

# The Role of Kerbela in the (Re-) Construction of Alevism in Turkey

*Krisztina Kehl-Bodrogi*

In its editorial published in September 1987, the liberal Turkish monthly *Nokta* (No. 30) announced the impending end of Alevism, a large and officially still unrecognized heterodox Islamic minority in Turkey. Due to a thorough secularization and the dramatic breakdown of its traditions and socio-religious institutions, Alevism at that time actually seemed to be about to lose its characteristics as a distinctive community and to become a mere chapter in history. The early 1990s, however, brought about an unexpected community revival, accompanied by a political movement aimed at the official recognition of Alevism as a ‘faith community’ (*inanç topluluğu*) and as a distinctive collective identity (*kimlik*). In this process, the preoccupation with the group’s history has become a crucial issue. In this paper I discuss the significance of the historical event of Kerbela for Alevism in general and for the current, ongoing process of revitalization in particular. I shall argue that the re-evocation of the ‘myth of Kerbela’ enables the Alevis<sup>1</sup> to reinforce communal cohesion and at the same time to legitimize political claims *vis-à-vis* the state and the majority society.<sup>2</sup>

## *Concealment, Secrecy and Mourning for the Righteous – Alevi Identity in Retrospect*

In Turkey, the term Alevism (*Alevilik*) designates a large socio-religious community, members of which are both of Turkish and Kurdish ethnic origin. Though the different regional groups hold a wide range of divergent views about religion, they all share a strong negative attitude towards Islamic law, which they regard as the mere outer (*zahirî*) dimension of the prophetic revelation. Instead, the Alevis lay claim to being the custodians of the inner (*batinî*) meaning of the faith, which remains hidden from ordinary humans. Stressing the superiority of the ‘faith of the heart’ over the ‘faith of the tongue’, they regard the observation of rituals proscribed by the Shari’a as not binding for them. Another shared charac-

---

<sup>1</sup> In Turkey, the term ‘Alevi’ is used in the sense of the ‘followers of Ali’, while in other parts of the Islamic world ‘alawî usually designates the Alids, i.e. the direct descendants of Ali ibn Talib, the cousin of the Prophet Mohammed.

<sup>2</sup> The transcription of Arabic, Persian and Turkish personal names and place names follows the modern Turkish spelling. However, terms frequently used in English (such as Shi’a, Shari’a) follow the English usage.

teristic is the veneration and even divination of the fourth Islamic Caliph, Ali, and an altogether strong attachment to the twelve Imams of the Shi'a.<sup>3</sup>

Because of their leading role in anti-Ottoman upheavals, the numerous heterodox groups which later came to be known as Alevis experienced serious persecution by the state in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, as a result of which they withdrew into marginality.<sup>4</sup> Expelled as heretics and subjected to propaganda regarding their alleged immorality,<sup>5</sup> they took refuge in the well-known Shi'i practice of *takiye*, the concealment of one's religious and social identity. While *takiye* first of all served the protection of the group in a hostile environment, it comprised also a 'non-prudential' dimension, 'based on the need to conceal secret doctrines from the uninitiated' (Kohlberg 1995: 345). In traditional Alevism,<sup>6</sup> access to the group's teachings was restricted to those who were born into the community and underwent a particular initiation ceremony (*nasip alma*). Religious knowledge was transmitted orally within a great number of 'holy families' (*ocak*) and passed down to the initiated lay members (*talip*) of the community. For centuries, the exclusive possession of a truth inaccessible to non-group members formed an essential part of the consciousness of being an Alevi. Awareness of possessing a secret testified to group membership. From the insiders' perspective it invested the participants with a special, positive status, which compensated them for experienced humiliations. In view of their continuing stigmatization in the Republic of Turkey and the political ban on the articulation of deviant collective identities, this 'social mimicry' has remained for the Alevis until very recently a necessary survival strategy.

As a religious community that borrowed a large part of its doctrines from the Shi'a, the event of Kerbela is of crucial importance for Alevism: its members see in their allegiance to 'the people of the house' (*ehl-i beyt*) the birth of their community.<sup>7</sup> For them Kerbela became an origin myth. Kerbela is the place where, in 680 A.D. in the Islamic month of Muharrem, Ali's son Hüseyin, together with his family members and followers were slaughtered by the soldiers of the Caliph Yezid in an unequal battle fought for the Caliphate. Traditionally, the anniversary of the tragedy was commemorated with ten to twelve days of mourning (*matem*), consisting of fasting, abstaining from shaving, washing, changing one's

<sup>3</sup> For the history and religion of the Alevis see Kehl-Bodrogi 1988; Dressler 2002.

