat, *Doğu Illeri ve Varto Tarihi*, p. 49.

Tankut, who worked on the Nusayri and tried to attribute every element of their rituals to Turkish beliefs and traditions, directly uses the “curtain” metaphor through quoting Gordlevski: “the *Aliyyullahilik* in the Karakoyunlu people must be the Islamic version of an old Turkish tradition (*Al-Alev*).” Tankut is with Gordlevski here, “because the Anatolian Alevis respect fire and especially flame (*alev*) and they call Ali as Ali.”<sup>314</sup> To confirm the validity of Tankut’s data is beyond the scope of this study; however, it should be noted that his example here is not among the data provided by other writers we have been studying.

Among the writers whose texts we have been studying in this section, only Yörükan and Yılmaz do not use the “curtain” metaphor. These writers were in search of a “core” source for *Alevilik*/Bektashism and they found it either in the Turkish traditions as in the texts of this period, or in other places like Islam or Anatolian cultures, as we see in the texts of later periods. In fact, the use of this metaphor renders impossible a true understanding of how *Alevilik* was perceived and lived in this period and the dynamics of the Alevi communities because, according to this an already existing core remains unchanged and keeps reappearing under different disguises in sociologically historically different periods. It will be useful to go back to Bardakçi’s approach to exemplify how far the use of this metaphor could go. As was stated earlier, the writer who defines Kizilbas communities as Turks who had to gather secretly to practice their national traditions, beliefs, and laws, comes close to the point of totally rejecting the religious dimensions of the Alevi identity and even tries to persuade the head of the *tekke* of Bektashis. Actually what Bardakçi did was an extreme example of a very common conception of *Alevilik*.

The curtain metaphor in the *semah* narratives of the 1920-1950 period is generally used together with Shamanism: the Alevis converted/had to convert to Islam. However, for them, Islam was only a curtain and according to the texts we are studying, under it you could see the true nature of the Alevis; that is, the beliefs

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<sup>314</sup> Tankut, *Nusayriler ve Nusayrilik Hakkında*, pp. 63-64.

and traditions of the old/Central Asian Turks or simply Shamanism. In these *semah*/ritual narratives there are mainly five points through which they refer to Shamanism: that women take part in the secret rituals of the Alevis, that they drink intoxicating drink, that they have music and dance (especially Turkish sayings), and that they sacrifice animals. As we all know, except for the sacrifice, the other elements are controversial to the Sunni notions of worshipping. However, what is important in the texts that claim that Islam is only a curtain for the Alevis is not this, but that the relationship between *Alevilik* and Shamanism is strongly emphasized.

Confirming the validity of the parallels drawn between *Alevilik* and Shamanism is again beyond the scope of this study. The point we want to draw attention to is that in the texts that emphasize the Turkishness of the Alevis, *semahs* –or other elements of the rituals like dance, women, drink- are related to Shamanism, while in texts that discuss *Alevilik* as an Anatolian tradition, they are related to Anatolian cultures, and in the ones that emphasize the Kurdishness of the *Alevilik*, *semahs* are related to the *Zerdüşt* teachings. All these parallels drawn between *Alevilik* and other cultures, that is, the question of what lies behind the “curtain”, are closely related to how the Alevi identity is defined.

There are two points that have to be explained further in relation to the curtain metaphor. First, the elements related to *semahs* in Alevi rituals have been taken up selectively. For example, the most discussed ones in the 1920-50 period are the quartet women-drink-dance-music (sayings) plus sacrifice. However, not all of the four elements have been included in the discussion of Alevi rituals in all the periods we will be studying. For example, in all of the works of the 1920-50 period, it is stated that drink (*dem*, *bade*) is taken in a ritualistic way in 3/5/7 turns and after that they start the *semahs*. After the *semah*, the performers immediately partake of their drinks. Sometimes, the performers also serve drink to the audience before the performance of the *semah*.

In the 1920-1950 period, the element of intoxicating drink was also taken into consideration by the writers of popular publications who did not do field studies and it was related to the ‘*kimiz*’ rituals of Shamanism. However, in later periods, especially in the studies that emphasized the links between *Alevilik* and Islam, the presence of intoxicating drink in Alevi rituals was denied. Even in these texts, when they want to emphasize the Turkish roots of the Alevis, they still refer to the above-mentioned elements (women, dance, sacrifice, Turkish sayings, etc.) and their relationship with the elements of Shamanist rituals. Thus, to repeat ourselves, the writers who look for a “core” source for Alevi rituals, made selective use of these elements in their discussion of the Alevi rituals.

It should also be pointed out that these elements are not always considered to be “positive” elements by the writers. For example, in the period 1920-50, all the elements like women and drink are considered as positive elements by the writers who emphasized the Turkish roots of the Alevis because these elements strengthened the possibility of the relationship between the Alevis and Shamanism. However, we cannot say that the approaches were always positive for the fire element.

For example, this negative approach towards the fire element/cult is an important factor in the distanced attitude of Samancigil who considered *Alevilik* as a branch of Bektashism. The writer who calls the Zerdüst community “*atesgedeler*” (fire-worshippers) <sup>315</sup> and claims that the essence of *Zerdüstlük* is fire-worshipping, <sup>316</sup> considers *Alevilik* to have originated from *Zerdüstlük* (Iran). This assumption explains that “fire” is important for Alevis (at least for some of them).

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<sup>315</sup> Samancigil, *Bektasilik Tarihi*, pp. 137-141.

<sup>316</sup> For more information on the cult of fire and *Zerdüstlük*, see. A.Y. Ocak, *Bektasi Menakibnamelerinde Islam Öncesi inanç Motifleri*, (Istanbul; Enderun; 1983), pp. 185-186, Also for *Zerdüstlük* p. 45-51.

The writer himself shows his disapproval of this Alevi community by calling them “an ostracized branch of Shi’ism.”<sup>317</sup> However, he does not provide information on the precise constitution of this Alevi community (which tribal or regional communities, etc.) and left the point of whether these people were village Bektashis (Alevi) or not totally unclear. The only information we know about them is that they had respect for the fire cult.

Tankut, on the other hand, in a very different way from Samancigil, underlines the importance of the fire and the sun for all Alevi communities.<sup>318</sup> The ceremony that the writer personally attended and described in his work was organized on the plains of Bingöl. As we have discussed earlier, it was probably a ritual of the Alevi Zazas. While describing this ritual, he says, “there should have been a fire in the middle of this circle. It was evident from their gestures when they gathered close to each other facing the center that they were addressing the fire and when they opened up facing the sky that they were addressing the sun.”<sup>319</sup> It is impossible to take his comment seriously as it was only a ceremony specially organized for him (a stranger) and the fire was nonexistent. What draws our attention to the possibility that fire and sun were important motifs is that he emphasized these motifs more than any other writer did. In contrast to Samancigil, is Tankut, who sees the fire cult as a positive element relates the Ali cult to Alev

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<sup>317</sup> Samancigil, p. 141.

<sup>318</sup> Tankut, *Nusayriler ve Nusayrilik Hakkında*, p. 63.

<sup>319</sup> Ibid., pp. 48-49.



(fire) cult and tries to prove that this cult has connections to the old Turkish cultures and religions.<sup>320</sup>

If we try to sum up, we can say that the “curtain” metaphor that we see frequently in the texts of the period 1920-1950, or the search for a “core” source for *Alevilik* is closely related to the question of Alevi identity. Our point can be summarized in the following formulation: Alevi rituals= Shaman rituals preserved behind the “curtain” of Islam” in relation to the parallels drawn between Alevis and Central Asian Turks on the basis of *semahs*. The elements that are taken as points of reference in the establishment of these parallels are drink, women, dance, music and sacrifice. Cult of fire, on the other hand, is mentioned only in a few texts and not always with a “positive” attitude. They sometimes highlight the presence of this cult, other times they just deny its existence to legitimate *Alevilik*. It sometimes even led the writers to make twisted definitions of *Alevilik*.

For example, in Tankut’s narrative, fire is considered as a positive element because in the same texts, it is argued that fire was very important in old Turkish cultures and for this reason, the presence of the fire cult strengthens the proposition that Alevi rituals are equivalents of the old Turkish rituals.

In Samancgil’s narrative, however, the fire cult is considered a negative element because although the writer tries to explain *Alevilik* in relation to Turkishness, he does not do the same for the fire cult found in rituals. There are two reasons for this: First, he relates the fire cult to the teachings of Zerdüst and the influence of Iran. In the period 1920-50, when it was claimed that *Alevilik* originated in Turks and that it represented a form of Islam that was refined from Arabic and Persian

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<sup>320</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 63-64; and also pp. 48-49.

influences, to suggest that *Alevilik* showed Persian influence would conflict with the positive approach to *Alevilik*. The second reason could be that the rituals of Kurdish speaking Alevis showed great similarities to the rituals of Alevis living in Iran and the Zerdüst teachings had more influence on Kurdish Alevis. Thus, admitting the presence of the fire cult would mean admitting the existence of Kurdish Alevis, who were not mentioned in the publications of this period. However, since we do not know the extent of the writer's knowledge on this point, we cannot claim that this was the real reason for his hesitation to admit the presence of the fire cult. In conclusion, Samancgil's classification of the Alevi communities on the basis of the fire cult, and his adoption of a negative attitude (an ostracized branch of Bektashism) towards Alevis who respected this cult without clearly stating who these Alevi communities are, should be related to loss of respect for the general proposition that *Alevilik* is a peculiarly Turkish system of faith.

We do not see the fire cult in Baha Said's narratives. However, he finds the Dersim Ocagi rituals similar to Yezidi rituals and has an attitude different from the other two writers in his approach to the variation of rituals. He puts the Dersim Ocagi outside of *Alevilik*; as the Dersim Ocagi is considered more Rafizi than the others and follows the Yezidi codes of rituals, it constitutes a separate type and sect.<sup>321</sup> Baha Said Bey was one of the most important people who helped establish the proposition of *Alevilik* = Turkishness. In the field studies he conducted, he found out that the Dersim Alevis were Kurdish.<sup>322</sup> Since he claimed that all Alevis are Turkish people, and those who are not Turkish could not be Alevis, he put the

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<sup>321</sup> Baha Said Bey, "Sofıyan Süregi-Kızılbas Meydani" and also Nejat Birdogan, ed., *İttihat-Terakki'nin Alevilik Bektasilik Arastirmasi*, p. 32.

<sup>322</sup> See Baha Said, "Anadolu'da Gizli Mabetler-VI" and "Anadolu'da Gizli Mabetler-III".

Dersim Alevis outside of *Alevilik* as a separate group. In fact, Tankut and Samancigil adopted the same view. The point where Baha Said differed from them was that he openly reported that he had found Alevi communities that were not Turkish, and he did not try to either prove that they were Turkish (like Tankut) or include them in *Alevilik* through twisted definitions (like Samancigil's "Turkish form of *Alevilik* in Bektasilik").

### The *Semah* Narratives that Refer to the Religious Origins of the Alevis

Throughout the 1920-1950 period, authors attempted to relate Alevi rituals and *semahs* to different ethnic cultures while their religious aspects and how they were interpreted by the Alevis were considered of secondary importance. We can formulate the widely accepted view of *Alevilik* in the period in relation to rituals/*semahs* as "Alevi rituals = Shaman (or Turkish) rituals preserved behind the "curtain" of Islam." This view denies the existence of a system of faith that can be called "*Alevilik*" to a great extent. This approach emphasizes the Shamanist elements again even when it accepts the religious dimension of *Alevilik* by referring to the Alevi's ethnicity. The relationship between *Alevilik* and Islam, however, could not be explained sufficiently because, taking the "curtain" metaphor as the point of reference, it is assumed that *Alevilik* only superficially resembles Islam. However, this suggestion of superficial resemblance contradicts itself because the elements of women, drink, and music, which are taken as the basis in the formulation of this theory, conflict with Sunni Islam. They attempted to overcome such contradictions created by this hypothesis through the argument that

*Alevilik* is a peculiarly Turkish form of Islam refined from the Arabic and Persian influences, as mentioned above in the analysis of Samancigil's discussion of Alevi rituals. However, when we scrutinize it carefully, we see that this discussion is also based on ethnicity.

Consequently, in the ritual/*semah* narratives of the 1920-50 period, many characteristics of Alevi culture that did not have ethnic connotations were disregarded and thus the point of how Alevis interpreted the rituals and beliefs they practiced, and also the theological aspects of *Alevilik* were not included in the discussion themselves.

At this point we will take into consideration the works written in the same period that tend to remain outside the generalization that have been made above. First of all, we will consider the works of Yörükan conducted on the Tahtaci communities. The importance of this work, which has already been mentioned above, in relation to the point we are discussing here is that he draws attention to the fact that the Tahtaci adopted a name which is not related to any tribal communities, including the *Alevi* communities. The second point is the myth of the *kirkklar meclisi* (the assembly of the forty). Writers like Salci and Firat bring this myth into the discussion as it constituted a major basis of speculation about the religious origins of Alevi rituals/*semahs*. Yörükan, who conducted interviews with Alevis, also mentions this myth. Last, the different definitions of two folklorists, one Bektashi (Salci) and one Sunni (Yönetken) in relation to *semahs* and the references they make to the Alevi identity through these definitions will be taken into consideration.

*Ocaks* in *Alevilik*/Bektashism:

Like the other writers discussed above, Yörükan admits that the Tahtaci communities are Turkish (from a pure Turcoman tribe of the Turks).<sup>323</sup> However, in his later discussion of the various material and metaphysical elements of their culture, he does not attempt to relate each one of them to the elements of Central Asian/Turkish cultures. Yörükan questions the fact that the Tahtaci adopted a name that is not related to any tribal communities, including the Alevi communities. In this context, he pays special attention to the comparison of each element and step in the rituals of the Alevi and Tahtaci communities.

Yörükan's work brings an important point to discussion: In the period 1920-50, when it was claimed that all Alevi-Bektashi communities in Anatolia belonged to the Hacı Bektas Ocagi, he rejected this very strongly by arguing that the Tahtaci communities did not belong there. We should point out that other writers like Atabeyli, Yılmaz and Sevgen, who worked on the Tahtaci groups after Yörükan, also pointed out the same observation. However, there are explicit differences in the attitude of Yörükan and Yılmaz and that of others. Sevgen and Atabeyli

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<sup>323</sup> Desterci, *Yusuf Ziya Yörükan ve Tahtacılar*, p.4. Also, Yörükan states that some The Tahtaci have Iran passports or Abdal identity certificates. The fact that he interviewed many Alevis, Alevi *dedes* and also the Turkish ambassador to Iran of the period Ali Rıza Bey, and that he reports the findings of these interviews clearly, and that he compares them in his work shows that he was trying to be as scientific as possible in conducting his researches. In his narrative, it is also stated that some of the Tahtacis (about 150 family) still lived in Iran (towards the end of 1920s when this research was conducted). For details, see volume 12 and 13 of *DİFM* where some parts of this research were published. The subsection about Çaylak Oymağı is especially important.

obscure the observed difference by referring to it within the context of the relativity. For example, Atabeyli comments that “they were never truly loyal to the Hacı Bektas Ocagi either.”<sup>324</sup> However, Yilmaz strongly emphasizes that the Tahtacis differ from other Alevi communities in their devotion to *ocaks*. After naming the two *ocaks* to which the Tahtaci communities belonged to (Yanyatirogullari and Emirogullari), he clearly states that “there are no other *ocaks* for them superior or inferior to these two.”<sup>325</sup>

Yörükan, on the other hand, argues that it was not only the Tahtaci who had different *ocaks*; there were many other Alevi communities who belonged to a different *ocak* than Hacı Bektas. He exemplifies these different communities with data from his field studies. He also criticizes those who claim that all *Alevi* communities belonged to the Hacı Bektas Ocagi: “those who could not admit the vast and profound influence of the movement claim that these communities found their true self in the Hacı Bektas Ocagi and they thought that the various Alevi tribes and communities satisfied their religious needs only in the Hacı Bektas Ocagi.” The writer, who claims that this misconception results from the lack of ethnographic information, adds: “The data I have collected prove these two observations incorrect and showed that the Hacı Bektas Ocagi is not the only center of *Alevilik* in Anatolia and Rumeli. Among the Alevi communities in question, there are many people who have not even heard the name of this *ocak*, or who do

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<sup>324</sup> Atabeyli, “Antalya Tahtacilarina Dair Notlar,” p. 211.

<sup>325</sup> Yilmaz, *Tahtacilarda Gelenekler*, p. 17.

not know what it means to other Alevis.”<sup>326</sup> Yörükan gives several examples in his narrative. Among the examples, he cites the names of the Çelebi Alevis and Bektashi *Babalari*, who wanted to influence them, or those who expelled the ones who did not belong to the same *ocak* with them, and those who did not even know the name of the Hacı Bektas Veli Ocagi.

There are two major implications of the claim that the Hacı Bektas Ocagi is not the only center of *Alevilik* in relation to the religious dimension of *Alevilik*: First, attributing a single center for all the Alevi communities is related to the question of ethnicity because, as has been pointed out earlier, both the person of Hacı Bektas and the Bektashi Ocagi are historically connected to Turks and the Ottoman policies of promoting Islam and Turkishness by the authors. Thus, the claim that all Alevi communities belong to Hacı Bektas Ocagi seems to be closely related to the assumptions that Alevis are Turks and *Alevilik* is a Turkish form of Islam. Yörükan, as he positions himself away from the ethnicity-based approaches, does not seem to be interested in this dimension of the question.

The second implication Yörükan draws our attention to is that the rituals of communities that belong to different *ocaks* also differ from each other. However, for Yörükan, these are only data and he warns the reader:

In order to get an in-depth knowledge of the history of *Alevilik*, we need to do more research on Turkish tribes before the

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<sup>326</sup> Yörükan writes that “hareketin bu kadar geniş ve derin etkilerini kabul edemeyenler, bu toplulukların sonunda benliğini Hacı Bektas Ocagi’nda bulduğunu, çeşitli Türk asiret ve oymaklarının dini gereksinimlerini ancak Hacı Bektas Ocagi’nin doyurduğunu sanmışlardır.” He adds: “Elde ettiğim bilgi bu iki kanının da kusurlu olduğunu gösterdi ve anlaşıldı ki, Anadolu’da ve Rumeli’de Aleviliğin merkezi yalnız Hacı Bektas Ocagi değildir. Buralarda bulunan Alevi toplulukları içinde Hacı Bektas Ocagi’ni bilmeyenler, adını isitip ne dedikini anlamayanlar çoktur.” Taken from year 5, no: 19 of *DİFM* where this series of research was published. Also in Desdereci, p. 106.

migration and what kinds of processes these Turkish tribes went through during the period of their conversion to Islam. Just as the views about the unity of the *ocaks* and centers are varied, the differences between them indicate the necessary in accordance of the traditions and manners. In that case, the variations seen in rituals and *semahs* should not be surprising to us.<sup>327</sup>

In fact, Yörükan provides important data showing the variety in *Alevilik* thanks to his emphasis on the data he collected about these communities which have maintained the quality of being closed communities to a great extent. Instead of drawing certain conclusions from his own data, Yörükan underlines the fact that further research is needed in the field. Thus, Yörükan's field studies on the Tahtacı and other Alevi communities still have an important and privileged place among the works published in the period 1920-50, as they helped open to discussion of the religious dimension of *Alevilik* and how Alevis practiced it.

Actually, it is quite clear that Baha Said was also aware of the variations on the basis of *ocaks*. In some of the articles he wrote in 1919 he refers to this point and mentions several differences himself. According to Baha Said, the real difference is between the *Tarikat-i Bektasiyye* (Bektashi order) and the *Sufiyân* branch (communities like, or as the writer puts it, all Turkish Alevi communities in

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<sup>327</sup> “*Alevilik tarihinin aydınlatılması için Türk oymaklarının göçünden önceki devirlerin incelenmesine ve göç zamanında Türklerin Müslümanlığa ilk girdikleri zamanlarda geçirdikleri dini asamaların saptanmasına muhtaç olduğumuzu açıkça anlıyoruz. Ocakların ve merkezlerinin köklerinin birliği hakkındaki ilkelerin çeşitliliğinin gösterdiği gibi, adap ve törenin gerekli uyumsuzluklarını da gösterir. Su halde ayinlerde ve cemde gördüğümüz değişiklikler bizi artık sasırtmayacaktır.*” Ibid., p. 107. For more information on which communities belonged to which *ocaks*, see Yörükan, pp. 105-108. *DİFM*, year: 5, no: 19 (1931): 66-80.



Anatolia). The differences between the Bektashi order and other Alevi communities in Turkey and the fact that they do not like each other are also pointed out by Yörükan. It is important that they drew attention to this point too because in most texts about Alevis, especially the ones in popular publications, this difference is disregarded and the Bektashis and other Alevi communities are treated either as a homogeneous group or on the basis of some unclear criteria which are removed from the scientific method. This attitude is not only peculiar to the period 1920-50, as discussed in relation to popular publications above, and is seen even in recent publications. Thus, the studies of Baha Said and Yörükan yield very important data on this issue.

On the other hand, Baha Said Bey includes his personal interpretation of the data too in the assessment of certain points. The Hacı Bektas Ocagi is among these points. He finds out that the *dede ocaks* of the Çepni and Tahtaci communities are in different places. However, he reports this finding in a twisted and self-contradictory way: “Like the Tahtacis, the Çepnis too consider themselves to belong to the *Ocak* of Hacı Bektas. The *ocak* of the Tahtaci is in Izmir (Narlidere) while the *ocak* of the Çepni is in Gaziantep (Ayıntap).”<sup>328</sup> According to his statement, these two communities eventually seem to belong to the Hacı Bektas Ocagi. However, they have other *ocaks* too and how this could happen is not clarified by the writer.

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<sup>328</sup> “Çepniler kendilerini Tahtacılar gibi Hacı Bektas Ocagi’nin bağlilarından sayar. Tahtacılar’ın dede ocagi Izmir’de “Narlidere”de olduğu gibi, Çepnilerin de ocagi Ayıntap (Gaziantep)’tedir.” Baha Said Bey, “Anadolu’da Gizli Mabetler-V”.

The *Kirklar Meclisi* narratives:

Among the narratives of Alevi rituals and *semahs* published in the period 1920-50, the first person to mention the myth of the “*kirklar meclisi*” is Yörükan.<sup>329</sup> It is also mentioned in works written by Alevis in the 1940s.<sup>330</sup> It is argued that the Alevis attribute the *cem* ritual to the assembly of the forty in origin and their *semahs* to the first *semah* (*kirklar semahi*) of the forty. As will be seen later, the “*Kirklar meclisi*” is pointed out with more emphasis and greater frequency in the academic and popular texts after the 1950s. There are different versions of this myth which constitutes the basis of various elements of rituals like drinking (*dem* or *bade*), the presence of women, *semah* performances, the equality and fairness with which all the participants are treated, and it is also mentioned frequently on various occasions, including the oral history interviews carried out for this study.

It is certain that the myth of the *Kirklar Meclisi* did not emerge with Yörükan’s study in the 1920s. This particular *cem* ceremony is mentioned in Alevi sayings composed hundreds of years ago and also in *Miraciyes*. Apart from these, the *Buyruk* (the orders of Imam Cafer that appear in one document) also provides ample information about this ritual.<sup>331</sup> Thus, the myth of the “*kirklar meclisi*” has

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<sup>329</sup> In the first article of Yörükan’s *IDIFM* series “Anadolu’da Aleviler ve Tahtacılar,” he narrates the *kirklar cemi* reported by an Alevi Father. no: 8, 1928.

<sup>330</sup> Salci, p. 18; Firat, p. 69.

<sup>331</sup> This document has several editions today. As an example of better one, see Sefer Aytekin, ed., *Buyruk (Imam Cafer Buyruğu)* (Ankara: Ayyıldız Yayınları, 1967), p. 157.

hundreds of years of history behind it. What makes Yörükan's work important in this process is that he was the first to utilize this myth as part of the data to interpret the rituals and *semahs* in relation to the general system of belief of the Alevis. (In the following part, the developments about this myth will be discussed in the context of the period 1920-1950.)

First of all, we should point out that we do not have sufficient information as to which Alevi communities and to what extent knew *Buyruk*. Again, we do not know whether the myth of the "*kirkklar meclisi*" was acknowledged by all the communities mentioned here. We can attribute this to two factors: In the 120-50 period, the writers were more interested in the ethnic aspects of *Alevilik* than in the religious ones; also, the people who were interviewed in the field studies might not have considered the "*kirkklar meclisi*" important enough or as the basis for rituals and *semahs*. It is also possible that it was among the parts of their teachings that were not disclosed to people who did not belong to the community.

The second point is that while this myth is related to the presence of music, women, and dance in the rituals, it also has an Islamic undertone because the names cited among the forty are Muhammed, Ali, and Fatma, and the ceremony takes place on the night of Muhammed's elevation to Mirac. Thus, the fact that the authors or Alevis started to refer to it more frequently might be a result of the discussions of *Alevilik* within the context of Islam, outside or beside the framework of Turkisness. This makes more sense from a historical point of view because we know that in the democratization process, especially in the 1950s, the attitude towards Islam started to change and *Alevilik* started to be discussed in relation to

Sunni Islam. The real focus of research on this issue should be which version of this myth is commonly accepted in which region or at what point in history. However, the available data on this are not enough to allow evaluation. For example, in the version Yörükan reports, there is a clear emphasis that Ali is himself God. This emphasis has waned recently. Again, in Yörükan's report, it is stated that on his way back from Mirac, Muhammed meets the forty and joins them. According to *Buyruk*, on his way back from Mirac, Muhammed knocks on the door of the forty, however, he is not taken in because he answers the question "who are you?" with "I am the prophet." Allah (that is, Ali) helps Muhammed to give the right answer to get in. In an interview we have conducted for this study however, the person who helps Muhammed is a "dede" (old man) in a green *kaftan* and headpiece, which is more connected with the Sunni images of the helper.

Thus, the *Kirklar* narrative contains similar figures as those in the Islamic faith and history although there is no one to one correspondence between them. Although this narrative is referred increasingly after the 1940s as the source of the rituals and ceremonies, we do not have enough information to conclude that it constitutes firm enough grounds to establish links between *Alevilik* and Islam. Moreover, it seems that today what is more important is not that the myth of the *kirklar meclisi* is referred to but in what way it is mentioned or to which version is referred.

Lastly, we want to point out that it is also important who reports this myth in the publications of the 1920-50 period. As has been mentioned earlier, Yörükan was interested in the religious side of *Alevilik*. What is more interesting is that apart from Yörükan, only Alevi writers were interested in this dimension of *Alevilik*. Salci discusses it in detail and claims that it is the reason Alevis perform

*semahs* in their rituals. However, following this claim, he comments that the “‘*Horasan erenleri*’ were very successful in presenting their new religion Islam to Turks who were obliged to accept Islam as if it was totally compatible with their old religion.”<sup>332</sup> According to this narrative, Alevi rituals are nothing but their old traditions, which they have been practicing under the cover of Islam and that the myth of “*kirkklar cemî*” is an element connecting these older traditions with Islam. Firat, who was from Varto, on the other hand, says that only the “*cem* ceremony, *dem*, and conversation and love are the elements remaining from the forty (*kirkklar*).”<sup>333</sup>

Depending on these data alone, it is not possible to claim that the Alevi writers we have been discussing took up this myth just to emphasize the religious connections of *Alevilik*. However, it is still clear that this myth is especially common among Alevi communities.

The *semah* narratives that define the *semahs* in relation to ritual dances:

The folklorist Yönetken’s claim that *semahs* are not religious dances but only sectarian dances caused a serious debate:

Anatolian Turkish folk dances do not consist only of dances that are performed in public to an audience and known by everyone. *Semahs*, which have been performed secretly in closed circles by

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<sup>332</sup> “*Mecburi Islam olan Türklere yeni dîni, bu suretle Türklerin tipki eski adetlerine uygun olarak gösteren “Horasan erenleri” bunda çok muvaffak olmuslardır.*” Salci, *Gizli Türk Dini Oyunlari*, pp. 18-19.

<sup>333</sup> “*Ayin-i cem, dem ve muhabbet, ask, kirklardan kalmaz.*” Firat, *Doğu Illeri ve Varto Tarihi*.

Alevi communities living in Anatolia for hundreds of years, are also among Anatolian Turkish folk dances. However, these dances are not just religious dances like others; they have other musical qualities as well. Although there are some who call *semahs* religious Turkish dances, as there is no such thing as religious dance in Sunni Turkish Islam, it might be understood that these “religious Turkish dances” are Islamic dances performed in the mosques, which do not exist, we should rather call these dances “sectarian dances” instead of “religious Turkish dances.” If only *Alevilik* would be understood in the case of Turkish religion, then we could properly call the Alevi *sema*’s as the “Turkish religious dances.” However, *Alevi sema*’s are not “religious” but “sectarian”, that is, they are not religious but sectarian.<sup>334</sup>

However, the Bektashi researcher Vahit Lutfi Salci disagrees with Yönetken, arguing that they do not have to be performed in mosques for *semahs* to be considered religious dances and that it is more important that their subjects and contents are religious are more important.<sup>335</sup>

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<sup>334</sup> “Anadolu Türk halk oyunları, yalnız herkesin gözü önünde, her yerde oynanan ve herkesçe bilinen oyunlardan ibaret değildir. Anadolu Türk halkından Alevi olanların kendi aralarında yüzlerce yıldan beri gizli olarak oynadıkları Sema’lar da Anadolu Türk halk oyunlarından. Yalnız bu oyunlar, ötekiler gibi salt dini olmayıp sözleri ve ezgileri bakımından özel bir mahiyet arzederler. Onlara Türk dinî oyunları diyenler varsa da esas sünnî İslam Türkinde dinî raks bulunmadığına göre dinî Türk halk oyunları denildiği zaman İslam mâbedi olan camide oynanan bir takım islâmî oyunlar hatıra gelebileceğinden, bir cami oyunu da mevcut olmadığından biz oyunlara “Türk dinî oyunları oyunları” demeyip “sectaire oyunlar – mezhebî oyunlar” demeyi daha uygun buluyoruz. Türk dini denince yalnız alevilik anlaşılsaydı, o zaman alevi sema’larını Türk dinî oyunu diye anmak doğru olabilirdi. Halbuki Alevi sema’ları “religieux” değil “sectaire”dir, yani dinî değil, mezhebîdir.” Halil Bedi Yönetken, “Anadolu Türk Halk Oyunlarından Köy Alevi Sema’ları”, *Varlık Dergisi*, no: 268-269 (1944), p. 444.

<sup>335</sup> “The reporter’s opinion that these dances cannot be called “Religious” because they are not performed in mosques is not necessarily right. Who says that for a practice or rule to be considered “Religious” it should be practiced in mosques? If not in mosques, it is in tekkes. The important thing is that their content is religious. If not, there might appear people who want to call them by orders. However, it is not enough to call them “*tariki*” because orders have many branches... Then, it would be called by branches, which is an absurd idea. As this literature, music and dances originated in Islam, it is useless to classify them according to periods or

This discussion provides us with some clues in relation to the Alevi identity when it is considered in terms of the identities of the opposing sides and in the context of its own period. It seems that the real problem is not whether *semahs* are religious or sectarian dances but whether the Alevis constitute a marginal community in a society which is mostly made up of Sunni population; this is what the two sides do not even mention. In Yönetken's article, when the word "religion" is used, it is clear that it refers to Sunni Islam which was considered the "official" religion of state because he emphasizes the points that there is no Islamic dance and *semahs* are not performed in mosques. However, the dances of such orders as the Rufai, Kadiri, Sadi, Bedevi, Halveti, Celveti, etc., are put in this category since they are considered "only religious dances." It is interesting that these orders are Sunni orders. It is also emphasized that they are not only Turkish orders. The writer has a negative attitude towards these orders because of the ethnic origins of their members of these orders. We can summarize his conclusions as: Alevi *semahs* are acknowledged because they are products of Turkish culture. However, *Alevilik* is a "different" sect in Turkey where Sunni Islam is the most widely accepted form, thus, the Alevi dances should actually be considered as sectarian dances.

It is not surprising that the Bektashi writer Vahit Lutfi Salci strongly disagreed with Yönetken, although he was with Yönetken in attributing the Bektashi-Alevi dances (and these communities) to "Shamanism" and "old Turkish traditions." The social acceptability of the Alevis and Bektashis has always been

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regions. They are of course "religious." Salci, "Anadolu Türk Halk Oyunlarından Alevi Sema'ları".

questioned, however, this questioning and took place on different grounds depending on the writer and period and the identity of the sides. The 1940s is an important period when attempts were made to legitimize the Alevi/Bektashi on the grounds that they are “Turkish” people. In addition, the authors attempted to prove that these communities are not “perverted” in terms of religion. In this context, Yönetken’s attitude seems to be a challenging one. As stated earlier, the writer tends to acknowledge Alevis/Bektashis on the grounds that they are Turkish while he keeps them separate from the officially accepted Sunni Islam. From this point of view, Alevis and Bektashis are marginal groups.

In summary, considering the *semahs* narratives belonging to the 1920-1920 period, it can be concluded that the paradigm of national identity was taken as an important measure for the Alevi identity. In this period, the Alevi identity was shaped on the basis of Turkish ethnicity. This attitude emerged in two different forms: The first and the most widely seen form was to refer to Central Asian/old Turkish cultures and traditions through *semahs* and rituals. There were also attempts to present *Alevilik* as a peculiarly Turkish form of Islam that refined Arabic and Persian influences. The *semahs*/rituals are used to exemplify this hypothesis. However, this second attitude too essentially corresponds to an ethnic-based definition of religion.

These attitudes are generally expressed with a “curtain” metaphor in the narratives of the 1920-1950 period. The Alevis submitted/converted to Islam. However, for them Islam was only a “curtain” and behind this curtain, the true nature of *Alevilik* was preserved; that is, the beliefs and traditions of old Turkish/Central Asian Turkish people, or only Shamanism as representing these. In



these *semah*/ritual narratives, there are five main elements through which the writers refer to Shamanism: The presence of women in the secret ceremonies of the Alevis, the drinking, dancing, music (especially Turkish *deyis*) and sacrifice. As we know, apart from sacrifice, the other elements contradict the Sunni conception of ritual. However, in these texts where it is emphasized that Islam is only a “curtain” for the Alevis, the important point is actually just to highlight the relationship between *Alevilik* and Shamanism.

To conclude, in the 1920-1950 period, various characteristics of *Alevilik*, which did not have ethnic connotations were disregarded, and thus the important points of how the Alevis themselves interpreted these beliefs and ritual ceremonies and the theology of *Alevilik* were kept out of the scope of the narratives.

The Representation of the Alevi Identity in the *Semah* Texts of the  
1950-1980 Period

General Presentation of the Publications

*The Alevi Identity and Semah Discourse in the Publications About Specific  
Alevi Communities*

As in the 1920-1950 period, in the 1950-1980 period too, the studies that dealt with specific Alevi community utilized field study and adopted a folklorist approach. However, as will be discussed below, there are differences in terms of the communities studied, the emphasis on *semahs*, and the references made to the Alevi identity.

The communities studied:

It has already been stated that the most widely studied community in the 1920-1950 period was the Tahtacis while there were works on various Turcoman Alevi communities, and other communities like the Nusayris, Ehî-i Hakks, or Dersim Alevis who were connected to different ethnic cultures. The studies in the 1950-1980 period, on the other hand, are almost exclusively on the Tahtacis. The most important reason for conducting research on all the Alevi communities in the previous period had been the strongly felt need to collect data on all Alevi communities. It was because all different ethnic and religious communities, including the Alevis and Bektashis, were taken into consideration, as was discussed in the previous section, to solve the problem of national identity. However, towards

the end of the single-party period, the question had more or less been settled as the state had already collected enough data on which to establish the national identity.

For this reason, they needed to focus on communities that required immediate attention. On the other hand, there were remarkable changes in the cultural policies of the state. Arzu Öztürkmen's observations on folklore studies are also valid for folklore studies that focus on various Alevi communities: "In the first years of the Republic and in the single-party regime period, the underlying reason for the interest in folklore is the need to 'accumulate data regarding a country' and to keep the circulating information under control." She points out that this trend underwent some change starting from the 1950s:

The DP government did not attempt to simultaneously distribute the accumulated ideological data that had been sent to the center by local organizations like the *Halkevleri*. Instead, they established a more material relationship with the "public" based on patronage. In addition to this, the DP government opened up new space for legitimacy based on "conventionality". Thus, the populist discourse of the *Halkevleri* period was brought into practice by the DP government.<sup>336</sup>

There are some important reflections of the new circumstances on the studies conducted on certain Alevi communities. For example, with the decreasing need in accumulating information and the support of the state or institutions which

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<sup>336</sup> "DP iktidari, *Halkevleri* gibi yerel örgütlerden merkeze akan bilginin de katkisiyle üretilen bir ideolojiyi, yine yurt çapında simultane bir biçimde yayan bir yapılanmaya gitmedi. Onun yerine, 'halk' ile, patronaj ilişkisine dayanan çok daha maddi bir ilişki sistemi kurdu. DP iktidari, bunun yayanında, 'gelenekseklilik' içinde yeni bir mesruiyet alanı da açtı. Bu anlamda da, *Halkevleri* döneminde söylem düzeyinde kalan popülizm, DP iktidari sırasında bir tür realize edilmeye çalışıldı." Arzu Öztürkmen, *Türkiye'de Folklor ve Milliyetçilik* (İstanbul: İletisim Yayınları, 1998), p. 221.

were in strong affiliation with the state, a remarkable decrease occurred in the number of studies and the number of different communities studied. It is possible that the personal connections, choices, and experience of the researchers also played an important role in the selection of communities to be studied. However, we should also state that there were some common points between these choices and the widely accepted definition of the Alevi identity of the previous and present periods. For example, it is interesting that almost all the studies conducted in the 1950-80 period are on the Tahtacis. It is possible to argue that the same trend gave the direction to later studies focused on the Tahtacis, who appeared as representing best the Alevi identity that was in the process of construction on the basis of Turkishness in the 1920-50 period. Although other elements of the Alevi identity (like its connection to Islam) were also emphasized in the studies of the 1950-80 period, the main tendency was still to emphasize Turkishness. It is even more interesting that none of the Kurdish or Arabic speaking Alevi communities were studied in this period. When we come to 1950s, we see that the ethnic connection between the Alevis and Turkish culture and origin has been established and additionally the point in discussion is the place of *Alevilik* in Islam.

The emphasis on *semahs*:

As stated in the previous section, a great deal of the current knowledge of the various *semahs* that were performed by the Alevi and Bektashi communities in the 1920-1950 period is owed to the field studies conducted among various Alevi communities in the same period. It is difficult, however, to argue the same thing of

the texts published in the 1950-80 period. First of all, the number of both the texts published in this period and the different communities studied is less than in the previous period. Second, only some of the available studies of the period include *semahs*.<sup>337</sup> From this point of view, the important works for this discussion are Rıza Yetisen's articles on the Naldöken Tahtacıları<sup>338</sup>, Ülkütasir's article on Abdallar ("Abdallar"),<sup>339</sup> and Necati Üçyıldız's article titled "Silifke ve Yöresindeki Tahtacı Türkmenleri'nde Gelenekler" (Traditions of Tahtacı Turcomans in and around Silifke).<sup>340</sup>

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<sup>337</sup> We can count the following among the works which do not include *semahs* in the discussion: Fazıl Siktas, "Kagızman Yöresinde Alevilik," *TFA*, 9, no. 184 (November 1964): 3570-3571; Veli Asan, "İsparta Tahtacılarına Dair Notlar," *Türk Yurdu*, 1, no. 238 (January 1954): 463-466; Hamit Zübeyir Kosay, "Manisa, Akhisar ve Çevresi Halkbilgisine Dair Notlar", "Türk Yurdu", (August 2, 1954): 112-118.

<sup>338</sup> "Naldöken Tahtacıları: Coğrafi Durum-Köyün Adi-Köyün Eskiği-Köydeki Eserler-Geçim Vaziyeti-Köy Halkının Mensuriyeti," *TFA* 1,17 (1950): 263-265; "Naldöken Tahtacıları-II: Ev Sekilleri ve Ev Düzeni," *TFA* 1,18 (1951): 279-280; "Naldöken Tahtacıları-III: Yataklar, Kaplar ve Kullanılması, Yemekleri ve Yeyişleri" *TFA* 1,21 (1951): 329-331; "Naldöken Tahtacıları-IV: Nevruz ve Hidirlezzet" *TFA* 1,23 (1951): 365-366; "Naldöken Köyü Tahtacıları-V: Kadın ve Erkek Çalışmaları," *TFA* 2,25 (1951): 393-394; "Naldökende Alevî Adetleri ve İzmir Havalisi Alevî Köyleri," *TFA* 3,53 (1953): 837-839; "Naldöken Tahtacıları-VII: Naldöken'de Kıyafetler," *TFA* 3,55 (1954): 871-873; "Naldöken Tahtacılarında Günlük Kadın Giyimleri (VIII)," *TFA* 8,175 (1964): 3312-3313; "Naldöken Tahtacıları Folklor ve Etnografyası: Naldöken Erkek Giyimi," *TFA* 9,184 (1964): 3565; "Naldöken Tahtacıları-X: Naldöken'de Toplumsal Hayat," *TFA* 9,195 (1965): 3882; "Naldöken Tahtacıları-XI: Sayılı Günler ve İnanışlar," *TFA* 9,197(1965): 3948-3949; "Naldöken Tahtacıları-XII: Belirli Günler, Ramazan ve Bayramı," *TFA* 10,199 (1966) 3990-399; "Naldöken Tahtacıları-XIII: Naldöken'de Kurban Bayramı," *TFA* 10,212 (1967) 4364-4367; "Naldöken Tahtacılarında Sayılı Günler ve İnanışlar," *TFA* 11,227 (1968); "Naldöken Tahtacıları Gelenekleri: XV- Yılın Sayılı Günleri. Yaz Kurbanı," *TFA* 13,257 (1970) 5815-5817; "Naldöken Tahtacıları -XVI: Naldöken'de Sağlık İşleri-I," *TFA* 13,263 (1971) 6004-600; "Naldöken Tahtacıları-XVII: Naldöken'de Sağlık İşleri-II," *TFA* 13,266 (1971) 6081-608; "Naldöken Tahtacıları-XXIII: Naldöken Tahtacılarında Ölüm," *TFA* 17,340 (1977): 8145-8146.

