

Rethinking the Institutionalization of Alevism

Itinerant Zakirs in the Cemevis of Istanbul

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In this chapter, I explore the contemporary redefinition of *zakir* – sacred music performer in Alevi *cem* ritual – identity and practice as part of institutionalization and standardization processes within Alevism since the 2000s¹. *Zakirs* perform one of the twelve services², which take place during the *cem* ritual, the main religious worship

1 | The Alevis constitute the largest religious minority in Turkey. There are several religious communities, from the Balkans to the Middle East, which are connected to Turkey's Alevis as well. The Turkish term *Alevilik* can be translated as both Alevism and Aleviness. Aleviness refers to a sense of being or living as an Alevi, but Alevism refers more to an ideology (Markussen 2012: 9). In addition to referring to it as an ideology, I use the term Alevism as a reference to identity aspects of different Alevis.

2 | The services in the Alevi *cem* ritual are called the *oniki hizmet* (twelve services) and are performed at every *cem* ceremony. These services are *dede* (directs the *cem*); *rehber* (assists the participants); *gözcü* (maintains order); *çerağcı* (charged with lighting of the *çerağ* -candle/light-); *zakir* (plays and sings sacred music); *ferraş* (uses the *çar* - broom - to sweep); *sakka* (distributes water); *lokmacı* (sees to sacrifices and food); *semahçı* (dances the *semah* -dance pieces-); *peyik* (charged with notifying people in the region that a *cem* will be held); *iznikçi* (sees to the cleanliness of the *cemevi*); *bekçi* (assures the security of the *cem*). All these duties have esoteric and sacred meanings in Alevi faith.

service in the Alevi faith attended by both men and women. It is a unique ceremony and musical performance and it is held regularly in the *cemevis*, which is the sacred place for Alevi gatherings. After a discussion of the effect of Alevi institutions in reshaping *zakirhood*, I focus on the instances, locales, and strategies of itinerant *zakirs* that disrupt the boundaries imposed by top-down institutionalization.

The analysis focuses on *zakirs* serving only in Istanbul *cemevis*. Participant observation and in-depth interviews are the primary methods used during fieldwork I undertook between March 2012 and January 2015 to examine these issues.³ I focused on *cemevis* and non-affiliated, “itinerant *zakirs*” from both continental sides of Istanbul; namely, on Yenibosna, Küçükçekmece, Esenler and Zeytinburnu on the European side, and Göztepe, Üsküdar and Ümraniye on the Asian side. The chapter is based on in-depth interviews with nine male *zakirs* and one female *zakir*, whose ages are between 20 and 30 and who were born and raised in Istanbul. Most of them studied (or were still studying at the time of the interviews) at university with fields ranging from archaeology and musicology to banking and management. None of the informants were professional musicians and they all provided the ceremonial *zakir* services as a voluntary religious duty.

3 | This research was a part of my doctoral fieldwork on the *zakirs* of Istanbul *cemevis* with regard to identity, ritual, and musical performance. Because of my family background and musical experiences in the Alevi community, I had a close connection to the *zakirhood* tradition. This helped me to connect with younger generation *zakirs* and to recognize the changing cultural and religious codes of Alevis. I used standardized questions about identity, ritual, and musical performance issues in in-depth interviews. Following my participant observations I carried out more than one interview with most of the *zakirs* to gather the maximum amount of data. I proceeded to analyze these data using an oral history method. For more data, interview-related information, and information about the *zakirs* of Istanbul *cemevis*, see my recent book Özdemir (2016).

By “itinerant *zakirs*,” I mean those *zakirs* who served at an Istanbul *cemevi* for a period of time and then quit their affiliation with that *cemevi*, yet continue to serve as *zakirs* and actively participate in the *cems* in multiple *cemevis*. Itinerant *zakirs* experience high mobility and hence demonstrate a new, ground-level expression of contemporary Alevi identity at a time when Alevism is intensively restructured around attempts to standardize its faith and institutions. As such, the aim of this chapter is to shed light on the spatial, social organization, and faith-related developments within Alevism by providing place-sensitive and subject-centered, ethnographic evidence based on *zakirs*’ experience in Istanbul.

ALEVISM AS A RELIGIOUS PHENOMENON

The religious, social, and cultural organization of Alevis began in the mid-1980s among Alevi communities in Turkey and Western Europe, and gained momentum in the early 1990s. In particular, the process involved the establishment of *cemevis* and a general opening to the public sphere through broadcasts and other religious, social, and cultural activities (Şahin 2002: 147–151). The process was dubbed the “Alevi Revival” and described as the Alevi identity movement, self-expression, awakening, opening up, etc. (Çamuroğlu 1998: 80; Vorhoff 1998: 23; Massicard 2007: 84–93). The organization and institutionalization of Alevis have since then spread throughout the world, but “Alevi Revival” is hardly sufficient to explain the ongoing dynamism of its communities since the 2000s. In contrast to the broad-based, cultural transition of the 1990s, this new phenomenon may be described as a *cemevi*-based process of institutionalization and identity building. Notable also for its religious tone and emphasis, this post-2000 period is unique and significantly distinct from the cultural “Alevi Revival” of the 1990s. In the 2000s, nearly all elements of the Alevi movement accepted Alevism as a religious rather than a cultural phenomenon (Massicard 2007: 169–193; 326–356).