<sup>4</sup> At that time the diverse heterodox groups of Anatolia were mainly called Kızılbaş (literally 'red head') or simply *rafizi* (heretic). As a collective term for the group in question, Alevi did not emerge before the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>5</sup> Thus the Alevis were – and are sometimes even today – accused of promiscuous orgiastic practices performed in the course of their religious ceremonies.

<sup>6</sup> I use the word 'traditional' to designate Alevism prior to the beginning of the dissolution of the community in the 1950s.

<sup>7</sup> 'The people of the house' (*ehl-i beyt*) refers to the Prophet Mohammed, his daughter Fatima, Ali, cousin of Mohammed and husband of Fatima, and their sons Hasan and Hüseyin.

clothes, sexual intercourse, and the like. In memory of the agony of thirst that Hüseyin and his family suffered in the desert of Kerbela, during the mourning period the Alevis in particular refrained from drinking water. However, the Muharrem-*matem* was not the only occasion where Kerbela was remembered. In fact, the Alevis incorporated the commemoration of the tragedy in each of their communal celebrations (*cem*).

Traditionally, *cem*s were held several times a year.<sup>8</sup> They lasted the whole night from Thursday to Friday and were led by a *dede* or *pir*, the usual designations for members of ‘holy families’, whose authority is based on their (assumed) descent from the Prophet Mohammed.<sup>9</sup> The first part of a *cem* was usually devoted to the settling of disputes, which may have occurred in the community. The ritual of reconciliation (*rızalık*) marked the transition to the religious part of the ceremony, which itself consisted of various stages and reached its emotional peak in the ritual of *sakka sıyu*<sup>10</sup> in which the event of Kerbela was re-enacted anew. The ritual, which cannot be treated here at length, began with a prayer recited by the *dede*, the opening words of which were as follows: ‘Allah, Allah, with the help of the saints, for the love of Mohammed Ali, for the honour of the pure souls of all those who endured thirst and suffered martyrdom with Imam Hüseyin in Kerbela’.<sup>11</sup> Amid the participants’ loud curses on Yezid, the *sakka*, a ritual specialist, entered the scene carrying a bucket of water symbolizing ‘the water of the martyrs of Kerbela’. In remembrance of the agony of thirst which the latter once endured in the desert while being cut off from the Euphrates River by Yezid’s army, the *sakka* walked along the rows of the assembled and gave them a drink one after the other. While the water was being distributed, the singers and lute players (*zakir*) sang laments (*mersiye*) in which the most tragic moments of the tragedy were recalled. The participants accompanied the laments with ecstatic exclamations of sorrow and love for Hüseyin. It was especially this phase of the *cem*, which showed strong resemblance to the *zîkr* of Islamic mystics. Sitting on their knees, the participants, men and women alike, swayed to the rhythm of the music beating their thighs and loudly uttering the words “Allah Allah”. Everyone cried and some participants even fell into ecstasy and had to be carried out to calm down. To give just one example of the *mersiyes* usually sung during the ritual:

The army of Yezid has taken the Euphrates  
It has forgotten God, Muhammad, and the faith  
It has dried the water flowing to Kerbela  
Your wounds upon me, Imam Hüseyin!

<sup>8</sup> For a detailed description of a traditional *cem* see Kehl-Bodrogi 1988; Yaman 1998. For *cem*s in the diaspora see Karolewski 2005 and Sökefeld 2005. An excellent literary description of a rural *cem* in the early twentieth century is found in the novel by Kaygusuz (1991).

<sup>9</sup> Hence the designation *evlad-i rasul* (children of the Prophet) for members of such lineages.

<sup>10</sup> *Sakka sıyu*, literally ‘the water of the water carrier’.

<sup>11</sup> Throughout the article, all quotations from Turkish and German have been translated by the author.

Lacking water, the people of the house became martyrs  
 The son of Ali endured [the pain]  
 The Yezids should drown in a flood of curse  
 Your wounds upon me, Imam Hüseyin!