<sup>339</sup> M. Sakir Ülkütasir, "Abdallar," *Türk Kültürü*, year: 6 no: 64 (February 1968): 251-255.

<sup>340</sup> C. Necati Üçyıldız, "Silifke ve Yöresindeki Tahtacı Türkmenleri'nde Gelenekler," *Folkloru Doğru*, 50 (1979): 10-18.

The references to the Alevi identity:

It has already been stated that in the *semah* texts published in the 1920-1950 period, based on field studies, the data and the writer's personal interpretation of the data are kept more or less separate, and that in the interpretations part, the *semahs*/rituals are generally related to the Central Asian/Old Turkish culture and religious practices. In the 1920-50 period, no writer who totally denies this connection or puts as much emphasis on any other element as on Turkishness.<sup>341</sup> The same double structure has been more or less preserved in the *semah* texts of the 1950-1980 period that will be discussed below. However, in these texts, in addition to the emphasis on the connection between *Alevilik* and Turkishness, there is also an emphasis on *Alevilik*'s relationship with Islam. The emphasis on Islam is still less in texts which report the *semahs* performed in the period and which are based on field studies than in other texts based on field studies, but which are not concerned with *semahs*, or in the popular texts that will be analyzed below.

To sum up, the most widely studied community in the publications of the 1950-80 period that are concerned with a specific Alevi community was that of the Tahtacis who were followed by the Abdals. This group of publications provides little information about the *semahs* performed in the period because the number of publications was few, the number of the studied Alevi communities was very limited, and *semahs* were studied only in a few of the available publications. It is also important that, as in other groups of publications, in this group too, in addition

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<sup>341</sup> However, we have already stated that Yörükan tries to keep away from this framework and to limit his comments on their origins. Yilmaz also tries to keep away from this framework.

to the emphasis on the connection between *semahs* and/or Alevi and Turks, there is also an attempt to establish a connection between *Alevilik* and Islam. This is a generalization we get by comparing the works published in the 1950-80 period with the works published in the previous period. In the following introduction of the publications in which the *semah* texts we will be discussing appeared, the other aspects of these works that are not expressed by this generalization will be mentioned, too.

The publications introduced in this section are Rıza Yetisen's articles on the Naldöken Tahtacı, published in *Türk Folklor Araştırmaları Dergisi* (The Journal of Turkish Folklore Studies) and his book *Tahtacı Asiretleri Adet, Gelenek ve Görenekleri* (The Tahtacı Tribes, Their Practices, Traditions and Customs)<sup>342</sup>; Ülkütaşır's article, "Abdallar" (Abdals); and Necati Üçyıldız's article, "Silifke ve Yöresindeki Tahtacı Türkmenleri'nde Gelenekler" (Traditions of Tahtacı Turcomans in and around Silifke). Since the publications that are concerned with a certain Alevi community in the 1950-80 period do not include a variety of Alevi communities, Mehmet Eröz's work *Türkiye'de Alevilik ve Bektasilik* (Alevilik and Bektashism in Turkey) which is based on field studies on various Alevi communities in Turkey, will be also taken into consideration.<sup>343</sup>

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<sup>342</sup> Rıza Yetisen, *Tahtacı Asiretleri Adet, Gelenek ve Görenekleri* (İzmir: Memleket Gazetecilik ve Matbaacılık, 1986).

<sup>343</sup> Mehmet Eröz, *Türkiye'de Alevilik ve Bektasilik* (Ankara: Kültür Bakanlığı Yayınları/234, Basbakanlık Basımevi, January 1990). Initial publication: İstanbul: Otag Matbaacılık, 1977.

Riza Yetisen's work on the Tahtacis is one of the most comprehensive studies not only among the 1950-1980 period publications but among all the works on the Tahtacis. Yetisen, who himself was a member of the Tahtaci community, graduated from *Izmir Sanat Okulu* (Izmir Art School) and served as a teacher for many years. In addition, during 1937-1954, he worked as a technician at the Ankara State Conservatory Folklore Archives and participated in some of the studies around Turkey compiling folk songs with important folklorists of the period like Muzaffer Sarisözen, Halil Bedi Yönetken, and Mahmut Ragip Gazimihal. Yetisen, who was born in Naldöken, conducted field studies in the villages of Naldöken, Narlidere and Yakapinar, and in other Tahtaci villages around Izmir like Dogaçay, Uzundere, Bademler, Güzelbahçe, Cumaovasi, Kizilcali, and Kizilagaç over many years (1940-1986). He published the outcomes of his research in *TFA* as a series of articles over about thirty years starting in the 1950s. In 1986, he published the book *Tahtaci Asiretleri Adet, Gelenek ve Görenekleri*<sup>344</sup>, which was based on his articles published in *TFA*. As this book mainly consists of his articles published since 1950, below it will also be referred to while the works of Yetisen will be discussed and analyzed.

The main title of the articles published in *TFA* is "*Naldöken Tahtacıları*" (The Naldöken Tahtacis). However, Yetisen mentions many other Tahtaci communities living around Izmir and he keeps the general subject of *Alevilik* in perspective.<sup>345</sup> There is extensive information on the locations of the villages, the

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<sup>344</sup> Yetisen, *ibid.*

<sup>345</sup> For example, Yetisen, "Naldöken'de Alevi Adetleri ve Izmir Havalisi Alevi Köyleri".



history of settlement in these villages, and the general history of the Tahtacis together with observations about the Yanyatir Ocagi. The spiritual and material culture of the Tahtaci communities in question is discussed in detail. Their religious beliefs and practices are amply exemplified, especially in articles published after 1965. In the book too, which consists of three sections as “Traditions,” “Religious Beliefs and Practices,” and “Hymns,” the largest section is the one about religious beliefs and practices. An important point about this section, which discusses the *cem* ritual and all the performances in this ritual in detail, is that it refers to ‘*eglence erkanlari*’ (entertainment ceremonies, usually which are observed among the esoteric sects) as the intersecting points of everyday life and religious practices. This quality of the work reminds us of Yilmaz’s book, *Tahtacilar da Gelenekler* (Traditions of Tahtacis), published in 1948, which focuses on the Tahtacis living around Izmir. As mentioned in the previous section, Yilmaz’s work also emphasizes the fact that *semahs* are a part of both religious ceremonies and secular everyday life events like circumcision ceremonies. Yetisen also gives extensive space to the discussion of *semahs* and demonstrates which ones are performed in religious rituals and which ones in secular ceremonies. Another important aspect of this study in terms of *semahs* is that it brings to light some of the *semahs* which had almost been forgotten by then. Through the data he collected, he explains why these *semahs* had been forgotten and thus sheds light on the evolution of *semahs*.

In Yetisen’s works, the data and the general interpretation of the history of the Tahtacis and *Alevilik* in general are kept separate. He states that the Tahtacis

come from the Oghuz branch of the Turkish tribes and that they use a Turkish dialect both in their religious ceremonies and in everyday life. However, such passages where he refers to the ethnic origins of the Tahtacis/Alevis are kept very brief. Yetisen also refers to the important points of “the abolition of religious orders” and the ‘*mum söndü*’ rumors. As was stated about the works of the Alevi writers in the previous section, in his works too, *Alevilik* is regarded as a matter of history (or starting to be so), and thus he could conduct research with less hesitation.<sup>346</sup> In fact, like the other Alevi writers, Yetisen knows that *Alevilik* is still alive. However, he might have thought that due to the law enacted in 1925, *Alevilik* should become extinct soon. This attitude is related to the search by the Alevis for a positive position in the new regime: “They conformed to the decision of ‘abolition of the religious orders’ and later to the renovations of the new Republic.” It is quite interesting that they relinquished so easily the traditions that they have treasured and preserved secretly for hundreds of years, and stepped into a new era.”<sup>347</sup>

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<sup>346</sup> “*Artık yasamayan eski tarikat zihniyetini ve geleneklerini yerli yerinde araştırmanın zamanı geçmektedir bile. İste bu nedenledir ki son bilgi kirintilerinin zamanla yok olabileceği ve daha fazla beklemenin zararlarını dikkate aldık.*” He writes that is high time that proper research is done on the traditions and doctrines of the religious orders that have stopped functioning. We have started this study considering that the last pieces of information are being lost and waiting longer would risk losing it all. Ibid., p. 888.

<sup>347</sup> “*Cumhuriyet çağındaki ‘Tarikatların ilgası’ kararına ve daha bir çok inkılaplara kolaylıkla uymuslardır. Sayani dikkattir ki, asırlar boyunca fevkalade bir kiskançlıkla sakladıkları, adet ve ananelerini büyük bir ustalıkla bir hamlede bırakmışlar, yepyeni bir çağa girmişlerdir.*” Ibid., pp. 887-888.

However, this new era did not help free them from the “*mum söndü*” accusations. They became especially pronounced after the 1950s, when the migrations from the rural areas to the cities started and Alevi and Sunni communities came to share the same public space. Yetisen writes that the reason these rumors spread was that Alevi rituals are performed secretly. He also states that it was Yavuz Selim’s precautions that had led Alevis to perform their rituals secretly, however, these rituals are very decent and in accordance with the national sensitivities.

Necati Üçyildiz is another researcher who worked on some Tahtaci communities in the 1950-1980 period and who gave extensive space to the discussion of *semahs*. Üçyildiz worked on the Tahtaci groups located in and around Silifke: the Silifke (Kirtil) Bahçe Obasi, Mut Köprübasi, Kumaçukuru, Sinamis, Ermenek ve Gür (Sarıkavak) Tahtacis. His article published in 1979 was presented as a paper in during the Hacı Bektas-i Veli Commemoration Ceremonies organized on 16-18 August 1978.

Üçyildiz, like Yetisen, is concerned with the “*mum söndü*” rumors. However, he does not concentrate on in his narrative the point of “the abolition of religious orders.” In the work of Üçyildiz, there is a section on the “military service,” which we do not see in other writers’ works. In this section, he emphasizes how patriotic the Tahtacis are. The ceremony of sending a son to the military service is a complex of religious and cultural values together. Sacrificial ceremonies, fasting, the funeral ceremony, lamentation and elegies, and the laws of conduct are among the other points discussed in his study.

*Semahs* are the most important part of this study and they are discussed in two sections under the titles of “*semah*” and “*mengi*”, the contents of which are different. While *semahs* are reported within the general classification of rituals (*cems*), *mengis*, which are described by the writer as the previous section of *semahs*, are discussed in the section about folkdances. The writer classifies the folkdances as “religious dances (*semahs*) and secular dances (*mengis*).” According to this approach, all *semahs* are classified under the title of folkdances, however, their religious quality is retained. From this point of view, we can say that Üçyildiz’s approach is very similar to that of the Bektashi folklorist Salci. Both writers agree with Yönetken in describing *semahs* as folkdances.

The main element in Üçyildiz’s narrative of the *cem* ritual is *semahs*. There is detailed description of how *semahs* are performed in *cem* rituals and their technical features. The data/observations and interpretation are kept separate in this work too. At the beginning of the article, the writer states that the Tahtacis are a Turcoman people. However he does not refer to the ethnic connections of the Alevis through *semahs*. In the lamentations section, the writer states, “Another tradition coming from Shamanism is to recite elegies after the dead.”<sup>348</sup> Since the word “Shamanism” is not mentioned elsewhere, we do not know which traditions he refers to and whether *semahs* are a part of these traditions. On the other hand, this statement still shows that the writer assumes that at least some of the traditions of the Tahtacis come from Shamanism.

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<sup>348</sup> Üçyildiz, “Silifke ve Yöresinde Tahtaci Türkmenleri’nde Gelenekler,” p. 17.

What is more interesting in terms of the identity of the Tahtacis/Alevis in this article is that the writer sometimes adopts a discourse based on the “oppressedness” of the Alevis. For example, the elegies section starts as follows: “Elegies reflect the voice of being oppressed and despised for hundreds of years.”<sup>349</sup> As this discourse is not related to *semahs* by the author, it will not be discussed here. The aim of mentioning it here is just to give a general idea of the writer’s attitude in the article.

There are a couple of interesting articles on the Abdal community published in the 1950-1980 period.<sup>350</sup> The one that will be referred to here is Ülkütasir’s article that discusses rituals/*semahs* in detail, and while emphasizing the similarities between the Abdal and the Alevi communities, speculates generally about the Alevis. The subtitle of the article is “The Geographical Location, Ethnic Origins and Everyday Life (of the Abdals).” The writer claims that the Abdals are ethnically Turcoman, and thus relates them to all the *Kizilbas* communities of Anatolia. For him, all these communities are Turcoman.<sup>351</sup> The Alevis and Abdals are also similar in terms of their religious peculiarities. The writer claims that the Abdals are “Alevi-Caferi”.<sup>352</sup> Although he does not give his reasons for putting

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<sup>349</sup> Ibid.

<sup>350</sup> For example, Nevzat Müftüoğlu, “Abdallar,” *Taspınar*, vol: 2, no. 20 (December 1965): 10-11; Cemil Güzelbey, “Abdallar,” *Folklor* 25 (May 1972): 21-25; M. Sakir Ülkütasir, “Abdallar,” *Türk Kültürü*, vol: 6, no. 64 (February 1968): 251-255.

<sup>351</sup> Ülkütasir, “Abdallar,” p. 251.

<sup>352</sup> Ibid.

*Alevilik* and *Caferilik* together, it is clear that he sees *Alevilik* as a sect of Islam because he calls the Alevi rituals “*mezhebi ayinler*” (secterian rituals),<sup>353</sup> stating that the Abdals themselves believe that “they are truly and rightfully Turkic and Islamic people.”<sup>354</sup>

In the rituals section of the article, he states that “the *cem* rituals are all the same in the Abdals, the village Bektashis, the Çepnis and the Tahtacis.” The description of the rituals is based on the writer’s observations and there are detailed descriptions of the *semahs* in some parts. For example, the technical steps of the *semahs* and how these steps are called by the Alevis and the Abdals are among the details given in the article.

In this article, too, the data and the interpretation are kept separate. However, the emphasis on the ethnic origins of the Abdals/Alevis is stronger in this article than in the two previous articles. In addition, the connection of *Alevilik* with Islam is also relatively more emphasized. He also touches upon the points of the “*mum söndü*” accusations and the abolition of the religious orders. The writer states that the former is the product of the Sunni imagination, and while discussing it in more detail, he voices a claim which no one has ever mentioned before: He says that although secterian rituals are forbidden by law, it is known that these rituals are still performed secretly.<sup>355</sup>

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<sup>353</sup> Ibid., p. 255.

<sup>354</sup> Ibid., p. 251.

<sup>355</sup> Ibid., p. 255.

In this article, which was published in 1968, he emphasizes the connections of Alevis not only with Turkishness but also with Islam. In another article he published in 1976, he shows a clearer attitude toward the relationship between *Alevilik* and Islam.<sup>356</sup> Where he discusses the Bektashi and Alevi rituals from a comparative perspective (but does not go into details about Alevi communities), he emphasizes the ethnic connections of *Alevilik* and Bektashism and argues that it would not be logical to look for Islamic meanings and elements in them. He states that, ethnically they carry, first of all, the mark of “Turkish shamanism” and, in addition, “elements of the Persian religion.” However, there are not enough examples and explanation in this article and what is meant by “elements of the Persian religion” is not clarified.

The last work to be studied here is Mehmet Ersöz’s book, *Türkiye’de Alevilik ve Bektasilik* (*Alevilik and Bektashism in Turkey*). There are two reasons why we consider this work among the publications that deal with a certain Alevi community although its name implies that it talks about *Alevilik*/Alevis in general. First of all, it cannot be considered among popular publications because it is based on scientific methods and has scientifically supported arguments. More importantly, many Alevi communities living in different parts of Turkey are included in this work based on field studies. Thus, it complements the Alevi studies of the period efficiently as most of the field studies conducted in the 1950-1980 period focus only on the Tahtacis and neglect other Alevi communities. He pays special attention to representing the regional variety, and except for some regions

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<sup>356</sup> M. Sakir Ülkütasir, “Alevi ve Bektasi Ayinleri,” *Sivas Folkloru* 44 (September 4, 1976): 5-7.

around eastern and south-eastern Turkey like Mus, Bingöl, Dersim, and Erzincan, he includes many Alevi communities in different parts of the country.<sup>357</sup> In the section about eastern and south-eastern Turkey, two Alevi communities are taken into consideration, one living in a village in Diyarbakir and the other living in Maras-Pazarcik.

However, it should also be mentioned that this work, which aims at exploring all Bektashi and Alevi communities living in Turkey, remains insufficient as it does not include in the field studies the regions like Dersim, Bingöl, and Mus where most of the Kurdish speaking Alevis lived. Eröz does not provide information as to on what basis he selected the regions for his field studies. As was stated in the previous section, it was very hard for researchers who did not belong to the Alevi communities, especially the Kurdish speaking communities, to conduct their studies and to collect sufficient data. This condition might have played an important role in the writer's avoidance of these regions. On the other hand, the fact that the writer considered *Alevilik* in this study only in relation to Shamanism<sup>358</sup> might imply that his personal ideology was also important in his

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<sup>357</sup> The places of field studies conducted for this work: Meriç (Edirne) the villages of Nasuhbey and Umurca; four Alevi villages in Bozüyük; Kayseri-Pazarören; an Alevi village in Diyarbakir; a Çepni village in Bursa-Mustafakemalpasa; the villages of Kizilcapinar and Alamut in Aydin; Silifke-Kirtil; Edremit-Çamci; Balikesir-Bahçesehir (Çepni); Ödemiş; Balikesir-Bahçedere village; Maras-Pazarcik (there is information about Elbistan either); Konya; Kastamonu; Yozgat; Sivas; Kars; Izmir-Bademler village; emigrants to Izmir from Tire and Isparta; Ulubey village in Senirkent.

<sup>358</sup> A. Y. Ocak states that the emphasis on Shamanism in Eröz's work is problematic although he appreciates Eröz's effort to conduct a scientific research: "The writer who objectively approaches the issue from a scientific perspective, tries to adopt an impartial attitude towards Alevilik and Bektasilik, however, this attitude is incomplete as he only focuses on the ground of Shamanism." "Alevilik ve Bektasilik



choice of the regions. His quotation of Firat's work to include the Alevis living in Mus-Varto in his discussion does not necessarily mean he wants to make up for the deficiency of his work, it may be read as an act of supporting the argument that all Alevis are Turkish people.

Another point emphasized in this study is the relationship between *Alevilik* and Islam. According to Eröz, the sources of *Alevilik* and Bektashism are Islam, Sufism (*tasavvuf*), and Turkish traditions.<sup>359</sup> In this work, which is a rich source of rituals and *semahs*, the data and the interpretations are mostly merged into each other. As will be seen in the next section, from the enumeration of the important elements of rituals to the interpretation of these elements, there is a dominant discourse based on the synthesis of Turkishness and Islam. This is also an attempt to clear the Alevi and Bektashi communities in the eyes of the public. In the foreword to the book, he expresses his wish: "it is our aim to clear the Alevis and Bektashis of charges, who, contrary to the rumors about them, are a very decent and honest people, and also to establish that they are members of the Turkish nation and subjects of Islam."<sup>360</sup> The writer not only talks about various Alevi communities who had converted to the Sunni sect several times in the book, but also seems to approve of this act: "A respected Alevi acquaintance of ours told us

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Hakkındaki Son Yayınlar Üzerine (1990) Genel Bir Bakış ve Bazı Gerçekler," pp. 191-223 in *Türk Sufiliğine Bakışlar* (İstanbul: İletisim, 1999 (3)), p. 209-210.

<sup>359</sup> Eröz, *Türkiye'de Alevilik ve Bektasilik*, p. 418.

<sup>360</sup> "bazı inanislara rağmen ahlak bakımından çok dürüst olan Alevi ve Bektasileri temize çıkarabilir ve Türk milletinin bir parçası olduklarını, İslam ümmetinden sayılmaları gerektiğini anlatabilirsek, ne mutlu bize." Ibid., pp. 419-420.

that Hz. Ali was assassinated on the 19th day of Ramadan while praying in a mosque and was wounded and he died as a martyr on the 21st day of Ramadan. He stated that instead of a hostile attitude, an embracing one would bring Alevis close to Sunnis; would make Alevis start to fast and pray between the 19th and 21st days of Ramadan and we all found this observation right. Thus, the first steps would be taken for a close relationship and these people who fast for Muharrem would be fasting at least for three days during Ramadan too.”<sup>361</sup>

In conclusion, the writer, who is sorry for the undeserved accusations directed towards the Alevis and Bektashis, and believes that the building tension and hostility between Alevis and Sunnis should be ended, looks for a solution in proving that the Alevis/Bektashis are Turkish people and also in bringing them closer to Sunnis.

*The Alevi Identity and Semah Discourse in Popular Publications that are Concerned with Alevis/Alevilik in General*

As Ocak points out, an important development for the publications of the 1950-1980 period is that starting from 1950s, some amateur researchers and writers from both Alevi and Bektashi and also Sunni backgrounds began to publish popular publications.<sup>362</sup> There are two important points in these publications in relation to *semahs* and Alevi identity: the publication of sacred books and the books about

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<sup>361</sup> Ibid.

<sup>362</sup> A. Y. Ocak, “Alevilik ve Bektasilik Hakkındaki Son Yayınlar Üzerine (1990) Genel Bir Bakış ve Bazı Gerçekler,” p. 195. Ocak states that, this development took place with the influence of “the partial democracy movements starting to form in Turkey recently.”

Haci Bektas-i Veli; and the reflection of the tension and problems between Alevis and Sunnis to the process of the formation of Alevi identity.

(i) The publication of sacred books and the books about Haci Bektas-i Veli: Most of the popular publications of the 1950-1980 period are about Haci Bektas-i Veli and the Haci Bektas Ocagi. Also during this period, some of the sacred books and other material sources of the Alevis/Bektashis were published in the Latin alphabet for the first time.<sup>363</sup> It is possible to consider these two general tendencies that appear in the popular publications of the period together and in terms of their relation to the Alevi identity. An important point that the writers of the 1920-1950 period complain about is that the sacred books of the Alevis, like *Buyruk* were not shown to them. They even state that these books are not shown to the members of the community except for the *dedes*.<sup>364</sup> With the 1950s they started to publish these books in the Latin alphabet and thus they became available to everybody (Alevi or Sunni). This can be considered as the first step of the recognition of the teachings of Alevis/Bektashis in the public space, which had been kept secret for hundreds of years, including the first twenty five years of the Republic. However, if we look at the process of publicization carefully, we can see that it also signals the beginning of a standardization process. On the one hand, the oral tradition of the teachings of

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<sup>363</sup> For example, *Buyruk (Imam Cafer Buyruğu)*, 1958; Hasan Gülsan, *Pir Haci Bektas Veli ve Alevi-Bektasiligin Esaslari* (Istanbul: Zafer Matbaasi, 1975); Remzi Gürses, *Haci Bektas Rehberi* (Ankara: Emek Matbaasi, 1964); Sefer Aytekin ed, *Haci Bektas-i Veli: Makalât*, (Ankara: Emek Matbaasi, 1954); I. H. Ertaylan Hatiboglu, *Bahrü'l- Hakayik* (Istanbul: Ist. Ün. Edebiyat Fakültesi Yayinlari, 1960); *Hünkâr Hazreti Haci Bektas Veli'nin Vasiyetnâmesi (Kitabü'l Fevaid)* (Istanbul: Dizerkonca Matbaasi, 1959); Nurullah Kiling, *Pir-i Azam Gays-i Evham Haci Bektas Veli Hazretlerinin Tarikat Silsilesiyle Vasiyetnâmeleri* (Istanbul: Ismail Akgün Matbaasi, 1967); Halim Baki Kunter, *Kirkbudak – Haci Bektas Incelemelerine Giris*, (Ankara: II. Erkek Sanat Enstitüsü Yayinlari, 1951); Murat Sertoglu, *Evliyalar Evliyasi Hünkâr Haci Bektas-i Veli* (2 Volumes), (Istanbul: Toker Matbaasi, 1966); Ali Sümer, *Haci Bektas Veli'nin Bilimsel Yönleri* (Ankara: Yeni Sanat Matbaasi, 1975); Abdullah Tekin, *Babalilar Ayaklanmasinda Haci Bektas'in Islevi ve Babaligi Bektasilige Dönüştürmesi* (Ankara: Karaca Matbaasi, 1979).

<sup>364</sup> For example, see the mentioned articles of Yörükan.

*Alevilik* is spread in written form. On the other hand, the importance of Hacı Bektas-i Veli is emphasized. While discussing the publications of the 1920-1950 period, it was pointed out that Yörükan claims that many Alevi communities do not belong to Hacı Bektas Ocagi and he discusses the differences (rituals, for example) of the Alevi communities that are loyal to other *ocaks*. It seems that the fact that they stopped referring to the differences between the different Alevi communities in the 1950-1980 period is a result of the general emphasis on Hacı Bektas-i Veli and the Bektashi Ocagi in the process of publicization and standardization.

Another important point to be discussed here is how the name of Hacı Bektas-i Veli, who came to be pronounced strongly in the publications of the 1950-80 period, was interpreted. Since the texts taken into consideration in this study are the ones that are about *semahs* published in popular publications, there are not many references to Hacı Bektas-i Veli in them. Therefore, it will be enough to give a few titles as examples of works, which will not be included in the discussion of the *semahs* texts of the 1950-1980 period but which increasingly portray, especially after the 1960s, Hacı Bektas-i Veli as a revolutionary leader, as a man of passion, and as a great humanist.<sup>365</sup> “*Anadolu’nun Devrimci Önderi Hacı Bektas*” (Hacı Bektas, the Revolutionary Leader of Anatolia, 1977), “*Gönüller Sultani İnsan Hacı Bektas Veli*” (Hacı Bektas Veli, the Sultan of the Hearts, 1977),<sup>366</sup> “*Hacı Bektas Aydınligi*” (The Luminosity of Hacı Bektas, 1976),<sup>367</sup> and “*Ilerici İnsan Hacı*

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<sup>365</sup> For a comprehensive scientific evaluation of different theses about Hacı Bektas-i Veli see the following works: A. Y. Ocak, *ibid.*, pp.216-223 and the same writer’s, “Anadolu Heterodoks Türk Sufiliginin Temel Tasi: Hacı Bektas-i Veli el Horasani,” pp. 148-190 in *Türk Sufiligine Bakislar*.

<sup>366</sup> These two articles were published in *Hacı Bektas Veli: Bildiriler, Denemeler, Açikoturum* (Ankara: Yeni Sanat Matbaasi, 1977). The first one belongs to Ibrahim Öztoprak (pp. 193-197), the second one belongs to Hüseyin Erkan (pp.184-192).

<sup>367</sup> *Cumhuriyet Gazetesi*, 16 August 1976.

*Bektas Veli*” (The Foresight of Haci Bektas Veli, 1968)<sup>368</sup> are just a few of the titles.

Turning back to the studies that include *semahs* texts which will be below, it can be stated that Haci Bektas-i Veli is emphasized as an important leader who served the Turkish culture and Islam. For example Ali Sümer describes Haci Bektas-i Veli as “a person who contributed greatly to the destruction of religious conservatism in Anatolia, and the establishment of the Turkish and Islamic organizations.”<sup>369</sup> This approach to Haci Bektas-i Veli is generally adopted by the other works that will be examined in the next sub-section, although sometimes the emphasis on Turkishness is stronger than on Islam. For example, Sertoglu daims that Haci Bektas-i Veli “was able to help establish a new state with a totally new national identity upon the ruins of the Seljuks,” and “restored the national honor together with Turkishness and the Turkish language.”<sup>370</sup> These comments about Haci Bektas-i Veli are dominant in the popular publications that will be studied in the next sub-section, in which *Alevilik*/Bektashism is defined on the basis of Turkishness and Islam.

(ii) The problems between the Alevi and Sunni communities and the Alevi Identity: In the section about popular publications of the 1920-1950 period concerned with Alevis/*Alevilik* in general, it has been stated that the most important quality of these studies in terms of the problem of identity is that they provide important clues as to how the discourse of the “legitimate” Alevi identity was constructed on the popular level in accordance with the circumstances of the period. In that period, attempts were made to define the Alevi identity within the paradigm of “national identity” and thus Turkishness was taken as the common

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<sup>368</sup> Ragip Üner, *Cumhuriyet Gazetesi*, 16 May 1968.

<sup>369</sup> “Anadolu’da taassubun yıkilmasinda, Türklük ve Islamiyet’in örgütlenmesinde de en büyük emegi olan kisi” olarak tanitmaktadır.” Sümer, *Haci Bektas-i Veli’nin Bilimsel Yönleri*, p. 10.

<sup>370</sup> Sertoglu, *Bektasilik Nedir* (Istanbul: Basak Yayınevi, 1969), p. 335.

ground. It is not possible to argue that the paradigm of “national identity” disappeared completely in the 1950-1980 period. However, the changes in the social, economic and political conditions of both Turkey in general and the Alevi communities in particular in this period led the problem of Alevi identity also to be defined and discussed on different grounds.

The most commonly emphasized point in the popular publications is the need for a solution to the problems between the Alevis and the Sunnis and the desire to clear the Alevis of the charges of immorality. In addition to the charges of immorality, the left-right polarization starting to form in the Turkish political arena of the 1960s was labeled an Alevi-Sunni conflict, as an important number of the Alevis, especially the youth and the workers in big cities, were feeling affinity to or participated in the left movement. For this reason, many of the popular publications that will be discussed below were published after 1970 focus on the solution to these problems.

However, it must be pointed out that the publications that are concerned with *Alevilik* in general and that include *semah* texts did not adopt a historical approach or refer to contemporary developments. The importance of these works for this study is that while they define Alevis and *Alevilik* in general, they also take into consideration the current developments mentioned here briefly. The reason why *Alevilik* and the Alevis are considered on the basis of Islam and Turkishness may be read as an attempt to legitimize the Alevi communities.

It is also possible to find different definitions of the Alevi identity in the popular publications of the 1950-1980 period that are concerned with *Alevilik* and Bektashism in general. However, the number of publications that include *semah* texts in this period is limited when rituals were not very popular due to division in the Alevi communities, political turmoil and getting less acquainted with religion. The general tendency, however, is to define *Alevilik* on the basis of Turkishness and Islam. We will now discuss the *semah* texts in popular publications that are

concerned with *Alevilik*/Alevi in general in two groups: the narratives of the Alevi writers and the narratives of the Sunni writers.

The narratives of the Sunni writers:

Four studies published in the 1950-1980 period on *Alevilik* or Bektashism will be discussed. One of them, differing from the others, is about the sects and orders in Turkey in general. However, it gives extensive space to the discussion of *Alevilik* and Bektashism. The studies to be discussed are as follows: Hasan Basri Erk, *Islami Mezhepler-Tarikatlar* (Islamic Sects-Orders) <sup>371</sup> Yahya Benekay, *Yasayan Alevilik* (The Living *Alevilik*) <sup>372</sup>; Murat Sertoglu, *Bektasilik Nedir?* (What is Bektashism?) <sup>373</sup>.

As it has already been stated, in the 1950-1980 period, the dominant discourse of the 1920-1950 period, which focused on the attempt of discovering the unknown aspects of “our” Alevi/Bektashi brothers and thus clearing them in the eyes of the public, underwent some modifications. In this new period, as the retired judge Erk, who served as a judge for a long time, asserts so strongly, a different discourse was adopted, whose aim is “to uncover the unknown and hidden sides of the sects and orders, and to redirect those who have diverted from the right path, to the path of righteousness, faith and virtue.” <sup>374</sup> Erk classifies Islamic sects and orders in three groups. The first group consists of the sects and orders which have served the spreading of Islam and which are “entirely based on purely Islamic

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<sup>371</sup> Erk, *Islami Mezhepler-Tarikatlar* (Istanbul: Varol Matbaasi, 1954).

<sup>372</sup> Istanbul: Varlik Yayinlari, 1967.

<sup>373</sup> Istanbul: Basak Yayinlari, 1969.

<sup>374</sup> “*Mezhep ve tarikatların gizli yönlerini açığa çıkarmak ve yolunu sasirmis olanlar varsa, bunları hak yoluna, iman yoluna, mesru ve tarikat yoluna yöneltmek.*” Erk, *Islami Mezhepler-Tarikatlar*, pp. 12-13.

principles and have nothing to do with and bear no resemblance to *Alevilik*.”<sup>375</sup> The remaining two groups are actually the two divisions of *Alevilik*: The sects that conform to the Islamic principles (*mutedil/moderate Alevi*s) and the sects that reject Islamic principles (*müfrit/excessive Alevi*s).<sup>376</sup> It is clear that Erk classifies Alevi communities according to their conformity to the five principles of Islam. Which Alevi communities are regarded as moderate and which ones as excessive is not clear. This point will be referred to again in the section about the Yezidis.

The writer who gives detailed information about the *Babagan* and *Çelebi (Sofiyân)* branches of Bektashism claims that all Anatolian Bektashis belong to the Dergah of Hacı Bektas. He adds that they are all “Turkish and Islamic.”<sup>377</sup> It is interesting that the writer, who had served as judge in eastern towns for a long time and knew the Alevi communities in these regions well, claims that these people are Turkish and they are being abused through *Alevilik*.<sup>378</sup>

Erk continues with the Ehl-i Hakks and the Yezidis, and attributes to them several rumors quite similar to those that are attributed to the Alevi (“sexual intercourse is free”, “it is compulsory to dance and especially to drink wine”, “most

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<sup>375</sup> “*Tamamen (Ehl-i sünnet) esaslarına dayanan ve... Alevilik’le ilgisi ve nisbeti bulunmayan...*” Ibid, p. 11-12.

<sup>376</sup> Ibid.

<sup>377</sup> Ibid. p. 86.

<sup>378</sup> “*Sarkin asiret usulü ile idare olunan Alevîlerin de Asiretin Reisi, Agası, Seyyidi haddi zatından çok saf olan Asiret sâkinlerini tesvik tahrik etmekte onlari teferrut ettirerek kendi nef’i maksatlarının tahakkuku için bu zavallı masum Türk kardeşlerimizi Alevîlige zorlamaktadırlar.*” According to the writer, the Alevi communities, which are ruled by the leaders (reis, aga, seyyid) of common eastern tribal institutions, being extremely naïve, are urged and provoked and abused by these leaders for the profits of the leaders themselves. He concludes that, these innocent Turkish brothers of us are forced to accept *Alevilik*. Ibid.



things forbidden in Islam are religiously permissible for them,” etc.).<sup>379</sup> The point of the excessive Alevi is mentioned here: After stating that some of the beliefs and practices of the Anatolian Alevi and Bektashi are very similar to those of the Yezidi, he adds that “it is assumed that the rituals practiced among excessive Alevi come from the old traditions of Yezidi.”<sup>380</sup> As it seems, the writer, who considers different communities in relation to the degree of their relationship to orthodox Islam, adopts a negative approach towards those who perform rituals including dance and drinking. From this point of view, it is not surprising that he has a more lenient attitude towards the Bektashi who, he claims, “do not like as much the unending *semah* performances, *cem* rituals, and submitting to bodily desires.”<sup>381</sup>

Yahya Benekay, on the other hand, divides *Alevilik* into three branches in his book *Yasayan Alevilik* (Living *Alevilik*) published in 1967: Shi’ism, *Kizilbaslik* and Bektashism. In this classification, Bektashism refers to the Ocak of Bektashi, and the city Bektashi and *Kizilbas* people refer to Anatolian Alevi, that is, the *Sofiyan* branch. It is logical to assume that he took this classification system from Baha Said. It is also clear that he utilized Baha Said’s work in his narrative of the *Sofiyan* branch and its initiation service (*sürek*), yet he does not refer to him.

The skeleton of this work is a series of articles the writer had written for the newspaper *Aksam*. Yahya Benekay had visited several Alevi populated regions and made use of some texts. However, it is not stated in the work which Alevi communities were personally visited by the writer as it is qualified as a text of journalism. The writer himself admits that he did not attend the *ayin-i cem*, so he would be reporting from the available texts. He only attended one *asure* day in the

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<sup>379</sup> ““cinsi münasebet serbesttir”, “raks etmek, hele sarap içmek zaruridir”; “İslamiyet’te haram sayılan birçok şey onlar için helaldir,” Ibid., p.152.

<sup>380</sup> “Müfrit Aleviler arasında yapılan ayinlerin eski Yezidilerden kaldığı tahmin edilir,” ibid.

<sup>381</sup> “Öyle devamlı semahlardan, ayini cemlerden, tasyiki nefisten pek hoslanmazlar,” ibid., p. 188.

*Muharrem* (the first month of the Hegira calendar) of 1965 organized in Izmir-Narlidere and he mentions briefly the *semahs* performed during this ceremony.

The importance of this work for our study is that the writer frequently comments on the rituals and the *semah*/ritual narratives are shaped around these comments. As will be seen later, the relationship between *Alevilik* and Turkishness is emphasized more strongly on the basis of the “curtain” metaphor discussed above in detail in the previous section although *Alevilik* is still considered as “a sect of Islam.”<sup>382</sup> In reporting rituals too, he emphasizes Shamanism and the shaman rituals.

As for the other writers in this group, Benekay too refers to the problem of “*mum söndü*” because he also wants to clear the Alevis of these charges. It is interesting that he does not directly refer to these rumors but argues that light (*isik*) is an important element in Alevi rituals. As will be discussed later, light (*Horasan Çeragi* in Bektashism, *delil* in *Kızılbaşlık*)<sup>383</sup>, will eventually be related to Shamanism. The writer reminds his readers that Turkey is a secular state and eventually defines Alevis as Turkish and Muslim underlining their loyalty to and respect of Atatürk: “By the way, in the house of the friends, I saw a picture of Atatürk hanged on the wall next to the pictures representing the sacred persons of Islam... As our President Sunay has stated: ‘In a secular state, the people determine the degree of their affinity to God by themselves. No one is entitled to judge it, and it is emphasized in our constitution.’”<sup>384</sup>

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<sup>382</sup> Benekay, *Yasayan Alevilik*, p.138.

<sup>383</sup> Ibid., pp. 100-101.

<sup>384</sup> : “*Bu arada, dost’ların evinde İslam dininin ulu kisilerine ait temsili olarak yapılmış resimleri de Atatürk’ün fotoğraflarının yanında asili gördüm. (...) Cumhurbaşkanımız Sayın Sunay’in belirttiği gibi: ‘Laik devlette halk, kendi itikadını, Allah’la arasındaki ilişkiyi kendi ayar eder. Buna kimse karışmaz. Anayasamız bunu çizmiştir.*” Ibid., p.183.

Murat Sertoglu, who published his book *Bektasilik Nedir?* (What is Bektashism?) in 1969, has a similar attitude. The writer stresses that Bektashism as a sect does not deny Islam. He adds that there are even people among the Bektashis who conform to the five (or some of the) pillars of Islam.<sup>385</sup> However, the relationship he emphasizes is the one between Bektashism and Turkishness/Turkish culture. Sertoglu claims that Bektashism bears “a hundred percent national Turkish character in its roots.”<sup>386</sup> The difference of this work from the other works discussed in this section is that it is exclusively on Bektashism. The writer interviewed several Bektashis during his research and read the books they had recommended. He includes his interview with Turgut Koca from Balıkesir, who did not object to disclosing his name.<sup>387</sup>

Murat Sertoglu, like many of the other writers discussed here, makes mention of the rumors about Bektashism. Moreover, he divides this issue into some sections.<sup>388</sup> He emphasizes the relationship between Bektashism and Islam in attempting to explain that these rumors are false. Like some of the writers mentioned above (especially the Alevi/Bektashi writers), Sertoglu includes in his discussion the abolition of religious orders. However, he adopts a different narrative than the ones discussed so far: “Since this law is still in action, the Bektashi gatherings are only organized privately at home. They test the ones who want to attend these gatherings and thus the torch Hacı Bektas-i Veli lighted seven centuries ago is kept going.”<sup>389</sup>

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<sup>385</sup> Sertoglu, *Bektasilik Nedir?*, p. 280.

<sup>386</sup> Ibid.

<sup>387</sup> Ibid., pp. 303-307.

<sup>388</sup> For example, “Bektasilige Yapılan İftiralar” pp. 97-99; “Bektasiler’in Ugradığı İftiralar” pp. 194-196.

<sup>389</sup> “Bu kanun hala yürürlükte olduğu için bugün Bektasi toplantıları ancak evlerde özel olarak yapılagelmektedir. Aralarına girmek isteyenler çok sıkı bir imtihandan geçirilmektedir. Ve Hacı Bektas-i

It should not be concluded from this statement that the writer is against the renovations of Atatürk and the law: “In addition to their religious duties, Bektashism takes it as its responsibility to set up the social order of Turkish nation, to serve the Turkish national ideals, to support the Turkish economic life, and to knock down all perverted ideologies that are against the Turkish national interests.” He also describes the contributions of Bektashism to the renovations of Atatürk (for example, women rights, the concept of modern family and dressing, and the purification of language, etc.).<sup>390</sup> As understood from these, the aim of the writer, who respects the laws and the principles of Atatürk, is to help reconstitute Bektashism as a religious order in accordance with the laws of the Turkish state and thus the maintenance of their contribution to Turkey. “For Bektashism to be under the state control, it is necessary that it should be taken under the protection of the law. That way, it would be an assurance for the renovations of Atatürk.”<sup>391</sup>

These three works belong to Sunni writers. In all of them, the writers refer to the relationship of *Alevilik* with Turkishness/Turkish culture and orthodox Islam, and emphasize the synthesis of Turkishness and Islam. However, Erk’s work treats the relationship between *Alevilik* and Turkishness/Turkish culture as of secondary importance while it is the relationship between *Alevilik* and Islam that is treated with less emphasis in the works of Benekay and Sertoglu. Another work that discusses *Alevilik*/Bektashism in general terms is Eröz’s book *Türkiye’de Alevilik Bektasilik*. As it was discussed in the previous section, it will not be referred to

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*Veli’nin bundan yedi asir önce yakmiş olduğu mesale, bu sekilde devam ettirilmektedir.” Ibid., pp. 382-383*

<sup>390</sup> “*Bektasilik dini görevinin yanında, Büyük Türk ulusunun toplum düzenini sağlamayı, Türk’ün ulusal mefkuresine hizmet etmegi, Türk ekonomik hayatına destek olmayı, Türk’ün ulusal çıkarlarına karsit her türlü sapık düşüncüyü yere vermegi kendisine amaç olarakabullenmistir. Yine Bektasilik büyük kurtaricimiz Atatürk’ün uyguladigi devrimlere tamami tamamına mutabiktir,*” *ibid.*, p. 331.