During this period, Alevi institutions promoted the construction of new *cemevis*, first in Turkey and later throughout the world, in proportion to their influence upon the public sphere and their impact on the political arena (Kaleli, 2000; Gölbaşı, 2007). The building of new *cemevis* in Turkey was not limited to large cities such as Istanbul and Ankara. It also spread to smaller Anatolian cities such as Tokat, Çorum and Sivas, which have large Alevi populations, as well as to rural Alevi towns and villages (Karabağlı, 2013). These new *cemevis* are the most important centers for the expression of Alevism as a belief system, as well as of Alevi identity in general (Es 2013: 33).

One of the most important debates in Alevism is whether or not *cemevis* are historically relevant, or if they would be officially recognized as places of worship. These are significant and fraught questions in Turkey's contemporary political climate, that leave much in the balance. The laws which (following the 1925 religious reforms in the Turkish Republic) closed down and banned sufi lodges and hermitages are still in effect, and this is why *cemevis* are not granted the status of "place of worship," but legally operate as "cultural centers." For this reason, and in order to legally survive, today's *cemevis* are officially part of Alevi associations and foundations. Demands for the recognition of *cemevis* as places of worship are expressed by leading groups and individuals in the Alevi movement and the issue constitutes the most important Alevi demand in the 2000s both in Turkey and abroad. This and similar democratic Alevi demands, such as equal citizenship and the abolition of mandatory religion classes in primary education, continue to be raised in Alevi meetings and demonstrations.

Today, among the most important intracommunity areas of activity in the *cemevi*-centered Alevi movement are the efforts to institutionalize and standardize Alevi cultural and religious knowledge. Covering many different areas, from *cem* rituals to funeral ceremonies, general Alevi education and the training of *dedes* (Alevi religious leaders) and others in the service of the faith, these activities constitute the most important branch of the developing Alevi identity movement.

A GENERAL LOOK AT THE ACTIVITIES AND SERVICES IN ISTANBUL'S CEMEVIS

Many Alevi-Bektashi⁴ lodges, hermitages and associations have existed in Istanbul for centuries. A number of them have disappeared over time for a variety of reasons, such as demolition, while others have survived to this day (Yılmaz 2015: 128–131). Today, in addition to the old lodges operating as *cemevi* within a religious foundation or another association, there are tens of newly-constructed *cemevis* distributed widely throughout the city. The most recent count of Istanbul's *cemevis* found over sixty establishments, but if one takes into account newly-constructed *cemevis* and small places of worship, this number is likely to be much larger. Especially in comparison to cities with many *cemevis* in villages in their hinterland, such as Sivas or Tokat, Istanbul may not be home to the largest number of *cemevis*. Yet considering the activities and variety of its *cemevis*, it may easily be said to be the city with the most activity.

Cemevis are the most important public space in which Alevism defines itself and develops parallel to the affiliated Alevi organization. They are home to social and cultural activities as well as religious services. Today, non-Alevis may also enter *cemevis*. In addition to weekly *cem* ceremonies and funeral services, and especially the daily distribution of food, the old lodges' doors are open to people of all faiths. Furthermore, the institutions associated with *cemevis* carry out educational functions and support a variety of public assistance campaigns, such as the Şahkulu Lodge's campaign to assist victims of the 2014 Van earthquake, and the Garip Dede Lodge's assistance campaign for the Ezidis. Also, some *cemevis* create social projects: the Girls' Dormitory project, also a project of the Şahkulu Lodge, is one such example.

4 | Bektashi order was founded after Hacı Bektaş Veli (13th century Alevi-Bektashi saint). For more information about Bektashi order and Bektashism see Birge (1965).

Figure 1: Street view of Pir Sultan Abdal Cemevi in İçerenköy



Photograph: Ulaş Özdemir

The number of *cemevis* increased rapidly in the 1990s, especially following the Sivas Massacre of July 2, 1993. Thirty-five people (mostly Alevi intellectuals, writers and musicians) were killed in a hotel in Sivas city while attending the Pir Sultan Abdal Festival, named after the important 16th century Alevi saint and poet. The new *cemevis* not only met religious needs, such as *cem* ceremonies or funeral services, but also contained conference centers, schools, and other venues for social and cultural activities. The spatial and functional redefinition of *cemevis* led them to be regarded as cultural and community centers rather than places reserved for worship alone. This bears witness to the fact that although *cemevis* are specialized religious venues, they have also taken place in a broader framework of incorporating multiple functions (Massicard 2007: 173–174).