The damned Şimîr cut his head  
 And placed it in front of Yezid  
 May all his relatives be cursed  
 The *dede* sacrifices himself for you, Imam Hüseyin!<sup>12</sup>

The *mersiyes* led over to the next and final part of the ceremony, by now taking place in the early morning hours: this was the *lokma* or communal meal. Martin Sökefeld (2005: 210) rightly calls the *cem* ‘a communal ritual..., which sanctifies the participating community itself.’ In it, the ritual of the *sakka suyu* had a particular significance as it ensured that knowledge of and identification with a past considered one’s own would not be forgotten. In *sakka suyu* the self-perception of the group as having supported the morally superior side in the battle between good (represented by Hüseyin) and evil (represented by Yezid) was thus repeatedly reinforced and the boundary between them and the outsiders was reasserted. Here we witness the construction of the ‘significant other’, i.e. the Sunnis: following the principle of responsibility for the deeds of one’s ancestors, the Alevis hold the Sunnis responsible for Yezid’s betrayal of the Prophet’s family. This dichotomy based on the Kerbela tradition has survived in the colloquial speech of the Alevis, who among themselves still use the term Yezid to designate their Sunni compatriots.

### *Integration and Politicization of the Alevis*

After being defeated by the Ottomans in the course of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Alevis never entered the political arena again. Forced into social and spatial marginality and more or less tolerated by the state authorities, they continued to live in accordance with their own norms and values, which sharply contrasted with those of the majority population of the Empire. The profound changes following the proclamation of the Republic of Turkey in 1923, however, induced the gradual integration of the Alevis into the wider society. Their mass migration into the cities from the middle of the 1950s onward ‘brought them into closer contact, and sometimes in direct competition, with strict Sunnis, from whom they remained socially separated for centuries’ (van Bruinessen 1996: 8). The adaptation to urban life and modernity brought about dramatic changes for the community.

<sup>12</sup> In Turkish original: *Yezid'in ordusu Fırat'ı tuttu / Hak'kı Mubammed'i dini uuuttu / Kerbela'ya akan suyu kuruttu / Yaraların bana İmam Hüseyin! Susuz şebit oldu ehli ayali / Dayandı dayandı evlad-ı Ali / Boğsun yezileri lanetler seli / Yaraların bana İmam Hüseyin! Kesti kafasını Şimîr i lain / Götiirdü önüne koydu Yezid'in / Soyuna sopuna lanet Yezid'in / Dede kurban sana İmam Hüseyin!* (Kaygusuz 1991: 206)

The traditional socio-religious institutions collapsed and the transmission of religious knowledge from one generation to the other was interrupted. The tradition of the *cems* came to an end, and religion altogether lost its former significance as a crucial element of Alevi identity. The process of secularization became especially accelerated in the 1970s, when in the course of the political polarization of the country the Alevi youth took sides with the left and became actively engaged in various (Turkish and Kurdish) leftist organisations including some militant ones. For an entire generation, being an Alevi was tantamount to being a revolutionary (*devrimci*). The nearly collective shift from the former religion-based identity to one defined in terms of a political ideology was accompanied - and actually made possible - by the divestment of Alevism of its religious dimension and its re-interpretation as a 'way of life that intends to transform the existing system through revolutionary consciousness' (Hacı Bektaş Veli Turizm Derneği 1977: 197) For the new socialist generation - and actually the entire left - Alevism altogether appeared as a (proto-) socialist ideology, and its central figures such as Ali, Hüseyin, the thirteenth century popular mystic Hacı Bektaş, and the 16<sup>th</sup> century poet and rebel Pir Sultan Abdal were re-interpreted as early socialists and revolutionaries who fought against the exploitation and oppression of their time. As Peter Bumke (1979: 544) noted concerning the Alevi youth in the Tunceli region,

...in their songs and discussions the martyrs of Kerbela are equated with the left-wing victims of the armed conflicts which took place in the cities, and with those persons who had identified themselves as Marxist-Leninist guerrillas and who were hanged or shot dead after 1971.

The young revolutionary generation expressed its political actions in the symbolism of Kerbela in very much the same way, as did the Iranian Shi'ites in their struggle against the Shah regime. In his excellent analysis of the significance of the 'Ashura rituals for the demonstrations and street fights in 1978 in Iran, Hans Kippenberg (1981) demonstrated in a historical perspective that for the Shi'ites, the memory of Kerbela has always served as a point of reference in actual social and political conflicts. It is obvious, he notes, that 'the ritual of 'Ashura has always had the additional function of a discourse which expressed and generalized current experiences. Collective conflicts.... shaped the memory of the battle of Kerbela, and repressed its former interpretation' (Kippenberg 1981: 243).