<sup>391</sup> “*Bektasiligin kanun murakabesine girmesi için, kanun teminatına alınmasi bir mecburiyettir. Atatürk devrimlerine bir teminat olacaktır.*” *Ibid.*, p. 332.

here again. In this work, *Alevilik* is considered in almost equal distance to both Islam and Turkishness/Turkish culture.

The narratives of the Alevi/Bektashi writers:

The studies that are discussed in this section are: Ibrahim Kamil Karaman and Abdlvahap Dehmen's, *Alevilikde Hacibektas Veli ve İlkeleri* (Hacibektas Veli and His Principles in *Alevilik*)<sup>392</sup>; Ali Smer's, *Haci Bektas Veli'nin Bilimsel Ynleri* (The Scientific Aspects of Haci Bektas Veli)<sup>393</sup>; and Bayram Kemanci's, *Aleviligin Kimligi, Dayandigi Esaslar, Gelenekler ve Grenekler* (The Identity, Essentials, and the Traditions and Customs of *Alevilik*).<sup>394</sup>

Of the writers of *Alevilikde Hacibektas Veli ve İlkeleri*, Karaman was born in the village of Ocak in Erzincan-Kemaliye and Dehmen was born in the village of Nimri (Pinarlar). The book was written by Karaman, who was a lawyer. The sections about the lives of the Alevis and Bektashis mostly are based on Dehmen's personal observations and experiences. The aim of the book is to end the prejudices about the Alevis and/or Bektashis and to set up "national unity and cooperation." They emphasize that they do not blame the "whole Turkish Sunni society" as the source of these prejudices: "It is known that a handful of religious fanatics provoke these malicious rumors and publications to disrupt the unity and cooperation of Turks and thus to divide us for their apparent aims."<sup>395</sup> According to the authors,

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<sup>392</sup> Ibrahim Kamil Karaman and Abdlvahap Dehmen, *Alevilikde Hacibektas Veli ve İlkeleri* (Istanbul: Tipo Nesriyet ve Basimevi, 1996).

<sup>393</sup> Ali Smer, *Haci Bektas Veli'nin Bilimsel Ynleri* (Ankara: Yeni Sanat Matbaasi, 1975).

<sup>394</sup> Bayram Ke manci, *Aleviligin Kimligi, Dayandigi Esaslar, Gelenekler ve Grenekler* (Izmir: Karınca Matbaacilik, 1979).

<sup>395</sup> "Bir avu yobazın Trk birlik ve beraberligini bozucu ve sarsici yayinlarda ve iftiralarda bulunmasinin muayyen maksatlarla bizi blmek isteyenlerin tesviki ile yapildigi bilinmektedir." Karaman-Dehmen, *Alevilikde Hacibektas Veli ve İlkeleri*, pp. 5-6.

this book, in which the problems are attributed to an indefinite group of people, is “a kind of self-defense.” The elements that are stressed in the defense provide strong clues about the Alevi/Bektashi identity that is constructed in this work: The Alevis and Bektashis are “true Muslims” and “pure Turks.” They fought together with the Sunnis in the War of Independence and to establish the Republic and they “adopted the path of Atatürk, the path of improvement and the path of revolution.”<sup>396</sup>

The first half of the work is devoted to the history of Islam and the explanation of why the Alevis are “true Muslims.” According to their thesis, Ali and his followers kept practicing the true teachings of Islam after the death of Muhammed while many turned back to their old pre-Islamic religious practices. The section on the history of Islam starts like this and when considered scientifically, it has an evaluation on the origins of Shi’ism, not those of *Alevilik*, and this is applied to the history of *Alevilik*. The importance of Hacı Bektas-i Veli is that he pointed out the value of Islam and Turkishness together: “Hacı Bektas-i Veli took in his hands this marvelous diamond which was clumsily processed by the Arabs and with it he lighted the torch of learning in the loyal hearts of Turks.”<sup>397</sup>

In this work, Hacı Bektas-i Veli is strongly mentioned and the definition of *Alevilik*/Bektashism is developed around his personality and the novelties he introduced to society. As the above quotation shows, in Turkey *Alevilik* and Bektashism are eventually considered on the basis of a synthesis of Turkishness and Islam. This work differs from the works discussed above: The discussion is not based on to what extent Alevis conform to the five pillars of Islam but on the argument that the true Islam is already represented by *Alevilik*. We can phrase the

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<sup>396</sup> “İlerilik yolu, Ata yolunu, devrim yolunu benimsemislerdir.” Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>397</sup> “Hacı Bektas-i Veli arabin yarım yamalak isledigi İslamiyet denen bu muazzam elmasi ele aldı ve bu elmasla Türkün ilim mes’alesini (...) Türklerin sadık sinelerine yaktı.” Ibid., p. 55.

synthesis of Turkishness and Islam referred to in this work as follows: The religious roots of *Alevilik* go back to the “true Islam,” while the way of life and the ethnic origins of the Alevis are attributed to the Turkish culture and descent. This might be the answer to the question of why *semahs* are not included in the larger section about the Bektashi organizations and various rituals (the ritual of brotherhood, good conduct, etc.), but in subsections like “Women in *Alevilik*”<sup>398</sup> and “Literature, Music and Folklore in Alevis and Bektashis”.<sup>399</sup> The *semah* texts in this work are very short and not comprehensive enough.

Kemanci, author of *Aleviligin Kimligi, Dayandigi Esaslar, Gelenekler ve Görenekler*, was born in Aydın-Kizilcapinar and was a member of the Ibrahim Sani family of the Tahtaci community. There are remarkable similarities between his work and that of Karaman and Dehmen. Although the writer, who expresses his wish for “national unity and cooperation”, does not give references, it is clear, especially at the beginning of the book where he states his aims and in the section about the birth/history of *Alevilik*, that he made use of other sources, and even plagiarized in his own work. From this point of view, differences between the two works can be seen: Although Kemanci, like Karaman and Dehmen, claims that Ali and the Alevis always supported and practiced the true Islam and shapes his own work on the basis of a synthesis of Turkishness and Islam, he does not focus on Haci Bektas-i Veli as the others do. This difference results from the fact the Tahtacis have a more indirect relationship with the Bektasi Ocagi. On the other hand, Kemanci starts his work with “*Bismillahirrahmanirrahim*” (in Islam, “in the name of God”) and repeats it at the beginning of each section. In addition, he explains various practices in *Alevilik* and some of the services in the rituals (for example, the services of *delil* and *pervane*) referring to Quranic verses. He gives extensive space to the discussion of rituals and frequently refers to the “*dede*, *rehber* and *mürşit*” as “*din adamı*” (clergyman). Kemanci takes the perspective of

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<sup>398</sup> Ibid., p. 87-91

<sup>399</sup> Ibid., pp. 106-110.

Karaman ve Dehmen on *Alevilik* to further points and thus approaches the perspective of Öztoprak, whose work is not included in this study because it does not include *semah* texts. Halil Öztoprak, one of the Alevi leaders of the 1950s, was the forerunner of an orthodox line of *Alevilik*.<sup>400</sup> In his works, he claims that the most orthodox practices are preserved by *Alevilik*.

Turning back to Kemancı's work, it should also be pointed out that he differs from Karaman and Dehmen in putting the discussion of *semahs* in the rituals section within the context of the ritual of *kardeslik* (fraternity). However, unlike the works of the 1920-1950 period regarding the Tahtacis and the work of Yetisen, who published his work in the 1950-1980 period, Kemancı gives little space to the *semahs* in his discussion of rituals.

In conclusion, in these two popular publications of the 1950-1980 period that deal with *Alevilik*/Bektashism in general terms, the aspiration for "national unity and cooperation" is dominant. In both works, *Alevilik* and/or Bektashism are considered within the general frame of the synthesis of Turkishness and Islam. Both works approach an orthodox view of *Alevilik* as they claim that *Alevilik* represents the true Islam. Kemancı is closer to this orthodox view of *Alevilik* than Karaman and Dehmen. Karaman and Dehmen, on the other hand, highlight the place of Hacı Bektas-i Veli and they show him as the point of reference in their argument of the synthesis of Turkishness and Islam through which they define *Alevilik* and Bektashism.

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<sup>400</sup> Faik Bulut, *Alisiz Alevilik*, (Ankara: Doruk Yayıncılık, February 1997), p. 11. In addition, for Öztoprak's ideas as to Orthodox Alevilik see, Cemal Sener, *Alevilik Olayı: Toplumsal Bir Baskaldırının Kısa Tarihçesi*, (İstanbul: Yön Yayınları, 1989), pp. 150-157. Öztoprak's works: *Kur'an'da Hikmet Tarihte Hakikat*, 2 Volumes. Vol: 1 (Ankara: Emek Basımevi, 1959), Vol: 2 (Ankara: Ekonomi Matbaası, 1960); Halil Öztoprak and Hüseyin Erdoğan, *Kur'an'da İbadet, Müslümanlarda Saadet*, (İstanbul: Sinan Matbaası, 1963); Halil Öztoprak, *Kur'an'da Hikmet Tarihte Hakikat ve Kur'an'da Hikmet İncil'de Hakikat*, (İstanbul: Anadolu Matbaası, 1990).



This last point is also valid for the last work to be studied here, Ali Sümer's *Hacı Bektas Veli'nin Bilimsel Yönleri*. In this work, Hacı Bektas-i Veli is described as the person, "who contributed most to the destruction of religious bigotry in Anatolia, and also in the organization of Turkishness and Islam."<sup>401</sup> It also refers to Hacı Bektas-i Veli as, "the great Turkish thinker and minstrel."<sup>402</sup> In contrast to the works studied above, Sümer relates the love and respect of the Alevis for Muhammed and Ali, not in the context of the history of Islam, but on the basis of their ethnicity: "The Bektashis and Alevis are very dedicated to God, Muhammed, and the sacred books and they consider them divine. However, as they know that only Muhammed and Ali were Turkish and Ebubekir, Ömer, and Osman were Arabic, they like and respect only those who are from their own race and only consent to their leadership."<sup>403</sup> This work draws on the Turkish roots of the Alevis and their contributions to the Turkish culture on the basis of Hacı Bektas-i Veli and thus upsets the balance of the synthesis of Turkishness and Islam in favor of the former component. He does not give enough space to the discussion of rituals and *semahs* either in his work and puts it in the section of "Music".<sup>404</sup>

#### The Alevi Identity and *Semah* Discourse in Publications that Consider *Semah* a Dance

In the previous section it was pointed out that one of the major developments that marked the 1940s was the inauguration of compilation works and ethnological research conducted by the folklorists. The data about *semahs* in the works of folklorists are based on field studies, and *semahs* were considered relatively

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<sup>401</sup> Sümer., p. 3.

<sup>402</sup> Ibid.

<sup>403</sup> Ibid., p. 39.

<sup>404</sup> Ibid., pp. 24-27

independent of rituals. As the period was dominated by field works motivated by nationalistic concerns, *semahs* kept the folklorists busy for a long time as an important part of “Anatolian Turkish Folkdances.” On the other hand, the fact that *semahs* were defined in different ways by Sunni and Alevi researchers –“sectarian dances” and “religious dances” respectively–, led to several arguments in the formation of the Alevi identity of the period.

In the 1950-1980 period, however, folklorists were less interested in field studies on *semahs*. This change of attitude was brought about by the accumulation of enough ethnological data required for the formation of the Turkish identity towards the end of the single-party period and also by the decrease of state support on the compilation studies.<sup>405</sup> Halil Bedi Yönetken, whose work was discussed in the section on 1920-50 period, published some articles and symposium papers in 1960s. The articles in his work *Derleme Notlari-1* (Compilation Notes-1) published in 1966 were based on compilation/research studies conducted between 1937 and 1952 by the Ministry of National Education, and were discussed in the previous section. His paper, presented on July 26-28 in 1961 in “The First Seminar on Turkish Folk Dances,” is also based on his research conducted during the same period.<sup>406</sup> In this paper, he discusses the *semahs* of the Sıraç community, who lived in Zile-Tokat, and those of the Nalci community, who lived in Ünye-Ordu, whom he met in his compilation tours in 1943. The *semahs* performed by these communities, the way they performed them, the steps they consisted of, and other technical qualities are reported in detail in this fieldwork. Yönetken’s approach to *semahs* and *Alevilik* was discussed in the previous section on the texts of the 1920-

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<sup>405</sup> For detailed information, see Öztürkmen, *Türkiye’de Folklor ve Milliyetçilik*; especially the section “Folklore Studies in Turkey in 1950s” pp. 193-221. It is also referred to in the section above, called “Alevi Identity and *Semah* Discourse in the Publications About Specific Alevi Communities” of the 1950-1980 period.

<sup>406</sup> “‘Sıraç’ ve ‘Nalci’ Alevilerinde Samah’a Dair Birkaç Söz”, pp. 36-40 in Serif Baykurt ed., *Türkiye’de İlk Halk Oyunlari Semineri* (Istanbul: Yapı Kredi Kültür Sanat Yayıncılık, December 1996).

1950 period. There is no striking difference in his approach in these later works, which he published in the 1960s. The data and evaluations are kept separate to a great extent and personal views are kept very limited. There are occasional references to Shamanism.

Another researcher we will be dealing with here is Metin And. In his works *Türk Köylü Danslari* (Dances of Turkish Villagers) <sup>407</sup> and *Oyun ve Bögü* (Performance and Sorcery) <sup>408</sup> discusses various factors that contributed to the formation of Turkish folkdances and refers to *semahs* in this context. In this study we will focus on *Oyun ve Bögü* because in this work, published ten years after *Türk Köylü Danslari*, the writer revises the section about the factors that contribute to the formation of folkdances, and did some modifications on the basis of more recent scientific/academic theses. For example, he refers to Shamanism as a religion in *Türk Köylü Danslari* while in *Oyun ve Bögü*, he strongly emphasizes that Shamanism is not a religion, referring to Eliade's academically established work *Shamanism*.<sup>409</sup> Another reason why *Oyun ve Bögü* is chosen is that it gives more space to the discussion of *semahs*. There is a subsection named 'Semahs among Social Dances' (*Dernek Danslarindan Semahlar*) in the book.<sup>410</sup>

And, who states, "[as] no culture has evolved into their present form singly, the Turkish culture of the present day Turkey has also been formed as a combination of different cultures,"<sup>411</sup> sees three main factors in the formation of Anatolian folkdances: Descent (Central Asian culture), location (Anatolian culture)

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<sup>407</sup> Metin And, *Türk Köylü Danslari* (Izlem Yayinlari, 1964).

<sup>408</sup> Metin And, *Oyun ve Bögü* (Istanbul: Is Bankasi Kültür Yayinlari, 1974).

<sup>409</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism. Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (London, 1964).

<sup>410</sup> And, *Oyun ve Bögü*, pp. 185-195.

<sup>411</sup> "Hiç bir kültür kendi basına çıkıp gelmediği gibi, bugün Türkiye Türklerinin kültürü de çeşitli kültürlerin karışımı ile oluşmuştur." Ibid., p. 85.

and religion (Islamic culture). Other factors he discusses are the cultural interaction in the Ottoman times and westernization. The writer attributes the descent factor to the Central Asian culture and argues that the clearest evidence of it is the Turkish language spoken today. In this section, the writer gives examples of various elements of the Central Asian culture, discusses Shamanism and shaman rituals in detail and draws attention to similarities between these rituals and Anatolian folkdances.<sup>412</sup> However, And concludes the section about the descent factor with a warning: “The cultural imprints of the Central Asia, especially that of shamanism, is explored in other fields but there has not been satisfying research about performances (*oyun*) yet.”<sup>413</sup>

And attributes the factor of “location” in the formation of Anatolian folkdances to the “Anatolian cultures.” He claims that the mythologies and rituals of ancient Anatolian civilizations are preserved especially in the dramatic dances of the rural Anatolian people, and he gives several examples. His emphasis on Anatolian culture and civilizations enables him to discuss folkdances in a larger framework than the “descent”-based framework that focuses only on Central Asian influence. For example, in the Anatolian cultures section, he states, “the best outcome will be attained with the comparison of the folkdances of various ethnic communities living in Anatolia.”<sup>414</sup>

In the section on the factor of religion, he refers to Islamic culture. He points out that, like Christianity, one of the monotheistic religions that wanted to eradicate idol worshipping and polytheistic religions, Islam too was not in favor of

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<sup>412</sup> For example, “The most important instrument of the Shaman, *davul* (drum) is also interesting. To some, the dance of the drummer seen in Kastamonu, or the two drummer performance seen in Bolu are the extensions of Shamanist rituals.” Ibid., p. 87.

<sup>413</sup> “Orta Asya’dan ve özellikle Samanlik’tan gelen kültür izleri çeşitli alanlarda incelenmektedir, ancak oyunlarla ilgili henüz kandirici araştırmalar yapılmamıştır.” Ibid., p. 97.

<sup>414</sup> “Asıl önemli sonuçlar verecek Anadolu’nun içinde yaşayan değişik etnik toplumların oyunlarını karşılaştırmak olacaktır.” Ibid., p. 109.

dance. After stating that the traditional dances and performances of the people were forbidden in Islam, the writer adds that two practices were “born” instead in Islam: *Taziye* (Condolence) and *Sema’*. *Sema’* is the name given to Mevlevi dances. However, he states argues that, as Köprülü and Krohn had shown in their 1929 study, *Sema’* was not “born” out of Islam but originates from Shamanism.<sup>415</sup>

In the discussion of *semahs*, And again takes these three factors (descent, location, religion) into consideration. In this section he makes use of various academic texts, the works of Salci, Yönetken and Yilmaz and a pamphlet on fifteen century dances. He also includes some data from his own compilation. In this section, he focuses on the *semahs* performed in the villages of Eskisehir, Tokat, and Antalya.

And describes *semahs* as “semi-religious dances”<sup>416</sup> in *Türk Köylü Danslari* and as “quasi-religious dances” in *Oyun ve Bügü*. These definitions do not contradict each other in relation to his general conception of *semahs*; both are partially ambiguous because the writer claims that although *semahs* have religious quality, they were not born of Islam: “These are truely the pure dances of the pre-Islamic peoples who have preserved them under the cover of religion despite the prohibitions. They originate in the need to perform it with men and women together.”<sup>417</sup> Although in this sentence he does not refer to a particular ethnic origin, the writer would later claim that *semahs* have always been known and performed by Turkish people.<sup>418</sup> In the section about the field studies, And describes each one of the different *semahs* performed in the villages of Eskisehir,

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<sup>415</sup> Ibid., p. 115.

<sup>416</sup> And, *Türk Köylü Danslari*, p. 12.

<sup>417</sup> And, *Oyun ve Bügü*, p. 185.

<sup>418</sup> Ibid., s. 189.

Tokat, and Antalya in detail. He gives information on how they are named, how many people perform them, and in what way, and their various steps.<sup>419</sup>

The work of Metin And makes it possible to bring together analytically the factors that are important in the formation of folkdances (and *semahs*) performed in Turkey, to question the approaches that attribute these folkdances and *semahs* to a definite root, and to discuss them on scientific grounds. The factor of Anatolian cultures reduces the importance of the place of the factor of Central Asian cultures to a great extent. On the other hand, the fact that the descent factor is attributed to a single root complicates the problem in spite of the addition of the factor of Anatolian cultures. It appears as a problem in the discussion of *semahs*. Unlike many of the authors discussed, And states that *semahs* were known to pre-Islamic Turks although he pays special attention not to present Central Asian cultures and Shamanism as the only factors on the formation of *semahs*. More importantly, while descent and religion are determining factors on his approach to *semahs*, the influence of the Anatolian cultures is not even mentioned.

In this section on the publications of the 1950-1980 period that deal with *semahs* in the context of dances, the last studies that will be discussed are two works published in the 1950s. The main body of these works is based on a pamphlet on fifteenth century dances. Ahmet Kudsi Tecer includes a copy of it in his series of articles titled “*Oyun ve Raks Hakkında Bir Eser*” (A Work on Dance and Performance),<sup>420</sup> which he found as an appendix to a *Garipname* in Ankara Maarif Kitaplığı.<sup>421</sup> It dates from 1426-27 (830, Islamic calendar). Another manuscript copy of the pamphlet was discovered by Agâh Sirri Levent in the Fatih

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<sup>419</sup> Ibid., pp. 191-195.

<sup>420</sup> *Türk Folklor Arastirmalari*, I no: 106 (May 1958); II no: 107 (June 1958), III no: 108 (July 1958); V no: 113 ( December 1958), VII no: 119 ( May 1959).

<sup>421</sup> Old record no: P 2/5, new record no: 320.

Library<sup>422</sup> and he published it with editorial notes in 1955.<sup>423</sup> The fact that it was published again in the 1950s is important for our study. Ever since it was published, it has been presented to as a point of reference in discussions as to the origins of *semahs*. As this pamphlet was written prior to the emergence of the Kizilbas communities, it can not refer to Alevi *semahs*. The word *sema*' mentioned in this pamphlet might be either the name of various religious dances (for example, Mevlevi *sema*'s) at that time, or the old form of dances (or parts of these dances) that later evolved into Alevi *semahs*. However, extensive scientific research is needed to answer this question. Thus, it is not scientifically proper to use this pamphlet as direct evidence in contemporary discussions about Alevi *semahs*.

#### Analysis of the Narratives That Refer to the Origins of the *Semahs*

The studies published in the 1950-1980 period about *Alevilik* and/or Bektashism that include *semahs* texts were introduced in three main categories. The *semahs* texts include references to the Alevi/Bektashi identity as in the texts of the 1920-1950 period publications. These references are emphasized strongly in some texts while in others they are not very overt. The references to Alevi identity are stronger in texts in which the data/observations and the discussion on the origins of Alevis are merged into each other while in texts that keep these two separate, the references are not very strong and generally covert.

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<sup>422</sup> Record no: 5335.

<sup>423</sup> Two pamphlets attributed to Asik Pasa, *Türk Dili Arastirmalari. Belleten* (Ankara, 1955): 153-163. Levent does not agree that these belong to Asik Pasa, and thus refutes this thesis.

(i) The texts in which the data/observations on *semahs* were kept separate from the discussions about the origins of Alevis: Except the work of Eröz, all the works discussed in the first and third groups are constructed on this basis. To give examples, in the works of Yetisen, Üçyildiz, Ülkütasir, Yönetken, and And, the data/observations on *semahs* are kept fairly separate from discussions/comments as to the origins of the Alevis. All these works state that the Alevis are Muslim Turkish people and they primarily stress the relationship between *Alevilik* and the Turkish descent and culture. The communities they study are Alevi communities like the Tahtaci, the Sıraç and the Nalci that originate from Turcoman tribes. However, the emphasis on ethnic origins in these works remains of secondary importance compared to the *semah* texts in popular publications. In the above section where these studies were introduced one by one, various examples were given of to each one and the approach of the writers of these texts to Alevi identity discussed. In the following section<sup>424</sup> about the relationship between *semahs* and the ethnic origins, the works of Yönetken and Ülkütasir will be briefly referred to again.

(ii) The texts in which the data/observations about *semahs* and the discussions on the ethnic origins of Alevis are not separated: In all of the popular publications of the 1950-1980 period introduced except for Sertoglu's work (the works of Erk, Karaman-Dehmen, Benekay and Kemanci) and in Eröz's work, the data/observations on *semahs* and the discussion on the origins of Alevis are merged into each other. Like other writers of popular publications, Sertoglu also states that

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<sup>424</sup> IV.3.2 (a)



the Bektashis are Islamic and Turkish, however, he differs in some respects from the others. For example, Sertoglu deals directly with the Bektashi order and avoids commenting on the Alevi communities that are not included in it. The writer does not consider Bektashism within orthodox Islam although he refers to the connections between Bektashism and Islam and points out the non-Islamic aspects of Bektashism in his comments on *semahs*. Sertoglu tries to restrict himself to oral reports and sacred books, and attempts to contextualize his narratives within the Bektashi philosophy. The problem with his text is it is not certain where his personal comments start or end. For example, he reports Bektashi *semahs* not on the basis of his observations but mixed with his comments. Although the comments are put in the context of the Bektashi philosophy, it is not certain whose comments they are, thus, they are taken as the writer's comments. The fact that his *semah* narratives give the impression of being taken from Oytan's work, which were discussed in the previous section, strengthens the possibility that the writer included his personal views too. This work that considers *semahs* in relation to the Bektashi philosophy will be discussed below in the section on the evaluation of references to different origins of Bektashism/*Alevilik* through *semahs*.

In Benekay's work, on the other hand, *semahs* and rituals are related to Turkish culture and the Alevi identity is evaluated on the basis of Turkishness. In the Alevi rituals section, he refers to the "curtain" metaphor we have discussed in the previous section. Although he states that Alevis are Islamic people, the religious aspect of *Alevilik* is not among the emphasized points. Thus, on the relationship between *semahs* and the ethnic roots will be discussed.

In the rest of the works named above, the relationship between *Alevilik* and Islam is emphasized more strongly than in the other works mentioned above and in the previous section. For example, unlike Sertoglu, *Alevilik*'s relation to orthodox Islam is introduced and *Alevilik* is considered partly in relation to it and partly in relation to Turkish race and culture. It is clear that Erk, Eröz, Karaman-Dehmen, and Kemanci consider the Alevi identity as a synthesis of Turkishness and Islam. However, considering these works from the point of view of the ritual/*semah* narratives, we cannot say that they all emphasize the two components of the synthesis equally. For example, it can be said that the ritual/*semah* narrative of Eröz is completely based on Turkish culture. It can be argued that Karaman-Dehmen, on the other hand, formulate the synthesis of Turkishness and Islam as follows: The religious dimension of *Alevilik* is based on the "true Islam" while their way of life and ethnic origins are attributed to Turkish descent and culture. In the narratives of Erk and Kemanci, on the other hand, the religious aspect of *Alevilik* is emphasized more strongly.

In addition, although these four writers base their arguments on the concept of orthodox Islam, they explain the relationship of *Alevilik* with it differently. The Sunni writers Erk and Eröz emphasize more strongly the Islamic principles that are valid in Sunni-ism too. Alevi/Bektashi writers, Kemanci and Karaman-Dehmen, on the other hand, claim that the true Islam is represented by *Alevilik*; thus, they formulate narratives that are closer to the concept of orthodox *Alevilik*. The work of Eröz, whose ritual/*semah* narrative is almost completely based on Turkish culture, will be discussed in the following section on the relationship between *semahs* and

ethnic origins, and the points he emphasizes in relation to the connection between *Alevilik* and Islam will be examined. The works of Erk, Karaman-Dehmen and Kemanci, however, will be discussed in the section on the narratives of a synthesis of Turkishness and Islam as the definition of the Alevi identity.

#### The *Semah* Narratives that Refer to the Ethnic Origins of the Alevis

The narratives that will be discussed in this section are from the works of Yönetken, Ülkütasir, Benekay and Eröz, all of whom are Sunni writers. Yönetken and Ülkütasir are folklorists; Benekay is a journalist while Eröz is a sociologist. As has already been pointed out in the previous section, the emphasis on the ethnic origins of *semahs* is not very strong in the works of Yönetken and Ülkütasir, who keep their data/observations on *semahs* separate from their comments on the ethnic origins of the Alevis. However, it is still possible to observe some stress on the ethnic origins of *semahs* in these texts. The importance of these examples is that they show that even though these writers pay particular attention not to deviate from the data yielded by the field studies, they can still occasionally comment on the ethnic origins of the *semahs* because in both periods, especially in that of 1920-50 period, the discussion on the ethnic roots were central in the formation of the Alevi identity. Considering the *semah* texts, it can be said that, as in the 1920-1950 period, in the 1950-1980 period too, the ethnic roots of the Alevis were sought in the Old Turkish culture and descent. However, in the 1950-1980 period, the Kurdish and Arabic speaking Alevis ceased to be the subjects of research.

The folklorist Yönetken refers to ethnic origins only in one place, in his article on the Sıraç and the Nalci communities. He says that the Sıraç community is “purely Turkish in terms of blood,” and makes the following remark on the *semahs* of Nalci community: “Women dance with their heads swung back, the plaits of their hair undone, with coins and other shining metals at the end of their hair let loose at the back, whirling around like whirl gigs... Like the ancient Shamans and Baskis, like the prayers performed standing and whirling around.”<sup>425</sup>

Ülkütasir, unlike the other writers, refers to two origins in his article “*Bektasi ve Alevi Ayinleri*” (Bektashi and Alevi Rituals). According to him, it would be more accurate to attribute these rituals to the old Persian religious practices and Turkish Shamanism rather than to look for Islamic meanings or contents.<sup>426</sup> It is not clear how the writer concludes his article with this sentence because in the previous sections of the article, he does not refer to Persian religious practices at all. Thus, only his emphasis on Turkish culture can be discussed.

Ülkütasir focuses on the word *ayin* (ritual) and, referring to the work of Besim Atalay, he relates both this word and the Alevi rituals to old Turkish traditions: “We should not think that this word comes from Persian. Even today,

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<sup>425</sup> “Kadınlar baslar arkada, saçlarının örgüleri çözülmüş, uçlarına pullar, paralar takılmış, arkaya sarkıtılmış olarak firildak topaç gibi firil firil dönerek oynuyorlar. -Eski saman, Baskılar gibi, zikirde döne döne yapılan kıyam zikirleri gibi.” Yönetken, “‘Sıraç’ ve ‘Nalci’ Alevilerinde Samah’a Dair Birkaç Söz,” p. 40.

<sup>426</sup> “Bu ayinlerde kesinlikle İslamî bir ma’nâ ve mahiyet aramaktan ziyade eski İran dini an’anelerinden ve özellikle Türk samanizminden geçme eser ve izlerin mevcudiyetini kabul etmek en dogrusudur.” Ülkütasir, “Alevi ve Bektasi Ayinleri,” p. 7.

the expression “*Ayin, Toyun*” is used in Anatolia. As in the words ‘*Yazin, güzün,*’ the suffixes ‘*in*’ and ‘*un*’ make time adverbials. These might refer to the worships the old Turkish people performed at the beginning of months. The village Alevis who preserve most old Turkish traditions still call their meetings ‘*Ayin-i Cem – Ayn-i cem.*’ These meetings are held either at the beginning or at the end of the months. There is no doubt that the old worships were performed in the form of dances (like Mevlevi rituals). Dance was a kind of ritual in those times and in uncivilized tribes, it still is.”<sup>427</sup>

Both of the *semah*/ritual texts above emphasize the practices of men and women performing the rituals together, dancing, playing music, and drinking. Although not discussed here, the same elements are present in Yetisen’s work, too. However, these elements are not directly related to the old Turkish culture. They are mentioned here because some texts of the 1950-1980 period give very little space to *semahs*, disregard the element of drinking completely (Karaman-Dehmen, Kemanci, Erk), or only bring it into discussion to explain it away (Eröz). Last, we should add that Ülkütasir diverts from the general tendency by stating that the Alevi and Bektashi rituals differ from each other and that *semahs* constitute the basis of Alevi rituals. Ülkütasir’s observation is repeated by Erk and Eröz, who did extensive research on this point. However, Erk, who attempts to define *Alevilik* within the framework of Islam, has a negative attitude towards those Alevis in whose practices he finds some contradictory elements to Islam, and thus considers this remark in favor of Bektashism.

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<sup>427</sup> Ülkütasir, *ibid.*, footnote no: 1.

In the *semah*/ritual narratives of the Sunni writer Benekay, the data and observations are presented merged with his comments on *Alevilik* and the ethnic origins of the Alevis. Although Benekay defines *Alevilik* as a “a sect in Islam” and states that “the essentials of *Alevilik* and *Kizilbaslik* are also essential in Islam,” he resorts to the “curtain” metaphor we have discussed in the previous section, emphasizing the relationship “*Alevilik*=Turkishness/Turkish culture,” and highlighting the shamanist roots: “The Shaman Turks who converted to Islam and chose the sect of *Alevilik*, have preserved the form of their old religious meetings, and did not give up drinking as they had done in their sacrificial ceremonies, and for it, they found beliefs and explanatory forms which originate from Islam.”<sup>428</sup>

This approach is present in the entire *semah*/ritual narrative of Benekay. It is interesting that although the writer was informed about the variation among Alevi communities in terms of their ethnicity and social organizations, he still emphasized Turkishness so strongly: “*Alevilik* is a large sect. It includes many nationalities like Acems, Arabs, Turks and many more are related through Bektashi order. However, the Kizilbas communities living in Anatolia, that we frequently state as a branch of *Alevilik*, are originally Gagauz Turks.”<sup>429</sup> This approach excludes the definition of from *Kizilbaslik* not only the Kurdish speaking Alevi

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<sup>428</sup> “Müslüman olup Alevi mezhebini seçen Saman Türkler dinî gayelerle yaptıkları toplantıların şekillerini de yasatagelmisler ve bu arada o kurban ayinlerinde yapıldığı gibi, içkiden de vazgeçmemisler ve ona Islami menseli inanış ve izah şekilleri bulmuşlardır.” Benekay, *Yasayan Alevilik*, p. 131.

<sup>429</sup> “*Alevilik* geniş bir mezheptir. Aleviler arasında Acemler, Araplar, Türkler ve Bektasilik tarikatı yoluyla daha birçok diğer millerler vardır. Fakat Anadolu’da yaşamakta olan ve Aleviliğin bir kolu olduğunu ikide bir belirttiğimiz Kizilbaslar Gagauz Türkleridir.” Ibid., p. 102.

communities in Turkey, but also the village Bektashis who migrated from the Balkans to live in Anatolia.

Although Benekay admits the existence of drinking, sacrifice, the participation of women, dance, and the playing of music, and Turkish sayings in Alevi rituals, he primarily discusses the motif of “light” and in relation to it, the motif of “fire.” He repeats several times that the roots of these motifs are in Shamanism: “Turkish people were mostly Shamanist before converting to Islam. In this religion, ‘light’ is a very important element. The sun, the moon, and Venus, what they call the brilliant star, are believed to be on the different layers of the seventeen-layered “*Sema*” (the sky). The moon, what they call “*Ay Ata*,” (Ancestor of the Moon) is on the sixth level while the Sun, what they call “*Gün Ata*,” (Ancestor of the Day) is in the seventh level. In Shamanism, important religious ceremonies and especially the sacrificial ceremonies are held in the evenings. After the sunset they built special and sacred fires of the juniper tree.”<sup>430</sup> The writer, who states here that the moon is believed to be in the sixth level, also claims that the *çerag* (candle or torch) service in *Kızılbaşlık* is the sixth service, and in his list of the twelve services, he puts it as the sixth service. However, in the other texts examined in this study, the services included in the twelve services are usually given in different orders.

There are two implications of the emphasis on “light” and “fire.” First, as we have been stated several times, the prejudices about the Alevi rituals and their secrecy have been expressed with the phrase “*mum söndü*,” referring to the *çerag*

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<sup>430</sup> Ibid., pp. 102-103.

service in the rituals. Thus, focusing on light, fire and the ‘*çerag*’ service and attributing them to Shamanism symbolically, serves to clear the Alevis of the prejudices on ethnic grounds. Second, as seen in the previous section, “fire” is an important motif in the discussion of the Kurdish speaking Alevis living in the eastern and southeastern Anatolia. It is possible that this serves the writer’s purpose to claim that these communities are originally Turkish by implying that these motifs, which were attributed to the Kurdish culture in the texts of the previous period (1920-1950), belong to Turkish culture as we know that the writer claims that all Alevi communities living in Anatolia are Turkish people. As discussed in the previous period, Tankut’s approach was in line with this. As Benekay states himself, these motifs are also related the Persian origin religions. However, he insists on attributing them to Shamanism: “The *cem* rituals and other meetings and gatherings of Turkish Alevis carry the traces of Shamanism. It is understood that the root of this concept of meeting goes back to Shamanism. It was of course also influenced by the practices of the Persian origin religions like Mazdekizm and Maniheizm.... Fire and light are sacred in all these religions.”<sup>431</sup>

Some of the theses of Benekay which have an amateurish tone are brought into discussion by the sociologist Eröz, on scientific grounds. Eröz’s work indisputably is based on extensive field studies and a wide range of scientific/academic reading. Considering it from the perspective of *semahs*/rituals,

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<sup>431</sup> “*Alevî Türklerde yapılagelen âyini cem’ler veya dernek ve birlik’ler Samanliktan bazı izler tasimaktadır. Öyle anlasiliyor ki bizatihi bu toplantı düşüncesinin kökü Samanliktadır. Bu arada elbet de İran’da dogus yayilmis Mazdekizm ve Maniheizm gibi dinlerden kalma inanıs ve aliskanlıklar da tesir etmistir. Ates ve isik bütün bu inanislarda kutsaldır.*” Ibid., pp. 137-138.



it is a rich source of data and has been utilized and referred to by many studies, including scientific/academic ones. However, as stated earlier, Eröz's work eventually considers *Alevilik* within the framework of a synthesis of Turkishness and Islam, and thus, in terms of the discussion of *semahs*/rituals, it is based on an approach dominantly centered around Shamanism. Eröz also uses the "curtain" metaphor very often. Here are some passages where he refers to this metaphor:

"This community, which mostly consists of illiterate village Turkish villagers, innocent but persuasive Turcomans, have preserved the pre-Islamic religious beliefs and practices that they have brought with them from Central Asia with great attention and perseverance, under the Islamic polish which they name as '*Alevilik*'.<sup>432</sup> The same emphasis is repeated in the rituals section: "The practices of men and women gathering together, drinking intoxicating beverages in these gatherings, playing music and dancing (*sema*, *samah*) are because of the traditions of Turks. After converting to Islam, they could not leave them behind and found Islamic disguises for them."<sup>433</sup>

As it is understood from the above quotation, the practices of gatherings composed of women and men, drinking, playing music and dancing are among the

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<sup>432</sup> "Büyük çoğunluğu okumamis Türk köylülerinden, temiz fakat kandirilabilen Türkmenlerden meydana gelen bu topluluk, Orta Asya'dan getirdikleri, İslamlık öncesi dini inançlarını inatçı bir ısrarla, '*Alevilik*' adını verdikleri İslami bir cila altında muhafaza etmişlerdir." Eröz, *Türkiye'de Alevilik Bektâsîlik*, p. 89.

<sup>433</sup> "Türklerin kadınli-erkekli toplantılar, buralarda içki içip eğlenmeleri, çalgılar çalip sema (*samah*, *raks*) etmeleri, töre'leri icabidir. İslâmiyeti kabul ettikten sonra, bu adetleri terkedemeyerek, onları İslâmî bir kiliga soktular." Ibid., p. 311.

elements most emphasized elements in this work that attributes the Alevi rituals to old Turkish traditions. The writer even claims in a passage about *semahs* that “*Semah*. Dance. Music. These are the indispensable elements of the Shaman rituals and *cems*.”<sup>434</sup> In other sections of the work, sacrifice is mentioned among these elements too. Moreover, some parts of the section titled “The Similarities between the *Cem* ritual and the ritual of the *Kamlık* religion [shamanism]” are devoted to the sacrificial ceremonies.

It has already been stated that among these elements, intoxicating drink was excluded most in the *Alevilik*/Bektashism studies in the 1950-1980 period, especially in the works in popular publications and those that relate *Alevilik* to orthodox Islam. Although Eröz also describes Islam as a curtain, he pays special attention to not to exclude Alevis from Islamic communities as he is concerned about the public legitimacy of *Alevilik*. This particular concern is apparent in several parts of the study. However, the element of intoxicating drink, which is generally neglected and even excluded in the works that emphasize the relationship between *Alevilik* and Islam, is not excluded in the work of Eröz, which is based on comprehensive field studies. It is even considered as an important element in the discussion of the relationship between *Alevilik* and Turkish culture. Eröz criticizes the members of the Alevi communities who attempt to support this practice with Islamic evidence, searching for it in *Mi'raç*, and Quranic verses (*El insan*, verse 21).<sup>435</sup> However, he himself tries to legitimize the element of intoxicating drink by

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<sup>434</sup> Ibid., p. 318.

<sup>435</sup> Ibid., pp.311-312.

first claiming that drinking originates from Turkish customs and then arguing that it is practiced only within the limits of the rituals and for religious purposes.<sup>436</sup> In the section about the origins of *semahs*, Eröz states that the Huns and the Göktürks performed religious dances similar to contemporary *semahs*. He also claims that the Turkish origin community, the Tabgaç also perform ‘*kamlık*’ rituals. Eröz makes use of Emel Esin’s article “*Semâ*,” which has been used as a point of reference in most works about the ethnic origins of *semahs* ever since it was published.<sup>437</sup> As in the case of Eröz, the most quoted section of this article is the passage where Esin relates the narrations of Chinese poets about the dances of young Gokturk girls. In this dance, girls whirl around themselves very quickly.