In terms of size and location, some of the newly constructed *cemevis* are designed as large complexes while others are located in small arcades or offices. Some *cemevis* have even been designed as parts of shopping centers. Regardless of size, they all carry out various social and cultural events outside the *cem*. Although *cemevis* still await legal status as places of worship, these events continue as expressions of the wider scope of Alevi organization outside of religious activities.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF ZAKIR IDENTITY: EFFORTS TO INSTITUTIONALIZE ALEVISM

The chief form of Alevi worship, the *cem*, is a ritual carried out with musical performance from beginning to end. As one of the twelve servants in the *cem*, the *zakir*, together with the *dede*, keeps the *cem* going from beginning to end through music. Most of them play the *bağlama*, though bowed instruments, such as the *keman* or the *kabak kemane*, occasionally appear in some regions. Today, depending on their individual experience, (the *ocak* – Alevi saintly lineages – to which they belong, as well as their local style and/or musical past), they perform a repertoire which has achieved a certain form in nearly all *cemevis*.⁵

Figure 2: Street view of Şahkulu Lodge in Merdivenköy



Photograph: Ulaş Özdemir

5 | To compare *zakir* services in different regions, and for a study on *zakir* Battal Dalkılıç from Çubuk, see Ersal (2009); about Dertli Divani, a *dede*, *zakir* and *âşık* from Urfa/Kıyas, see Erdem (2010); about *kamber* tradition in Balıkesir, see Duymaz, Aça, Şahin (2011); about musical performance in the *cems* in Tokat see Pekşen (2013); about *sazandar* tradition in Tahtacılar living see Şahin (2014). For a study on the position of *âşık* tradition in *cems*, see Dönmez (2010).

In the musical realm, the term “Alevi Revival,” used to describe the increased activity of the Alevis in the 1990s, can be examined from the standpoint of a parallel “Alevi Musical Revival” (Erol 2009; Dönmez 2014). It is, however, safe to say that in the 2000s, the dynamics of both the “Alevi Revival” and the “Alevi Musical Revival” periods underwent significant changes. In particular, the identity of *zakir* underwent an almost complete reconstruction. The increased distinction of *dedes* and *zakirs* as the most needed figures in the general functions of the *cem* in Alevi *cemevis* throughout the world is an important factor in their increased visibility in the 2000s (Özdemir 2016).

Another influential factor in the increased visibility of *zakirs* was in the area of music: In the late 1980s, Arif Sağ, Musa Eroğlu, Yavuz Top and other prominent musicians of the Alevi Revival began to be replaced by the next generation (Dertli Divani, Gani Pekşen, Muharrem Temiz et al.) who emphasized the more religious side of Alevism with *cem* repertoires as guides to young *zakirs*. In addition, the frequent participation of this new generation of Alevi musicians in *cems* or other events organized at *cemevis*, displaying their Alevi identities, was the main social and religious factor feeding the desire of musicians to serve the “path” (the Alevi faith) in Alevi identity. At this point I observe an emerging desire among young Alevi musicians to express their Alevi identities, both serving the religious “path” and gaining social acceptance, through the role of *zakir*.

There is another feature of the emerging *zakir* identity in the 2000s which is much discussed in the context of the Alevi Musical Revival: The replacement of Alevi *âşiks* (lit. minstrel or bard) who have been popular on the commercial music scene and in Alevi communities since the 1960s by today’s popular Alevi performers, and the deaths of these last *âşiks*. The *âşık* tradition (whether Alevi or not) still survives in various Anatolian communities. Importantly, the type of *âşık* tradition that our *zakirs* are trying to carry on – with regard to the term “*cem âşığı*” for *zakirs* performing in the *cems* and the ambition of today’s young musicians performing as *zakirs* to become *âşiks* – plays an important role in the development of *zakir*

identity. Consequently, the *zakir* tradition today involves a desire or interest in being an *âşık* as well as a view that the status of *âşık* is above that of *zakir*. At this point it is safe to say that the emergence of notable personalities such as Dertli Divani in the capacity of *dede* and *zakir* as well as *âşık*, has been influential in the formation of this identity.

In line with increasing attempts to institutionalize and standardize Alevism by Alevi institutions, a similar trend also exists in the domain of *zakirhood*. The Cem Foundation's in-service training courses, the *zakir* identification cards granted by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, and the attempts of Dertli Divani, who was chosen as a living cultural treasure by UNESCO in 2010, can all be regarded as the most important steps with respect to efforts in this area. These attempts are significant for understanding the dynamics of the process since the 2000s. The Cem Foundation's aim to create an institutionalized Alevism, the Ministry of Culture's official efforts and Dertli Divani's personal endeavors denote different approaches to the issue. These approaches are important in demonstrating that the Alevism debate that has been going on in various circles, points to the multiplicity of "Alevisms" operating in different layers and through various channels.

The increasing visibility of *zakirhood* in particular has roots in several sources, such as various activities aiming to position Alevism in a specific religious frame in addition to the *cemevi*-centered attempts that prioritize the religious aspect of Alevism. However, the young *zakirs* of today, through their opposition to the "rigid framing" of Alevism, go beyond these attempts and continue to serve in *cemevis* with different desires and approaches. Alevi institutions' wide ranging influence in matters as diverse as building new *cemevis* to administration, to their authority to assign the *dede* and *zakirs* who will serve in the *cems*, leads to conflicts in the *zakir-dede* relationship. The itinerancy *zakirs* can be regarded as a response to this rift.