In conclusion, the studies of the 1950-1980 period, which refer to the ethnic origins of the Alevi in the *semah*/ritual narratives, the element of Turkishness is strongly emphasized. As in the *semah* texts of the 1920-1950 period, in the 1950-1980 period too, the elements that are emphasized most in relation to the general element of Turkishness are music, dance, Turkish sayings, sacrifice, drinking and the presence of women in rituals. While most of the works that strongly emphasize the relationship between *Alevilik* and Islam do not refer to *semahs* extensively and neglect the element of intoxicating drinks, in the narratives that focus on the formulation of “*Alevilik*=Turkish culture/descent/traditions/Shamanism” these elements are especially emphasized. However, as we seen in Eröz’s attitude, some of the writers who pay particular attention not to exclude *Alevilik* from Islam also

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<sup>436</sup> Ibid., pp. 311-318.

<sup>437</sup> Emel Esin, “*Semâ*,” *Türk Edebiyatı Dergisi* 36 (December 1974).

include drinking, but with supporting comments in their texts to legitimate this practice.

There is no study conducted in this period on Kurdish or Arabic speaking Alevi communities. Only Eröz refers to the rituals of Kurdish speaking Alevis in his narrative. In such passages, he stresses the existence of Turkish traditions and especially Turkish sayings in their rituals. For example, in his discussion of the Alevi communities living in Varto, he takes as his basis the approach of Firat, who claims that these communities are Turkish, and introduces the subject as follows: “Let’s see the completely Turkish rituals, traditions and *cems* of the Zaza speaking Alevis living in and around Varto from the perspective of a teacher (M. Serif Firat), who is himself a member of this Alevi community.”<sup>438</sup>

In the next section, discussion will be made of the studies that consider *Alevilik* within the framework of a synthesis of Turkishness and Islam through the *semah* narratives. The emphasis on Turkishness is still very strong in these narratives, however, the emphasis on the relationship between *Alevilik* and Islam is as strong too. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the component of ethnic origin is valid in all the works of the 1950-1980 period and by ethnicity, it means Turkish race/descent and culture.

#### The *Semah* Narratives that Define Alevi Identity on the Basis of Turkish-Islamic Synthesis

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<sup>438</sup> Eröz, p. 136.

As stated above, along with the reasons, the *semah* narratives that will be discussed in this section belong to the works of Erk, Karaman-Dehmen and Kemanci. Erk is a Sunni writer who served as a judge in the eastern cities for a long time. Karaman, a lawyer, is from Erzincan while Dehmen is from Elazig. Both belong to Alevi communities. Kemanci, on the other hand, is from Aydin and belongs to the Ibrahim Sani Ogullari group from the Tahtaci community. Erk's work describes *Alevilik* on the basis of the orthodox practices of Islam. In the other works, the definition of *Alevilik* is closer to the concept of orthodox *Alevilik* centered on the idea of "true Islam." According to this, most of the practices present in the time of Muhammed and approved by him are still present in *Alevilik*. What is more, Kemanci refers to the Quranic verses to support Alevi practices and the elements of their rituals.

A common characteristic of these works important for this study is that they give limited space to the discussion of *semahs*. Erk, for example, hardly ever mentions them. Karaman and Dehmen, on the other hand, discuss *semahs* only in the section "Women in *Alevilik*" and "Literature, Music and Folklore in Alevis and Bektashis" thus cutting their connections from the rituals. Only Kemanci discusses *semahs* in relation to rituals, although in a very limited sense. Similarly, the element of drinking is not mentioned in the first two works while Kemanci's work includes it in the list of services without going into detail about it.

**Erk's approach is very clear although it is not objective. He defines the Alevis who do not comply with the principles of Islam as 'müfrit/excessive Alevis,' and chooses to keep away from them. While comparing the "excessive**

**Alevi” with the Yezidi community, the writer comments on the Yezidi and their rituals as follows:**

“It is thought that the origins of the speculations about (the practice of Anatolian Alevi bringing roosters to the rituals, tying them to the lanterns or to the candles, and that they put off the lanterns or candles by the movements of their wings, and that the sins that would be committed afterwards would be tolerated) should be in the Rooster idol of the Yezidîs. The Yezidîs also believe in *Hulul*, reincarnation. They speak Kurdish and Arabic. They have a sacred book belonging to their sect written in Kurdish... Sexual intercourse is free among the Yezidîs... Carrying the child of the *dede* is considered very important for a woman; she is praised by the community. Dancing, and especially drinking wine are compulsory. Most things forbidden by Islam are recommended in this sect.”<sup>439</sup>

To conclude, Erk does not approve of practices that divert from Islamic principles. The rituals that include dance, music and drinking are among these practices. However, in his narrative, there is a covert approach based on ethnicity. This approach is similar to that of Samancigil that discussed in the previous section. The fact that they make a division among the Alevi communities and adopt a negative approach to some of them without exactly stating who these people are (which tribes, families or the people of which region, etc.) should be taken

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<sup>439</sup> “(Anadolu Alevilerinin âyinlerine Horoz’la girmeleri lâmbanın veya mumun yanına horoz bağlamaları horoz ötüncü kanatlarının çirpinması ile lâmbayı, mumu söndürmesi ve bundan sonra âyinde bulunanların isleyecekleri günahın makbul olduğu hakkındaki) telakkilerin rivayetlerin menseinin Yezidîlerdeki bu Horoz Totemi olması lâzım geldiği zannedilmektedir. Yezidîler aynı zamanda Hulul’e, tenasuha da inanırlar. Kürtçe, Arabca konuşurlar. Kürtçe yazılmış mezheplerine ait mukaddes kitapları da vardır... Yezidîler arasında cinsi münasebet serbesttir... Dededen hamile kalmak Yezidîler nazarında büyük bir hadisedir. Hamile kalan kadın takdis edilir. Raks etmek hele sarab içmek zaruridir. Islâmiyette haram sayılan bir çok şeyler onlarca tamamen helâldir.” Erk, *İslami Mezhepler-Tarikatlar*, pp. 151-152.

seriously. The rituals of those Alevis who are called by the author as excessive Alevis are compared to those of the Yezidis, who have a sacred book in Kurdish, and additionally that the Alevi communities Erk worked on were living in eastern Turkey might be clues to assume that the Alevis that are defined as excessive may actually be Kurdish speaking Alevis.

Kemanci, Dehmen, and Karaman, who themselves belong to Alevi/Bektashi communities do not express their opinions on Alevi/Bektashi rituals which include dance, music and drinking as clearly as Erk does. They report these rituals in a more Islamic framework. As Eröz also points out, Alevis should be considered as Muslim people in order to attain a legitimate Alevi identity and thus end the conflicts between Alevis and Sunnis. It seems that Alevi/Bektashi writers are more sensitive to this problem. However, this situation is not valid for all Alevi/Bektashi narratives. The Alevi/Bektashi communities also underwent major changes in the 1950-1980 period. Some Alevi communities started to emphasize secularism while others tried to establish connections between *Alevilik* and Islam.

However, the focus in this study is on the relationship between the rituals/*semahs* and the framework in which *Alevilik* is defined. Our analyses show that writers shape their *semah* narratives in accordance with the general framework within which they define *Alevilik*. Even though *semahs* are performed less often in this period, the exclusion of *semahs* from the ritual narratives shows the preferences of the writers (Karaman-Dehmen). The use of *Bismillahirrahmanirrahim* at every stage of the narrative, or referring to the *dede* or *mürsit* frequently as “clergyman” (Kemanci) are also the outcomes of the

personal preferences. For example, Kemanci in his *semah* narrative states that “the clergymen pray for those who complete at least three stanzas of *semah*.”<sup>440</sup>

In conclusion, in the narratives of the Alevi/Bektashi writers like Karaman-Dehmen and Kemanci, unlike in Erk’s narrative, *semahs* are not disregarded, but they are either limited or put in different contexts than rituals not to negatively influence the discussion of the Alevi identity. Another element which has a similar position in these narratives is, as stated above, drinking. Among the Alevi ceremonies, the *musahiplik töreni* (or *kardeslik töreni*; companionship ceremony) and *görgü* (or *düskünlük meydani, görüm*; ceremony of repentance) are emphasized because the former of these refers to the eternal brotherhood of Muhammed and Ali and the brotherhood of the emigrants of Mekke with the people of Medine,<sup>441</sup> while *görgü* refers to the desire of the Prophet Muhammed to “his desire to be always accounted for what he does”<sup>442</sup> as long as he is alive.

Last, reference will be made to some studies that attribute the ethnic origins of *Alevilik* to different sources than Turkishness or a synthesis of Turkishness and Islam. However, it must be kept in mind that these works too define the Alevis as Turkish and Islamic people though they do not emphasize it as strongly as the ones we have been studying do.

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<sup>440</sup> “Üç beyit tamamında sema yapan kislere din adami dua okur.”Kemanci, *Aleviligin Kimligi, Dayandigi Esaslar, Gelenek ve Görenekler*, p. 39.

<sup>441</sup> Karaman-Dehmen, p. 62; Kemanci, pp. 33-35.

<sup>442</sup> Ibid., p. 75.



### The *Semah* Narratives that Emphasize Various Origins of the Alevi

The examples of this kind are limited in the 1950-1980 period, however, discussion will be made to a couple of works about *semah* narratives that predict the approaches of the later period as the 1950-80 period can be considered as a period of transition. The first of these works belongs to Sertoglu. Sertoglu tries to contextualize the *semahs* within the Bektashi philosophy. However, it is not certain where his personal comments start or end in the work. His way of approaching *semahs* is seen again after 1980. The most interesting characteristic of his work is that he comments on every aspect of *semahs* within the general context. The elements of *semahs* Sertoglu relates to the Bektashi philosophy emphasizing the differences of Bektashism would be attributed to totally different origins. In the following passages, the emphasis is on the different stages of *semahs* and the meanings of figures:

*Semâs* are essentially similar to each other. There are not major differences among them. They generally start with a slow tempo and get faster as they progress. And almost all *semâs* have three stages. Actually, the number three is very important for Bektashis. It refers to the trinity of Allah-Muhammed-Ali.<sup>443</sup>

It is possible to attribute different significations to each movement of the *semâ*. That it has three stages is a signification. That the souls meet each other, correspond to each other is another signification.... Turning around a single soul signifies the desire to

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<sup>443</sup> “*Semâlar esas itibarile birbirlerine benzer. Aralarında esasli bir fark yoktur. Genel olarak yavaş bir tempo ile baslar ve gitgide hızlanarak sona erer. Ve hemen her semâ üç safha gösterir. Esasında Bektasiler nazarında üç rakamının kıymeti çok büyüktür. Ve bunun manası, Allah-Muhammed-Ali üçlüsüne benzeyistir.*”Sertoglu, *Bektasilik Nedir?*, p. 266.

be reunified with it. This signification expresses the *Vahdet-i vücüt* (oneness of God and human) philosophy. Moving one after the other is similar to the movements of stars and planets around the sun... All the movements of hands and arms are also meaningful. These are a kind of prayer, striving to reach that great being. And that being is actually himself, his own being.<sup>444</sup>

The Bektashi writer Sümer describes the meaning of *semahs* in a similar way: “sema is elevation from the earth and leaving your own being behind and being one with God.”<sup>445</sup>

The last point to be discussed in this section is the attempts to define *Alevilik* in *semah* narratives by referring to its relationship to the Anatolian cultures. Although this tendency is present in the *Alevilik*/Bektashism texts of the 1950-1980 period, it was not clearly reflected on the *semah*/ritual texts. We have already stated that Metin And discusses the influence of the Anatolian cultures on folkdances. And, in his comprehensive study of the Anatolian folkdances published in 1960 as *Dionisos ve Anadolu Köylüsü* (Dionysos and the Anatolian Villagers), states that this approach was sharply criticized by people who did not want to admit any source of influence other than the Central Asian cultures.<sup>446</sup> His statement

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<sup>444</sup> “*Semâ devrinin her hareketinde manalar bulmak mümkündür. Onun üç safha arzemesi bir manadır. Canların birbirlerini karsılaması, birbirlerine uymaları bir manadır. (...) Tek bir canın etrafında dönmeleri, sanki ona kavusmak ister gibi yapmalarının bir manası vardır. Ve bu mana; Vahdet-i vücüt felsefesini ifade eder. Birbirlerinin pesi sıra gitmeleri, yıldızların güneşin etrafında seyretmesine benzer. (...) El ve kol hareketleri de hep manalıdır. Bunlar bir çeşit yalvarisi, o büyük varlığa ulaşmak için çirpinmeyi, yakarisi ifade eder. Ulaşılmak istenen varlık ise hakikatte gene de kendisi, kendi benliğidir.*” Ibid., p. 268.

<sup>445</sup> “*Sema yerden yükselis, tanrıda yokolus halidir.*” Sümer, pp. 24-25.

<sup>446</sup> And, *Oyun ve Bügü*, p. 99.

clearly shows why the discussions as to the origins of *Alevilik*/Bektashism could not go beyond “Central Asian culture.”

Metin And states that the first writers to mention the influence of the Central Asian cultures were Cevat Sakir Kabaagaç and Sabahattin Eyüboğlu.<sup>447</sup> In the 1950-1980 period, there were researchers like İsmet Zeki Eyüboğlu and Burhan Ögüz who concentrated on this point within the framework of *Alevilik*/Bektashism. However, these studies do not claim that *semahs* originate in Anatolian cultures. Especially İsmet Zeki Eyüboğlu’s later work, published after 1980, reflect the beginning of such an attitude.

To sum up, in considering the *semah* narratives of the 1950-1980 period, we can say that there are two dominant discourses about the Alevi identity. The first one of these is the discussion of *Alevilik* on the basis of ethnicity, that is, Turkish ethnicity; and the second one is the discussion of *Alevilik* on the basis of a synthesis of Turkishness and Islam. To generalize, most of the works that are based on field studies do not emphasize the problem of ethnicity. The *semah* narratives in popular publications, on the other hand, include direct references to Alevi identity. They include legitimized definitions of the Alevi identity. In most of these texts, the framework of Turkishness and Islam is dominant. From this point of view, the definitions of the Alevi identity made in the 1950-1980 period based on the synthesis of Turkishness and Islam are highly legitimized. This point is especially emphasized by the Alevi/Bektashi writers of the period. On the other hand, *Alevilik* is still considered in relation to the Turkish race and culture as in the previous

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<sup>447</sup> Ibid.

period. Turkishness is still the most strongly emphasized, or at least an indispensable component of the Alevi identity. This attitude is also reflected by the fact that the Kurdish and Arabic speaking communities were generally excluded from discussions and that the ethnic dimension of *Alevilik* is completely attributed to the Turkish ethnicity without any room for uncertainty.

## The Representation of the Alevi Identity in the *Semah* Texts of the Post-1980 Period

The 1980s and especially the 1990s were the years when identity policies were discussed and reformulated on a wide scale, locally and globally. In this period, affected by the internal and external factors mentioned in Chapter 2, the formulation of the “secular and homogeneous Turkish national identity” that has played a very important role in the construction of the nation-state in Turkey since the establishment of the Republic started to be questioned seriously for the first time, and was even challenged occasionally. The religious and ethnic aspects of this process of questioning/challenging and the social and political actors that brought it into discussion (especially Political Islamists and the Alevis in terms of religion, and ethnically Kurdish people in the first place –including the Kurdish Alevis- and then other ethnic communities like the Circassian, Abhas, Laz and Georgian communities) are very important in terms of this study.

A large section of the Alevi communities that felt threatened by the events of Maras, Çorum, Sivas and Gazi Mahallesi towards the end of the 1970s and who perceived the Sunnification policies of the government after 1980 as a blow to their identities participated actively in the questioning of the paradigm of national identity that gained wider acceptance in the 1990s. This process, which has been expressed by the terms of the awakening of the Alevis or the repolitization of the Alevis, has occupied an important place in the social and political agenda in Turkey.

In this section, the *semah* texts published after 1980 will be discussed in the context of the Alevi identity. They will be examined in relation to the socio-political processes briefly mentioned above and discussed in Chapter 2.

### General Presentation of the Publications

As briefly introduced above, a break occurred in the process of the formation of the Alevi identity in the 1980s, and especially in the 1990s. The changes can be attributed to four major developments that appeared in the practice of *Alevilik*/Bektashism and *semah* writing after 1980. First, an “explosion” in the number of publications on *Alevilik* and Bektashism after 1980 occurred. Second, many members of the Alevi and Bektashi communities disclosed their identities, and even exclusively discussed the identity problems of their own communities, thus becoming the active subjects of Alevi/Bektashi writing. Third, some Kurdish speaking Alevis started publishing on Kurdish *Alevilik*. Fourth, especially in the 1990s, in parallel with the public performances of *semahs* and the privileged position they acquired in the traditional and religious ceremonies of the Alevis, *semahs* became a subject of publication on their own. Many writers, especially the Alevis, discussed and published on *semahs*.

#### Explosion of publications:

In the 1980s and especially in the 1990s, the obscurity about *Alevilik* started to disappear and Alevi communities opened up into the public sphere. One of the most important developments accompanying and supporting this process was an increasing number of works published in this period. Especially after 1990 when the publication of “*Alevilik Bildirgesi*” (Alevi Manifesto) put an end to the obscurity about *Alevilik*, there was a real “explosion” of publications on *Alevilik* and Bektashism.<sup>448</sup>

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<sup>448</sup> A.Y. Ocak, in his article “Alevilik ve Bektasilik Hakkındaki Son Yayınlar Üzerine (1990) Genel Bir Bakış ve Bazı Gerçekler” first published in 1991 uses this expression for the year 1990. See Ibid., pp. 191-223 in Ocak, *Türk Sufiliğine Bakışlar*. Karin Vorhoff holds the same opinion although using different terms. The writer states that the number of publications on *Alevilik* and Bektashism have increased

In this period, in addition to books on *Alevilik*/Bektashism, serial articles and interviews started to be published in newspapers and journals, and many people from both the Alevi/Bektashi and Sunni communities became involved (like writers, researchers, journalists, politicians, and *Alevi dedes* of Turkish and Kurdish communities, the representatives of several Alevi institutions, like foundations, *cemevleri*, culture houses, etc.) in this process. Thus, in the last twenty years, many people from different religious and ethnic communities, working in different sectors, and holding different opinions on *Alevilik* and Bektashism as will be seen later, published hundreds of books and articles.

In the post-1980 period, in publications in which the Alevi identity is discussed vehemently by many people from different backgrounds, *Alevilik* is not examined in depth. However, these publications not only reflect the social and political processes of the period, “they [also] affect the constitution and perception of social reality itself,”<sup>449</sup> as Vorhoff points out. Thus, these publications, most of which carry the mark of non-scientific approaches –this is valid for most of the works discussed among the publications of the 1920-50 and 1950-80 periods, however, the number of people who expressed their opinions and the number of different opinions expressed were limited in these periods- provide very important clues about the dimensions, problems and the different aspects of the reconstructed Alevi identity in the post-1980 period.

Alevi/Bektashi writers increased:

Alevi and Bektashi writers become active subjects of the practice of writing on *Alevilik*-Bektashism. In earlier periods, it was generally Sunni writers who

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enormously in the post-1980 period, *ibid.*, Also, this point is referred to in the prefaces of most works on *Alevilik*/Bektashism published in 1990s.

<sup>449</sup> Karin Vorhoff, “Academic and Journalistic Publications on the Alevi and Bektashi of Turkey” pp.23-50 in Olsson et al., eds., *Alevi Identity* (Istanbul: Swedish Research Institute, 1998).

conducted research on *Alevilik* and Bektashism and expressed their opinions through publications. The number of publications written by Alevi/Bektashi writers was very limited so it does not influence the general tendency. The fact that Alevi/Bektashi writers become the active subjects of writing on *Alevilik* –although there was still an important number of Sunni writers publishing on the subject– showed that a different era had started in the formation of the Alevi/Bektashi identity.

Two points about this new era need special emphasis: First, as will be seen in the analysis of the narratives of these writers, it is not possible to talk about a common language, a common history or a common concept of *Alevilik* among the Alevi/Bektashi writers. Their common point is that Alevis claim the right to tend on their own vision of *Alevilik* on the basis of their own vision of history. Olsson, who has written on the scripturalization of Ali-oriented religions (including *Alevilik*), highlights his point as follows: “By writing or telling one’s own history an imagined community of an idealized past is constructed, and even confined up, into which the needs and wishes of the present are projected.” He adds that “the telling of history provides meaning, experience of identity, and visibility.”<sup>450</sup>

The second point that will be referred to in the discussion of the new stage in the construction of the Alevi identity is, as a tangent from the main concern of this paper, the “symbolic” value of these publications. Vorhoff, who thinks that these publications are not read widely, comments as follows: “Even if the books only decorate the show-cases of the book-shops and the bookshelves in the private houses, they may still function as signals and symbols,” because even the mere existence of these publications shows that Alevis are still present and alive and cannot be silenced.<sup>451</sup> Olsson, who points out the same issue, draws the following

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<sup>450</sup> Tord Olsson, “Epilogue: The Scripturalization of Ali-oriented Religions” pp. 199-208 in Olsson et al., eds., *Alevi Identity*, p. 200.

<sup>451</sup> Vorhoff, p.35.



conclusion: “Writing, and the keeping of written things, seems to deny deaths: that of memory, of fame, of identity, and indeed that of absence, which as such carries a trace of death.”<sup>452</sup>

Thus, the acquisition of the central position of the practice of writing on *Alevilik*-Bektashism by Alevi themselves serves directly or indirectly the enhancement of awareness of identity by the members of their communities. The question of how the Alevi identity is represented in these publications will be discussed in the following sections.

Kurdish speaking Alevi writers appeared:

Kurdish Alevi gained an active position in the practice of writing on *Alevilik*/Bektashism and some of them put the subject of Kurdish *Alevilik* on the agenda. It is possible to read the two observations in the previous section by replacing “Alevi and Bektashi writers/communities” with “Kurdish Alevi writers/communities.” However, there are two important points which should not be disregarded. First, there was no writer prior to 1980 who disclosed her/his Kurdish Alevi identity<sup>453</sup> and published on Kurdish *Alevilik* or Alevi Kurds. Second, in the case of Kurdish Alevi we can only talk about an “introduction” rather than an “explosion” of publications.<sup>454</sup> This situation is a result of the continuing lack of interest in the ethnic diversity of *Alevilik*.

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<sup>452</sup> Olsson, p.206.

<sup>453</sup> However, it needs to be added that there are just a few names like Nuri Dersimi, who stay out of this generalization. In *Kürdistan Tarihinde Dersim* (Dilan Yayinlari) and *Hatiratim* (Özge Yayinlari, 1992) he refers to beliefs and ritual practices of Kurdish speaking people in Dersim. His publications can not be included in the mainstream Alevi writing of this period.

<sup>454</sup> Although the *Nusayri* community is not included in this study as they do not perform *semahs* in their rituals, it should be pointed out that in the post-1980 period there are some published works on this community, too.

*Semah* became an important subject matter:

*Semah* is an important service performed in the *cem* rituals that are highlighted in the post-1980 period by Alevis who try to reconstruct the Alevi community life. Many young Alevis who have been brought up in cities first meet *Alevilik* through *semahs*.<sup>455</sup> Moreover, in the 1990s, *semahs* have two important missions in relation to the Alevi identity: They not only served in the inner restructuring of *Alevilik* and the transition of the Alevi traditions from generation to generation, but also in the view of many community members, they represented *Alevilik* in the outer world.

Parallel with these developments, two books and several articles were published directly concerning *semahs* in the 1990s. Both of the books were written by Alevi writers (Erseven and Bozkurt) and most of the articles were published in the Alevi journals that became very popular in this period.<sup>456</sup> Thus, after about half a century, *semahs* again became the subject matter of research and publication. The importance of these works, most of which were written by Alevi writers, is that while they re-transcribe the *semah* texts that are already present, they also serve to assign new meaning to *semahs* and reshape them in terms of their choreography and expression. The reverse of this relationship is also possible as the changes in *semahs* in the public sphere are reflected in the texts. The question of how *semahs* are defined in the process of this mutual interaction is closely related to the (assumed) Alevi identity. Thus, the works published in the 1990s, especially the ones published in Alevi journals and which are directly concerned with *semahs* provide ample source material for the study of the Alevi identity.

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<sup>455</sup> This point will be discussed Chapter 4, which is devoted to field studies.

<sup>456</sup> İlhan Cem Erseven, *Aleviler'de Semah* (Ankara: Ekin Yayınları, January 1990) and Fuat Bozkurt, *Semahlar* (Istanbul: Cem Publications, 1990).

Considering the four developments briefly explained above in the study of the *semah* texts of the post-1980 period will be helpful in analyzing the references to the Alevi identity through *semahs* in detail. However, it would be misleading to claim that the Alevi identity constructed and represented in the publications of the previous periods (1920-50 and 1950-80) was totally replaced by a radically new one, or that the representation of the Alevi identity in these publications entered a completely new era, because some of the dominant ideologies and opinions of the previous periods appear to have sustained their importance and influence in the post-1980 period. For this reason, in the following section, which introduces the publications that deal with *semahs*, the following method will be adopted: As different people from different religious or ethnic communities are actively involved in the practice of writing on *Alevilik*/Bektashism in this period, the publications are also grouped on the basis of the narratives of writers from different communities. The first section is devoted to Sunni narratives, and the second one to Alevi narratives. The narratives of Kurdish Alevi writers will be discussed separately within this group. Moreover, in the process of analysis, reference also will be made to the influence of the opinions and attitudes deployed in the practice of writing prior to 1980.

### The Representation of the Alevi Identity in the Sunni Narratives

As it was pointed out several times in the previous section, prior to 1980 most of the writers who dealt with *Alevilik* and Bektashism were members of Sunni communities. In the most general words, throughout the 1920-1980 period, these writers fought against the misconceptions and prejudices, especially the charges of atheism (or *Rafizîlik*) and “*mum söndü*,” and the political accusations about Alevis and Bektashis of being against the state/government. As have already been seen, the Alevis/Bektashis were considered on the basis of “Turkishness” in the 1920-1950 period in order to be legitimized. However, this approach neglected not only

the existence of Kurdish and Arab Alevis but also the religious ties of *Alevilik*. Although the Alevis/Bektashis started to be considered in terms of their religious connections in the 1950-1980 period, this time they became objects of Sunni-based approaches and the legitimation was attempted through the framework of a synthesis of Turkishness and Islam. There were still works in the 1950-1980 period that considered Alevis only on the basis of “Turkishness.”

These approaches, which were mainly adopted by Sunni writers/researchers during the periods 1920-50 and 1950-80, also carried clearly the marks of the dominant cultural policies of the Turkish state. Although the post-1980 period reflected the diversity of the writers’ affinities, most of the Sunni writers kept the previous approaches. Most of these writers considered *Alevilik* primarily as a synthesis of Turkishness and Islam; they developed an approach more in line with the cultural policies of the period. In the next section, first, the “main tendency” in the Sunni narratives will be discussed. Afterwards, other approaches that deviate from the main tendency will be examined.

### The Main Tendency in the Sunni Narratives

As discussed in Chapter 2, the synthesis of Turkishness and Islam which was first formulated in the 1970s has turned to be an official conception in the post-1980 period.<sup>457</sup> In addition, the various practices like the construction of mosques in Alevi villages by the government and the compulsory religious education in schools are the reflections of the “Sunnification” policies that were followed in relation to *Alevilik* in the post-1980 period.

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<sup>457</sup> Also see Binnaz Toprak, “Religion as State Ideology in a Secular Setting: The Turkish-Islamic Synthesis”, in M. Wagstaff, ed., *Aspects of religion in Secular Turkey* (Univ. of Durham, Center for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, 1990), pp. 10.15.

Vorhoff describes the writers who consider *Alevilik*/Bektashism within the framework of a synthesis of Turkishness and Islam as “religious Sunni writers.”<sup>458</sup> Although we agree with Vorhoff’s definition in general, it should be added that this definition is valid for the majority of Sunni writers who have an important place in the practice of writing on *Alevilik*/Bektashism. As they both have a rich body of works published before them and adopt approaches that are in line with the cultural policies of the period, they represent an effective trend. There are many people from different backgrounds and formations in this general group. For example, academicians like Yasar Nuri Öztürk, Ethem Ruhi Figlali and Orhan Türkdogan, Abdülkadir Sezgin (the former Head of Religious Affairs), Mehmet Kirkinci (a member of the ‘*Nurcu*’ *tariqa*’ and some researchers-journalists like Taha Akyol, and Rüstü Sardag can be cited among these writers.<sup>459</sup> These works not only emphasize the similarities between Alevis/Bektashis and Sunnis rather than the differences, but also claim that they share the same values highlighted by the Alevis/Bektashis (like the love of Ali and his followers).<sup>460</sup> The element of *semahs*

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<sup>458</sup> We can count Bilgiseven and Erdogan as examples. The works of these writers whom we do not include in this study as they do not include *semahs* in their discussions are: Amiran Kurtkan Bilgiseven, *Türkiye’de Millî Birliği Bozan Ayrılık (Alevi Sünni Ayrılığı)* vol. 82 (Istanbul: Türk Dünyası Araştırmaları Vakfı Publications, 1991); Kutluay Erdogan, *Alevilik Bektasilik* (Istanbul, İletişim Yayınları, 1993).

<sup>459</sup> Yasar Nuri Öztürk, *Tarihi Boyunca Bektasilik* (Istanbul: Yeni Boyut, 1992 (2)). 1st edition: 1990; Ethem Ruhi Figlali, *Türkiye’de Alevilik ve Bektasilik* (Istanbul: Selçuk Yay., July 1994 (3)). 1st edition: October 1990; Orhan Türkdogan, *Alevi Bektasi Kimliği* (Istanbul: Timaş Yay., 1995); Abdülkadir Sezgin, *Hacı Bektas Velî ve Bektasilik* (Istanbul: Kamer Publications, 1995 (5)) 1st edition, by the Ministry of Culture in 1990). Mehmet Kirkinci, *Alevilik Nedir?* (Istanbul: Cihan Matbaası, 1987); Taha Akyol, *Osmanlı’da ve İran’da Mezhep ve Devlet* (Istanbul: Milliyet Yayınları, May 1999). Rüstü Sardag, *Her Yönü ile Hacı Bektas-i Veli ve Yepyeni Eseri Besmele Açıklaması* (İzmir: Karınca Press, 1985).

<sup>460</sup> For the two theses mostly proposed by “the rightwing nationalist Sunni writers” in this context, see A. Y. Ocak’s *Alevilik Bektasilik Gerçeği ve Buna Yönelik Bazı Tezler*. The group he calls “the rightwing nationalist Sunni writers” is the same group we talk about here. He also scientifically refutes these two theses in his article. pp. 246-258 in Ocak. *Türk Sufiliğine Bakışlar*. Also see İsmail Engin’s article, “Alevîlerin Kendi Görüntüsünü Algılayışı ve Alevî İmajına Yönelik Bakış Açıkları” pp. 275-302 in İsmail Kurt and Seyit Ali Tüz, eds., *Türkiye’de Alevîler, Bektasîler, Nusayrîler* (Istanbul: Ensar Nesriyat, Aralık

which do not conform to the Sunni faith and practice, on the other hand, is either neglected or only touched upon in passing remarks. Most of the time, this element is related to the old Turkish traditions as previous periods (1920-50 and 1950-80). For example, Figlali and Türkdogan relate Alevi rituals completely to old Turkish traditions, including the *semahs*. Although Figlali seems to agree with this hypothesis completely, Türkdogan has hesitations about it. Another way of legitimation for *semahs* is to attribute them to Sufism, thus bridging the gap between *Alevilik* and Sunni-ism. Sezgin discusses the Mevlevi *sema's* and the Bektashi *semahs* or *sema's* in the same section and attributes the origins of both to “the foundations of Sufism” by referring to Mahir Iz’s work *Tasavvuf*. In addition, he puts the rituals of various Sunni orders (like Mevlevî, Kadirî, Rukai, Sa’dî, Halvetî, Naksî) and the rituals and *semahs* of the Bektashi order in the same category, implying that the difference between them is not much beyond a difference of terminology.<sup>461</sup> Öztürk does not refer to the origins of *semahs*, but his narrative relates them to Sufism. Like Sezgin, he calls the Bektashi *sema's* “*zikir*” and the performers “*dervis*.” Although the *semahs* in which the performers hold hands had been mentioned very rarely in the *semah* narratives of the last forty years, Öztürk emphasize that “*sema* or ‘*zikir*’ is performed by men and women together holding hands and turning in a circle.”<sup>462</sup> On the other hand, Sezgin who objects to the “*mum söndü*” charges, in his narrative emphasizes that “the opposite sexes do not hug each other.”<sup>463</sup>

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1999).Engin, who states that the Sunni writers emphasize similarities rather than differences, says that this approach “brings the concept of assimilation at the background.” p. 283.

<sup>461</sup> Sezgin, *Hacı Bektas Veli ve Bektasilik*, pp. 118-120.

<sup>462</sup> Öztürk, *Tarih Boyunca Bektasilik*, p. 241

<sup>463</sup> Ibid.

Another important point discussed in detail in most of these works is the intoxicating drinks in rituals. They call it “a bad habit”<sup>464</sup> or “perversion,”<sup>465</sup> with less tolerance than the *semahs*. Figlali discusses the element of intoxicating drinks in the four pages of a five-page section on the similarities between Alevi and, Shaman rituals. Referring to the old Turkish/Shamanist traditions, he states that intoxicating drink was taken for religious purposes. However, he adds that “today many of our people both Alevi and Sunni, have this bad habit although it is forbidden in our religion” and that “not all Alevi communities take intoxicating drinks, they sometimes serve sweet drinks ‘*şerbet*’ instead.”<sup>466</sup> His attitude about intoxicating drink is clearly negative.

Sezgin who argues that “intoxicating drinks and other drugs which create drunkenness are forbidden in our religion”<sup>467</sup> and that “at the beginning alevi-bektashi communities did not drink intoxicating drink,”<sup>468</sup> claims that this practice transmitted to these communities through Christians.<sup>469</sup> According to the writer this could have happened in either of the following two ways: First, while the Bektashi dervishes were converting Christians to Islam, “intoxicating drinks might have remained as one of the old habits and traditions that these newly converted Muslims could not give up”.<sup>470</sup> Secondly, it might have been a plot of “the enemy who could not beat Turks on the battle-ground and wanted to undermine the castle

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<sup>464</sup> Figlali, *Türkiye’de Alevilik ve Bektasilik*, p. 367

<sup>465</sup> Sezgin, p. 121

<sup>466</sup> Figlali, pp. 367-370.

<sup>467</sup> Sezgin, p. 120

<sup>468</sup> Ibid., p. 121

<sup>469</sup> His reference is the serial articles published in the paper *Yarın*, in 1930 by Galip Baba who was officially “*baba*” when the religious orders and lodges were abolished.

<sup>470</sup> Ibid., p. 125

from within by putting some of their men in the disguise of Muslims.”<sup>471</sup> Sezgin, who “finds out” the reason for this “perversion” as thus,<sup>472</sup> addresses the reader as follows: “You should decide on which side you are according to your own conscience.”<sup>473</sup> According to Sezgin who claims that the “the era of degeneration” started after Balim Sultan, who was a convert from Christianity and became the head of the *Bektashi Tekkesi*. The non-Islamic practice of “drinking wine (*demlenme*) was also brought by Balim himself as a ritual.”<sup>474</sup>

Öztürk is not the first writer who names the time of Balim Sultan as “the era of degeneration.” Baha Said Bey, whom he refers to, is one of the first writers to assert this claim. However, since Baha Said Bey, who considers Bektashism not in religious terms but only in a nationalist framework relates the element of intoxicating drinks to the old Turkish traditions, that is, Shamanist rituals.

Last, Türkdogan’s work will be discussed and its importance among the other ones, which approach *Alevilik*/Bektashism in similar terms, will be examined. Türkdogan mentions the names of writers like Figlali, Öztürk, Sezgin with praise. However, unlike their works, his own work is based on a comprehensive field study in seventeen cities and forty-five Alevi villages and neighborhoods,<sup>475</sup> and includes the narratives of informants. It is constructed on the basis of field studies, that the adopted methods (participant observation, interview and the “*emic-ethic*” approach) are clearly defined and the insistence on the use of scientific terminology

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<sup>471</sup> Ibid., p. 126

<sup>472</sup> Ibid., p. 121

<sup>473</sup> Ibid., p. 121

<sup>474</sup> Ibid., p. 176.

<sup>475</sup> The seventeen cities are Manisa, Mugla, Aydin, Antalya, Izmit, Çorlu/Tekirdag, Istanbul, Malatya, Elazig, Çorum, Bursa, Tokat, Amasya, Kars, Bolu, Kirikkale, Ankara. Türkdogan, *Alevi Bektasi Kimligi*, p. 43.



strengthens the scientific reliability of the work. For this reason, this work can be considered as a reference book on *Alevilik* and Bektashism. However, it is clear that the framework of Turkishness which relies in the synthesis of Turkishness and Islam that are dominant in the works discussed above, are also present in this work. The writer, who claims that all Alevi and Bektashi communities are Turkish, suggests solutions within the framework of Turkishness and Islamic synthesis in order to end the controversies between these two communities.

Türkdogan expounds his main thesis as follows: “(1) The difference between the Alevis and the Sunnis has been formed by internal and external factors throughout history; (2) For this reason, both approaches could lead a social unification by going back to the roots through the adoption of the process of reformation.”<sup>476</sup> While the writer claims that “unification” does not mean assimilation through the individual loss of the communal identities,<sup>477</sup> it cannot be said that the writer himself is very careful not to confuse these two concepts. Although he does not disregard the differences between the communities and even attempts to uncover them, he claims that they have emerged through historical processes and tries to prove that they do not have separate roots. This will be discussed further in the section on the rituals and Kurdish Alevis. In the end, the writer suggests that Alevis and Sunnis should “unite” on the basis of “Islamic culture” around the concept of “nationalization”: “What I mean by unification is not the melting of one group by the other in a melting pot. It is to unite the two groups on the basis of a common Islamic culture while each respecting the thoughts, feelings, and activities of the other.”<sup>478</sup>

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<sup>476</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>477</sup> Ibid., p. 42-43.

<sup>478</sup> “Bütünleşme ile ele almaya çalıştığım husus, bir grubun öteki grubu bir eritme potası (melting pot) içinde eritmesi değildir. Her iki grubu, düşünme, duyma ve eylemde bulunma özelliklerine saygı gösterme suretiyle, ortak bir İslami kültürde birleştirmektir,” ibid., p. 42

The orientation of the unification of Alevis/Bektashis and Sunnis is in the direction of completing the nationalization process in our society... The most important goal of our society today is to establish the concept of becoming a nation, which means gathering around common ideals in good and bad days alike. To divide and destroy or to form small pools of ethnic communities prevents Turkish society from becoming a nation.<sup>479</sup>

As is understood here, Türkdogan is supporting both religious and ethnic unification. After the 1950-1980 period, when the Kurdish Alevis were not included in the works of the Sunni writers, Türkdogan took up the subject again and included various Kurdish Alevi villages and towns in his field studies.<sup>480</sup> In the sections about these communities, he refers to the identities with which the interviewed people define themselves. The ones whose narratives are quoted here generally claim that they are purely Turkish people. It is unclear whether the writer picked only the narratives that were in line with his own discourse and whether the interviewed people practiced *takiyye* or not.<sup>481</sup> However, it should also be stated that the writer's own discourse is in line with these narratives and he highlights it

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<sup>479</sup> "Alevi-Bektasi ve Sünni bütünleşmesinin yönelimi, toplumumuzda geç kalmış bulunan millîleşme sürecinin gerçekleşmesi amacını tasir. (...) Ülkemizin bugün en büyük davası, sosyolojik anlamda tasada ve kivançta ortak duygular etrafında birleşme anlamına gelen milletleşme olgusunu gerçekleştirmektir. Bölmek ve parçalamak, etnik havuzcuklar olusturmak Türk toplumunu milletleşme kimliğinden uzaklastirir," ibid., p. 43.

<sup>480</sup> For example, the villages of Sögüt (Mamuret), Kozluk and Izoli near Malatya. Also, some people interviewed in and around Malatya and Elazig are partly Kurdish. The interviewees also include people who have migrated from Hozat and Çemişgezek to other places. For example, there are many such Kurdish Alevis who have settled in the village of Beyoba near Akhisar.

<sup>481</sup> Türkdogan states, in his discussion of the Kurdish Alevis and Bektashis and the Shiite communities that the "emic" approach is mostly a way of exercising *takiyye*, and he adds that experienced and skillful approaches would overcome this difficulty. p. 46.

frequently. He establishes connections between religious and/or traditional practices and Shamanist traditions. Below are some examples concerning this issue:

Hasan Efendi claimed that he was a member of the “**Koçusagi** tribe.” Koçusagi, as the name implies, was a purely Turkish tribe... [Hasan Efendi] groups the religious sects into four: 1) **Derviş Cemal**, 2) **Ağuçınlar**, 3) **Sari Saltuklar**, and 4) **Baba Mansurlar**. These are very important, too. Especially the “**Sari Saltuklular**” should be of interest among these sects. They clearly show that the communities of this region are Turkish clans belonging to Horasan community.

Hasan Efendi, the representative of the Zazas, stated with pity that they were despised in Tunceli and thus had to hide their Turkish identity. When he learned that I acknowledge their being a ‘Turkish clan’, he hugged me and burst into tears.<sup>482</sup>

Except for the incomplete attempt of Eröz, Türkdogan is the first since Baha Said Bey among the writers who consider *Alevilik* in relation to Turkishness and/or a synthesis of Turkishness and Islam to include Kurdish Alevis in his field studies.<sup>483</sup> It is important that this development coincides with other cultural and political developments that led Kurdish Alevi people to start writing about their own

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<sup>482</sup> “Hasan Efendi kendisinin “**Koçusagi**” asiretine mensup olduğunu ifade ediyordu. Koç usagi, adi üzerinde halis Türk boyu oluyordu. (...) İtikadi mezheplerini de dört kisma ayırıyor: 1) **Derviş Cemal**, 2) **Ağuçınlar**, 3) **Sari Saltuklar**, 4) **Baba Mansurlar**. Bunlar da çok önemli. Özellikle, **İtikadi mezhepleri arasında “Sari Saltuklular”** dikkat çekici olsa gerek. Bunlar bölgenin Horasan Ehline bağlı Türk boyları olduğunu açık seçik göstermektedir...Zazaların temsilcisi Hasan Efendi, Tunceli’de kendilerinin horlandığından, bu yüzden Türklüklerini gizlediklerini acı bir dille açıkladı. Benim kendilerini “Türk boyu” olarak kabul ettiğimi belirtmem üzerine ‘boyuma sarıldı, ağlamakli oldu’.” Türkdogan, p. 166. The reason why the writer takes Hasan Efendi as “representative” might be because he was the oldest member of the village. However, his construction of the narrative leads us to think that Hasan Efendi represents Zazas on the level of the community. It should also be questioned whether it is scientifically correct for the researcher to reflect his personal ideas to the informants.

<sup>483</sup> As it has been stated earlier, Sevgen and Tankut also worked on Alevi Zazas. However, as they were prepared for distribution in a partially close-circle, they have not been published. The reason for starting with Baha Said Bey is that we only refer to works that have been published.

communities. However, it is also interesting that Türkdogan does not refer to the works of these writers even only to refute their theses. The writer “unites” all Alevi communities including the Kurdish Alevis (stating the differences of *ocak*, ideas, dialects, etc. among them) in terms of their ethnic roots on the basis of the framework of a synthesis of Turkishness and Islamic culture, regardless of the differences among their present situations and ideas. Thus, it is not possible to claim that the writer turns his back to the approach of “melting pot” while developing his hypotheses into a thesis. The same problem emerges again in the sections about rituals/*semahs*.

It should be pointed out that this writer, who conducted such a comprehensive field study and emphasized the importance of “participant observation,” did not participate in a single ritual. However, he still has some ideas regarding the rituals and *semahs*. The elements of “intoxicating drink” and “musical instruments” are highlighted by Türkdogan. He does not mention *semahs*. However, the fact that the *semah* performances are accompanied by “*baglama/saz*” might imply that he refers to both music and dance with the term “musical instruments.” The elements of “intoxicating drink” and “musical instruments” (*çalgi*) are approached from a negative perspective as they are considered to be contrary to Quranic principles and harmful to the Alevi identity. In principle, Türkdogan, like many other writers who view *Alevilik* in the same framework (Turkishness or a synthesis of Turkishness and Islam), relates Alevi rituals and their elements to the Shamanist culture. However, his aim is not simply to legitimize *Alevilik* but to attain true interaction and unification between Alevis and Sunnis. Thus the writer thinks that instead of legitimizing these negative elements that “harm the Alevi identity,” they “should be discarded” from the Alevi culture. With this attitude Türkdogan represents an extreme point among the writers with whom he shares the same point of view, and

he could disregard some elements of a certain identity not to harm it but at the end create the same –maybe even stronger- effects on that identity.<sup>484</sup>

It is only later understood that Türkdogan, who relates the Alevi ritual and its elements to Shamanist traditions, attributes the origins of *Alevilik* to Hacı Bektas-ı Veli and Ahmet Yesevi. The need to discard the elements of intoxicating drink and musical instruments from the *Alevi* culture is reasserted this time by referring to these historical figures:

“The practice of both intoxicating drink and music, and worship in *Cemevi* could separate *Alevilik* from its roots. Because the core of *Alevilik* are the souls of Hacı Bektas Veli and Hoca Ahmet Yesevi. *Alevilik* that does not control one’s **hands, tongue and sexual needs** under control is not *Alevilik* anymore.”<sup>485</sup> The fact that he uses Alevi beliefs (keeping hands, tongue and sexual needs under control) to reject some parts of the Alevi rituals shows that he interprets this belief in a completely different way, and this is probably more harmful to the Alevi identity than the elements he rejects.

Türkdogan also rejects the *Kirklar Meclisi* (the assembly of the forty) which has been brought into discussion mostly by Alevi writers and which partially constitutes the link between *Alevilik* and Islam. He considers the *Kirklar Meclisi*

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<sup>484</sup> According to Türkdogan, many aspects of the old Shaman pantheon like the Kams’ practice of drinking intoxicating beverage when they are ascending to the “*Kirklar Meclisi*,” leading the rituals, playing the *saz* are preserved in the Alevi traditions with all their beauty. This root paradigm which is called ‘*Mıraçlama*’ and its derivatives and other elements of culture are completely against the Quranic ideals of Islam. For this reason, we have to differentiate the “*volk-alevilik*” from these elements because then the unification of Sunnis and Alevis can be based on stronger grounds and achieved more easily. It is clear that Islam is the unique universal religion that is against intoxicating drinks in its sacred book the Quran. To defend *Alevilik* by claiming that the proneness of Alevis to intoxicating drinks, and becoming drunk comes from their old Shamanist culture firstly harms *Alevilik* itself. p. 545.

<sup>485</sup> “*Cem Evi’nde hem içki ve çalgı, hem de ibadet türü davranış normları Aleviliği köklerinden koparabilir. Çünkü Alevilik’in özü Hacı Bektas Veli, Hoca Ahmet Yesevi ruhudur. Eline, diline ve beline hakim olmayan bir Alevilik, alevilik olmaktan çıkar.*” Türkdogan, p. 558.

among the cultural elements that are related to *Miraçlama* which he takes as the “root paradigm.” His suggestion is, like the elements of intoxicating drink and musical instruments, that *Miraçlama*, and thus the *Kirklar Meclisi* should be excluded from the Alevi traditions: “To exclude ‘*Miraçlama*’ from the Alevi traditions would not be very harmful to the whole system. However, to put Ali in the place of the Prophet could harm the Alevi philosophy itself. If we want to restore *Alevilik*, we should first reform the Alevi traditions on the basis of the Quran.”<sup>486</sup>

In conclusion, it can be said that in this seemingly highly scientific work that is based on comprehensive field studies, the ideological views of the writer receive too much attention. As in the other works discussed in this category, Türkdogan’s work too considers *Alevilik*/Bektashism within the framework of Turkishness and the synthesis of Turkishness and Islam. However, its difference is that it takes this argument to an extreme by suggesting that for the unification of the Alevi and Sunni, *Alevilik* –and, only *Alevilik*, but not Sunni-ism– should undergo a structural reformation in the process.

#### Minor Tendencies in the Sunni Narratives

It has already been stated that *Alevilik* and *semahs* were considered in the context of “Turkishness” in the 1920-50 period, and in the context of “Turkishness” and/or “a synthesis of Turkishness and Islam” in the 1950-80 period. It has also been pointed out that in both periods there were writers whose attitudes were outside this general frameworks or who tended to go beyond those boundaries. For example, Yörükan demonstrated a different approach in the 1920-50 period by considering *Alevilik* in relation to its religious aspects rather than its ethnic origins. In the 1950-80 period too, was Eyüboğlu, who connected *Alevilik* with Anatolian civilizations

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<sup>486</sup> Ibid., p. 544

and And who counted the Anatolian cultures among the elements that constituted *Alevilik*.

Eyüboğlu, who published his first work on *Alevilik*/Bektashism in 1979, has paid greater attention to the subject since 1980.<sup>487</sup> Eyüboğlu also refers to *semahs* in his works and states that there is no concrete evidence about the origins of *semahs*. Although he does not attribute *semahs* completely to the pre-Islamic Anatolian cultures, he points out the similarities between *semahs* and the cultural legacy of the Anatolian civilizations. In the post-1980 period, as will be seen in the section that is based on Alevi narratives, there are writers who have been influenced by Eyüboğlu's works and who have taken the Anatolian civilizations into consideration while discussing the process of formation of *semahs*.

On the other hand, it should be made clear that Eyüboğlu does not agree with the idea of defining *Alevilik* and *semahs* in relation to its "roots" and does not take the widely accepted "roots" paradigm into consideration when he establishes connections between *Alevilik* (and *semahs*) and Anatolian civilizations. He does not attempt to particularly find out which *Alevi* beliefs and practices belong to which Anatolian civilizations. On the contrary, he emphasizes that it is a result of the hundreds of years of accumulation of cultural elements that interact and add upon others in Anatolia. For this reason, he rejects the term "Anatolian civilizations" and calls it "the Anatolian Civilization." The writer states that Anatolia has always been occupied by some people throughout its history. And all these people have had their own traditions, dances and other successful practices. They might have changed but they have never disappeared. In this context, he thinks as follows in relation to the *cem* ritual:

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<sup>487</sup> İsmet Zeki Eyüboğlu, *Alevîlik-Sünnîlik-İslâm Düşüncesi* (İstanbul: Hürriyet Ofset, 1979); *Bütün Yönleriyle Bektasîlik* (İstanbul: Der Publications, 1990) 1st edition: 1980; *Hacı Bektas Veli* (İstanbul: Özgür Publications, 1989); *Günümüzde Alevilik* (İstanbul: Pencere Publications, September 1997 (2)).

It cannot be denied that any work produced in Anatolia has been influenced, inspired and developed by the [Anatolian] civilization. The successes of human beings are like knots one upon the other, each strengthening the others, thus, without one the rest are not very efficient or strong. The *cem* ritual that has a very important place in *Alevilik* and *Bektashism*... is a human success with roots in deep. It has been established not only by the contributions of the Turkish communities who migrated from Asia, but also by the contribution of the native Anatolian peoples and today, it is difficult to point out their peculiarities and contents in detail and bring them out after criticism. There is even a controversy about which one is brought from Asia.<sup>488</sup>

The writer, who claims that the *cem* ritual was actually a mass ritual celebrated in the name of the Persian king Cem who constructed the tradition of drinking wine in Zerdüst religious ceremonies, asserts that it cannot be said for sure that this ritual came from the Persians and without any change. He supports his argument with examples from “the differences between the similar practices in the Shiite rituals and the practices of Anatolian Alevi and Bektashi.”<sup>489</sup> He claims that “these differences prove that this ritual is not only of Persian origin and they have connections with the various rituals performed in ancient Anatolian cultures.”<sup>490</sup>

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<sup>488</sup> “Anadolu’da ortaya konan bir ürünün [Anadolu] uygarligından etkilendiği, esinlendiği, beslenerek geliştirdiği yadsınamaz. İnsan başarıları birbirine eklenen, birbirini pekiştiren düğümler gibidir, biri olmadan ötekini etkinliği, sağlamlığı söz konusu değildir. Alevilik’te, Bektasilik’te büyük önem taşıyan (...) cem töreni de kökleri derinlere uzanan bir başarıdır, burada Asya’dan göçen Türk topluluklarının olduğu gibi, Anadolu yerlilerinin de katkıları vardır; bu katkıların özelliklerini, içeriklerini bugün için bütün ayrıntılarıyla saptamak, eleştiri süzgecinden geçirerek açığa çıkarmak güçtür. Hangisinin Asya’dan getirildiği bile tartışmalıdır.” Eyüboğlu, *Günümüzde Alevilik*, pp. 75-76.

<sup>489</sup> “Sii inancında sürdürülen benzeri törenle Anadolu Alevileri’nin, Bektasilik’in uygulamaları arasında ortaya çıkan ayrılıklar,” *ibid.*, p.45.

<sup>490</sup> “Bu ayrılıklar, bu törenin yalnız İran kökenli olmadığını, Eski Anadolu’da sürdürülen benzeri törenlerle az çok ilişkili olduğunu kanıtlamaktadır,” *ibid.*, p. 45.



Eyüboğlu, as opposed to the approaches that attribute *Alevilik* to a certain “root,” emphasizes human successes building upon the previous ones through the interaction of various processes and from this point of view he underlines the importance of historical evolution. Eyüboğlu also criticizes many Alevi and Sunni writers who have published on *Alevilik*-Bektashism for having emphasized the “formal” aspects of the rituals too much. He states that this formalist approach is predominant in Islamic practices and, for unknown reasons it is applied to the institutions of *Alevilik* and Bektashism too. In this context, he warns the reader in relation to *semahs* and the *cem* ritual:

To look at them always from a formalist perspective, thinking that they are traditional practices distances people from the problems. These practices do not just have a formalistic aspect, they are the expression of their philosophy of life and they are performances which make life more meaningful. There are two sides of the ritual: the external and the internal. Externally, the ritual is very formalistic and addresses only the eye. However, beyond this there is a meaningful internal side. This internal side is all the elements that make up the content.<sup>491</sup>

### The Representation of the Alevi Identity in the Alevi Narratives

As we have discussed above, many Alevi writers started to work on *semahs* in the post-1980 period when *semah* performances began to be carried onto the public sphere. Some Alevi journals tried to publish the opinions of *dedes* and other

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<sup>491</sup> “Bunlari birer geleneksel uygulama sanarak hep biçimsel yaniyla görmek, sorunlardan uzaklaşmaktır. Bu uygulamalar biçimsel değil, birer yasama anlayisinin dışı vurusudur, yasami anlamlandıran sergilemelerdir. Törenin biri dış, öteki iç olmak üzere iki yanı vardır. Dış yani biçimseldir, yalnızca göze yöneliktir. Bu biçimselliğin ötesinde bir de anlam dolu iç vardır. Bu iç, içeriği oluşturan öğeler bütünüdür.” Ibid., p. 67.

community members on public performances. The basis of this interest in *semahs* lies in the fact that *semahs* have an important place in the formation of the Alevi identity both within and outside the community. This situation is also pointed out by some writers. For example, the title of one of the articles of Aydogmus on the subject is “*Alevi Kimliginin Disa Vurumunda Semahların Önemli Bir Yeri Var*” (*Semahs Have an Important Place in the Expression of the Alevi Identity to the Outer World*).<sup>492</sup> Necati Üçyıldız describes the *semah* as “the symbol of Alevi’s existence in society as a means of communication.”<sup>493</sup> Thus, the way *semahs* are discussed in the post-1980 period publications gives important clues about how the Alevi identity has been constructed by the Alevis themselves.

### Alevi Narratives that Refer to the Origins of the *Semahs*

It is the Alevi writers who emphasized the *semahs* in direct relation to the Alevi identity in their narratives and published extensively in the post-1980 period.<sup>494</sup> However, there are two major issues in the publications of these writers: There are

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<sup>492</sup> Mehmet Aydogmus, “*Alevi Kimliginin Disa Vurumunda Semahların Önemli Bir Yeri Var*” *Nefes*, year: 3, no: 32 (June 1996), pp. 45-46.

<sup>493</sup> “*İletişim aracı olarak toplumun içinde varoluş simgesi*” Necati Üçyıldız, “*Semahlarımız*”, *Nefes*, year: 2, no: 14 (December 1994), pp. 58-59.

<sup>494</sup> It has been stated above that in the 1950-1980 period *Alevilik* and *Bektasilik* are described as “true Islam” by some Alevi/Bektashi writers (Karaman-Dehmen, Kemancı, Öztoprak). We can name Koç, Tanrikulu and Dinçer among the writers who adopt this approach which has become more common in the post-1980 period. In this group of publications, as it can be remembered from the previous section, they either do not talk about *semahs* at all or just mention them superficially. The works holding such a view are quite marginal among the post-1980 period publications, thus, are not included in our discussion. (Sinasi Koç, *Gerçek İslam Dini* (Ankara: Güven Press, 1989); Rasit Tanrikulu, *Ademi Farkeden Allah’i Bilir* (Ankara: Güven Press, 1989); and Murtaza Dinçer, *Alevi-Sünni Ayriminin Tarihsel Nedenleri* (Ankara: Evren Press, 1990)).

not many publications on *semahs* in the post-1980 period that are scientifically qualified these texts only superficially refer to the changes in the conditions in which *semah* performances take place.

First, we will focus on the scientific validity of these texts. Weak scientific quality is not a new phenomenon for *semah* texts and it has been referred to in the case of the previous periods' (1920-50 and 1950-80) texts. The main indicator of this feature in the post-1980 period publications is that very few of them are based on field studies.<sup>495</sup> Second, they have not been in search of new primary sources. What is more questionable is how the already-discovered sources are made use of in this period. For example, most of the writers who refer to the pamphlet (*risale*) about the fifteenth century dances, which was published in two different versions in the 1950s, choose to read/interpret this pamphlet according to their own points of view about the origins and definition of *semahs*. Another common practice is the publication of a copy of the pamphlet without any comment or interpretation. The writers who choose to act this way are probably trying to present their works as if they have a scientific background. The same unprofessional attitude is generally present in the use of various Alevi texts which have religious quality for the community. They generally used the later editions of these important books as primary sources, sometimes even without paying significant attention to which is written by whom.

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<sup>495</sup> The number of works that do not fit this generalization is very small. For example, Rıza Yetisen's book *Tahtacı Asiretleri* was published in 1986. Most of the sections of this book which is based on the researches he has conducted since the 1940s have been published in the journal of *Türk Folklor Arastirmalari* from 1950s on. The importance of this book, which was discussed in the previous section for the post-1980 period publications, is that it is regarded as a reference book, but it did not have any influence on changing the direction of publications in this period. Dr. Ayten Kaplan has a work titled "Kongurca ve Türkali Tahtacılarında Semah": *Folklor/Edebiyat*, no. 16 (Winter 1988): 49-54. Also the BA thesis of Belgün Aygün submitted to the Department in 1982 was used as a reference book in the works of the writers who published in the 1990s. This thesis examines the *semahs* of the Elmalı village of Antalya and those of the Alevis living in Amasya: *Alevi Bektashi Semahlari ve Törenler*, A.Ü. Faculty of Language, History and Geography, Theatre Department.

The scientifically weak arguments and the prejudices present in the publications of the earlier periods find their ways to our day through the newly written texts. It is possible to find most of the works written by Alevi and Sunni writers discussed previous sections in their bibliographies. Even when the new writers do not prefer to recite or note the earlier publication, it is not difficult to find their marks.

The concept of *Alevilik* as a particularly Turkish system of belief is the most important legacy of the previous periods to this period. This legacy has been questioned by the Kurdish Alevi writers who published in the post-1980 period just to some extent. Another legacy of the earlier periods is the emphasis on Hacı Bektas-i Veli. In the first place, all the Alevi communities besides Bektashis are related to Hacı Bektas-i Veli and thus the various differences, among these communities (*ocak* differences, cultural and ethnic diversities etc.) are neglected. This general tendency becomes even more widespread in the post-1980 period and both *Alevilik* and/or Bektashism and also *semahs* are taken into consideration only “in general lines.” Second, new approaches have emerged on the basis of the interpretations of the place of Hacı Bektas-i Veli in the works of the 1950-1980 period. Among these, the important ones for the discussions of ethnic roots are the ones that refer to the framework that take *Alevilik* and Bektashism as a synthesis of Turkishness and Islam on the basis of the argument that Hacı Bektas-i Veli played an important role in the spreading of the Turkish culture and Islam. This approach, as will be seen below, is very common at present too. Other approaches are about the personality of Hacı Bektas-i Veli and are shaped within the leftist approaches of the period: they consider *Alevilik*/Bektashism either as a religion of “friendliness and tolerance” or as a “rebellious culture.” Both of these approaches are among the “legacy” of the previous periods to this period.

As a second main feature of the Alevi narratives that refer to the origins of *semahs*, the disregard of the process of the reformation of *semahs* deserves attention. What helped *semahs* to regain importance in society was the struggles of the Alevi communities to reunite after a long period of disintegration, and to preserve their identities and traditional communal institutions. However, it is naturally not

possible to go back to the traditional forms and thus traditions and all related institutions are reconstructed in accordance with the new historical/social circumstances. The most major changes that surround the present day *semahs* are the diversities among the members of these reuniting communities in terms of *ocaks*, tribes, ethnicity, economic situation, political stand, social status, etc. In other words, the *cem* rituals that bring these people together have replaced the *cem* rituals of the close community structures where all participants had more or less the same background and knew each other well. Second, *semahs* are no longer performed only among Alevis but are performed in public places accessible to Sunnis, too. Third, the Alevis have started to form *semah* groups and performed their *semahs* on stage and television besides their “natural” and “traditional” conditions and purposes. However, it is interesting that the process of the revival of *semahs* is not accompanied by analyses or discussions of these transformations in the publications of the period. There are some writers who mention the urbanization of the Alevis and state that *semahs* are not performed only within *cem* rituals. However, these writers make only general statements about the present conditions and they sometimes add their grief about “degeneration” and “loss of authenticity.” On the other hand some of them confirm the idea that under whatever conditions the *semahs* are performed, and they force the Alevis to face their own identities. The fact that the transformations that *semahs* have undergone are not analyzed in the discussions show that that appear on those texts, the Alevi identity is not being shaped around real questions and present conditions. However, it should not be claimed that none of the changes that *semahs* have undergone are considered in the discussions of *semahs*. On the contrary, it is possible to see, within the main tendencies, new attitudes adopted in relation to each new development about *semahs* in the post-1980 period. This point will be revisited at the end of the section.

In the following section, the *semah* narratives of the Alevi writers will be discussed and analyzed in two main parts. These two parts are: Alevi narratives that refer to the origins of the *semahs*; and Alevi narratives that refer to the reformulation of the

*semahs* in the public sphere. In the first part, the references of the Alevi writers to the origins of *semahs* will be discussed, considering the “legacy” of the previous periods in two separate groups as “Turkish Alevi narratives” and “Kurdish Alevi narratives.”

### Turkish Alevi Narratives:

The *semah* texts discussed here give the impression that the Turkish Alevi writers agree more or less on the religious dimension of *semahs*. First of all, considering all the texts together, it is clear that the connection between *Alevilik* and Islam is taken for granted and is not questioned further. Second, we observe a lack of interest in the *ocak* differences among Alevi communities and the division between *Alevilik* and Bektashism. Although some writers merely mention these issues, they do not reflect it to the discussions *semahs*. The last point that should be emphasized is that all of the writers reach a consensus on *semahs*. Most of the writers describe *semahs* as “uniting with God in an ecstasy” or “being one with God” after pointing out that *semah* is a form of “prayer” or “religious dance.”<sup>496</sup> Although it is not clearly stated by all the writers, the definitions produced in this vein can usually be included in Sufism within the philosophy *Vahdet-i Vücut* (Oneness of God and

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<sup>496</sup> For example, Orhan, who sees *semahs* “as a symbol of beliefs on their own” states that “the moment a person experiences the love of God at the fullest is the EXTACY of reaching God.” Muharrem Orhan, “Alevilik’te Semah,” *Cem*, year: 3, no. 31 (December 1993): 23-25, p. 24. The Ballet Department member Barin: “We see the idea of being one with God through an “extatic” experience at the roots of *semahs*.” Ayhan Aydin, *Alevilik Bektasilik Söylesileri* (Istanbul: Pencere Yayinlari, August 1997, p. 36. Interview with Nasuh Barin, pp. 325-337 in *ibid.* Erseven, who interprets the structural aspects of *semahs* from the perspective of astronomy, describes the last part of *semahs* that generally consist of three stages as follows: “They reach the peak in acceleration where they meet God. There God appears, and also the essence of human being.” *Ibid.*, p. 255. Interview with Ilhan Cem Erseven pp. 251-256. Kaygusuz, who describes *semahs* as “the joyful and entertaining institution of mass worship in *Alevilik*” emphasizes that *semahs* “symbolize reaching God and uniting with Him.” Ismail Kaygusuz, “Alevilik’te Toplu Ibadet, Cem ve Kurumlarına Nesnel Bakis,” *Kervan* 65 (August 1997): 16-19, p.19.

men) which supports the view that “existence is one, and that the Creator and the created are one and the same.”<sup>497</sup> The writers who claim that *Alevilik* has a “syncretistic” structure emphasize various beliefs and ideas that have been transmitted from other systems of faith to *Alevilik*. The interesting point in the *semah* narratives being discussed here is that the writers who adopt the *semah* definition as “uniting with God in an ecstasy” still consider ethnic origins as the main constituting element of *semahs*, thus distancing themselves from the idea that *semahs* have “syncretistic” structure. In addition, while many writers keep mysticising *semahs* through the adoption of concepts from Sufism they also equate them with contemporary values. The analyses of the connections of *semahs* with primitive dances, *Sufi* dances and/or dances of the religious orders will certainly help scientific elaboration of the discussions on *semahs*. However, what we want to draw attention to at this point is that *semahs* are equated by writers with the particular belief, culture, ethnic origin, contemporary socio-cultural values that the writers favor themselves. As will be seen below, the main tendency of the post-1980 writers is to emphasize the relationship of *semahs* with a single ethnic culture.

As has already been stated above, the most important “legacy” of the works on *semahs* conducted from the 1910s on to the post-1980 period is to discuss *Alevilik* and Bektashism on ethnic grounds in general and in relation to Turkish culture and Central Asian Turkish traditions in particular. For example, the Bektashi writer *Dedebaba Noyan* defines *semahs* in relation to Sufism as the struggle of the soul to reach its essence inspired by divine love while at the same time arguing that the clothes of the performers carry “national characters” and that the bards still compose sayings that are “purely Turkish.”<sup>498</sup> According to the writer, the old Shamans also practiced such a dance.

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<sup>497</sup> Esat Korkmaz, *Alevilik Bektasilik Sözlüğü* (Istanbul: Ant Yayinlari, 1994 (2)). For detailed information, see A. Y. Ocak, *Osmanli Toplumunda Zindiklar ve Mülhidler* (Istanbul: Tarih Vakfi Yurt Publications, July 1998.) Especially Chapter V.

<sup>498</sup> Bedri Noyan, “Semâ “Semah” Hakkında”, *Cem*, year: 1, no: 9 (February 1992), p. 7.

Veli Asan who is known for his work on the Tahtaci community, claims that *semahs* originated in the “Central Asian religion of Turks,” which is Shamanism. describe the Shaman dances: “The Shaman stands in the middle holding the drum over his head. To his right 12 women and 12 men line in order. They start to turn around with the sound of the drum. It ends with reaching God.”<sup>499</sup> It is not clear how he connects *semahs* with this description of Shaman dance, the source of which he does not provide. Additionally, Asan does not provide the name of the particular *semah* which is choreographically similar to the dance that he describes. There is also no writer who claims that the Alevi perform *semahs* accompanied by drums.

Kocadag, who is from Varto, which is generally populated by Kurdish speaking Alevi, gives almost a summary of Salci’s work on *semahs* published in 1941 and adopts his “curtain” metaphor without change.<sup>500</sup> It is possible to give more examples of the works that emphasize strictly the relationship between *Alevilik* and Turkishness. However, at this point it will be sufficient just to state that this approach has been adopted by many Alevi writers in the post-1980 period, too.

Finally, two works focusing on *semahs* and published in 1990, one written by Erseven and the other by Bozkurt, will be discussed.<sup>501</sup> Erseven, in his study of *semahs* as an element of Alevi-Bektashi folklore, particularly makes use of And’s works and shapes his framework on religious rituals and the concept of dance. However, his study is quite eclectic and there is not a sufficient connection between its various parts. On the other hand, the sections that are directly about Alevi *semahs* constitute a one third of the work and it is a compilation of already

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<sup>499</sup> “Saman, davulu basında tutarak ortada durur. Sagında 12 kadın ve 12 erkek sıralıdır. Davulla birlikte dönmeye baslar. Tanrıya ulaşma ile sona erer.” “Tahtaci Türkmenler II,” *Cem*, year: 3, no: 32 (January 1994): 26-28, p. 26.

<sup>500</sup> Burhan Kocadag, “Aleviler’de Sema”, *Cem*, year: 1, no 46 (March 1995): 22-23.

<sup>501</sup> İlhan Cem Erseven, *Aleviler’de Sema* (Istanbul: Ekin Yayınları, January 1990.)



published *semah* texts. Erseven, who describes Alevis as Turkish and their *semahs* as Turkish dances, frequently refers to Shamanism and even deals with the Shamanist culture in sections like “Shamanism and Poetry” and “Central Asian Dances (Shaman Dances).” Erseven, who discusses the “astronomical qualities” of *semahs* in his later works, relates *semahs* to Central Asia from this aspect, too.<sup>502</sup>

Bozkurt, another researcher who published a book on *semahs* in 1990, on the other hand, is not as certain as to the origins of *semahs* as Erseven. He makes use of his own personal experiences and oral interviews in the analysis of *semahs* while he refers to the already existing theses in the discussion of the origins of *semahs*. He groups these theses into two as the hypothesis of Central Asian origins and the hypothesis of Islamic origins. In the second section, he refers to four different narratives about the origins of *semahs* (“God and Gabriel”, “Muhammed and Muaviye”, “*Kirklar Cemi*, and finally Hacı Bektas Veli on Hirka Mountain”), all of which he rejects. He claims that these four different narratives are the voices of four different opinions:

The first one tries to reflect the common Islamic view. The second one is the discourse of the Sunni belief who claims that the *semas* in such Sunni orders like *Mevlevi* or *Naksibendi*. The third one belongs to the common Alevi beliefs, while the fourth one belongs to the Bektashi beliefs. Thus, the origin of *semah* or *sema* is attributed to Islam. This is only a way of legitimation, a way of changing the appearance (*kiliklama*).<sup>503</sup>

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<sup>502</sup> For example, Erseven, “O Bir Ask Halidir”, *Nefes*, year: 3, no: 32 (June 1996), pp. 34-38.

<sup>503</sup> “Birincisi Islamin ortak görüşünü yansitmaya çalisir. Ikincisi Mevlevi ve Naksibendi gibi Sünni tarikatlarda yer dan semaların Islam’dan kaynaklandigini ileri süren Sünni inancin söylencesidir. Üçüncüsü ortak Alevi inancinin, dördüncüsü Bektasi inananinin söylencesidir. Böylece tümünde sema ya da semah Islam’a dayandırilir. Bu bir yasallastirma; bir kiliklamadır.” Bozkurt, *Semahlar* (İstanbul: Cem Yayınevi, 1990), p. 40.

In conclusion, the writer, who states that “it is impossible to claim scientifically that *semahs* originate in Islam,” supports the view that *semahs* are “most probably” of Central Asian origin.<sup>504</sup>

The comments of the writer on the origins of *semahs* bring about the necessity to reemphasize the two important aspects of the publications about *semahs*. First, the writers of the 1980s who consider *Kirklar Meclisi* as the point of reference or at least as one of the points of reference are the ones who view *Alevilik* within the scope of Islam and moreover they strongly point to the relationship between *Alevilik* and Islam.

The present situation makes it necessary to take the relationship between *Alevilik* and Islam into serious consideration and analyze it scientifically. On the other hand, the Alevi writer Birdogan who, after a certain investigation proposed a hypothesis saying that *Alevilik* can not be considered within the scope of Islam was regarded as *yol düskünü* (excommunicated) by the Alevis. This has been an important lesson in the Alevi community of the 1990s. Birdogan’s thesis needs to be taken into serious consideration and be questioned scientifically. However, the events that have taken place after the publication of his works show that most Alevi intellectuals are not even willing to question the relationship between *Alevilik* and Islam.<sup>505</sup>

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<sup>504</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>505</sup> For the details of Birdogan’s thesis, see Nejat Birdogan, *Anadolu Aleviligi’nde Yol Ayrımı* (Istanbul: Mozaik Yayinlari, October 1995). Especially “Introduction” and “Heterodoxy is not possible.” Also, his article “Alevilik Islam Disidir!” where he introduces this idea for the first time. (The title belongs to Hüseyin Simsek who interviewed the writer for *Aktüel*): *Aktüel* (20 October 1994): pp. 19-20. For the comments of the Alevi writers Çamuroglu, General Director of the *Cem* Journal Abidin Özgünay, Bozkurt and A. Y. Ocak on the subject, see *Aktüel* (27 October 1994): pp. 24-25. Çamuroglu, who accuses Birdogan of being an enemy of “Orientalist” Islam, says, “I will not attend *cem*s or other gathering with Birdogan anymore.” It is also interesting that Çamuroglu claims that Birdogan’s thesis will be used to provoke tension between the Alevi and Sunni communities. Özgünay, on the other hand, accuses Birdogan of “being a clown of Alevis and *Alevilik*” and calls him as being “without faith, empathy, honor.” The

The second aspect of Bozkurt's work we want to emphasize is that he does not take the thesis of Central Asian origins as granted. The writer, who deals with the qualities of *semahs* rather than their origins, takes the arguments about roots from already published works and rejects the religious origins of *semahs*. The fact that the only remaining possibility is the thesis of Central Asian origins once more shows that *semahs* have mostly been considered in relation to Turkishness since the 1910s, and also that the only data which are seemingly more scientific deal with this relationship.

Among the writers who discuss *semahs* in relation to old Turkish traditions and beliefs in the post-1980 period, only a few of them refer to Anatolian civilization in the discussion of the formation of *semahs*. However, none of them modify their central thesis in favor of this different opinion. For example, the dancer and Mimar Sinan University Ballet Department academician Nasuh Barin, published a series of articles on *semahs* in the Alevi journal *Nefes*, and mentioned various cultures or civilizations in relation to the basis of the *semahs*. After mentioning the Anatolian civilization that is based on Dionysos rituals, the Shamanist dance, culture and beliefs of the Oghuz Turks and the narrative of the "*Kirklar Meclisi*", he states that,

These people [Oghuz Turks] who brought their own Shamanist beliefs with them to Anatolia naturally influenced by the culture of the places they stopped on their way and they influenced them. After they converted to Islam they started to call their dances

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writer of *Semahlar*, Bozkurt, on the other hand, takes this thesis seriously and considers it from two perspectives as scientific and religious. Bozkurt, who states that Birdogan politically rejects "the 'sunnification' policies of the state, the policy of melting them in Islam", also thinks that he is conscientious scientist and researcher who feels responsibility towards history. However, he also states that when it comes to religious beliefs, we cannot argue whether they are correct or not. Ocak, on the other hand, thinks that the concept of "heterodoxy" misleads Birdogan and thus he tries to explain this concept.

“*Sema-Semah*” as an Islamic point of reference, a divine reason.  
That is all.”<sup>506</sup>

Although it seems as if this hypothesis is drawn from a serious analysis of the already existing comments on the origins of *semahs*, the writer still takes it for granted that the Alevis belong to the Oghuz branch of the Turkish people. The writer refers not to Anatolian civilizations or the *Kirklar Meclisi* but to the Shamanist rituals throughout the article.

#### Kurdish-Alevi Narratives:

The new dimension added in the ethnic origins discussion of the post-1980 period is the relationship between *Alevilik* and Kurdish identity. However, except a few writers, the ones who take this dimension into consideration do not conduct a serious research, but mostly emphasize their Kurdish Alevi identity and claim their right to write on their own history. This reminds us of the problematic aspects of the publications of Alevi Turkish writers. The first phenomenon that attracts our attention is the attempt to form a Kurdish version as opposed to the existing Turkish version of the origins of Alevis and *semahs*. In this context, these writers focused on cultures and beliefs that have emerged in the Mesopotamia-Iran-Anatolia region. Although they emerged as a reaction to the nationalist Turkish history writing and Turkish nationalism, they carry some of their problematic aspects in their own works. The most important of these problems is that most of them take over the attempt of searching for ethnic origins.

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<sup>506</sup> “*Kendi Samanist inançlariyla Anadolu’ya gelen bu insanlar [Oguz boylari] elbette konakladıkları yörelerin kültürlerinden etkilendiler ve o kültürleri etkilediler. İslamiyeti kabul etmeleriyle birlikte kendi danslarına “Sema-Semah” diyerek İslami bir dayanak, kutsal bir gerekçe buldular. Hepsi bu.*” Nasuh Barin, “Semahlar III,” *Nefes*, year: 1, no: 3 (January 1994): 17-20, p. 18.

For instance, Cemsid Bender, who exemplifies religious dances from different historical periods (neolithic, antiquity, calcolithic, Hittite period, etc.) by referring to several scientific works, draws parallels between these rituals and the beliefs in *Yezidilik* and *Zerdüstlük*. The parallels are drawn both in the dances and several elements of various rituals. The turning of the people who participate in the rituals around themselves with their hands held upwards, reciting religious hymns, the ceremony of eating, drinking wine with it, etc., are given as examples of similar elements. According to the writer, the roots of *semahs* go back to *Zerdüstlük* and *Yezidilik*.<sup>507</sup> Munzur Gülabusagi also claims that *semahs* are not of Central Asian origin but they have *Zerdüst*, and Mazdek roots. The comments and opinions that appeared in the pamphlet about the fifteenth century dances are related to *Zerdüst* and Mazdek teachings.<sup>508</sup>

The ratification of the validity of the parallels drawn between *Alevilik* and *Zerdüstlük* is not within the scope of this study. The point to be emphasized here is that in the most part, like Turkish Alevis, Kurdish Alevis too refer to ethnic origins in search of a place for themselves in the history of *Alevilik*, by drawing parallels between *Alevilik* and various cultures and beliefs evolved in Mesopotamia and Iran through references to *Zerdüslük* (and sometimes Yezid and Mazdek teachings) to establish connections between *Alevilik* and “Kurdishness”. There are some points that distinguish the problems of Kurdish Alevi writers from other writers who work on *Alevilik*/Bektashism and *semahs*.

It should primarily be stated that the exclusive emphasis on the connection of *Alevilik* and *semahs* with the Turkish culture and beliefs for about 70-80 years not only left the history of Kurdish and Arabic speaking Alevis overlooked but at the same time led the history of the Turkish Alevis, or in other words, the history of

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<sup>507</sup> Cemsid Bender, *Kürt Uygarliginda Alevilik* (Istanbul: Kaynak Yayinlari, Aralik 1991), especially pp. 309-328; “Semahin Tarihi Kökeni,” *Nefes*, year: 3, no: 32 (June 1996), pp. 47-49.

<sup>508</sup> Dr. Munzur Gülabusagi “Ask, Inanis ve Tanriya Duyulan Heyecan-Semahlar Üzerine,” *Çagdas Zülfikar*, year: 1, no: 2 (February-March 1995), pp. 10-14.

*Alevilik* in Turkey in general to be written incorrectly. However, considering the material accumulated through this process, we can say that except for the Turkish Alevis, the other Alevi communities are only at the starting point. For example, the fact that the Kurdish Alevi writers do not provide enough examples for the *semahs* they discuss in their works or that Cemsid Bender utilizes the works of Erseven and Birdogan and that he does not establish connections between the *semahs* he takes from them and the *semahs* performed by Kurdish Alevis are remarkable from this point of view. A reason for this is when they started to transcribe *semah* texts in the first years of the Republic, they only included the *semahs* of the Turkmen tribes like the Tahtaci, Çepni, Nalci, Sıraç, and disregarded the *semahs* performed in regions where Kurdish speaking Alevis lived to a large extent. The works of such writers as Firat, who are from the same region but who chose to emphasize the Turkish culture and traditions and did not include enough examples of *semahs* in their works, can not be taken as valid sources of data either. Thus, considering the works published in Turkey, there is hardly any data about the *semahs* performed in this region.<sup>509</sup> The fact that some of the writers who were dealing with the place of Kurdishness within the larger Alevi community attempted to make use of the nineteenth century missionary records without any critical overview, or to translate various works published outside Turkey and then include in their own works also show that there is not enough source mentioned on the subject.

Second, some special conditions have emerged in the regions where Kurdish speaking Alevis live due to several waves of migration which accelerated the transformation of the Alevis in this region and thus have made field studies

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<sup>509</sup> Actually the French researcher Mélikoff contributed a lot to the scientific studies about *Alevilik* by claiming that *Alevilik* has a “syncretic” structure. The writer, whose works have also been published in Turkey in the last 20 years, also establishes connections between *Alevilik* and the rituals and other religious practices of the Kurdish and Kurdish related religious communities like Yezidi, Ehl-i Hakk, Ali İlahi, etc. However, as she explains *Alevilik* only in relation to Turkishness, the connections she establishes remain restricted and these data are generally used by other researchers who try to prove the connection between *Alevilik* and Turkishness. Eröz and Türkdogan are among these researchers.

difficult. It should be noted that the increasing migration from Dersim, which was considered the center of the Alevi<sup>510</sup> after the 1938 events, caused the decomposition of the unity in Alevi communities. In addition to the migration waves of the 1950s and 60s that influenced the lives of all Alevi communities dramatically, the migration wave that has started about twenty years ago from eastern and south-eastern Anatolia to big cities and to other countries also influenced the lives of the Kurdish Alevi.

As has already been stated above, the works on Kurdish Alevi with their problematic aspects have been written by Kurdish Alevi writers who disclosed their Kurdish Alevi identities claiming their rights to write about their own history and culture. Apart from the Alevi writers who disclose their Kurdish identities, we have mentioned Kocadag and given examples of his work among the writers of the region who strongly emphasize the relationship between *Alevilik* and Turkish culture. There are some other writers who are from the same region and attest to the existence of Kurdish Alevi, but who do not make any comments on it. For example, Hasan Gülsan from Dersim includes two different views about the origins of *semahs* in his work. The former is the phenomenon of “*Mir’ac*” while “the latter is more historical attributing the origins of *semahs* as far back as to Central Asia, the polytheistic religions and cultures of Turks, Persians, and Kurds living in Iran and Azerbaijan.”<sup>511</sup>

Gülsan refers to Aydogmus at the end of this sentence and does not come back to the subject of Kurdish Alevi again.<sup>512</sup> In his article “Kurds and Alevi” published in the journal *Cem*, the writer states that the only way to keep “Turkey from falling

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<sup>510</sup> See Bruinessen, “The Ethnic Identity of the Kurds,” pp.613-621 in Andrews, ed., *Ethnic Groups in the Republic of Turkey* (Wiesbaden: Reichert Publication, 1989).

<sup>511</sup> . “*İkinci görüş ise; Tarihsel olup, semah, Orta Asya, İran ve Azerbaycan’da yaşayan Türk, Fars ve Kürtlerin çok tanrılı inanç ve kültürlerine değin uzanır.*”

<sup>512</sup> Av. Hasan Gülsan, *Anadolu Alevi Müslümanlığı* (İstanbul: Can Yayınları, Ocak 2001), pp. 58-59.

apart is to acknowledge the Kurdish identity and culture within the limits of democracy and human rights.” That he names Mustafa Kemal and refers to the work of General Kenan Esengil can be taken as attempts to legitimize his claims for the Kurdish people.