ITINERANT ZAKIRS IN ISTANBUL CEMEVIS

During my field study, I observed that some *zakirs* gave up being institutionally affiliated with a specific *cemevi*, and visited different *cemevis* on a weekly basis to perform *zakir* services there. This mobility, which denotes a new phase in terms of *zakirhood*, presents itself as a new need of, or quest for the youth who have served as *zakirs* at specific *cemevis* for a long time. *Zakirs'* movement among different *cemevis* after they have given up being a resident *zakir* at a given *cemevi* emerges as an expression of their desire to improve themselves religiously. *Zakirs'* cessation of their institutional affiliations may also relate to several new emerging desires and necessities, such as contacting different *dedes*, performing with other fellow *zakirs*, and developing the *cem* repertoire. Thus, such mobility leads to significant changes in *zakirs'* understanding and practice of time and locality within the context of *cem*.⁶

In terms of time-related arrangements, young *zakirs* who, on the one hand, follow the weekly *cems* and, on the other, attend to *muhabbets* (gatherings outside of the *cem*) that take place at other times, state that even if they are not able to attend the weekly *cems* they perform a *çerağ* (lit. candle or light, one of the main service in the *cem* ritual) on Thursday night and strive to continue the service. Itinerant *zakir* Cihan Cengiz, who served as a *zakir* at Ümraniye Cemevi for years, remarks the following:⁷

6 | Time and space in Alevism requires a study of its own. As an introduction to different approaches to the subject see Çamuroğlu (1993); Erdemir, Harmanşah (2006); İrat (2009: 95–107). Also, for a detailed examination of sacred time and space in sufism in a broader perspective, see Schimmel (1994: 47–87). For mythical time and space in *âşık* poetry tradition including Alevi literature, see Köse (2013). Related to the subject under consideration here, for an examination of *cemevis* through Foucault's notion of "heterotopia" see Yalçınkaya (2005: 200–210).

7 | In-depth interview, 21.09.2014.

I did not miss a single Thursday in four years. Because of the saying '*Kırk sekiz Perşembe hakır.*' [Forty eight Thursdays are the truth.], after some time, I told myself 'there is not only Thursday; there are other days of the week as well.' Let's search for what is in these days after Thursday ... After that I set a rule – though not as if it is carved in stone. I want to perform a *çerağ* on that day (Thursday) for sure. In fact, *cem* does not have an hour or a day, hence no time. Thus there is no need to put it into a specific time frame. For the last two to three months, I have not put myself on a scheduled time. There is no Thursday, in fact; you determine the day. So I do not go by such a criterion. Instead of saying I should go to a *cemevi* on Thursday, I say I should sing/perform a *çerağ* on Thursday. Since I thrive on *muhabbet*; I continue it besides Thursdays.

As a *zakir*, the interpretation of time within the context of Alevism points to a need that does not confine itself to weekly *cem*s and aspires to spread the *cem* spiritually to any time. This condition reveals a new plane of thought where *zakirs* regard time differently than Alevi institutions' approaches to Alevism, and interpret time in relation to Alevism's notion of holy time.

A similar approach is observed in *zakirs*' spatial alienation from institutions. For instance, Bektaş Çolak, who serves as a *zakir* at Gaziosmanpaşa Hoca Ahmet Yesevi Cemevi, states that *zakirs* (and Alevis in general) should not make a distinction among institutions, and, further, from a historical and spiritual perspective, *âşık*s never had a resident space.⁸ Thus, the itinerant *zakir* approach moves beyond the explanation of Alevism as based on certain Alevi institutional perspectives, namely the prioritizing of these institutions and *cemevis* due to their spatial significance as an Alevi cultural/social space as well as a place of worship. Instead, *zakirs* bring forth a new understanding that is at equal distance from all Alevi institutions in general, and interprets today's Alevism as separate from institutional spaces with which it has been religiously identified. In fact, for centuries *dede* and *âşık* mobility was one of the most important vehicles

8 | In-depth interview, 18.09.2014.

Figure 3: *Semah performance of the cem ceremony at Şahkulu Lodge*



Photograph: Ulaş Özdemir

for the transmission of Alevi cultural and religious memory across Anatolia, as well as in other areas where different Alevi communities lived (Balkans, Middle East etc.) (Karakaya-Stump 2015).

It is also worth noting that, as Kaplan (2000) shows in her study of religious and *semah* practices transferred to the daily life of Tahtacılar in Kongurca ve Türkali villages, Alevi worship does not depend on space and time. It rather relies on connecting to the faith in the inner world of the individual (Kaplan 2000: 200). Hence, in contrast to mainstream arguments in Alevism studies, binaries, such as ‘traditional-modern’ and ‘rural-urban,’ are not sufficient in explaining the difference between ‘traditional’ Alevi practices and contemporary approaches. Contemporary *zakirs*’ quest for mobility and reinterpretations of religious-musical performance in Alevism are also examples in this direction. *Zakirs* express different justifications for the need to visit different *cemevis*. They mostly relate the fact that *serving* at a specific institution may lead to *identification* with that institution. This in turn is related to the need to maintain the performance during *cem* and the personal relationship with the faith as different sources of signification. *Zakir* Kenan Zede, who

served as a *zakir* at Erikli Baba Lodge for nine years, spoke about how he started visiting different *cemevis*:⁹

“I asked *dede*: ‘My *dede*, I always come and go but I feel like a civil servant here. I come here to fulfill my duty every Thursday. I want to visit other *cemevis*.’ I said, ‘I want to be touched (inspired) by a *dede*’s breath, a *zakir*’s voice; I want to learn things.’ They did not like the idea much. Both the *cemevi* administration and *dede* said ‘that is not going to happen.’ But my desire was firm and at that point I said ‘I am leaving.’ I started wandering: [to the] Garip Dede Lodge, [the] Yenibosna Cemevi, and so on. In fact, I wanted to do that for a certain period. Who is where, doing what, performing which *nefes* (lit. hymn or mystical poetry); maybe we are going in circles all the time. I tried to look into that a bit.”

Zakir Cihan Cengiz stated that after visiting a different *cemevi* for the first time, he met the “*aşk ehli*” (spiritual) people at that *cemevi* and began to go after them. He recounts telling people from the institution, who opposed his choice for going to different *cemevi*, that he answers to this only to *dede* not to the institution. *Zakir* Cengiz elaborates on his gradual alienation/withdrawal from the institution:¹⁰

I only went to Ümraniye Cemevi for four-five years. Then I started going to other *cemevis*. There were *dedes* who came to the *cems* at our Ümraniye Cemevi. For instance, Kasım Ülker Dede from Sarıgazi used to come. I believe in his *aşk* (divine love). He plays and performs/sings as well. Once he comes to *cemevi*, I have to enter his *cem*. One Thursday, I went to Sarıgazi Cemevi to participate in the *cem*. After I had been there a few times, Kasım Ülker Dede said, ‘why don’t you serve as a *zakir* here? I don’t invite everyone.’ There were people I trained in Ümraniye. If I went to Sarıgazi, I would have to leave *zakir* duty to my friends there. Kemal Uğurlu Dede would do it himself. I used to tell him, ‘*Dede*, I will go to Sarıgazi this week if I have your permission.’ He would reply, ‘sure, go ahead’ still they did not let me

9 | In-depth interview, 24.12.2014.

10 | In-depth interview, 21.09.2014.

go too often. I never depend on the institution, I always felt responsible to *dede*. The head of the institution would say ‘why didn’t you tell me?’ and I would reply, ‘I am devoted to *dede*, I only tell him about my decisions.’ After I started going to Sarıgazi Cemevi and conversed with Kasım Ülker Dede – both on *aşk* and daily matters – I said ‘I need to see different people.’ Different *aşk ehli* people ... After I went to Sarıgazi Cemevi, I quit going to Ümraniye Cemevi. But I didn’t quit being a *zakir*; I left the institution. That is, there were same faces, same talks in the Ümraniye Cemevi, I wanted to see what other people talk about, and to serve as a *zakir* at different places so that I can take from people’s *aşk* in those places.

Zakirs’ experiences at different *cemevis* reflect both upon their interaction with *dede* and *cem* participants, and how they perform with other resident *zakirs* of the *cemevis* they visit. *Zakir* Kenan Zede states that the decision of going to different *cemevis* is often shaped by multiple, interchangeable factors including place, *dede*, and sometimes the people:¹¹

If I go to Yenibosna Cemevi, I am not looking for a specific *dede*. But when I go to Garip Dede Lodge, I would like to see Hüseyin Dede if possible. I spent years at Erikli Baba Lodge. I have an emotional connection there. It does not matter whether *dede* is there or not on a particular day. Honestly, it is the people who I’m touched by there. I mean it is not about just one thing. If I am going to the Yenibosna Cemevi, I regard it as going to the Yenibosna Cemevi; I do not think much about which *dede* is there that day. If I am going to Erikli Baba and the people are there, that is enough for me. What I mean with ‘the people’ is that, since I live in Yedikule, I know most of those people, their families – I don’t mean it in the sense that those are ‘the people’ who love me.

Murat Ateş, another *zakir* who has given up attending regular *cem*s, recounts that he only serves as a *zakir* in the *cem*s of *dedes* whose *muhabbet* he believes in. He attends these *cem*s as a service to the

11 | In-depth interview, 24.12.2014.

path, and the motivation that takes him there is the rekindling of his faith by the *dede's muhabbet*:¹²

I want to go to the *dedes* whose *muhabbet* and sincerity I trust; that is, *dedes* who can bring what they tell into their own lives. And I want to participate the *cem* with them. I go to them. I do not go to a specific *cemevi*. I go to the *dedes* whose *muhabbet* is good; words are beyond doubt, and whose knowledge I can trust, [s]o that I can take him as an example by seeing his manners. There is a kind of cordiality between *dedes* and us. There are some resident *dedes* affiliated with certain institutions. These are young *dedes*. It is easier to communicate with them.