Like the Turkish Alevis, the Kurdish Alevis, including the writers who disclose their Kurdish identities have not sufficiently explored the religious dimensions of *semahs*. For example, Cemsid Bender, referring to Hacı Bektas-i Veli and Mevlana, remarks that “these two wise men agree that *semahs* serve the unification with God, becoming a part of Him, thus they are the core of being one with God.”<sup>513</sup> Gülabusagi, on the other hand, states that *Alevilik* is a “perversion” in Islam although he agrees with other writers on the point that *semah* is a way of ritual that aims at reaching God. Gülsan describes *semahs* in the same way as the others although he refers to Quran very often in his book where he uses the peculiar term “Alevi Islam” and calls the writers who consider *Alevilik* non-Islamic “charlatans.”<sup>514</sup>

Above, the Alevi narratives have been discussed in two groups: the narratives of Turkish Alevis and the narratives of Kurdish Alevis. The approaches in these narratives are mainly ethnicity centered while most of the narratives assume that Alevis are all Islamic people. The Sufi philosophy and its theory of *Vahdet-i vücud* has an important place in the definitions of *semahs*, too. In this context, they refer to “a state of ecstasy” or “reaching God and uniting with Him or with the essence of the soul.” Thus, the dominant approach is one that differs from the Sunni interpretations and Orthodox Islam, but still keeps its connections with Islam. The response of Alevis who worry about the advance of political Islam and the sunnification policies of the government and not like the Sunni narratives of a

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<sup>513</sup> “Bu iki bilginin de ortak görüşü semahin Tanrı ile bütünleşme, O’nun zerresi haline gelme, yani vahdaniyetin özü olduğu noktasında odaklaşıyor,” Bender, “Semahin Tarihi Kökeni”, p. 49.

<sup>514</sup> Gülsan talks about an Alevi way of Islam that is not always in line with the Quran but is enriched with humanist interpretations of Quran and hadith which are not against human logic. Ibid., p. 174.



synthesis of Turkishness and Islam in relation to Alevi identity in the post-1980 period shows the desire of Alevis for partial reconciliation. Doing this, not only the differences of *ocak* and tribe among the Alevi communities, but also the major difference between *Alevilik* and Bektashism are disregarded and the whole Alevi and Bektashi community is considered as one big body.

When it is considered carefully, one can see that this dominant approach of the publications about *semahs* actually takes into consideration the transformations through which *semahs* went in the 1990s. As a solution to the transformation of *cem* rituals in the 1990s into a gathering of people who differ from each other in many respects, they suggest “uniformity” and “homogeneity”. The differences of *ocak*, tribe, ethnicity, culture are overlooked and all Alevis and Bektashis are considered the same. Thus the call to Alevis from some nationalist and religious Sunni writers to unite by leveling differences are adopted and applied by the members of the large Alevi community themselves, and they try to form a common Alevi identity to fight common problems.

It is understood from their insistence on the emphasis on the relationship between *Alevilik* and Islam that the public performances of *semahs* where Sunni people are also able to see them are considered very important as another development about *semahs*. While this subject will be discussed thoroughly with reference to the fieldwork in the next chapter, the attitudes of the writers’ of this period toward the “stage performances,” together with an attempt of reformulating *semahs* will be discussed in the following section.

#### Alevi Narratives that Refer to the Reformulation of the *Semahs*

In the works of the Alevi writers in the post-1980 period, *semahs* are generally considered separate from rituals and the formal aspects of *semahs* are highlighted more than other aspects. For example, the choreographic structure of *semahs*, their stages, ways of performing each figure, the number of performers, etc., have

frequently become subjects of discussion. As already stated above, most of the writers have not conducted field studies themselves and they have formed their narratives by combining various (especially technical) sections of the previously published works through a selective approach. Also, some values respected by the Alevis are related to *semahs* and even interpreted in relation to the structural aspects of *semahs*.

The formation of a new *semah* culture shaped on the basis of the formal qualities of *semahs* coincides with the process of the formation of “*semah* groups”. This point will be discussed in detail in the next chapter which is about fieldwork. The reinterpretation of *semahs* in the context of the Alevi values is also closely related to the positive Alevi identity that they have attempted to construct in this period. This point will be discussed below around several common principle that appear on the texts with several examples.

(i) “They do not hold hands in *semahs*”: It has been stated before 1980 to that during the *semah* performances, the dancers do not hold hands. However, there are some differences between the statements of the previous periods and those of the post-1980 period. First of all, there are examples contrary to this statement in the *semah* texts provided in the publications of the previous periods and although it is observed in most *semahs*, they do not consider it as a rule. In the *semah* texts of the 1990s, it has also been related to different elements of the Alevi identity:

Erseven, the writer of *Aleviler’de Semah*, in the section where he describes how *semahs* are performed in general, states that “holding hands is not a part of *semahs*.”<sup>515</sup> However, in another section, he describes the *Kirat Semahi* as follows: “This is a kind of “*düz halay*.” Men and women line up side to side and they swing their arms to right and left together.”<sup>516</sup> The writer of *Semahlar*, Bozkurt, on the

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<sup>515</sup>Erseven, *Aleviler’de Semah*, p.132

<sup>516</sup> “*Bu bir çeşit düz halaydır. Erkek kadın karışık olarak sıralanır. Kollar birlikte sağa sola sallanır.*” Ibid., p. 146

other hand, relates the rule against “holding hands” to the theme of the “independence of the individual”: “Independence of the individual is the main principle of *semahs*. In none of the types of *semahs*, do the performers hold hands in any way. Each performer is independent of the others.”<sup>517</sup>

(ii) Men and women performing together: There are examples to these *semahs* as well as to *semah* performed by men and women separately. The description of *semahs* in the texts of the post-1980 period is similar the previous ones, but the performance of *semahs* by both men and women and sometimes even together is related to the values of contemporary society: Aydogmus who is a teacher of *semah* dances, refers to it as follows: “*Semah* is performed men and women together whirling around, accompanied by bard and *saz* [long-necked plucked folk lute]. It can be only men, only women, or men and women together. There is no taboo in *semahs*... In Alevi-Bektashi culture, separating men and women is against human dignity and personality. If the *semahs* will be performed, it must be done without sexual discrimination.”<sup>518</sup>

Ali Ulvi Öztürk also refers to the equality of men and women in relation to *semahs*: “*Semah* is arriving that unique concentration in which men and women equally (side by side) reach maturity through the unification of soul and its essence and being one with God.”<sup>519</sup>

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<sup>517</sup> Bozkurt, *Semahlar*, p.25

<sup>518</sup> “*Semah, zikir ve sazın esliginde kadın-erkek birlikte dönülür. Yalnız erkek, yalnız kadın veya kadın-erkek birlikte dönülebilir. Semahta tabu yoktur. (...) Alevi-Bektasi kültüründe haremlik selamlık, insan onuruna ve kişiliğine ters düşer. Semah dönmek gerekiyorsa, o alanda cinsel ayırım yapılmadan kalkılır, dönülür.*” Aydogmus, “Alevi Kimliğinin Disa Vurumunda Semahların Önemli Bir Yeri Var,” p. 45.

<sup>519</sup> “*Semah, kadın-erkek eşitliğinde, Tanrı’yla bir olan insanın yine kendine, kemale ermesi, kendisiyle birleşip o essiz konsantrasyona ulaşmasıdır.*” Ali Ulvi Öztürk, “Halk Hizmetinde Semah Dönen Turnalar,” *Nefes*, year: 3, no: 32 (June 1996): pp.51-52.

(iii) There is no solo dance in *semahs*: This is a new phenomenon in the discussion of *semahs*. There is no such concept in the texts of the previous periods. Oytan, one of the first two Bektashi writers to talk about the internal structure of *semahs*, refers to a *semah* that includes a solo performance while Salci refers to the concept of “good performers.” However, today the concept of neglecting solo performance is related again to the equality of men and women by some writers. For example Ali Kiliç states that: “There is no solo performance in Alevi *semahs*. There is no leader, no difference between men and women, there is only generosity of hearts and equal respect to men and women... Individual ideas or any action like that is not possible in *semahs*.”<sup>520</sup>

(iv) Equating various motifs and *semahs* with contemporary values: One of the motifs emphasized in the post-1980 period *semah* texts is “*turna*” (crane). This motif, which is also related to the movements of arms in *semahs*, is generally referred to in emphasizing the Central Asian connections of *semahs*.<sup>521</sup> However, there are others who related this motif to independence: “*Semah* is symbolized by ‘*turna*’. *Turna* is the symbol of independence, equality, and love and also of Ali, who carries all these qualities in himself.”<sup>522</sup>

Some of the writers, who see *semahs* as the sole representative of the Alevi identity, have composed narratives equating *semahs* with the Alevi struggle and various Alevi values. For example, Öztürk, after a short narrative about the struggle of Alevis states, “*semah* is a part of our honorable struggle.”<sup>523</sup>

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<sup>520</sup> “Alevi *semahinda* solo yoktur. Yöneten yok, kadın-erkeğin farklılaştırılması yok ve engin gönüllülük, kadına ve erkeğe esit saygı vardır. (...) *Semahlarda* bireysel fikir, ona benzer hareket mümkün değildir.” Ali Kiliç, “Semah Üzerine,” *Kervan* no: 45 (Ocak 1995), p. 22.

<sup>521</sup> For example, Erseven. Also see Mélikoff, *Uyur Idik Uyardılar*, p. 127.

<sup>522</sup> Öztürk, “Halk Hizmetinde Semah Döner Turnalar,” p. 51.

<sup>523</sup> *Ibid.*, p.51

It is interesting that in the narratives of this period *semahs* are related not only to the religious rituals of the Alevis and to Sufism, but also to the contemporary values, supported by many Alevi people. In these narratives various Alevi values dating only from the nineteenth century are considered at the same level with elements of Alevi theology whose roots go back to the sixteenth century. The adoption of such a non-scientific attitude is a reflection of the emphasis on the structural qualities of *semahs* and provides us with important clues as to how the Alevi identity is reconstructed today. The values that are equated with *semahs* in these narratives are the positive values of the Alevi identity assumed by the writers. According to these narratives, there is no taboo in *Alevilik*, men and women are equal, independence is essential, there is no place for individual action, there is no hierarchy, etc. Thus, in their narratives, *semahs* are considered as a positive symbol representing the Alevi identity in the present day Alevi gatherings and in the public sphere.

## CHAPTER 4

### REFORMULATION OF THE *SEMAHS* IN THE POST 1980 PERIOD IN RELATION TO THE PROCESS OF THE RECONSTRUCTION OF THE ALEVI IDENTITY

The 1980s and 1990s marked a shift in the relation of the Alevi people to “Alevi identity”. As discussed in the former chapter, the 1990s witnessed an Alevi cultural revival when a considerable number of books concerning the Alevi identity were written by Alevis, new periodicals came into publication, and many Alevi associations were established. Basically the revival was directed toward the reestablishment of community ties. The new associations attempted to revive the *cem* rituals (*ayin-i cem*), which had functioned as the primary social mechanism of the previous Alevi communities, and were now called *cemevi*. Actually in the 1980s urban world, some basic elements of Alevi rituals acquired newly attributed meanings within new structures. The relationship between the dance (*semah*) and the ritual (*cem/ayin-i cem*) changed within this process, with the end-product of *semah* groups (*semah ekipleri*), which were introduced to the public sphere.

Based on fieldwork and oral history interviews, the focus of this chapter is to analyze the relationship between the Alevi identity and the reformulation of the

*semah* dances in the urban conditions of the post 1980 period. The survey was conducted in Istanbul with the Alevi emigrants and the *semah* dance of the Siran as the focus of the case study.

The decision of focusing on the Siran Alevis and their *semah* dance depended on several factors. First, the Alevi groups of Siran had not been studied previously. Second, the groups were differentiated on the grounds of their ethnic/linguistic and *ocak* affiliations. Therefore it was thought that a study focused on the diverse groups of Siran could provide an opportunity to analyze the self-definitions of various people/groups in relation to the Alevi identity, represented in the public sphere.

Third, for the purpose of this study, it was important that a *semah* genre called ‘*Siran Semahı*’ be present in the public sphere. The public form of this dance was adapted by two people from the community, who then created a choreography that included several *semah* genres from different parts of Turkey, including that of Siran.<sup>524</sup> Today, this dance is performed within the *semah* choreography of the Karacaahmet *semah* group, instructed by its creators. This group is one of the best-known in Istanbul, and can be considered to be one of the initiators of the “*semah* group tradition”.

Finally, as opposed to the diverse structure of the Siran Alevi community, in the public sphere there was only one *semah* known with the name of Siran, the province. Therefore, a study on the Siran Alevis and their *semah* would also

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<sup>524</sup> The adaptation process of this dance started in the mid-1960s, and the final choreography was created in the 1980s.

provide a chance to compare the *semah* experiences of diverse groups and their reflections on the construction of Alevi identity.

This chapter is composed of two sections. In the first one, the representation of the Alevi identity in the *semah* narratives of the former villagers of Siran will be analyzed. In the second section, the Alevi identity constructed around the public performances of *semah* groups will be examined based on the data provided by these and additional interviews, as well as the actual developments that concern the *cemevis* and *semahs*. The sample groups and activities will be presented in each section.

It is necessary to make one point clear: The data presented in this chapter includes neither those *cems* which still take place in small rural localities, nor those secret ones that take place in metropolises apart from the open and visible ceremonies. Within its limits, this survey focuses on the “urban visibility” of the *semahs*. The significance of the fieldwork and interviews lie in their representational potential to reflect the predominant trend in the Alevi revival.

## Representation of the Alevi Identity in the *Semah* Narratives of the Informants

### Presentation of the Sample Group

#### Presentation of the Informants

I interviewed two groups of first generation emigrants who, due to economic reasons, left Siran in the 1950s-1970s. The groups were differentiated on the



grounds of their former and present localities, as well as their ethnic/linguistic affiliations. Siran is a district of Gümüşhane in the north eastern region of Anatolia which has twenty Alevi villages. Five of them, as described by the interviewees, were “Turkish speaking Alevi villages”, while the rest were “Kurdish speaking Alevi villages”. To deepen the analysis, the survey was focused on one village from each group.

The Kirinti village was considered as an important Alevi settlement by the Turkish speaking Alevis. Another village of Siran, Yeniköy, and a village of Giresun, Kayacik, were established by the former inhabitants of Kirinti. Additionally, the *dede* who served most of the Turkish speaking Alevis of Siran was from Kirinti. In Istanbul, there are many Kirinti, Yeniköy and Kayacik emigrants in Rumelihisarüstü, Kuruçesme and Ümraniye. They have built *gecekondus* (tin houses) and settled in these neighborhoods. With the realization of the second bridge project spanning over the Bosphorus, a large group living in Hisarüstü whose *gecekondus* were pulled down since they were in the expropriation area, have moved to the Anatolian side of Istanbul and were settled by the government in the *Imar Iskan Konutlari* (Reconstruction and Emigration Houses) in Küçükbakkalköy. These people later became the owners of these houses, paying the total amount by installments. In the same period, some others settled in Ümraniye, again in the Anatolian side of Istanbul.<sup>525</sup>

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<sup>525</sup> See Mine Koçak, Taner Koçak and Levent Soy, “Bir Derleme Çalışması: Kirinti Köyü,” *Folkloru Dogru/ Dans Müzik Kültür* 63 (1998): 301-314, 307.

The Yedibölük (formerly known as Sifon) belonged to the second group, Kurdish speaking Alevi villages, and the informants from Sifon lived in Kartal, in Istanbul. They too have first built *gecekondus* and later on settled in this neighborhood. Before their emigration to Istanbul, many inhabitants of Kirinti and Sifon knew each other and some maintain contact.

The informants were all of the lower middle class. Most of the female informants were either housewives or worked as domestic help (it is referred as *gündelikçi* by the informants). Most of the male informants either worked in building constructions or in factories.

#### An Account of the History of Kirinti and Sifon Drawn from the Interviews

##### Kirinti and Internal Migration:

The villages of Yeniköy near Siran and Kayacık near Giresun were established by people who originally came from the village of Kirinti near Siran. Anybody born in one of those three villages, when asked where he/she comes from, initially mentions his/her village, and adds the village of Kirinti immediately afterwards. According to the older informants, Kirinti was established three hundred to three hundred and fifty years ago.

In the interviews, it was mentioned that emigration from the village of Kirinti rose to significant proportions especially during World War I (these were referred as *seferberlik yılları* by the informants) and continued without interruption until the 1980s, and that the number of households in the village seriously declined

during the 1980s.<sup>526</sup> When the Ottoman Empire was defeated in the First World War and the Russian troops began to move forward along the Black Sea Coast, the whole population of Siran was moved out of the town and deported by government decree in 1332 (1916). After this event, the population of Kirinti village migrated to the inner regions towards the West, to safer places —to Tokat, Samsun, Amasya, Çorum and the villages near these towns. The government settled these people in vacant houses available in those areas.

After two or three years, the emigrants from Kirinti started to consider returning to their native village, but making a living there had become impossible by then for the village had remained unpopulated for so long. Thus, some moved back to the villages where they had first gone and some others restarted cultivation of their fields in the village of Kirinti, staying in the neighboring villages. Some turned back to Kirinti later, while some stayed where they had moved.

Still another part of the villagers, upon leaving Kirinti, started to look for yet another place to settle, and after rambling for a certain period of time, they decided to settle in the village of Pümk near the town of Susehri, Sivas. Pümk was formerly a Greek village, the population of which had been deported during the period in question, as had the populations of all the other Greek villages in the region. However, the emigrants from Kirinti were unable to settle permanently in Pümk, for Turkish *muhacirs* (refugees) from Rumeli were settled in this village after the population exchange between Greece and Turkey (1923-1925). So, the villagers from Kirinti settled in Hinziri, again a formerly Greek village in Giresun,

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<sup>526</sup> One of the informants has especially underlined this point during the interview. 1998b-t.

administratively connected to the town of Alucra (but currently to Çamoluk). The Hinziri village was later been given a Turkish name Kayacik.

After the establishment of the Republic, settled life restarted in the villages of Kirinti, Kayacik and Yeniköy. However, with the impact of the economic crisis that emerged in the 1950s, some inhabitants of these villages migrated to the neighboring towns in the region, such as Giresun, as well as to Istanbul and to Germany.<sup>527</sup>

#### Sifon and Internal Migration:

Though the written and oral sources do not present sufficient data on this issue, the process of migration from Sifon is considered to have a long history as well. Sifon was established more than three hundred years ago. There were roughly five clans in Sifon. The informants interviewed for this study say that their elders were originally from Malatya, and that they belonged to the Seyh Hasan Asireti (Seyh Hasan Tribe). They left Malatya and settled in Tunceli, but were unable to achieve the desired living standard (“*dirlik yapamadik*”) there, and thus moved to Sifon village. Among the other groups that they know, the Goslular group came from Hınıs, while the dwellers of the central neighborhood (*Orta Mahalle*) and the Sarioglu clan came from Beydagi, Sivas.

Migration from Sifon started in the 1950s, again due to economic problems. Currently, in Kartal, there are about a hundred and fifty households from the

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<sup>527</sup> Koçak et.al., pp. 307-309.

village of Sifon. There are natives of Sifon also in Erzincan, Germany, Austria, and France, and some fifty households in Switzerland.<sup>528</sup>

### Ethnic/Linguistic Diversity and *Alevilik*

In general, when the informants were asked to define the Alevi villages of Siran, they used the terms “the villages of Turkish-speaking Alevis” (or Turkish Alevi villages) and “the villages of Kurdish-speaking Alevis” (or the villages of “*asiret*”). These general definitions were accepted and expressed by almost all members of both communities. However, members of the two ethnic groups had constructed quite different narratives in relation to the ethnic dimension of their own community and the Alevi community at large. Therefore, below, the narratives of the Turkish-speaking Alevis and the Kurdish-speaking Alevis will be analyzed separately.

#### Narratives of the Turkish-Speaking Alevis

The narratives of all the Turkish-speaking Alevi informants exhibit three features in relation to the ethnic dimension of *Alevilik*. First of all, they all accept and declare that there are Kurdish-speaking Alevis in certain villages of Siran. They usually mention the names of those villages –at least some of them. They do not question the Alevi identity of the Kurdish-speaking communities, and say that their rituals are very similar to their own. The same rule applies in their narratives about

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<sup>528</sup> 1998d-t.

the *semahs* of the Kurdish-speaking Alevi communities. Actually, in the narratives of the Turkish-speaking Alevis, it is uncertain as to whether they have witnessed the rituals and *semahs* of the Kurdish-speaking Alevis. The similarity is explained through the fact of ‘*hakikat*’ (“reality”; which, in *Alevilik*, is mostly used to indicate the Alevi creed).

“Language” appears, in the narratives of both Turkish and Kurdish speaking Alevis, as a critical issue in the classification of the Alevi villages of Siran. In the narratives of the Turkish-speaking Alevis, it seems that linguistic diversity among Alevi groups is considered as a “fact”. However, in the discussion of Alevi identity in relation to ethnic and linguistic diversity of the community, it is more important to analyze the quality of this fact –that is, how it is interpreted by the informants. Because, as will be indicated by the examples below, this fact does not lead the Turkish Alevi informants to question the assumed “real” ethnic connections of the Alevis, which is considered to be Turkishness and Turkish culture.

In one of the interviews conducted with two Turkish-speaking informants from Kirinti, the informants indicated that there are Turkish, Kurdish, and Arab Alevi communities in Turkey. Then, they gave some information on the geographical distribution of these different Alevi groups. They also told about the ethnic diversity of the Alevi groups in Siran and defined them on the basis of the language they speak. It was apparent that they accepted the ethnic/linguistic diversity among the Siran Alevi communities and among the Alevi community at large as a fact.

Beyond this point, the narratives of the two informants diverge, each representing one of the two dominant attitudes observed in the narratives of the Turkish Alevi informants. One of the informants, who had worked as a teacher in Sifon village for three years, insisted that the Kurdish Alevis speak Turkish in a very elegant way.<sup>529</sup> He added that they speak Turkish in their rituals. The other informant, a *dede* on the other hand, asked, “what if she/he does not know any other language [than Kurdish]?” Answering his own question, he said that one can use her/his mother tongue, if she/he does not know any other language. However, these two attitudes seem to converge at this point: The basic language in *Alevilik* is Turkish and all written *deyises* and *duaz-i imams* are in Turkish. While the *dede* added that people may translate them into their mother tongue, the teacher insisted that Alevis are those who have paved the way towards the survival of Turkish in Turkey. Their narratives on the subject of Kurdish *deyises* are as follows:

Informant-1 (teacher): Now, its written form might be Turkish. Initially.

Informant-2 (*dede*): (...) But the reality, I mean... there are certain *asiks*. There are fifty thousand seven *asiks*. Those fifty thousand seven *asiks* have seventy thousand *asikbasis* (the head of *asiks*). All the *kelams* of those fifty seven thousand *asiks* are all in Turkish. But later on, for example, the Zazas may translate them to Zaza language, and talk in that language. The ones who know Kurdish may talk in Kurdish. Thus, what if she/he doesn't know another language? What's her/his mother language, that's it.

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<sup>529</sup> “Dillerine dikkat ettim. Ne kibar konusuyorlar Türkçeyi.” 1998b-t.

Informant-1 (teacher): Now, if Turkish is in use today in Turkey, it is maintained by the Alevi culture. We must admit it.<sup>530</sup>

It is important to note that the ethnic categorizations made by the Alevis in Turkey are based on linguistic differences. As Turkish is defined as “the real language of the Alevis” through almost all of these narratives, not only the languages other than Turkish, but also those groups whose mother tongue is not Turkish fall out of the definition of the “real *Alevilik*”.

At this point, a second common feature of the narratives of the Turkish-speaking Alevi informants should be mentioned: For them, *Alevilik* is based on Turkishness and Turkish culture, which has its roots in Central Asia and/or Shamanism. In reference to their ethnic roots, they usually call themselves (the Alevis) as “the real/pure Turks” (“*öz be öz Türk olan Aleviler*”). This argument as a whole can be recalled from the written literature examined in the previous chapter. It can also be added that the ethnic terms used in the narratives of the informants are very similar to those used by the writers. However, it should be noted that explanations concerning the Turkish roots of *Alevilik* become increasingly detailed as the formal educational level of the informants increases. For example, for a ninety year-old Turkish-speaking Alevi informant, who had no educational

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<sup>530</sup> Informant-1: “*Ha, onun yazilisi Türkçe’dir. Başlangıcı.*” Informant-2: “*(...) Ama gerçek en fazla seyden, belirli asıklar var. Ellibin yedi asık var. Ellibin yedi asığın da yedi bin asıkbasi var. Bu elliyedi bin asığın kelâmları hep Türkçedir. Ama sonradan mesela Zaza, Zazacılar, Zazaca’ya çevirip konuşabilir. Kürt lisanını bilenler Kürtçe konuşmak. Çünkü, başka lisan bilmezse ne yapacak? Anadili ne, a*” Informant-1: “*Türkiye’de Türkçe devam ediyorsa, Alevi kültürüyle gelmiştir o. Bunu kabul etmek lazım.*” 1998b-t.



background except for Alevi *cems*, it is certain that all Alevis are Turks, a “fact” without question. According to a learned Alevi *dede* who had only primary schooling, the most important evidence for the Turkishness of Alevis is their “Central Asian” background and the language of the *deyises*, while a primary school teacher adds Shamanism to these two items.

What has been presented above leads us to the conclusion that a very strong association is built between *Alevilik* and Turkishness / Turkish culture among the Turkish-speaking Alevis. The rise of formal educational level strengthens the dominant views on this issue. However, the popularity of these views indicates that an Alevi identity defined in such terms is constructed both within the community – in which the *cem* ritual has served as the main educational context– and through various publications. The ideas of the *dede* mentioned above are particularly important as they show the extent to which these views are reproduced within the community.

The last feature that the entire Turkish-speaking Alevi narratives exhibit is that while the informants “generalize” the ethnic identifications of the Alevis, they almost always talk in the name of the Alevis at large. Such an attitude shows that, as Turkish Alevis, they feel that they belong to the “real” Alevi community, and that they have the right to represent the whole community.

#### Narratives of the Kurdish-Speaking Alevis

In contrast to the general attitude of the Turkish-speaking Alevi informants, in their definition of *Alevilik*, the Kurdish-speaking Alevi informants did not pay much

attention to the ethnic dimension and they did not dwell much on this topic. In their limited narratives concerning the issue, unlike the Turkish Alevi, they did not generalize the ethnic background of the Alevi and preferred to talk only of their own case. Some examples will be examined below.

A married Kurdish-speaking Alevi couple from the Sifon village of Siran is interviewed. During the interview, the woman told that they moved to Istanbul in the 1970s and that they did not have any difficulty related with the Sunni-Alevi conflict. According to her, the only difference between the two groups was language. She said that the Sunnis speak in Turkish while most of the Alevi speak Kurdish.<sup>531</sup> As soon as she completed her sentence, her husband interrupted and said that their Kurdishness is different from that of the Safî group, and that they are not real Kurds, unlike the Safî.<sup>532</sup> He continued to state that their mother tongue is Turkish. From that point on, both of the informants tried to explain that their language was very different from Kurdish, Zazaki, and Arabic. According to them, unlike those three languages, they had a proper (“*düzgün*”) language which shared many words with Turkish. Their dialect was called *Kirdasça*.<sup>533</sup>

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<sup>531</sup> “*Biz buraya geldik, hiç öyle Alevi-Sünni diyilecek hiçbir şey yoktu...*” (...) “*Yani ha onlar Türkçe konisiydi, bizimkinler çoğu Kürtçe konisiydiler.*” 2000a-t.

<sup>532</sup> “*Biz bu Safîler’in Kürtlüğü değil, biz esas Kürt değiliz.*” 2000a-t.

<sup>533</sup> *Kirdasça* (or *Kirdaski*, as used by some of the writers, most of whom are Kurds) is referred as a synonym of *Kurmanci*. The Kurdish groups in terms of language are noted as follows: *Kirmancki* (Zazaki and *Dimilki*) and *Kurmanci* (*Kirdaski*). For example, see Erdal Gezik, *Alevi Kürtler* (Ankara: Kalan Yayinlari, May 2000), p. 16.

At the level of defining their identity, all the narratives of the members of this family referred to one particular point, that they are Alevi, but not Kurd.<sup>534</sup> Identifying oneself as Alevi, but not Kurd or Kurdish Alevi, seems to be a very typical attitude among the Kurdish-speaking Alevis of Siran. However, not all of them insisted that their mother tongue is Turkish.

The narrative of a young man from the village of Tepedam, another Kurdish-speaking Alevi village in Siran, is very illustrative in this case. In the example of his father, he tried to reveal the dominant attitude among the older generation of their village concerning self-identity definitions. He explained that when someone asks his father, in Turkish, whether he is a Kurd or a Turk, he says that he is “Turk”, while the answer turns into “Kurd” when the question is asked in Kurdish. In general, however, his father and relatives consider themselves “Alevi” rather than Turk or Kurd.<sup>535</sup> On the other hand, the narratives of the former inhabitants of the village of Tepedam show that they associate with the Kurdish component of their identity more than the inhabitants of the village of Sifon do. For example, it was possible to hear Kurdish *deyises* from a fifty year-old member of this group. However, it should be noted that those people from Tepedam who emphasize their Kurdishness are more politicized and oppositional individuals. They are quite distanced from traditional Alevi culture and do not participate in the current debates on *Alevilik*. Thus, their attitude may not be considered within the

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<sup>534</sup> This point has occurred for several times in the interviews. For instance, the male member of the family declared, “*Aleviyiz biz, biz Kürt degiliz biz.*” 2000a-t.

<sup>535</sup> 2002b.

mainstream notions of *Alevilik* among the Kurdish-speaking Alevi villagers of Siran.

Defining group and self-identity with reference only to religious identity is a general tendency among the Kurdish Alevis who have migrated from various villages of Siran to Istanbul and who still maintain their ties with “*Alevilik*”. Whether Kurdish or Turkish is indicated as mother tongue varies on an individual basis, conversations on issues of language and ethnic identity commonly give them a certain feeling of discomfort. That the Kurdish-speaking people spoke only in the name of themselves/ their own families during the interviews is one of the consequences/expressions of the popularity of the views in which Alevi identity is considered to be based on Turkish ethnicity.

#### Differences Between *Ocaks* and *Alevilik*

Three issues will be considered in this section: the differences between the *ocaks* of the Turkish and Kurdish speaking Alevis; the influence of these differences on *ayin-i cem*; and, as a case study, the differences between the *semahs* of Turkish and Kurdish speaking Alevi informants.

#### Differences between Turkish and Kurdish Alevi Informants’ *Ocaks*

The inhabitants of the Turkish and Kurdish speaking Alevis of Siran belong to different *ocaks*. All the informants from Turkish-speaking Alevi villages told that they belong to the Haci Bektas Ocagi and they are from the tribe of Saribalogullari.

The inhabitants of the Kurdish-speaking Alevi villages, on the other hand, were organized as *asirets* and not all the asirets belonged to one single *ocak*. Some of the Kurdish Alevi informants belong to the Cemal Abdal Ocagi, while some others belong to Dervis Cemal Ocagi.

In the light of the data gathered in this study, it does not seem possible to assert that there is a strict ethnically-based correlation between the *ocaks* and their followers. However, it is possible to argue for a connection beyond mere coincidence, or a parallelism between the two, as we consider the regions in which the *dedes* connected to certain *ocaks* provide services.

It has been already mentioned that all of the Turkish-speaking Alevi informants had a connection with the village of Kirinti. The *dedes* of these individuals were also connected with Kirinti. On the other hand, the *dedes* who visit the Kurdish-speaking Alevi groups of Siran come from eastern parts of Anatolia, where the Kurdish-speaking Alevi population is significantly high. According to the narratives of Kurdish-speaking Alevis, their *dedes* come mostly from Erzincan, Tunceli, Sivas, and Malatya. It is specifically stated that the *dedes* of Cemal Abdal Ocagi come from Kigi/Dersim,<sup>536</sup> and that the *dedes* of Dervis

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<sup>536</sup> Today Kigi is located within the boundaries of Bingöl rather than Tunceli —which is very frequently used in stead of Dersim. However, Tunceli does not share the same geographical boundaries with Dersim —which no longer exists as an administrative unit. Bruinessen, who defines Dersim as the “heartland of Kurdish Alevis”, draws its boundaries as follows: Dersim is “the province of Tunceli with the adjacent districts of Kemah and Tercan in Erzincan and Kigi in Bingöl.” ““Aslini inkar eden haramzadedir!” The Debate on the Ethnic Identity of the Kurdish Alevis,” pp. 1-23 in Krisztina Kehl-Bodrogi, Barbara Kellner-Heinkele and Anke Otter-Beaujean, eds., *Syncretistic Religious Communities in the Near East* (Leiden ; New York : E.J. Brill, 1997), p. 2.

Cemal Ocagi come from Erzincan. The members of Dervis Cemal Ocagi mention that *dedes* from Tunceli-Hozat visit them as well. Thus, it is important to note that the *dedes* who are connected to the *ocaks* of Dervis Cemal and Cemal Abdal, and who visit the villages of the Kurdish Alevi informants mostly come from various towns and villages located in or around Dersim, which is historically considered to be the center of Kurdish-speaking Alevi.<sup>537</sup>

The data obtained through the analysis of the narratives show that there is a strong connection between ethnicity and *ocaks*. However, it is not possible at this point to attribute an essential character to this relationship –which calls for additional surveys to be conducted in various regions of Turkey.

#### The Influence of *Ocak*-Based Differences on *Ayin-i Cem*

The narratives of the informants show that the practice of *ayin-i cem* differs mostly on the basis of *ocak*. Differences between the *ayins/semahs* of the Kurdish and Turkish speaking Alevi informants will be examined in the next part. Here, we will focus on the importance of these differences in the light of the narrative of the *dede* of the Kirinti village.<sup>538</sup> The *dede* mentioned that people from Karacaahmet Sultan Dergâhi –possibly the administrators of this institution– had invited him that institution to serve as *dede*. The *dede* referred to the differences between the “*sürek*”s (the way of conducting the *ayin-i cem*) of different *ocaks* in explaining

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<sup>537</sup> The information on the Kurdish Alevi *dedes* and *ocaks* are based on the narratives gathered through two interviews: 1998d-t and 2002b.

<sup>538</sup> 1998c-t.

why he did not accept this invitation. He says that the ones who conduct the *ayin-i cem* in Karacaahmet are mostly from Agucan Ocagi to which as he has revealed the Alevis of Malatya and Diyarbakir are connected. According to him, the *sürek* that he knows and follows does not accord with that of Agucan Ocagi. For example, reciting the Quran is an important issue in his community's *cems*; they read Quran during the evening prayers. The *dede* said that Agucans do not recite Quran but only the *duaz-i imam*. Although this example fits more to the question of how different *ocaks* exercise their ritual practices and how they formulate the relationship between *Alevilik* and Islam, in other parts of the interview the *dede* gave detailed information on the differences in the *ayins* and *semahs* of different Alevi groups, especially those of the Turkish and the Kurdish speaking Alevis of Siran, who belong to different *ocaks*.

#### Case Study: Differences between the *Semahs* of the Turkish and Kurdish Speaking Alevi Informants

Both the Turkish and Kurdish speaking Alevis mentioned that they had organized *ayin-i cems* quite often when they were living in their native villages, before settling in the big city. It was told that *cem* was conducted almost every night in the winter, though it was not held at all for at least three months during summer time. There are no strict rules about the location and timing of *cem*. It was related that whoever wished (by heart) to do it invited the others to his/her place and the *cem* was immediately gathered. These are usually the *muhabbet cems* in which the twelve services are conducted, but most of which are devoted to conversation and *semah*. It was told that *semahs* are often conducted in the last part of the *cem*.

Though not necessarily different in content, the *cem* conducted on Thursday night —not on Friday night, as often termed by the informants—<sup>539</sup> on the other hand, was considered to be especially important. They paid special attention to holding a *cem* every Thursday evening both in their rural and urban environments. They have tried to keep these *cems* after moving to the city, and until about fifteen years ago, continued to conduct them on Thursday evenings, though not on a regular basis. The descriptions presented in what follows are based mainly on traditional village *cems*, which have been only partially carried to the urban context.

The Turkish-speaking Alevi informants said that after the completion of the twelve services, two men and two women ‘turn’ the *semah* (“*semah dönerler*”). After they receive their blessing from the *dede*, they leave the place for others who are anxious to participate in the *semah* part themselves. The *semah* begins with a short slow part, which is called “*agirlama*” by the members of the *semah* groups as well as the Turkish-speaking informants. Then the participants form a circle and begin to move quickly in the same direction. The informants added that anyone who wants to turn around herself/himself (“*çarka gitmek*”) may do so and then rejoin the circle.<sup>540</sup>

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<sup>539</sup> In the interviews and among the Alevis in general, it was said that *cems* are held on “Friday” evenings. Technically, what is meant is the night connecting Thursday to Friday. Friday is not a particularly ‘holy’ day among the Alevis. This preference might be based on the fact that *cem* continues until the early hours of Friday. On the other hand, whether the fact that Sunnis consider Friday a holy day plays a role in this preference or not is a topic that needs to be investigated.

<sup>540</sup> 1999a-t.



The participant observations of mine conducted at these gatherings with the elderly informants are in accordance with the *semah* descriptions provided by these narratives. The “*agirlama*” in the beginning is actually very short. Just a few of the elderly perform the “*çarka gitme*” movement. The faster part of the *semah* is usually called “*yeldirme*”. Two different terms are used in referring to *semah*: Some informants called their *semah* “Kirkclar Semahi”, while others preferred the term “Siran Semahi”. Actually, Siran Semahi is the popular term used by *semah* groups in public performances. It seems that those who are more acquainted with the notion of “*semah* group” prefer this term. The *semah* described and performed by the Turkish Alevi informants is in 5/8 meter.

The Kurdish-speaking Alevis, on the other hand, do not use any specific terms, neither for the *semah* they perform, nor for its different parts. They perform it with different melodies and *deyises*. The melodies are usually based on a combination of 9/8 and 4/4 meters. At the beginning, those who perform the *semah* plead first on the ground (*yere niyaz etmek*) and then to each other. Then they open their arms to both sides and move in a slow fashion. Then they start to move the circle to the left and as the tempo and the volume of the music rises, they change the direction of the circle and start to move it to the right. They do not stop until one of them calls out with a “huu, hüü” sound.<sup>541</sup> Then they receive their blessing from the *dede* and finally plead on the ground again. The Kurdish-speaking Alevi informants also mentioned that anyone who wishes to move around herself/himself may do so.

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<sup>541</sup> Actually, the *semahs* of the Turkish Alevis from the village of Kirinti were observed to stop just in the same way. This point is not mentioned in the part related to the *semah* of the Turkish-speaking Alevis of Siran, just because it was not indicated in the narratives.

The *dede* of Kirinti village gave more detailed information on the *semahs* of the Turkish and Kurdish speaking Alevi informants. First of all, he stated that the *semahs* of the two groups are different from each other. He added that the *semah* of the Turkish Alevis of Siran are in accord with those of Amasya, Tokat, Havza, Ladik, Merzifon, and certain parts of Central Anatolia. The *semah* of the Kurdish Alevi groups of Siran, however are the same as those of Erzincan, Malatya, Diyarbakir, and Sivas.<sup>542</sup> My observations on various occasions confirm the information provided by the *dede*.<sup>543</sup> Especially the technical aspects of the *semahs* of the above-mentioned regions and the traditional characteristics of the figures performed in them render possible this regional classification made by the *dede*.

The *dede* of the Kirinti village visits various Turkish-speaking Alevi groups living in the first group of localities (Amasya, Tokat, etc.) mentioned above. The second group of places (Erzincan, Malatya, Sivas, etc.) is visited by other *dedes*, who also visit the Kurdish-speaking Alevi groups in Siran. Thus, it seems that the diversity based on ethnicity/language and *ocak* has to be taken into serious consideration again in the question of the diversification of *semahs*.

In conclusion, it is possible to argue that the *semahs* of the Turkish and Kurdish speaking Alevi informants differ from each other in a number of ways. However, what has appeared in the public sphere, especially in the 1980s and 1990s is one

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<sup>542</sup> “Zaten bizim semaha uyar, bah gizim, Amasya, Tokat yöresi, İç Anadolu’nun bir kısımları hep bizim semaha uyar; Havza, Ladik, Merzifon. (...) Bizim semahi etmezler onlar. Onlar Erzincan, Malatya, Diyarbakir, o yörenin semahini yaparlar. Sivas, aynı semahi yapar.” 1998c-t.

<sup>543</sup> The *semahs* conducted in all the above mentioned locations were observed in person for this study, except for Diyarbakir and Merzifon.

particular *semah*, the “Siran Semahi,” which has been adapted from the *semah* of the Turkish Alevis of Siran.

### The Relationship Between *Alevilik* and Islam

The significance of the discussions that will be presented in this part stems from the fact that they are based on the issues brought up in the interviews by the informants themselves. In other words, both the Turkish and the Kurdish speaking informants wanted to dwell upon, to explain, and even emphasize the following two issues although they were not asked any questions about them during the interviews: Sunni prejudice against the Alevis, and the Alevis’ attitude towards the five pillars of Islam. The narratives of the informants on these two main topics show how they define the relationship between *Alevilik* and Islam, as a response to Sunni prejudice against the Alevis. However, as will be discussed in the last section of this part, they try to draw their own particular outline of Islam.

#### Sunni Prejudice against the Alevis

All of the informants emphasized that the Alevis are accused of immorality, which is symbolized through “*mum söndü*” slanders. Some of them also wanted to explain the meaning of the term “*Kızılbas*”, which historically has been turned into a symbol of the claims regarding the Alevis’ disloyalty to the state. Another issue brought up by most of the informants was the place of Ali in Alevi theology.