Orhan Işık served as a *zakir* at different *cemevis* and no longer serves as a resident *zakir*. He, too, strives to attend weekly *cems* at different *cemevis* and participates in *cems* other than the Thursday *cems* as mentioned above in relation to *zakirs'* changing perception of time. He elaborates on the process of deciding to which *cems* to go with his family:¹³

There were *cems* held in people's homes. Not necessarily on Thursdays; someone would say 'there is a *cem* on Saturday.' I would answer 'Okay.' They would say 'We are going to this place on Thursday' and I would always say 'Okay' and go. I would serve them. Those who organize the *cem* would call and invite me. I went to different houses. In fact, I always go from one place to another. Also, I go to *cemevis* all the time. If the *dede* at that place is someone I know, before the *cem* I ask, 'Dede, may I join as a *zakir*?' Depending on the situation they either reply 'space is limited' or 'of course, be our guest.' I say 'thanks' and start. I go to the same familiar places, like Erikli Baba Lodge, Yenibosna *Cemevi*, Derbent *Cemevi*. I do my best to go every Thursday. But I do not go to one specific *cemevi*. We go to the one that we feel in our hearts. That is how we continue. We decide as a family. 'Let's go to Garip Dede this week,' we say. I take my *bağlama*. If I can find a spot, I serve as a *zakir*.

12 | In-depth interview, 15.09.2014.

13 | In-depth interview, 19.09.2014.

Findings show that it is commonplace for some *zakirs* to participate in services in other *cemevis* while serving as a resident *zakir* at a specific *cemevi*. However, participant accounts also reveal that the decision is a personal one, as well as a wider interactive process depending on the permission by the *dede* in the *cemevi* with which they are affiliated. For instance, Yaprak Dengiz, who serves as a female *zakir* at Esenler Erenler *Cemevi* states that she goes to other *cemevis* to serve, yet there are sometimes problems in getting permission from the *dede*. The specific gender dynamics at work in *dede-zakir*-institutional relations is an important issue but it is beyond the scope of this research. Still, it is important to note that there are only a few female *zakirs* in Istanbul. There are also few female members in the administration of Alevi institutions, which points to an important debate on how gender intersects ongoing standardization within Alevism (Bahadır 2004; Akkaya 2014; Okan 2016).

Zakir Dengiz explains her reasons for going to other *cemevis*:¹⁴

I go to *cems* in other *cemevis*. For instance, there are some *cems* on Sundays; I join them. Also, they invite me and say, 'be our guest this Thursday.' It's often the *dede* or a fellow *zakir* friend, or there are friends who are both *dede* and *zakir* who extend the invitation. Once I get permission from the *dede* with whom I serve as a *zakir*, I go to other *cemevis*. Sometimes *dedes* don't give permission. They either do not like the institution where I'm invited or think like 'you are ours.' For me, all institutions are the same. There is so much distortion of Alevism today. There is a lot of assimilation. That is why I join inviting places more. Thus I try to go to everywhere when possible. I care about continuing this service against the ongoing assimilation."

Similar to Dengiz's experience, Bektaş Çolak, who serves as a resident *zakir* at Gaziosmanpaşa Hoca Ahmet Yesevi *Cemevi*, mentions that he tries to go to different *cemevis* yet sometimes encounters problems in getting the *dede's* permission. He also adds that in his opinion a

14 | In-depth interview, 28.09.2014.

zakir (and *âşık*) does not have a resident place. His insistence on going to different *cemevis* denotes ties between today's itinerant *zakirs* and the traditions of itineracy created by the itinerant *âşiks* and *dedes* of the past who maintained exchanges, cultural interaction and sharing of faith among different regions:¹⁵

I have been to different *cemevis*. Normally, I go to other *cemevis* when I am invited. There is this understanding in *cemevis*, 'I do not send my *zakir* to another place; he will only play and perform in my place,' they say ... There are always *dedes* extremely fond of their culture, I mean *dedes* who express their culture to its fullest extent, coming all the way from the past; I got complaints from them. 'Why bother, you will go there and by way of this its name will be heard' are their words. I will go there and the institution will get a reputation because of me, in a positive sense. I think it is wrong to make a distinction among institutions. An *Âşık* never has a place. For the *âşık*, the mountain and the plain are both the same, just a place. That is how I have always thought. I go wherever I am invited, without making any distinction among people.

Zakir Cihan Cengiz shares the same opinion with *Zakir Dengiz* and *Zakir Çolak* on getting approval from the *dede*. *Zakir Cihan Cengiz* states that after he started going to different *cemevis*, he was asked to serve as a resident *zakir* at those *cemevis*. He refused these offers because he does not want to be affiliated with the institutions or internalize their hierarchies:¹⁶

I have been to different *cemevis*. I started meeting *dedes*. For instance, a *dede* whose *cemevi* does not hold a *cem* that week comes to the *cemevi* I serve as a *zakir* and after the *cem* he asks, 'Cihan, there will be a *cem* at my *cemevi* next week, can you come to serve as a *zakir*?' I reply 'of course *dede*, with pleasure' and go there the following week. After going to *cem*s at different *cemevis*, *dedes* say, 'come regularly' but I refuse. I think that I am

15 | In-depth interview, 18.09.2014.