It is interesting to note that the issue of “*mum söndü*” slanders usually appeared in the beginning parts of the interviews, which shows that this particular point, among various sorts of prejudice, is the most discomforting one for the

Alevis. It seems that all of the informants believe that this “slander” stems from the secrecy of the Alevi rituals and women’s presence in them. In their response, they usually emphasize that in those gatherings, all the men and women are considered as each other’s brothers and sisters (“*kardes*” and “*baci*”). They go on by telling how the morality of each member of the community is secured and how those who disobey the principles of the community are punished and even ostracized —not only from the ritual, but also from the community. All these points have to do with the communal organization of small Alevi groups and their rituals. However, what follows such explanations is the most significant parts of the narratives on this issue. The informants mostly end such explanations by emphasizing that they are Muslims and that they work for the good of the state, etc.<sup>544</sup>

On the issue of “*Kizilbas*”, Alevis say that this is just a name used for the Alevis, especially for those who live in the central regions of Anatolia. They add that, however Sunnis use the term *Kizilbas* to “humiliate” the Alevis. The narratives of the informants that indicate their answer to the Sunnis on the issue is very similar to those they formulate in response to accusations of immorality.

Actually, the place of Ali in Alevi theology is a more critical religious issue for the informants. They say that they are accused of accepting Ali as the main

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<sup>544</sup> To give an example, the narrative of the *dede* from Kirinti was as follows: “*Hani şimdi bizim hakkımızda diyorlar iste, “biraraya toplanırlar, hani baci-kardes tanımayanlar Aleviler, Gizilbaslar ve bir horon çirpindirirlar, ondan sonra rastgelesiye kim kime sarılırlar”. İste orda böyle söyle... Bunların bir defa hiçbir aslı yoktur. Bunlar softa. Buraya giren dürüstçe oturur, dürüstçe dinler, dürüstçe Allah’a yalvarır... Devletin sözünün çok üstün olduğunu, büyüklerimizin mesela üstün sözleri olmasını, dış devletlere garsi yükselmesini ister, talep ederler.”* 1998c-t.

religious personality.<sup>545</sup> Such accusations imply that Alevis do not believe, or believe less in Muhammed and so they do not believe in Islam –or at least they are not good believers.<sup>546</sup>

In this case, the informants try to explain that they feel love and respect for Ali and Muhammed and that they accept the two as holy figures. Such statements are usually followed by their explanations on the “roots” of the practice of “*musahiplik*” or “*ahiret kardesligi*”. They say that this Alevi tradition, according to which two couples (two men and their wives) become sisters-brothers throughout their lives, is initiated by Ali and Muhammed.

In sum, Alevis reject the issues of prejudice mentioned above, while they feel the need to develop an attitude against the views such as Alevis are “immoral”, they are “unbelievers”, “their relations with the state are problematic”, etc. implied in these prejudices. At this point, Alevis emphasize that there is a strong relationship between *Alevilik* and Islam, and mention about their loyalty to the state. Both of these attitudes deeply influence the reconstruction process of the Alevi identity. However, informants emphasize the relation between *Alevilik* and Islam more strongly. In the definition of their good relations with the state, Mustafa

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<sup>545</sup> However, it is believed that God has manifested in the vision of Ali (“*Ali Tanrı'nın tecellisidir*”). On the other hand, Muhammed is one of the most respected personalities. The Alevis consider Muhammed as the comrade (“*yoldas*”) of Ali.

<sup>546</sup> One of the informants was very angry at the Sunni people who accuse the Alevi of not recognizing Muhammed: “*Simdi, karsimizda olanlar ne iftiralar yapıyorlar, 'Yav bunlar peygamberi tanimiyor, yok yalnız Ali'yi tanıyorlar,' yok falan yok filan, artık neler neler, ne sapık konusmalar.*” 1998b-t.

Kemal appears as a very significant personage, respected by all of the informants.<sup>547</sup>

### The Attitude of Alevis towards the Five Pillars of Islam

Through a general analysis of the narratives, it is possible to argue that the Alevis consider *Alevilik* within the Islamic creed. However, the differences of *Alevilik* from Sunni-ism are emphasized. Actually, the basic reference points used in this comparison –such as Quran, *namaz*, *hac*– belong to the Sunni interpretation of Islam, even to the five pillars. Some practices are suggested as alternatives for such elements taken as reference points. For instance, reciting the Quran in Alevi rituals seems to be a very recent phenomenon. The informants mention that the Quran is recited in their rituals in order to imply that *Alevilik* is not a belief system “without a book” and that *Alevilik* should be situated within Islam.

The style of Quran recitation among the Alevis is different from that of the Sunnis. Some informants state that it is recited in Turkish, while others say that first, the Arabic text is used and then translated into Turkish.<sup>548</sup> The alternatives

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<sup>547</sup> Additionally, most of them hang Mustafa Kemal’s photographs on the walls of their dining or living rooms. In the *cemevis*, Mustafa Kemal’s photographs appear next to the illustrations of Hacı Bektas-i Veli and Prophet Ali.

<sup>548</sup> One of the informants who emphasized this point added that the translation of the Quran to Pure Turkish is followed by the evening prayer, in which Prophet Muhammed, Ali, Fatimatil Zehra (Ali’s wife and Prophet’s daughter), Haticetil Kübra, Twelve Imams and Fourteen Pure Innocents were mentioned. At the end, it was told that the prayer was dedicated to the government, Atatürk who established the Republic, his friend İnönü, their friend Fevzi Çakmak and to all the others who served in the military, all the martyrs. The original narrative is as follows: “*Önce Kuran okunuyor Arapça ama açıklamaları yapılıyor. Pesinden de akşam duası yapılıyor Öztürkçe. Uzun devam ediyor.. O akşam duasında peygamberden basılıyor, Ali, Fatimatil Zehra, Haticetil Kübra, On İki Imamlar, Ondört Masum-u Paklar,*

reproduced in this context seem to be related to the value that Alevis put on the Turkish language. Moreover, most of the Alevis mention that one has to understand in that which she/he believes. That is why reciting or summarizing Quran in Turkish is important.

Another topic within the five pillars emphasized by the Alevis is *namaz*. The Alevis argue that they too practice a sort of *namaz*, but that it is called *niyaz* (pleading). According to *Alevilik*, the face of the human being represents God's face, so, as the Alevis state, they therefore practice *namaz* in a circle ("*halka namazi*"), which is a kind of *niyaz*. People kneel and sit in a circle, and express their respect to the God by pleading toward each other's face.<sup>549</sup> Thus, a belief and practice that has a certain place in Alevi theology and traditional *Alevilik* (*niyaz*) is formulated with reference to another practice that has a place in the Sunni faith (*namaz*).

In the narratives, a similar pattern is observed on the issue of *hac* (pilgrimage). Orthodox Muslims visit Mecca at a specific time of the Muslim year in order to fulfill their religious duty of pilgrimage. As soon as they do it once, they become *haci* (pilgrim). The Alevis do had a tradition of visiting holy places, yet, quite apart from the orthodox Islamic understanding of pilgrimage, in *Alevilik* there is neither

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*bunların hepsini sayıyor, sayıyor. En sonunda diyor, 'hükümeti Cumhuriyetimizi kuran' diyor, 'Atatürk'ün' diyor, 'arhadası İsmet İnönü'nün' diyor, 'silah arkadaşları Fevzi Çakmak'ın' diyor ve 'Türk, bu orduda' diyor, 'hizmet geçen, şehit olan Mehmetçiklerin' diyor, aynen böyle... 'Bu Kuranımızı' diyor 'ithaf ediyoruz,' diyor, yani mutlaka bu akşam duasının sonunda, bu dediklerimi Aleviler...canlandırır."* 1998d-t.

<sup>549</sup> The following text is from the narrative of a Turkish Alevi from Sivas, who explained the Alevis' *niyaz* (*halka namazi*) in detail. In addition to what is revealed above on the subject of *niyaz*, he mentioned that the pleading starts when the *dede* calls "Allah, Allah": "*Hepsi böyle halka olurlar. Dede "Allah Allah" deyince, beyle... Allah, Allah der dua eder. O esnada hepsi yere secde ederler, beyle hepsi birbirine secde eder, yani karsındaki Hakkın gendisidir, insana secde ediliy... Bütün melekler ademe secde etmistir, insana secde edilir yani benim bildigim."* 2002a-t.

one specific holy place to be visited by all the Alevis, nor do the people who visit the holy places become *haci*. For example, while *Tahtaci* groups consider the *Kaz Dagi* (ancient name, Ida Mountain, in Balıkesir) as a holy place to be visited, some of the Kurdish Alevis, especially the ones living in or around the Dersim region, have a great respect for the mountains of Dûzgin Bawo.<sup>550</sup> Above all, in contrast to the fact that pilgrimage is one of the five pillars of orthodox Islam, visits to holy places are not a religious obligation in *Alevilik*.

However, recently there has been a kind of shift in the Alevis' practice of visiting holy places. This can be best observed in their recent interest in visiting the town of Hacı Bektas at the time of Hacı Bektas Festival in August each year. The Alevi community started to organize the Hacı Bektas Festival in 1964. Since then members of different Alevi groups from all around the country attend the Festival. However, in the 1990s, the festival began to acquire recognition from the state and the Alevi groups started to evaluate the Festival as an opportunity to gather as the Alevi community and to declare the presence of the Alevis in Turkey. Although the developments that took place in the 1990s indicate some political and socio-cultural changes, this activity was also formulated as a kind of pilgrimage by most of the informants. Those narratives usually included comparisons between the Sunnis and Alevis, and between Sunni Islam and *Alevilik*. For example, by referring to the Sunnis, one of the middle aged woman informants from Rumelihisarüstü says that "they go to pilgrimage, and the Alevis go to Hacı Bektas." The ninety year-old woman informant added that "visiting the town of Hacı Bektas once is just the same as visiting Mecca for forty times."<sup>551</sup>

In sum, today the Alevis can correspond some of the elements of the Sunni belief and worship system with some other elements (as in the case of *namaz-*

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<sup>550</sup> See for example, Mehmet Bayrak, *Alevilik ve Kürtler* (Özge Yayınları, 1997).

<sup>551</sup> The first informant stated that "[Sünniler] Hacca giderler, biz Hacı Bektas'a giderik." The second informant added that "Kirk defa hacca gidecek, bir kere Hacı Bektas'a gitsen aynı." 1999a-t.



*niyaz*), or produce an alternative interpretation for an element of Sunni Islam religious practices (as in the case of reciting Quran in Turkish). What is most significant in these narratives is the construction of a strong positive relationship between *Alevilik* and Islam as a response to the problematic relationship between the Sunnis and the Alevis. However, it is important to note that the Alevis stress on a particular outline of Islam in contrast to the traditional orthodoxy.

### The Alevis' Particular Outline of Islam and the Modern Constructions of the Alevi Identity

The narratives show that while the Alevis situate *Alevilik* within the scope of Islam, they draw certain boundaries between *Alevilik* and traditional orthodoxy. This is mostly expressed in comparisons that included Alevi/*Alevilik* and Sunni/Sunni-ism. First of all, while in some of the narratives the Sunni are referred as “*softa*”<sup>552</sup> or “old-fashioned” (“*geri kafalı*”), the Alevi is almost exclusively defined as “modern”. Second, although not all the informants stated that “*Alevilik* is the real Islam”, they all implied that “*Alevilik* is the correct interpretation of Islam”.

Below, first of all, why consideration of *Alevilik* within the scope of Islam is important for the Alevis will be discussed. Then, for the purpose of analysis, “*Alevilik* is the correct interpretation of Islam” will be taken as the main argument and will be tried to be analyzed it in order to understand how *Alevilik* is defined as a particular belief system situated within Islam. However, the analysis of the

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<sup>552</sup> *Softa* means, student of Muslim theology. However in daily language, it is also used in the meanings of ignorant, bigot, old fashioned.

narratives indicates that a variety of elements taken from analytically separate categories –theology, beliefs, ritual practices, social structure, social, political, economic and cultural demands of the community– are all merged in a very complex process of the construction of the Alevi identity. It is through this process that boundaries which surround and differentiate *Alevilik* are drawn.

The importance of situating *Alevilik* within the scope of Islam:

At the social level, situating *Alevilik* within the scope of Islam is closely linked with the uncomfortable position of the Alevis in the Sunni-dominated society, where a number of prejudices operate in the humiliation of the Alevi community.<sup>553</sup> At the political level, among many other factors, the anxiety of the

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<sup>553</sup> In the two examples presented below, the informants narrate how they are humiliated by some Sunni people just because that they are Alevis. Their response in those cases is based on showing or proving that they are wise people, good Muslims and have greater knowledge of Islam and the Quran. In the following narrative, the informant (*adede*) wants to buy shroud from a Sunni salesman. After learning that the informant is from Kirinti, meaning that he is an “Alevi/*Kizilbas*”, the salesman asks whether he would be able to cut it or not. The response of the informant is a counter question. He asks the salesman if he knows the origin of the shroud: “...*burdan bir öğretmen götürdüm iste bu hocanın dayisinin ogluydu, vefat etmişti de çocuk... kefin alıydım, bir tanesi dedi ki ‘kefini kesebilecek misiniz?’ dedi, biz, ‘nerelisin’ dedi, Girintiliyim dedim. Biz, Aleviyik ya... Gizilbas köyü. Adam bana diy ki ‘kefini kesilecek mi?’ Dedim ki kefini soran insan dedim, hem keser hem biçer hem de sarar dedim. Yalnız sana birsey soracagım, bu kefin nerden hasil oldu dedim, onun manasını bana verir misin? Bana dedi ki ‘onu’ dedi, ‘sizinkinler bilir, biz bilemek’ dedi. Hi, dedim, bizimkinler bilirse, yani Gizilbaslar bilir demek istedi... Ya iste dedi, yani ben nerden hasil oldu diye sordum ya ona, bilmiyor ki cevap versin! Bak dedim, dinle öyleyse. (...)*” Afterwards, he tells a religious story about the origin of shroud. 1998c-t.

Another case is narrated by a middle aged woman informant from Rumelihisarüstü, who works as *gündelikçi*. She says that she told everyone that she is Alevi, because she did not want to stay silent when somebody talks negatively on the Alevis. In this example case, somebody asks her why she does not cover her hair. She first says that God has created her nude, uncovered. Afterwards she tells many prayers and

Alevis regarding the organization and the very existence of the Directorate of Religious Affairs (DRA) seems to be a very critical one which they closely associate with the position of *Alevilik* in regard to Islam. They assert that this institution represents the Sunni population in Turkey and that it contributes to the notion that Sunni Islam is the legitimate state religion. While some members of the Alevi community want the DRA to be dissolved, most of the others (including our informants) want it to serve equally –especially in cultural and financial terms– the requirements of both the Alevi and the Sunni community. On the cultural level, the Alevis have a desire to be accepted as a legitimate religious group and to conduct their own rituals freely. Therefore, according to the narratives, certain social, political, cultural, and economic factors that affect the lives of the Alevi community seem to be paving the way for situating *Alevilik* as a religion strictly situated within the scope of Islam. They take it as a critical step for demanding equal social, political, economic and cultural rights.<sup>554</sup>

#### Particular Interpretation of Islam:

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surprises the Sunni man. “*Ben evlerde çalıştım. Herkese Alevi olduğumu söyledim. Çünkü bi laf söyledim, ona göre karsiligini vermeliyim. Ben şimdi biri bi laf dedi mi, bi sürü dualar, mualar vardır, sasirir. Geçen süde giderim burda. [Oglumun] arkadasi; süd almaya. Iste buralarini örtmiysin felan dedi. Allah dedim beni mesela çıplak yaratmış. Örtülü eyleydi örterim sizde, ama bir sürü ona dua okudum, demeler söyledim ettim. Sasti böyle, baka kaldı.*” It is necessary to note that she actually covers her hair, but in a traditional way –she uses a scarf. 1999a-t.

<sup>554</sup> For example, the informants who live in Kartal were very happy about the economic aid of the state for the construction of Kartal Cemevi, which provided them an opportunity to organize cultural and religious activities.

The argument of the Alevi informants that will be analyzed below as an example is ‘*Alevilik* is the correct interpretation of Islam’. This argument will be analyzed through one of the ritual practices of the Alevi community, ‘*niyaz*’.

When the interpretation of various religious practices which are formulated in correspondence to Sunni version of Islam –such as *niyaz/namaz*, pilgrimage, etc.– are analyzed, it is possible to see that Alevi theology, Islamic theology, religious practices, traditions and finally, modern values are interwoven in the final definition of *Alevilik*.

The example case of *niyaz/namaz*: In this case, one of the five pillars of Orthodox Islam, namely the *namaz*, is accepted by the Alevis as a reference point in formulation of their *niyaz*. On the other hand, the Alevi theology is referred to in the explanation of “face to face” form used in the practice of *niyaz*, as the representation of God in the face of human beings. Then, the difference between *niyaz* and *namaz* is set as the difference between *Alevilik* and Sunni-ism as follows: There is no “formalism” in *Alevilik*. One of the informants stresses that unlike the Sunnis, it is not important for Alevis to practice *namaz* five times a day or to perform it at the direction of *Kible* (the direction of Mecca). In his narrative, just as it is the case in many other narratives, *Alevilik* is positively discriminated as being more cognizant of Islamic knowledge. Because the informant stresses that according to the Quran, ‘*namaz*’ means prayer; in other words, since ‘*niyaz*’ has

the meaning of prayer, he mentions that the Alevi –not the Sunni– practice is the exact correspondence of what is said in the Quran.<sup>555</sup>

Finally, the interpretations about the practice of *niyaz* begin to contribute to some definitions of the *Alevilik* and Alevi identity that include modern values: “*Alevilik* is humanism” / “Alevi are humanists” (for instance, God reappears in the face of each human being, considered as a valid reference); or “*Alevilik* is based on the idea of equality” / “the Alevi is for equality” (for example, the consideration of the people who sit on the circle of *niyaz* as equals is suggested as a proof).

At this point, it is important to mention that the *Alevilik*-Islam relation became an important issue with the dispersion of the small community structures.<sup>556</sup> It seems that the construction of the Alevi identity in the last two decades is closely associated with the “Alevi’s increased confrontation with modernity, a process which is largely a result of their domestic migration”.<sup>557</sup> In this respect, for the Alevi, the world inside and the world outside the community integrate, and the values of modern society interfere in the interpretations of

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<sup>555</sup> “*Namaz Kur’an’da selattir. Yani selat duadir. Aleviler de namaz gilar, gilmayani da vardir. Eyisi de vardir... Veya kötüsü de vardir. Ha, yani namaz Quran’da duadir. Gece de namaz kilarsin, yani dua edersin, gündüz de edersin. (...) Alevide sekil yok. Yani bes vakit egilip gahma sekli yoktur. Çünkü Dogu’da da Allah vardir, Bati’da vardir, Kuzey’de vardi, Güney’de Allah, nerde insan, Allah ordadir...*” 2002a-t.

<sup>556</sup> See, Chapter 3.

<sup>557</sup> As quoted above, a similar argument has been asserted by Günter Seufert, who conducted a survey among the members of the Koçgiri tribe, living in Istanbul. “Between Religion and Ethnicity: A Kurdish-Alevi Tribe in Globalizing Istanbul,” pp. 157-176 in Ayşe Öncü and Paul Weyland, eds., *Space, Culture and Power in Globalizing Cities* (London and New York: Zed Books, 1997), p. 166.

traditional culture. In other words, a specific use of “traditional symbolic material in modern and urban circumstances” actually reshapes it to new requirements.<sup>558</sup> However at the end, the Alevi community draws boundaries between *Alevilik* and orthodox Islam on the basis of modern values.

It is in this respect that the *semah*, which seems to represent a challenge to the orthodox understanding of Islam, forms a bridge from the inside world of the Alevi community to the outside world in the urban setting.

### **The Alevi Identity Constructed in Relation to the *Semah* Performances Presented in the Public Sphere**

In this section, the public performance of the *semahs* in relation to the Alevi identity will be analyzed on the basis of my participatory observations and interviews.

#### **Presentation of the Sample Groups and Activities**

Within the scope of this survey, Alevi *cems* conducted in three different *cemevis* and in one of the most important Alevi festivals were attended, interviews were conducted on various occasions, a large number of visual records of *ayin-i*

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<sup>558</sup> Ibid., p. 167.

*cems* and *semahs* were analyzed, and the *semah* dances performed by the Karacaahmet *semah* group –including the *semah* of Siran– were practiced.

### Cemevis

The *cems* of three different *cemevis* were attended. One of them was in Izmir-Narlidere. This association was visited mainly to collect data to be used and evaluated in comparisons. Although the Narlidere Ocagi was known as one of the two main *ocaks* of the Tahtaci groups, the ritual attended did not belong to the Tahtacis. Most of the participants in the ritual were those who had migrated to Izmir from Sivas and Erzincan in the last ten to fifteen years. Among the participants were both Kurdish and Turkish speaking Alevis.<sup>559</sup> This *cemevi* was visited in February 1998. The ritual took place in a rather small room where it was difficult for the nearly forty people to find place for themselves. As the old Alevi accounts maintain that the *cem* ceremonies are famously secretive, I deemed it necessary to ask permission to attend the ceremony. It was interesting that in addition to granting my request, suddenly they changed the organization of the ceremony. Very kindly, I was told that although not all of the traditional twelve services were practiced in the new *cem* ceremonies (although they are practiced

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<sup>559</sup> This was revealed to me by three of the participants. Two women who took me there were friends of mine. They were Kurdish Alevis from Sivas. Yet I learned about their ethnic and religious affiliation during the time of my research –14 years after becoming friends with them. The other person who informed me about the ritual that took place in Narlidere, as well as those held in a village in his childhood, was a *dede* who moved to Izmir from Tunceli. During the ritual, he was sitting on the post, but he said that he had not conducted any rituals in his life; he was a *dede* based on the holy lineage of his family.

from time to time, in order to teach the religious order to the children), they would be able to perform them for me. It was like a quickly-organized staged version of a *cem* ritual. In the ritual, the position of the religious leaders was interesting: Although one *dede* led the *cem*, there were seven *dedes* sitting side by side. I learned that they had developed a system of rotation that each ceremony was led by one of them. The next most recognizable person was the *zakir*, who played the music. He was sitting next to the *dedes*, and the *semah* performers showed respect to him, like they did for the *dedes*.

The Kartal Cemevi was visited in November 2002, in the company of two informants from Kartal. According to the informants, the construction of the building started in 1998 and was completed in 2000. In the two-floor structure there was a large dining hall (“*as evi*” or “*yemekhane*”), a large hall, where the rituals take place and a morgue. In that hall, a portrait of Atatürk was hung, side by side with some illustrations of Hacı Bektas-i Veli and Prophet Ali. The floor was covered with large rugs. During the ritual, the participants sat in a large circle. The ones who attended the rituals were emigrants mostly from Sivas, Erzincan, Malatya, Tunceli, and Gümüşhane-Siran –especially from the Kurdish speaking villages of Siran.

According to the informants, the *ayin-i cem* that I attended was an exceptional one, in the sense that the *dede* who conducted it was a visitor –not the usual one. He was a young, but well-known *dede* from Erzincan. The attendants showed him great respect. That evening a discussion about women wearing head scarves (“*bas örtüsü*”) took place. An old man told the *dede* that he had something



to ask, or request (he said, “*maruzatim var*”). After being permitted, he said that he did not feel comfortable when some of the women attending the ritual did not wear scarves or something else to cover their heads.<sup>560</sup> He said that he was not used to seeing women like that in their former rituals, held in the villages. Three young women, who were the ones in question, responded to this saying that there should not be formalism about dressing in the rituals, which women should be free to attend in their ordinary clothing. After a short discussion among the participants of the ritual, the *dede* concluded that nothing was wrong about what the young women were doing, but if they wished, they could follow the demands of the elders as an act of respect. It seemed that the wearing a scarf was not a question regarding *Alevilik* as a belief system, but was a question of traditions within community life. In this case, the problem arose between the “representatives” of two different generations and life styles, and in the end, a consensus was achieved between the “traditional” and “modern”, most probably by paving a way for a new tradition in the urban setting.

The main reason for my visit to the Kartal Cemevi was that the Kurdish-speaking informants who contributed to this survey were living in Kartal and attended most of the rituals that took place in that *cemevi*.<sup>561</sup> There, the rituals take

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<sup>560</sup> Since I had been warned on this issue by the informants before attending the ritual, I was using a purple shawl –something that I use during the winter time for protection. Thus, the nature of thing that women used to cover their head was not so important. However, all the informants that I spoke to were quiet anxious about the Sunni type of dressing veil –especially the “*kara çarsaf*” (black veil) was a symbol of opposition in the narratives of the informants.

<sup>561</sup> During my initial interviews with these informants in 1998, the construction of the *cemevi* building was not completed. The informants, at least most of them, were usually attending the *cems* in

place on Thursday evenings, around 7-8 p.m. The Narlidere and Kartal *cemevis* are different from the Karacaahmet Dergâhi in that they can be considered as local structures, as almost exclusively, those who attend are from the local Alevi population of those districts. Although the Alevi population is large both in Narlidere and Kartal, most of the people know each other, or at least have some idea about the different Alevi families living in those districts.

The last institution included in this survey is the Karacaahmet Sultan Dergâhi, which has a long history and has served as one of the two most important gathering places of the different Alevi groups in Istanbul.<sup>562</sup> Especially since the late 1980s, this institution has been quite active in the reconstruction of the Alevi identity both within and outside of the Alevi community, based on their contribution to the invention of some Alevi traditions such as the organization of public rituals and the formation of *semah* groups. In this respect it is not simply a coincidence that the Karacaahmet Sultan Dergâhi has had a *semah* group since the late 1980s, and that the public rituals take place not on Thursday evenings, but on Sundays, during the day time. Thus, during the survey, as a representative of public rituals and *semah* groups, I focused mainly on the rituals of the Karacaahmet Dergâhi and its *semah* group. The public rituals were conducted by two brothers

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Karacaahmet or Sah Kulu *cemevis*. However, those visits were relatively rare. Before the *cem* that we attended together in Kartal, they told me that it was not necessary for me to ask for permission. If it were necessary, I would be introduced as a relative. I would just stay with them, and during the ritual I would repeat/imitate what they did. I accepted their conditions, because I did not want to disturb the others and I wanted to observe a communal ritual, not a presentation.

<sup>562</sup> The other one is Sahkulu Sultan Dergâhi in Merdivenköy, Istanbul.

from Sebinkarahisar (Giresun) who had served almost as the producers of the *semah* performances for more than twenty years.<sup>563</sup> They were Alevi, but not *dedes* in the sense of having holy lineages. However, it was apparent that many community members were very respectful of their contributions to the community.

The history, features, and the activities of the institutions are as follows: The Karacaahmet Sultan Dergâhi, like the Dergâhs of Hacı Bektas Veli, Abdal Musa, and Sahkulu, is one of the important institutions that help sustain the Alevi culture and teachings. These *dergâhs* have been considered as the sacred places by the Alevis and Bektashis. The Karacaahmet Dergâhi and the cemetery are in Üsküdar- Istanbul. In the Ottoman period, a large area was donated to the Karacaahmet Dergâhi, afterwards most of it has been used as cemetery. This area is now known as the Karacaahmet Cemetery. The Karacaahmet Dergâhi was among the Bektashi *dergâhs* that Mahmut II closed down together with the Yeniçeri Ocagi in 1826. And it was among those closed down on November 30, 1925 by Act. No. 677, which abolished the dervish lodges. Most of the existing files and sources were destroyed at that time. The abandoned Dergâh fell into ruins.<sup>564</sup>

The *Karacaahmet Sultan Dergâhi Onarma ve Yasatma Dernegi* (Karacaahmet Sultan Dergâhi Association of Repair and Sustenance) was

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<sup>563</sup> See also, Arzu Öztürkmen who interviewed Durmus Genç, one of those two brothers. "Different Generations, Different Styles: Alevi Semah Performances in their Changing Context," Proceedings of the 19th Symposium of the ICTM Study Group on Ethnochoreology: *Dance, Style, Youth, Identities* (Trest, Jihlava, Czeck Republic, 1996): (vol. 1) 112-114.

<sup>564</sup> Nedim Sahnüseyinoglu, *Alevi Örgütlerinin Tarihsel Süreci* (Ankara: Ayyıldız Yayinlari, 2001), pp. 129-131.

established in 1969. The Dergâh was restored and opened to public visits. There are many visitors. Animals are sacrificed there for different purposes and other traditional or religious practices, like *asure* (a special pudding with wheat, sultanas, etc., baked for the tenth of Muharrem) are fulfilled together. The association focuses on cultural activities (*semah*, *saz*, theatre, reading). When the space was deemed insufficient for these workshops, plans were made to build extra floors to the Dergâh building and the construction was started. However, on September 7, 1994, the municipality stopped the construction on the order of the mayor of Istanbul, Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Upon this, thousands of people gathered around the Dergâh. The following day, many people, including representatives of the Alevî-Bektashi organizations, democratic mass organizations, intellectuals and writers joined the crowd around the Dergâh. In response to this mass, organized reaction of the public, the mayor and the politicians were forced to apologize.<sup>565</sup>

According to the reports of the people who attend the activities in the Dergâh and who take part in its management, *Alevilik* is a way of life based on the combination of Islam and the rich varied culture of Anatolia. Politically, they claim to be modern, secular, and loyal to the principles of Atatürk and in favor of a democratically organized social and political life. Among the cultural activities conducted at the Dergâh are *semah*, *saz* and drama courses. They occasionally organize panels and conferences on various subjects (especially on topics related to Alevî/Bektashi culture). They also serve food to about a thousand people everyday.

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<sup>565</sup> Ibid. See also the periodical of the Karacaahmet Sultan Derneği, called *Gönüllerin Sesi Karacaahmet Sultan*.

### Festivals

Since the late 1980s and especially early 1990s, various Alevi groups living in different parts of Turkey began in a new trend of coming together on several occasions throughout the year. The concept of Alevi festivals is important in this respect. Festivals are organized at certain times of the year, usually in towns where the tombs of important Alevi saints are found. Such events are usually organized by Alevi organizations, but aid from local administrations is also demanded or accepted. During the festival time, people come together, perform certain religious practices, and get to know each other. In addition to such personal or small group activities, each festival has a program at featuring opening speeches and a *cem* ritual, although in most of the cases, the program mainly dominated by the performances of Alevi music and dance.

The festival I attended was the seventeenth Abdal Musa Festival of May-June 2001, organized in the Elmali village of Antalya. This festival is one of the most well-known ones, after the Hacı Bektas Festival. Closely linked with the Alevi cultural revival, the event was first held in 1985. The total number of the institutions participated in the seventeenth festival was four –about one third or one fourth of the previous years’ participants. This extraordinarily low level of institutional attendance occurred due to a conflict about the timing of the festival. Although this festival had usually been held at the end of May, in 2001, some Alevi institutions, the leading one being the CEM Vakfı, wanted to change the date, because the mayor of the municipality was not going to be available on those days.

Many institutions protested this proposal; however they followed different paths. Some institutions, like the Karacaahmet Sultan Dergâhi, the Erikli Baba Sultan Dergâhi, the Sahkulu Sultan Dergâhi and the Kartal Cemevi showed their protest by organizing the festival on the pre-determined date. Some others, especially those organized around the Pir Sultan Abdal Associations and the Hacı Bektas Cultural Associations, protested the event altogether. The remaining groups organized another festival at a later date in the name of Abdal Musa. The case of the seventeenth festival of Abdal Musa shows the fragility of the relationship among different among Alevi organizations.<sup>566</sup>

During the festival, following a few speeches on the problem summarized above, some *dedes* sang *deyises* in Turkish and the *semah* group of the Karacaahmet Sultan Dergâhi staged the twelve services of the *ayin-i cem*. At the end of the services, they performed their dances, using the choreography developed by Abbas and Durmus Genç in a long interval, between mid-1960s and the end of the 1980s. The dances included in the choreography were the *semahs* of Samsun-Ladik, Amasya-Alaçam, Malatya-Arguvan, Siran, Tokat, Erzincan, Fethiye-Tahtaci and Hacı Bektas.

Besides the Abdal Musa Festival, I attended several *semah* performances staged at the Atatürk Kültür Merkezi in Istanbul. A staged version of twelve services, including the *semahs* by a combination of local people and groups was presented in 1998, on a special occasion organized by the CEM Vakfı, attended

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<sup>566</sup> Another important note is that the mayor was from *Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi* (Nationalist Action Party) to which many Alevi institutions are not close.

mostly by the Alevis. In 1999, the Ankara Deneme Sahnesi staged a performance very similar to the former one in content, but quite stylized in form.

### Interviews

In this section reference will be made to some of the oral history interviews which were partially analyzed in the previous section. However, some oral history interviews with some Alevi informants who have no relationship with Siran were also conducted. The informants were again first generation emigrants living in Istanbul. They were emigrated from Elbistan (Malatya), Tunceli, Tugut (Sivas-Divrigi), and Sebinkarahisar (Giresun). The first two informants considered themselves as Kurdish-speaking, while the latter two as Turkish-speaking Alevis. Additionally, some interviews were conducted at the Abdal Musa Festival, with some elderly Alevis and with some members of the Karacaahmet *semah* group. I traveled to Abdal Musa with the *semah* group and during the festival, I stayed with them.

### Visual Records

Besides the ones that I recorded on different occasions, I used some visual records provided by other people. Local records included *ayin-i cems* and *semahs* performed by Tahtaci groups (1980s and 1990s), and by Alevis from Tokat (1980s and 2000), Urfa (1990s), Malatya (2000), and Elazig (1994). The rest of the records provided data on a variety of *semah* groups which participated in Alevi festivals (1992-2000).

### Practices

I practiced the *Semah* of Siran with the help of Abbas and Durmus Genç, who organize the *semah* courses at the Karacaahmet Dergâhi. I also practiced the whole repertoire with the *semah* group of this institution.

### The Significance of *Semahs* in the Reconstruction of the Alevi Identity

#### The Repositioning of *Semahs* Among the Twelve Services:

The Alevi, in former times known for screening themselves off from the outside world, have made various attempts to adapt *Alevilik* to modernity, the most significant among them being the scripturalization of their oral tradition, and the standardization of the doctrine and cult. This process started in the 1950s and reached its peak in the 1990s. Additionally, the Alevis' search for identity in the urban conditions of the late 1980s has had a great impact on the conditions of religious life, as regards both access and visibility. When in 1989 the ban on associations was somewhat relaxed, Alevi voluntary associations sprang up throughout the country.<sup>567</sup> Additionally, *cemevis* were opened and Alevi rituals, which had been practically banned since 1925, were publicly performed. Thus, new interest in religious knowledge has not entailed a revival of the traditional social structures. On the contrary, modern institutions have entered onto the scene,

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<sup>567</sup> Bruinessen, "Kurds, Turks and the Alevi Revival in Turkey," *Middle East Report* 200 (Summer 1996): 7-10.



institutions with written status.<sup>568</sup> They served as a bridge linking to the public sphere. Among the Alevi traditions invented in those institutions, *semah* started to acquire a relatively high position and almost as a symbol, it began to represent the *Alevilik* both inside and outside the world of the community. Below, a review of the factors which contributed to the rise in the position of the *semahs* among the twelve services of the *cem* ritual will be made.

Today in the *cemevis*, rituals are organized regularly. In local ones (like the Narlidere and Kartal *cemevis*), the rituals take place on Thursday nights. In more popular and inclusive *cemevis*, which people from various districts of Istanbul attend, the rituals are organized on Sundays. Sunday services are a new phenomenon which shows that the gathering time of the community is determined within the framework of urban conditions.

More importantly, the internal structure of the ritual has undergone a significant transformation. The communal *cem* rituals were organized around the twelve services, and the ritual would be cancelled in the absence of any one of them. In the reorganized *cems*, while some of those services are absent, most of the others are only represented (or “staged”), but not realized communally, as in the modern urban conditions, most of the services have either lost their functions, or have been professionalized. Those services have been formalized in a symbolic manner. For example, the service of light-keeping (*çerag*) was quite functional in former times when there was no electricity and the ritual took place at nights. In the performance of the service, the light-keeper used to keep an oil lamp (*kandil*). In

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<sup>568</sup> Seufert, p. 168.

the new *cems*, this service has lost its functionality and begun to be represented by three candles. As told by the informants,<sup>569</sup> the three candles symbolize the belief of *teslis* (the trinity of Allah, Muhammed, and Ali). Some of the other services, such as a guard surveiling the inside and outside (*bekçi*), a caller who invites people to the ritual (*peyik*), or a doorman (*kapıcı*) have also lost their functionality in the urban setting. On the other hand, some other services, such as cook (*asçı*) and cleaning person, are professionalized. For instance, most of the *cemevis* have their own dining halls and cooks, and a staff for cleaning the building.

Among others, the transformation of two services, those of *dede* and singer (*zakir, güvende*), require attention to analyze the character of the public *cems* in comparison with the communal ones. In the past and with a few exceptions today, the Alevi rituals are officiated by the *dede*, who belongs to a hereditary priestly caste. Although, the *dede* is still the most respected person in religious terms, his position seems to have declined in the popular *cems*. On the other hand, the singer, together with the *semah* group, who has started to symbolize *Alevilik* in cultural terms has begun to dominate the *cem* ritual.

The reasons for the decline of the *dede*'s position in relation to his service in the rituals may be put forward as follows:

(i) All of the informants emphasized that the people who have problems with each other, and the ones who do not live according to the basic principles of *Alevilik* (usually summarized as “*eline, beline, diline sahip olmak*”) cannot attend the rituals. If they do, they must be interrogated at the beginning of the ritual. At

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<sup>569</sup> This point is emphasized strongly in an interview conducted with an old Alevi from Sivas. 2002a-t.

these sessions, the *dede* appears as the significant figure who conducts the discussions and formulates the final decision. However, the practice of interrogation which is applied in all of the communal rituals, without exception, does not have a concrete validity in the popular ones as most of the attendants do not know each other at all, and there is no possibility to check their way of living outside of the ritual context.<sup>570</sup> Therefore, the function of the *dede* in checking and balancing the community order has almost disappeared, at least in the case of the public *cems*, but also reduced in the others as well.

(ii) Actually, the narratives about the communal rituals reflect the internal dynamics of Alevi belief and social order that emerge in close community structures. Problems arising among people or difficulties people face in their lives in the villages may be solved in the rituals attended by all members of the community, together with the *dede* who leads the ritual. On the contrary, the daily lives of people who attend the public rituals in the big cities are quite different from each other. Additionally they need to negotiate a complex social order. Therefore, they mostly seek solutions to their own problems not through “inherited” but “acquired” knowledge, either in the Alevi circles or mostly outside the community. Thus, although their religious significance is accepted by most of the community members, the position of the *dedes*, who are the transmitters of the inherited knowledge, is in decline in the context of finding solutions for daily

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<sup>570</sup> Actually no one is asked whether she/he is an Alevi or not. It is just supposed that mostly Alevis attend the rituals.

problems.<sup>571</sup> Thus, in most of the popular rituals, the *dede* serves mainly as a religious symbol.

The reasons that contribute to a rise in the position of *semahs* are as follows:

(i) The significance of *semahs* within the community: First of all, as put forward in the case of the *dedes*, the organized public rituals have become “meetings of relative strangers”.<sup>572</sup> Under these circumstances, *semah* dances and music emerge as the means by which a large number of different interpretations and explanations could be absorbed and a participatory space which can manage difference could be provided.<sup>573</sup> Secondly, music and dance form a bridge between communal religious life and modern cultural one. They are an appropriate means for the Alevi youth who brought up in the cities to become acquainted with *Alevilik*. Finally, the *semah* groups contribute to the socialization of the young Alevis.<sup>574</sup>

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<sup>571</sup> The *dede* of Kirinti, emphasized that some problematic cases between persons are solved with his own contribution. However, such cases are declining in number and have no relation to the popular rituals. In such cases, people go to him in person, and the problem is solved not at the ritual but in the local community, be it a small district, or a limited number of members of the same *ocak*. 1998c-t.

<sup>572</sup> The expression is taken from Martin Stokes, who analyzed a *cem* ritual which took place in Hatay, in 1992. Yet Stokes’ observations are quite explanatory in the case of the rituals that are conducted at the Karacaahmet Sultan Dernegi as well. Martin Stokes, “Ritual, Identity and the State: An Alevi (Shi’a) *Cem* Ceremony,” pp. 188-202 in K. Schulze, M. Stokes, C. Campbell, eds., *Nationalism, Minorities and Diasporas: Identities and Rights in the Middle East* (New York: Tauris Academic Studies, 1996).

<sup>573</sup> Ibid.

<sup>574</sup> This fact is revealed by the people who participate in the *semah* group of Karacaahmet. A young female member added that she loves her friends very much. A friend of her indicated that she hopes to attend the practices even after she gets married and has children. 2001c-v.

(ii) The significance of *semahs* in the outside world: When *Alevilik* is introduced to the public sphere, it gains visibility. Music and dance are “a convenient and resonant tactic” in the context of increased sensitivity across Turkey to Islamic moral prescriptions on the subject of music and dance.<sup>575</sup> The urban form of *semahs* is significant in this respect, for presently, the *semah* stands as a metonymy of difference.

To sum up, based on the factors presented above, it is apparent that in the last two decades, *semah* has been gaining a specific position within the Alevi culture and fulfilling certain needs of the urbanized Alevi people, as will be discussed in the next part, almost as a “symbol,” it could be conceived more as a “cultural event” in *Alevilik* with a mission of representing it.