16 | In-depth interview, 21.09.2014.

beyond the point of devoting myself to one place. I can't devote myself to a single place all the time. I no longer want to hear, either from a *dede* or an institution, 'Cihan, do not go to Sarıgazi *Cemevi* this week.' I say, 'Dede, this week I am at the Sarı Saltuk *Cemevi*, right? Next week maybe I will be at the Sarı Saltuk too but when I go to Sarıgazi the week after, don't reproach me, let me be myself.' That is why I don't want to be affiliated. If I become affiliated then I have to attend their weekly rituals. If I am invited to an institution or a *cemevi*, I pay attention to the *dede* and participants. If the call comes from here [*showing his heart*], that is it. If I see it in someone's eyes with all his sincerity and if he tells me 'be my *zakir*,' it does not matter whether it is the Cem Foundation or the Şahkulu Lodge. A person who is affiliated with an institution, who becomes a part of that institution starts internalizing their hierarchies.

Zakir Murat Ateş further states that *zakirs'* visits to other *cemevis* are part of a quest which has roots in *zakirs'* self-questioning of their relations with institutions. Ateş asserts that *zakirs* who do not go through the phase of self-questioning give up the service at some point, whereas those who question their relations with institutions continue to serve somewhere. He adds that in addition to the itinerant *zakirs* there are also itinerant participants in the Alevi community who renounce going to a specific *cemevi* but visit different *cemevis* every week for *cem* rituals.¹⁷

Zakirs who live in different parts of Istanbul across the Bosphorus are able to come together in different muhabbets and cems through their desire to continue the service. Hence they interact and share their music in an active network of relations. The aspect of musical performance as part of *zakir* identity outside of *cemevis* and *cem* rituals comes to the fore in the development of these networks. For example, sharing the repertoire, the desire to perform together, the quest for "aşk" and for interaction, are influential in improving musical performance, especially in the muhabbets which take place in houses or the youth branch rooms of *cemevis*.

17 | In-depth interview, 15.09.2014.

The itinerant zakirs' quest for interaction with other zakirs, and their desire to be exposed to their knowledge and musical and religious innovation, can also be read as a revolt against the relatively vertical and hierarchical structure of most Alevi institutions. Zakir Cihan Cengiz, gives the example of the institution, with which he was affiliated as a resident zakir, which did not allow the youth attend a particular Alevi demonstration in the name of that institution because the demonstration was against the institution's "understanding of Alevism." Alevi institutions' political position and hierarchical organizational structures cause tension, first, between the youth branches and the higher-ranking administrative staff, and also between dedes and zakirs. This situation leads zakirs to associate with the youth branches that lie at the bottom of the organizational structure instead of the higher-ranking administrative staff. This is primarily the reason why zakirs feel freer to participate in their (social) activities besides cems. These activities, such as dergah trips, site visits, soccer tournaments, and demonstrations influence zakirs' "horizontal" mobility and enable them to engage in new politically involved, musically inspiring, friendly, and diverse interaction.

Figure 4: A cem ceremony at Şahkulu Lodge



Photograph: Ulaş Özdemir

Zakirs' quest for *dede* affects their choice to become itinerant *zakirs*. This means that in the case of *zakirs*, *dedes* have become even more influential in the transition from resident to itinerant practice. This finding is in contrast to the widely acknowledged views that *dede* authority has diminished in the post-1990s period (Dressler 2006). On the contrary, *zakir* narratives in the study indicate a relationship where *dedes*, and not the institution of affiliation, appear as primary figures of authority regulating *zakir* practice. Further, it suggests that *zakirs* follow and support *dedes* more than the institutions that they represent. Their relationship is further shaped by factors such as the institution's intervention in the workings of *cemevi* and the services held during *cem*, and requests to change *dede* and *zakirs* depending on changes in the institution's administrative board. The (institutional) interventions coming from outside of the *cem* to the *cem* itself appear as the main dynamic affecting how *zakirs* connect with, or alienate *dedes* and the *cemevis* that they represent.

Zakirs' visit to different *cemevis*, their search for *muhabbet* outside the *cem*, and the desire to be with *dedes* whose "*aşk*" is strong and inspiring, reflect a need and a deepened understanding of spirituality. This search – that is, their spiritual expectations – often leads *zakirs* to perceive "Alevism" as separate from its institutions, thus driving them away from these institutions. Young *zakirs* endeavor to keep their spirituality alive and strive to find new ways to live Alevism and to develop different networks and relationships. Through musical performance, *zakirs* bring forth a new dynamic that stands in opposition to current debates on, and practices of standardization, institutionalization, and the general framing of Alevism by its institutions. *Zakirs* deliberately remain outside of the internal and general debates within and around Alevi institutions and, hence, do not feel politically close to any Alevi institution's particular view of Alevism. As such, itinerant *zakirhood* as a novel phenomenon reflects all these interrelated quests and practices of spiritual, spatial and cultural reorganization of *zakir* lives.

CONCLUSION

Zakirs are the most visible servants after *dedes* – in Alevi rituals, musical performance, and in the broader context of Alevi identity. Their mobility-related dynamism within the last fifteen years, especially at the organizational level, is significant for revealing the processes and extent to which Alevis' public sphere visibility gained a new dimension in the 2000s compared to the cultural revivalism of the 1990s. *Zakirs'* consideration of Alevism more as a faith than a culture, and their attempt to employ this understanding in their daily life, constitute important aspects of the contemporary Alevi identity construction process. In this respect, we can see how *zakirhood*, as a music-based expression of identity, transforms musical performance and spiritual practice in relation to the *cem* ritual, through interactions with its content, location and institutional setting and actors.

In some respects, the transition to “itinerant” mobility in *zakirhood*, such as traveling to perform for different communities, is also reminiscent of the itinerant mobility of *dede* and *âşiks* in Anatolia in centuries past. Contemporary *zakir* mobility, however, emerges as a self-generating individual process that is best understood as mostly “horizontal” mobility that stands in contrast and opposition to “vertical” (and hierarchical) institutionalization imposed by the organizational structures and conventions of Alevi institutions. Rather than an impetus to “inventing tradition,” where the past is to be revived in some fashion, the process reflects a transition, a quest or *sürek* (practice) in the service of preserving Alevism – its tenets, values, and living an Alevi life.

The *zakirs'* itineracy and mobility in Istanbul enable us to reconsider the location and place-based organization of the *cem* ritual and *cemevi*, which lies at the center of the Alevi institution. This mobility, where *dedes* play an important role, causes *zakirs* to leave their resident institutions for different spiritual, faith-related and artistic reasons. They regularly visit and perform in *cemevis*, primarily where *dedes* with “*aşk*” reside, and continue to serve there

as *zakirs*. *Zakirs* who follow *cems* and *muhabbets* at different times and places, in addition to the regular weekly *cems* at *cemevis*, consider their service as non-affiliated with a specific institution. Similar to *zakir* mobility, some *dedes* and *cem* participants also exhibit a similar mobility, which indicates an emergent dynamic in the Alevi faith and way of life today. This mobility, on the one hand, uncovers new networks and relational forms among the *zakir*, *dede*, and participants. On the other hand, it conflicts with and, to a degree, reverses the mainstream's attempts to institutionalize and standardize the diverse strands of Alevism.

Figure 5: Street view of Karacaahmet Lodge in Üsküdar



Photograph: Ulaş Özdemir

Zakirs' ties with Alevi institutions and standardization processes affect the relationship between *zakirs* and the *cemevis* in which they serve. This is so because, to a large extent, becoming a resident *zakir* depends on the support by *dedes* which, in turn, is contingent upon the relationship between the *dede* and his *cemevi*: Sometimes the *dede* makes the decision to alienate himself from, and cut all ties with a certain *cemevi*, thereby impacting the fortunes of the *zakir*. At other times, the decision to leave is based on problems *zakirs* experience directly with the *cemevi* as an institution. At this point, *zakirs*

generally have a relationship with the youth branches and their members who are closer to their age. However, at times, tension grows between youth branches and the administration of the institution with which the *cemevi* is affiliated, which may have an effect on *zakirs* as well. In this case, the leading reason why *zakirs* leave a *cemevi* is a difference of opinion they have with the institutions. Such conflicts do not prevent them from serving as *zakirs*, although it would be in a capacity as non-resident itinerant *zakirs*, serving in more than one *cemevi*. Hence, it can be concluded that *zakirs* refrain from identifying with one specific *cemevi* or institution and navigate an extended artistic, spiritual, and social landscape of Alevi faith and culture through spatial, temporal, political negotiations across *cemevis*, senior/administrative structures, and informal social circles and youth organizations within contemporary Alevism.

This study of *zakirs* serving in Istanbul *cemevis*, namely, their practices, perceptions, and strategies of constructing and utilizing place and relations to make room for an individual yet socially and spiritually connected and embedded *zakir* identity, provides an in-depth and subject-centered interpretation of one important facet of Alevism as it is lived today. The subject-centered ethnographic approach of the study sheds light on all the subjective and complex ways *zakirs* negotiate their social, faith-related, and artistic role and practice in an environment often characterized by individual and/or institutional pressures towards standardizing and/or institutionalizing Alevism. *Zakir* accounts show how these mainstream attempts can take different directions, as they become ground-level actions, inter-community relations, and power struggles. The complexity brought to light in the study relates very well to the well-known Alevi saying “*yol bir, sürek binbir*” which translates “one path, a thousand-and-one practices”. Contemporary *zakirs*’ approach to service can be interpreted as another *sürek* (practice) due to the complexity and individuality of their artistic, faith-related take on, and interpretation of power struggles within the Alevi community. In this respect, while Alevi institutions’ activities under the name of Alevism contribute today to Alevism visibility, (every) top-down, “vertical”

construct, sanction, and discourse on Alevism finds its counterpart in (every) “horizontal” mobility implicated in the interpretation of contemporary Alevism. Although Alevism has historically not relied on one single interpretation and has maintained its diversity with the “*yol bir, sürek binbir*” discourse at its foundation, contemporary efforts toward institutionalization and standardization point to a break from this discourse. Resisting that trend, different interpretations of *zakhirhood* mark a new phase in re-establishing close ties to Alevism’s historical trajectory and discourse.

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