#### Reformulation of the *Semahs* as the Symbol of the Alevi Identity

All of the middle-aged informants<sup>576</sup> indicate that the present *semahs* are very different from those that they were used to performing in their small community gatherings. However, they add that they are very happy about the new developments that are related to the presentation of the *semahs* on different occasions, such as televisions, theaters and festivals. For them, this is a good way

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<sup>575</sup> Stokes, *ibid.*

<sup>576</sup> The informants with whom I have conducted oral interviews, as well as the ones I have interviewed at different occasions, such as the Abdal Musa Festival and the public *cem* ceremonies.

of “putting *Alevilik* on the agenda of the country.”<sup>577</sup> They also put an emphasis on the fact that the *semahs* help their children to “learn what *Alevilik* is.”<sup>578</sup>

The Alevi youth does not have enough data to compare the new *semah* tradition with the previous ones, and so they comment on the contemporary public *semahs*: One of the informants said, “*semahs* are our creed (*özümüz*). With *semahs* we tell/demonstrate our creed to other people, and the newly-born babies will be aware of it. Nobody will manage to snatch our creed. We will always be on the side of freedom, secularism and democracy.” Another one added, “the Alevi youth will never die.” Still another one stated that “at least our music is played, our verses are sung.” A friend of hers completed her sentence as follows: “[Our music and verses] can not be silenced; the entire universe will turn *semah*.”<sup>579</sup>

Thus, in the narratives of the informants –as was the case in the narratives of the writers– the *semahs*, especially the public ones, appear as a “symbol” that above all, demonstrates and defines the existence of the Alevi community in

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<sup>577</sup> For example, one middle aged woman in Abdal Musa Festival said that, they are very grateful to Abbas Genç and Durmus Genç who give voluntary *semah* courses in Karacaahmet Dergâhi and put *Alevilik* on the agenda of the people. 2001b-v. About the *semah* performances on the television, one of the Kurdish speaking Alevi informants revealed that they watch it, if they like it; but if they do not like it, they turn off the T.V. However, he added that it was nice to see the *semahs* on the television. 1998d-t.

<sup>578</sup> “Çolugumuz, çocugumuz *Aleviligin ne oldugunu öğreniyorlar*.” 2001b-v.

<sup>579</sup> The original form of the citations taken from the narratives of the members of the *semah* group are as follows: “*Semahlar bizim kendi özümüz. Semahlarla özümüzü insanlara duyuruyor, gösteriyoruz. Yeni dogan bebekler de bu özü taniyacaktlar. Özümüzü kimseye kaptirmayacagiz. Her zaman özgürlükten, laiklikten, demokrasiden yana olacagiz.*” “*Alevi gençligi hiçbir zaman ölmeyecek.*” “*En azından sazimiz çalıyor, sözümüz çalıyor.*” “*Susmayacak hiçbir zaman sazlar. Bütün evren semah dönecek.*” 2001c-v.

Turkey. However it is necessary to recognize that the *semahs* have changed and been reformulated in the last two decades in parallel to their appearance in the public sphere. Therefore, as a next step, the changes will be discussed and finally, the Alevi identity that is constructed through the reformulated *semahs* will be examined.

### The Transformation of the *Semahs* in the Last Two Decades

In this part, the transformation of the *semahs* through a short comparison of the characteristics of communal and public *semahs* will be discussed. The data used here is drawn from the narratives of the informants and the participatory observations gathered during this study. Additionally, the articles and books of the 1920-50 period which are based on fieldworks are also employed after a critical analysis.

First of all, as mentioned above, in the last two decades, a transition from secrecy to visibility has taken place. Second, the mode of participation has changed. As opposed to a communal ritual in which everybody participates in the *semahs* as a religious practice, in the present ones the dances are performed by a group of young men and women (usually called a ‘*semah* group’) as a cultural activity stemming from a religious tradition. As the mode of participation has changed, a separation has been created between the *semah* performers and the “audience”. In the communal rituals, unlike the public ones, nobody was called “audience”, because everybody attending the ritual was part of every action that took place during the ritual. For example, while some people were performing

*semahs*, others were clapping hands or shouting in a tempo, like “*Sah Sah*” or “*Ask ile Allah*”.<sup>580</sup>

Third, the system of acquiring the *semah* skill is changed. While people in the communal life style become *semahçi* (*semah* performer) by observing and imitating their elders, today the youngsters are trained at *semah* courses.

Fourth, the relationship between the dance and music components of the *semah* event has been changed. From the older accounts, it can be derived that neither a full correspondence, nor a fixation between the *semah* movements, *deyises* and melodies was expected. For example, Yörükan argued that the *semah* melodies were harmonious with most of the *nefes* (hymns concerning the mystical experience).<sup>581</sup> Additionally, Salci emphasized that although a kind of accordance between the movements and the melody was expected, in *semahs* with slow or

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<sup>580</sup> For example Oytan, a Bektashi who described the rituals conducted at the *tekkes* of Sultan Sucaaddin Veli and Sultan Seyid Battal Gazi noted that during the *cem*, the *dede* chants “*ask ile Allah*”, “*sevkile Allah*”, “*Sah askina Allah*” or “*öz gönül birliğiyle Allah*” from time to time and excites all the participants. He added that everybody in the ritual cry as “*Allah, Allah*”. *Bektasiligin İçyüzü* (Istanbul: Maarif Kütüphanesi, 1962 (5)). (The first addition might be 1945.) Vol.1, p. 186. Baha Said Bey indicated that all the participants of the *muhabbet meydani* call as “*Alim hū*”, within the rhythm of the *semah*. “Sofiyen Süreği- Kizilbas Meydani,” *Türk Yurdu* 22 (October 1926). Vahit L. Salci, a Bektashi and a folklorist, noted that during the *semahs* which are performed in high tempo, there was the tradition of “*dem tutma*” that the participants of the *semah* shout as “*ya Sah, ya Sah*” in accordance with the tonality of the *nefes*. *Gizli Türk Dini Oyunlari* (Istanbul: Numune Matbaası, 1941), p. 32. Atabeyli who surveyed the Tahtaci groups in Antalya noted that both the couples who perform the *semahs* and the rest of the participants of the *cem* cry “*Sah, Sah, Sah, Sah*” and clap their hands as they get excited. Naci Kum Atabeyli, “Antalya Tahtacıları’na Dair Notlar,” *Türk Tarih, Arkeologya ve Etnografya Dergisi*, no: IV (1940): 203-212, p. 209.

<sup>581</sup> *Darülfünun İlahiyat Fakültesi Mecmuası*, year: 4, no: 17 (1930): 72-80.



medium tempo, there was no one to one correspondence between the *semah* movements and the musical meters.<sup>582</sup> Recently, a tendency toward the participation of some *semahs* and/or *semah* movements with certain melodies/*deyisses*, that a kind of fixation between dance and musical components of the *semahs*, has developed. Additionally, in communal *semahs*, besides moving in accordance with the musical score played, the dancers expressed a number of responses to the verses that were included in the music. For example, as the name of the poet was repeated, they were demonstrating an act of respect, such as stopping and waiting in silence.<sup>583</sup> Such a relation between the dancers and music is absent in the public *semahs*.

Finally, a concept of repertoire that includes *semahs* from different regions, and a choreographic interpretation are introduced. Thus, the changes summarized above indicate that the communal character of the *semah* has gone through a process of transformation, at the end of which a performance to be viewed by others is produced.

For the purpose of this study, the main concern is the characteristics of the final productions that dominate the public rituals and appear in the public sphere to

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<sup>582</sup> Salci, *Gizli Türk Dini Oyunlari*, p. 28. Salci calls it free style (“*serbest tarz*”).

<sup>583</sup> For example, Salci indicated that as the *Sah Beyit* (the verse where the name of the *asik* (poet/minstrel) is included) is repeated, the ones who perform the *semah* stop and wait in silence until the beginning of the next verse. *Gizli Türk Dini Oyunlari*, p. 30. In the Tahtaci *cems* and *semahs*, Atabeyli noted that as name of the *asik* or any one of the Twelve Imams is heard, the men among the ones who perform the *semah* smooth their beards with the right hands and then lay their hands on their hearts. He added that the Abdal men, too, lay their hands on the hearts, but instead of smoothing their beards, they turn their heads towards their right shoulders. “Antalya Tahtacıları’na Dair Notlar,” p. 210.

be watched by others. They are important because by a large Alevi population, they are considered as a symbol of the Alevi identity. However, as opposed to the diverse structure of the Alevi community, a great tendency toward “uniformity” in terms of the homogenization of different *semah* experiences and the standardization of the figures, forms and choreography are observed in the present *semah* performances. It seems possible to assert that uniformity serves an understanding of the Alevi as a single group and denies the diversity within the Alevi community at large.

The uniformity tendency may be observed at various levels, but the most striking one is the formulation of rules that dominate the contemporary *semah* performances. In the next part, these rules will be examined in relation to the reconstruction of the Alevi identity.

#### The Reformulated Rules that Surround the *Semahs* and the Reconstruction of the Alevi Identity

My research showed that the present *semahs* are formulated around a set of “rules”, which could be derived from the interviews, and could be verified by the public *semah* performances of the *semah* groups. The term “rule” is my interpretation meaning that some characteristics of *semahs* were repeated in a significant number of narratives, or emphasized with such terms as “never” and “always”, which at the

end sounded as rules.<sup>584</sup> Interestingly enough, there are *semahs* which do not fit these criteria. Some examples of the exceptional cases may be provided from several accounts and from one narrative that belongs to the religious leader of Kirinti. Below, the rules or characteristics of the public *semahs* will be discussed in two parts: The rules/characteristics, which are related to the way they identify themselves with respect to Sunnis, and how Alevis identify themselves with respect to the diverse structure of the Alevi community at large.

The rules/characteristics which are related to the way the Alevis identify themselves with respect to Sunnis are as follows:

(i) The *semahs* are performed by men and women together; (ii) the performers (*semahçi*) do not touch each other's arms, hands or waist; (iii) there are no solo forms in *semahs*; (iv) not a rule, but a taboo: There is no "Üryan Semahı".

(i) The *semahs* are performed by men and women together. A performance group whose members are all men ("baba") or women ("baci") is not preferred. Such a preference seems to be closely related to the idea of equality and the respected position of women in *Alevilik*, which are pronounced quite often. Almost all of the informants said that in *Alevilik*, there is equality between men and women. One of the old male informants from Kirinti added that "women do not hide themselves from men."<sup>585</sup> However, the informants usually stressed that the

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<sup>584</sup> Actually, as discussed in the related part, some of the following characteristics / rules were narrated by the Alevi writers who published their works in the post-1980 period, especially in the Alevi periodicals.

<sup>585</sup> 1998d-t.

participants of the *cem* consider each other as brothers and sisters. For example, one middle aged male informant expressed this point as follows: “There [in the *cem*] everybody is either men or women. You must consider it like that. (...) They are all the same soul. Nothing else. Nobody acts in a treacherous manner, if she/he does, she/he can’t participate in the *cem*.”<sup>586</sup> Another informant referred to this rule again in the context of equality, that everybody is considered equal in *Alevilik* and this applies to the status of women.<sup>587</sup>

Several accounts on *semah* dances include information on some dances performed by men or women alone –even some of the popular works of the 1990s mention them.<sup>588</sup> This is confirmed an Alevi *dede*. He said that in the villages, there were no such rules. Anyone who wanted to perform *semah*, should do so, because it was a religious act. Without a special comment, he added that everything has changed in the cities.<sup>589</sup>

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<sup>586</sup> 2002a-t.

<sup>587</sup> 2001c-v.

<sup>588</sup> For example, see Erseven, *Alevilerde Semah* (Istanbul: Ekin Yayinlari, 1990); and Bozkurt, *Semahlar* (Istanbul: Cem Yayınevi, 1990). Erseven describes the *Altiya Gitmek Semahi* and the *Yelleme Semahi* from the region of Tokat as *semahs* performed only by men, and the *Pervaz* as a *semah* performed by one young woman. p. 146. Bozkurt argues that there are many *semahs* which are performed only by women, almost as a rule, but the *semahs* performed only by men are very rare. As a male *semah*, Bozkurt tells about the *Ya Hızır Semahi* from Sivas region, but adds that it is sometimes performed by both men and women. Among the older accounts, for example, see Baha Said Bey, who tells about a *semah* performed by three women (*Üçler Semahi*). “Sofıyan Süregi- Kizilbas Meydani.”

<sup>589</sup> 1998c-t.

It must be clarified that this rule operates only for the *semah* groups that perform in the public sphere. That means, when researchers write about specific *semahs* known from certain localities, they include those which are performed just by women or men, too. However, the public *semah* groups perform several *semahs* and they produce an image in the minds of the people related to *Alevilik*, and Alevi rituals as a whole. What is excluded is the creation of sexually discriminative image of the Alevi rituals, for they frequently criticize the Sunnis/Sunni rituals on this issue. On the other hand, it must be added that, when the researchers make generalizations, they usually exclude the specific cases and repeat this rule.

(ii) The performers (*semahçi*) do not touch each other's arms, hands or waist: In general, I was told that the dancers do not hold each other's arms or shoulders while dancing. It is accounted that there are some *semahs* during which people touch each other.<sup>590</sup> This fact is again approved by the Alevi *dede*, but only

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<sup>590</sup> There are several accounts on this subject. For example, Baha Said Bey, *ibid.*; Hasan Resit Tankut, *Nusayriler ve Nusayriler Hakkında* (Ankara: Ulus Basimevi, 1938); Cemal Bardakçi, *Kizilbaslik Nedir?* (Istanbul: Isik Matbaasi, 1945); Kemal Samancigil, *Bektasilik Tarihi* (Istanbul: Tecelli Matbaasi, 1945). However, as discussed in Chapter 3, the scientific quality of most of these publications is questionable. Among them, Baha Said Bey's narrative, which was based on a series of fieldwork, seems to be scientifically more trusted. He describes first the *Birler Pervazi*, in which the partners (a man and a woman) hold each other by the thumb. In Baha Said Bey's narrative, the other *semah* in which touching is involved is the *Üçler Semahi*: Three young women hold each other by their waists. The main problem of this account is that the Alevi or Bektashi group who performed these *semahs* is not revealed. At this point, it must be emphasized that neither the Bektashi writers/researchers, nor the ones who surveyed the Tahtaci groups tell about any *semahs* that include touching. On the contrary, they stress the rule that is mentioned above. Not all, but most of the *semahs* described in the texts related to these groups, do not employ the circle form frequently. Either the couples or two groups of people placed in a line form perform the *semahs* face to face. Therefore, the *semah* form which excludes touching may be valid for some groups for a very long period of time. Yet, like many other facts, this one requires more research.

by him among the informants. In his narrative, he referred to the *semahs* of the Çepni group in Rize. He said that they hold each other by the arms very tightly and perform the *semah* in that form.<sup>591</sup> Yet again it is not possible to find such a form in the new popular performances of the Alevi groups. The rule of no touching seems to serve to a “positive image” of the Alevi community, whose honor is frequently questioned by some people from the Sunni majority. Men and women attend rituals together, perform the *semahs* side by side, but they do not touch each other. In this way, they define themselves as “modern” in comparison to the Sunni people, and at the same time try to protect their name against the prejudices of the Sunnis by mentioning and performing only those forms of *semahs* that exclude touching.

(iii) There are no solo forms: This point is not mentioned in the narratives of the informants, but in practice, I did not observe any *semah* group which makes use of this form. In the texts, the narratives surrounding this rule were such as “Alevis believe in the equality of all people,” “Alevis are humanists.” In the narratives of the informants and in their local experiences in the villages or cities, there are contrary examples to this rule, the best example being the “*çarka gitmek*” movement –anyone can go off and turn around her/himself any time that she/he

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<sup>591</sup> After describing this *semah*, the *dede* memorized one of the earlier Hacı Bektas Festivals. He told that he criticized the *dede* of the Çepni group (now living in Akyazi, Istanbul), who changed the *semah* for the Festival, in order to make renovation. According to the *dede* that I have interviewed, as the *semah* changed, the participants lost their ability to perform it. The original narrative is as follows: “*Dedeleri baska sekil yaptirmisti da Hacı Bektas’ta. Dedelerine dedim ki, niye gelenegi kaybettirdin, dedim. Bak hiçbir tanesi beceremedi semahi. Yürümesini de basaramadı. Kaz gibi sektirirsin. Öyle mi gelinir tarikatta dedim, semah. Ben dedim ki diyor, bir yenilik olsun. Yenilik olsun dedim, amma bak.*” 1998c-t. The *dede* witnessed the *semah* of Çepni group for the first time in 1956, when he visited that region with Kazım Ulusoy.

wants to and then comes back to the circle. In the public rituals, the *semah* group of Turhal is famous in the context of *çarka gitmek* movement. However, while all the women on the circle performs this style in the case of a large group, in the case of one couple the female partner performs it with the accompany of the male dancer who surrounds her.

(iv) Not a rule, but a taboo: There is no “*Üryan Semahı*”.<sup>592</sup> The negligence of the “*Üryan Semahı*” is significant again in the question of the Alevis’ honor. The informants did not want to mention it because “*Üryan*” means “nude” and the Alevis, accused of immorality throughout history, preferred to be silent, assuming that this *semah*, by its name, could damage any “positive image of *Alevilik*”. Only two of the informants mentioned it, but not during the initial interviews.<sup>593</sup>

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<sup>592</sup> *Üryan Semahı* is described by Baha Said Bey, “Sofıyan Süregi- Kizilbas Meydanında Düskünlük,” *Türk Yurdu* 23 (November 1926); Irène Mélikoff, “Bulgaristan’da Deliorman Kizilbas Topluluğu,” pp.139-150 in *Uyur Idik Uyardılar* (Istanbul: Cem Yayınevi, 1994) and Nejat Birdogan, ed., *İttihat-Terakki’nin Alevilik Bektasilik Arastirmasi* (Istanbul: Berfin Yayinlari, October, 1995 (2)), see notes 25 and 32. Mélikoff named that *semah* plural, *üryanlar semahi*, and said that it is very well-known in Deliorman and around that region in Bulgaria, and performed in the memory of Seyh Bedreddin. She added that she later on learned about that *semah* from a *dede* from Kars (presently living in La Haye), who had actively participated in it. The costumes described by Mélikoff and Baha Said are very similar. But in Baha Said’s narrative, this *semah* is performed by three women. The following description is from Mélikoff: “The ones who participate in the *semah* are not completely nude. The men put on a *pestemal* (similar to a cloth used in bathing); the women wear a very thin and long shirt, which leaves one shoulder free.” p.149, note: 14. Baha Said Bey noted that the Kizilbas groups do not find an ethical problem about performing this *semah*, and explained its meaning within the context of their doctrines and beliefs. According to them, he wrote, wickedness lies in secrecy.

<sup>593</sup> A female informant from Kirinti (1999a-t) and a male informant from Sifon (1998d-t) said that they had neither participated in nor witnessed that *semah*. While the first informant related it to the *Semah* of the Forty, the first *semah* performed by holy people according to the Alevi beliefs, the other informant explained that only those who were able to reach the fourth, the final gateway could be able to perform the

The rules/characteristics that are related to how Alevi identify themselves with respect to the diverse structure of the Alevi community at large: The homogenization of different *semah* experiences.

(i) Language: It is commonly accepted that the language of Anatolian Alevi rituals is Turkish. This fact is stressed heavily in today's Turkey, especially by the politicians and the directors of the state friendly Alevi associations. Yet there are some Kurdish *deyises*. Not all, but some of the Kurdish Alevi people interviewed for this study also said that in their parents' time, the language of the *cem* ritual was Kurdish. The dominance of the *semahs* in the public Alevi rituals, and their symbolic value in relation to the representation of the Alevi identity in the public sphere is discussed above. In this respect, the language of the *deyises* that appear in the public sphere requires attention in the analysis of the Alevi identity. The investigation of the "original" language of the *deyises*, or its variations in history are beyond the limits of this study for it basically questions the potential of this powerful and publicly recognized religious-cultural element in relation to the diverse structure of the Alevi community. In this case, it needs to be revealed that I heard of a non-Turkish *deyis* neither at the *cemevîs* where I watched some *cem* rituals, nor at the Alevi festivals. It seems that in the *cem* ceremonies of the well

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Üryan Semahi. (the fourth gateway is called "hakikat" (truth or reality), the spiritual state). He added that four people, the *müsahips* and their wives, who were able to withdraw from worldly pleasure, could perform it. In explaining the state of the performers, he used the same term, "*nefsi köreltmek*," that Baha Said Bey used in his text. Then he added that today, it is not possible to find that kind of people.



known Alevi associations which are organized like performances with presentable *semah* groups, the construction of the non-Turkish Alevi identity is questionable.

(ii) Naming of the *semahs*: The naming of the *semah* genres that are included in the repertoires of *semah* groups is a critical issue with respect to the diverse structure of the community. The *semahs* are named on the basis of provinces or towns, in other words, according to some administrative units. However, as demonstrated in the first part of this chapter, even the *semah* experiences of two neighboring groups (Sifon and Kirinti villagers), who differ from each other on the grounds of language/ethnicity, *ocaks* and tribes, are not the same. Therefore, among the basic categories that play a role in the variation of the *semah* experiences of the groups, administrative units do not have much significance. On the other hand, it does not damage the idea of one single homogenous Alevi community.

(iii) Lack of improvisation: Many informants defined the way that they perform *semahs* as “my own *semah* style is completely different from everybody else’s.” The meaning of this expression is conceived as the visual records of local *semah* groups are observed. In the *semahs* recorded in Elazig and Urfa (and partially Malatya and Sivas), there was a general pattern of action, but the interpretation of the movements by the bodies’ of the participants, as well as the accordance of the different parts of the body with each other and with music were completely different. Additionally, although it seemed that some kind of an invisible circle existed, the dancers were using the space more freely, without damaging the ritual atmosphere. The idea of *semah* groups with uniformed, stylized

movements seems to neglect the local experiences and again emphasize homogeneity.

Based on the data collected up to this point, it may be argued that in *semahs* there is a tendency to “uniformity”, that certain characteristics of different *semahs* were preferred at the expense of some others. Those preferences do reflect certain processes about the reconstruction of the Alevi identity. The tendency to uniformity serves to an understanding of the Alevi as a single group and denies the diversity within the Alevi community at large. In this process, any self-identifications that can harm the “positive image” of the Alevis in the eyes of the Sunni population or the state are discarded. The formalized *semahs*, which acquired urban visibility, imply that Alevis are modern, egalitarian, humanist, and honorable people and construct a positive image of *Alevilik*.

At first glance, the subjects discussed above are connected with the meaning attributed by many Alevis to *semahs* which became prevalent nowadays. On the other hand, the effects of the transformations those emerge following the presentation of the *semahs* in the public sphere on the reconstruction processes of the identity of the Alevis who take part in these performances, who support this form of performance, and who participate in the gatherings in which these performances take place have an additional significance for this study. That *semahs* have gained such high popularity strengthen the attempts of the Alevis to transfer their adopted values to *semahs* and to purify them of the values they deliberately stay away from.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

In the last two decades, the Alevi *semahs* have emerged into the public sphere and have come to represent the existence of the Alevi community in Turkey. The Alevi identity, which has turned into an important concern in this period has undergone a reconstruction process together with the reformulated *semahs*. This recent observation was a scientific concern for this study, which then focused on the relationship between a religious/cultural component of a religious community (*semahs*) and the identity of that community (the Alevi).

As discussed in the first part of this study, the critical approaches which called into question the basic assumptions of the classical modernist paradigm and the model of nation-building provided a general framework for the conceptualization of the Alevi identity. As a religious minority identity it was constructed in relation to that of national identity. Additionally, the approach that focused on the process of inventing traditions in times of rapid change or at times of reconstruction of different types of communities, contributed to the comprehension of *semahs* in both the Alevi and the official approaches.

In the second chapter, notions of secularism, nationalism and citizenship were discussed. The particular case of Turkey throughout history and in relation to the reformulations of Alevi identity was examined. In Turkey, secularism and nationalism were appropriated in order to create a rational and modern state, which would adopt itself to the requirements of the contemporary civilization. Yet the peculiar forms of adoption brought about identity problems for religious and ethnic minorities, including the Alevi in both respects. A secular state could have been inclusive of all Sunnis and all non-Muslims, as well as the Alevis. It could have brought a greater sense of security and more opportunities to all religious groups by allowing freedom of faith. However, in the conditions of Turkey, a paradox occurred between the freedom of faith and secularism. The Alevis, like other religious groups, would not be able express themselves in the public sphere with their religious symbols. Additionally, the secularism in Turkey provided means for Sunni Islam to be positioned within the government structure. Although controlled by the state, it became the legitimate state religion and created anxiety among the Alevis. On the other hand, for the Alevis, the problem about nationalism and national identity, as they were interpreted in Turkey, was related to the ethnically and linguistically diverse structure of the community. The wide recognition of the Turkish national identity, which was primarily based on Turkish descent and culture, had a divisive impact on the Alevi community due to its internally diverse structure. The practical consequences of this process were discussed in the final section of the second chapter in the context of the history of the Alevi community.

The last two chapters of this study were based on the analysis of the data collected during the research process, which aimed to question directly the relationship between the *semahs* and the Alevi identity throughout their construction processes. The focus of Chapter 3 was the texts that are concerned with the *semahs* or Alevi rituals. They were characterized by a common interest in defining the Alevi identity, through attributing *semahs* or rituals certain characteristics, which could then be related to a specific essence. The texts were subjected to a critical-comparative analysis.

After examining the *semah* narratives of the 1920-1950 period, this study concluded that the paradigm of national identity has been taken as an important measure for the Alevi identity. It is not surprising that most of the texts examined were written either by Sunni writers, or by others who do not mention their own religious and ethnic affiliations. The impression they produce is that they are writing almost with a national mission. In this period, the Alevi identity was shaped on the basis of Turkish ethnicity. This attitude emerged in two different forms: The first and the most widely recognized form gave reference to Central Asian/old Turkish cultures and traditions (or, sometimes simply to Shamanism) through *semahs* and rituals. The second one included attempts to present *Alevilik* as a peculiarly Turkish form of Islam, refined from Arabic and Persian influences.

In the texts of this period, the *semahs* and rituals were generally presented by referring to a “curtain” metaphor. Although it was indicated, or taken for granted, that Alevis resided in the sphere of Islam, according to the narratives, Islam was only a curtain behind which the “essence” of *Alevilik* was preserved. The presence of women in the secret ceremonies of Alevis, drinking beverages (but especially those with alcohol was the most important point for them), dancing, music (especially Turkish sayings) and sacrifice were used to interweave the essence of *Alevilik* and that of Turkishness. In summary, in the 1920-1950 period,

various characteristics of *Alevilik* which do not have ethnic connotations were disregarded and the Alevis' own views on their belief system, rituals, and the related activities were mostly kept out of the scope.

In the 1950-1980 period, some Alevi or Bektashi writers, most of whom contributed to the mainstream discourses, appeared in the field of publication. In the *semah* narratives of the period, two dominant discourses were observed in relation to the Alevi identity. The first one was transferred from the previous period and continued to evaluate *Alevilik* on the basis of ethnicity, that is, the Turkish ethnicity. The second one discussed *Alevilik* on the basis of a Turkish-Islamic synthesis. As a minor tendency observed among the Alevi writers, the discourse of “*Alevilik* is the real Islam” developed during this period.

It can be argued that the new development of this period was the conceptualization of *Alevilik* within the scope of Islam. In the context of the approaches that relied on a Turkish-Islamic synthesis, *Alevilik* was interpreted in close association with Islam. Moreover, several of its components which did or might contradict with the theology or religious practices of Orthodox Islam were either subdued or kept out of the boundaries within which *Alevilik* was located. One of the most significant examples of this case was the evaluation of the place of alcohol, music and dance (*semahs*) in the rituals. While it was strongly emphasized that the ritual beverages do not include alcohol, *semah* continued to appear, but in only a few of the narratives, and in a summarized and domesticated form. As argued by the Alevis, the formulation of “*Alevilik* is the real Islam” is another example which has utilized the legitimate Islamic framework to a large extent and which reserved little or no space for the *semahs*.

In relation to the resurgence of *Alevilik* and the reconstruction of the Alevi identity, the post-1980 period resembled a breaking point in the field of publishing. Among others, two developments were very important in relation to the identity question. First, this period was characterized by a “surge” in the number of publications. Many texts were written by members of the Alevi and Bektashi

communities who disclosed their religious identity and exclusively discussed the identity problems of their own communities. Second, some Kurdish speaking Alevis started to publish on *Alevilik*, especially the Kurdish form of *Alevilik*. This was a very critical development in relation to the mainstream approaches to Alevi identity because, for the first time in history, the argument of Turkishness as the foundation of *Alevilik* was being challenged.

In the *semah* narratives of this period, it is possible to observe a major trend among the non-Alevi writers, and two other trends among the Alevi writers. In the non-Alevi narratives, as transferred from the earlier period, but reshaped according to the new socio-political context, *Alevilik* was defined on the basis of the Turkish-Islamic synthesis. In these narratives, *semahs* and alcohol appeared at the margins of *Alevilik* and even scholars like Türkdogan called for the elimination of these components from Alevi rituals in order to form a basis for the Sunni and Alevi integration. In one group of the Alevi narratives, the *semah* was favored among all the other components of Alevi rituals, but *Alevilik* was again defined on the basis of some kind of a Turkish-Islamic synthesis. In their discourse, Islam was usually conceptualized within the framework of Sufism. In the narratives of the second group of Alevi writers, *semah* appeared as the symbol of Alevi identity, signifying the secular, egalitarian and humanist characteristics of *Alevilik*. Still, for some others, *semah* could be evaluated as the symbol of Alevis' honorable struggle. As a critical development of this period, as pointed out above, some Kurdish writers gradually started to occupy a position, although a minor one, among the Alevis. However, not much different from the others, most of them developed essentialist approaches to *Alevilik* and Alevi identity, but instead of Turkishness, they favored Kurdishness in terms of ethnicity.

The last chapter of this study focused on the fieldwork. The fieldwork carried out for this study between 1996 and 2002 consisted of oral history interviews; some shorter, more spontaneous interviews conducted at various gathering of the community; participant observation at Alevi *cem* rituals and

festivals; and critical observation of audio-visual records. It concentrated on the shaping and transformation processes of the popular Alevi identity at different levels of organization, and in relation to the urban visibility of the *semahs*.

The methodology of the fieldwork and the oral history interviews within it were utilized as part of an effort to reconceive the history from bottom to up. Yet the deepest layers of the Alevi community included in this research were limited to the ones that corresponded to the popular Alevi identity and the significance of the fieldwork lay in its potential to represent the predominant trend in the Alevi revival. The survey was conducted in Istanbul with Turkish and Kurdish Alevi emigrants from Siran. The *semah* of Siran was chosen as the focus of the case study.

The narratives of the informants were submitted to a discourse analysis at different levels. In the case of the ethnic diversity among the Alevis, the members of the Turkish and Kurdish speaking groups had constructed quite different narratives in relation to their own community and the Alevi community at large. Their ethnic categorizations are based on linguistic differences. Among the Turkish Alevi informants, a very strong association is built between *Alevilik* and Turkishness/Turkish culture. Additionally, the Turkish Alevi informants usually generalized the ethnic identifications of the Alevis and they talked almost in the name of the Alevis at large. Such an attitude implies that, as Turkish Alevis, they feel that they belong to the principle Alevi community, and that they have the right to represent the whole community. In contrast, the Kurdish Alevi informants did not speak much about the ethnic diversity in *Alevilik*. In their limited narratives



concerning this issue, they did not make any generalizations. Identifying oneself as Alevi, but not as Kurd or Kurdish Alevi, seemed to be a very typical attitude among the Kurdish-speaking Alevi informants, who maintain strong ties with *Alevilik*.

The data obtained through the analysis of the narratives showed that there is a strong connection between ethnicity/language diversity and *ocaks*. However, it is not possible at this point to attribute an essential character to this relationship. It calls for additional surveys to be conducted in various regions of Turkey. On the other hand, it became possible to argue that the *semahs* of the Turkish and Kurdish Alevi informants differ from each other in a number of ways. While the *semahs* that appear in the public performances do not include apparent features that imply that the Alevi identity is reconstructed with respect to its diverse structure, the linguistic diversity is mentioned in the narratives of both Turkish and Kurdish informants. This conflict seems to require additional investigation. However, at this level, it may be pointed out that people from both groups prefer to stay within the officially drawn boundaries, where the assimilation process, especially in the case of Kurdish Alevis, turns out to be a real case.

In the case of the location of *Alevilik* in religious terms, the narratives constructed of a strong relationship between *Alevilik* and Islam as a response to the Sunnification processes in Turkey, and in order to demand equal social, political, economic and cultural rights as citizens. However, it is important to note that while the Alevis situate *Alevilik* within the scope of Islam, they emphasize certain boundaries between *Alevilik* and traditional orthodoxy, and stress a particular

outline of Islam. The analysis of the narratives indicated that a variety of elements taken from analytically separate categories —theology, beliefs, ritual practices, social structure, social, political, economic and cultural demands of the community— and merged in a very complex process of the reconstruction of the Alevi identity. It seemed that the reconstruction of the Alevi identity in the last two decades has been closely associated with the Alevis' increased confrontation with modernity. In this respect, for the Alevi, the world inside and the world outside have been integrated, and the values of modern society have interfered in the reinterpretations of traditional culture. In the end, the Alevi community draws boundaries between *Alevilik* and orthodox Islam on the basis of modern values. It is in this respect that the *semah*, which seems to represent a challenge to the orthodox understanding of Sunni Islam, forms a bridge in the urban setting from the inside world of the community to the outside world.

Thus, in the post-1980 period, new interest in religious knowledge has not entailed a revival of the traditional social structures. On the contrary, modern institutions have entered the scene. Among the Alevi traditions reinvented in the new institutions, *semah* have started to acquire a relatively high position and according to the community almost as a symbol, it has begun to represent the Alevi identity both inside and outside the world of the community. Actually what has happened is the reconstruction of the Alevi identity in the public sphere on those reinvented popular *semahs*.

At this point, it is necessary to recognize that the *semahs* have changed and been reformulated in the last two decades in parallel to their appearance in the

public sphere. The research showed that the present *semahs* have been reformulated around a set of rules which could be derived from the interviews, and could be verified by the public performances of the *semah* groups. These rules made it possible to argue that in *semahs* there is a tendency to uniformity, that certain characteristics of different *semahs* are preferred at the expense of some others. Those preferences reflect certain processes about the reconstruction of the Alevi identity. The tendency to uniformity strengthens the understanding of the Alevi as a single group and denies the diversity within the Alevi community at large. In this process, any self-identifications that can harm the positive image of the Alevis in the eyes of the Sunni population or the state are discarded.

## Appendix: A

### GLOSSARY OF TERMS

#### Sources:

Korkmaz, Esat. *Alevilik-Bektasilik Sözlüğü*. Istanbul: Arba Yayinlari, 1994. (E.K.)

Markoff, Irene. "Musics, Saints and Ritual: Sama' and the Alevis of Turkey." In *Manifestations of Sainthood in Islam*, edited by Grace Martin Smith and Carl W. Ernst. Istanbul: The ISIS Press, 1994: 94-110. (I.M.)

Birge, John Kinsley. *Bektasilik Tarihi (The Order of Dervishes)*. Istanbul: Ant Yayinlari, 1991. (J.B.)

*Âsik*: Literally meaning "one who loves." In Bektashism its reference is to one who is faithful to the order, but not yet initiated. The *âsiks* may participate in the *sohbet* hour of mystic fellowship of music and song, but not in the actual ritualistic ceremony. (J.B.) However, today it is also referred as *zâkir*. See, *zâkir*.

*Asure günü*: name of the 10<sup>th</sup> of Muharrem. On the 11<sup>th</sup> day of Muharrem, a sweet dish made of twelve cereals (sugar, raisin, etc.) called *asure* (or *asura*) is prepared to be eaten on the 12<sup>th</sup> day of Muharrem, at the end of fasting. (E.K. and I.M.)

*Babagan kolu (Babalar kolu)*: in Bektashism, the sect tied to a dervish who sits on the skin of a saint (*pir postu*) and is considered to represent Hacı Bektas-i Veli. (E.K.)

*Bade*: wine made of fresh grapes, used also with the meaning of cup. It also means 'divine love' in Sufism. The Alevis and Bektashis use the word both in a literal and a figurative sense (J.B.)

*Baglama (saz)*: a long-necked, plucked folk lute. Sacred ritual instrument that accompanies the ritual dance. Built in a variety of sizes and up to 26 frets, the instrument's strings are generally arranged in three sets of double courses and tuned according to regional preferences. (I.M.)

*Buyruk*: written documents which explain the principles of Alevilik and Bektashism on the bases of the behaviours of Imam Cafer (the sixth Imam). (I.M.)

*Caferi*: the people or community who appropriated *Caferilik*.

*Caferilik*: a sect of *ehl-i beyt*, based on the love and belief of the *imams* and established by the sixth imam, Cafer Sadik. (E.K.)

*Çelebi*: in the *Çelebiyan* branch of Bektashism, a dervish who is at the level of *mürsit* and organizes the rituals and inner affairs of the *tekke*. (E.K.)

*Dede*: the holy men of the Alevis and Bektashis who supervise their rituals and religious instruction. They are recruited from privileged lineages. They serve as an important link in the chain of spiritual hierarchy connected through the founder saint of the Bektashis to the Imam Ali, the Prophet Muhammed, and finally God. (I.M.) In the *Babagan* branch of Bektashism, he is called *Baba* and in the *Çelebiyan* branch of Bektashism, he is called *Çelebi*. The service of *dede* is usually mentioned as the first among the twelve services.

*Delil*: literally “guide.” Its use in Bektashi ritual is as a name of the candle - lighter who awakens the candles. (J.B.)

*Dem*: means sometimes breath, more often a period of time, referring especially to the period of the reign or spiritual influence of the saint over gnostics. It also means wine or *raki*. (In this study, it is generally referred to as a beverage or intoxicating drink, depending on the narratives of the writers.) *Demlenmek* means to drink wine; *demli olmak* means to be intoxicated. (J.B.)

*Dervis* (Dervish): one, who having already been initiated as *muhip*, has now passed to the second degree, and is so entitled to wear the *tac*. Frequently, the actual dervish lived in the *tekke*. (J.B.)

*Deyis* (*deme*): songs of mystical love (I. M.)

*Dört Kapi*: The Four Gateways are the *seriat* (shariat) or orthodox, sunni religious law; the *tarikât* or teachings and practice of the secret religious order; *marifet* or mystic knowledge of God, and the *hakikat* or immediate experience of the essence reality. (J.B.)

*Düskünlük*: excommunication.

*Düskünlük töreni*: ceremony of repentance.

*Düvaz-i imâm* (*düvaz* or *düvezdeh imâm*): hymns in honor of the twelve imams. (I.M.)

*Ehl-i Beyt*: “household.” The family composed of the Prophet Muhammed, Imam Ali, Ali’s wife Fatma, and his sons Hasan and Hüseyin.

*Ehl-i Hakk*: “People of Reality.” Those who have become conscious of divine manifestations within themselves. (J.B.) “People of Truth”, an esoteric tradition of Kurdish origin.

*Görgü Ayini*: a ritual organized for the repetition of *ikrar* and, by this act, to clean spiritually. (E.K.)

*Horasan Çeragi*: one of the twelve *çerags*, with three wicks and placed next to the skin of the saint. (E.K.)

*Hulûl*: “incarnation,” a doctrine generally considered untenable by Muslim Mystics of the pantheistic school, because where there is no “other than God,” to even speak of *hulûl* becomes a contradiction. But in Bektashism, there is a definite belief in the special appearances of God in special individuals, chiefly in Ali, the Twelve Imams and the Fourteen Innocents. (J.B.)

*Hurufilik*: a sect established by Fazlullah Hurufi, which explains God, people and all beings with letters and numbers.

*Ikrar*: “confession.” Used in affirming beliefs in the ceremony of initiation, *ikrar ayini*. The word *nasip* is used in the same sense.

*Kimiz*: koumiss, fermented milk of mares, used as an intoxicating beverage.

*Kirklar*: the “forty,” name of the forty saints who were part of the spiritual hierarchy.

*Kirklar Meclisi*: The Assembly of the Forty, referring to the gathering in fellowship of Bektashis and Alevis.

*Melâmet*: reproach, blame. It is used as being without fearing of reproach, to walk on the path of *Hak* (God). (E.K.)

*Mengi*: a kind of folk dance in İçel, being one of the conventional dances of Tahtacıs, which is performed by women and men together. Similar to *semah*, but has secular properties.

*Mersiye*: laments concerning the martyrdom of the Imam Hüseyin at Kerbela. (I.M.)

*Mezhep*: religious opinion; religious sect; religion, creed; doctrine.

*Mir'aç*, (*Mirac* or *Miraç* as used in some of the texts): the Prophet Muhammed's ascent to heaven.

*Mi'râciye* (*Miraçlama*): the religious poems that narrate the *Mi'raç* of the Prophet Muhammed (E.K.)

*Miraçlama*: songs about the ascension of the Prophet Muhammed to heaven and his entrance to the Assembly of Forty on his return. (I.M.)

*Nefes*: hymns concerning the mystical experience. (I.M.)

*Semah*: other names used for *semah* are *sema'*, *sema*, *sama*, *samah*, *zemah*, *zamah*, depending on regional usage.

*Tarikat*: *tariqa* or "religious order". It is also the second gateway among the Four Gateways (*dört kapi*), meaning the teachings and practice of the secret religious order. (J.B.)

*Tekke*: residence of members of *tarikat*, a dervish lodge.

*Zâkir*: bard (*sazende*, and *güvende*, depending on regional usage). The musicians who perform Alevi music with long necked, plucked folk lute known as *baglama* and sing mystical poetry created in the folk idiom. The *zakir* is accorded the status of one of the twelve services. (I.M.)

*Zikir*: praising God with the recitation of litanies. (I.M.)





Appendix: B

MAP OF GÜMÜSHANE

Source: *Gümiishane 1973 İl Yilligi*. Ankara: Ayyıldız Matbaası, 1974: 14.  
MAP OF SIRAN (GÜMÜSHANE)

Source: *Gümüshane 1973 İl Yilligi*. Ankara: Ayyıldız Matbaası, 1974: 24.

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