Investing them with new meanings, young Alevis also appropriated the religious hymns of Alevism. They sang traditional songs such as 'My Ali, why are you sleeping, your time has come' (*Alim ne yatarsın günlerin geldi*) during political party meetings and demonstrations as appeals for armed resistance against the Yezids of the present, represented by contemporary fascists and religious extremists. Occasionally, for the sake of unambiguous understanding, whole songs were re-written and became in this form the common property of the entire leftist movement. To quote just one example:

*Original version*

Come oh souls let us reach unity  
 Let us strike a blow on the unbelievers  
 And avenge the blood of our Hüseyin  
 I trust in God the Almighty<sup>13</sup>

*New version*

Come oh souls let us reach unity  
 Let us strike a blow on the oppressors  
 And avenge the blood of the poor  
 Come into being, long live socialism<sup>14</sup>

The fascist and radical Islamist movements, which directed their respective propaganda efforts against the Sunni population, took advantage of the traditional Sunni-Alevi animosities in regions with a religiously mixed population. ‘Spreading rumors that Alevis had bombed a mosque or poisoned a water supply unfailingly drew Sunnis into the extreme right camp’ (van Bruinessen 1996: 8). Thus the originally religious divide became increasingly transformed into a political one. The second half of the 1970s witnessed numerous violent clashes between Sunnis and Alevis that at the end of the decade culminated in a number of anti-Alevi pogroms in the towns of Çorum, Malatya, Kahramanmaraş and Sivas (cf. Eral 1993; Şahhüseyinoğlu 1999).

The overall political changes induced by the military coup in 1980 affected the Alevis in various ways. The military, which claimed that its aim was the pacification of society after a decade of political turbulence, ‘did not treat the extreme right with anything like the severity that they reserved for the leftists and the Kurds’ (van Bruinessen 1996: 8). A huge number of Alevis, over-represented in both the Turkish and Kurdish leftist movement, were imprisoned, were forced to go underground or to seek refuge in Western Europe. Additionally, the Alevis as a whole became subjected to attempts to religiously assimilate them to a degree that they had never witnessed before in the course of their history.<sup>15</sup> Forcible assimilation, alongside the increasing Islamization of Turkish politics and society induced a community revival among the Alevis, in the course of which religion once again has gained crucial importance in defining their collective identity. This process was further supported by the discrediting of their political utopias after the worldwide collapse of socialism. Many Alevis began to view their

<sup>13</sup> In the Turkish original: *Gelin canlar bir olalım / Münkire kılıç çalalım / Hüseyinimizin kanı alalım / Tevekkeltü taallallah.*

<sup>14</sup> In the Turkish original: *Gelin canlar bir olalım / Zülüme kılıç çalalım / Yoksulun kanı alalım / Yaşasın var ol sosyalizm.*

<sup>15</sup> Thus, for example, religious education based entirely on Sunni Islam, was introduced as an obligatory part of the school curriculum. Alevi children were obliged to participate. In addition, mosques were built in a great many Alevi villages by order of the provincial authorities, which went so far as to make infrastructural improvements dependent on the villagers’ attendance of the prayers led by Sunni imams.

previous association with the radical left as a big mistake, which – to quote an often heard comment – ‘gave the deathblow to Alevism’. This development culminated in the foundation of community based volunteer associations (*dernek*) following 1989, when Turkish politics became somewhat liberalized and the ban on associations was relaxed. Leader- and membership of most of these *derneks* consisted mainly of former leftist activists who – under the motto ‘From now on we will strive for Alevism’ (Çamuroğlu 1997: 26) – decided to use their extended networks and political experiences in support of the community they belonged to by birth. With the publication of the so called ‘Alevi manifesto’ (*Alevi bildirisi*) in one of the leading Turkish newspapers, these former Marxists launched an identity movement that aims at the official recognition of Alevism and the end of the discrimination against them by both state and society.<sup>16</sup> This movement, however, did not achieve mass support until 1993, when the Alevis once again became victims of violence.

### *Sivas and the Politicization of Alevi Identity*

On July 3, 1993 a demonstration by radical Islamists took place in Sivas, a town in eastern Turkey inhabited predominantly by Sunni Muslims in an area of villages populated mostly by Alevis. The target of the demonstration was a cultural festival organised by the town’s Alevi association to commemorate the sixteenth-century Alevi poet and rebel Pir Sultan Abdal, regarded by the Alevis as a symbol of the nonconformist, rebellious tradition of their community. The festival was attended by a large number of famous Alevi intellectuals and artists. The most prominent guest was the author Aziz Nesin, a self-declared atheist, incidentally of Sunni origin. Nesin has long been a thorn in the side of the Islamists because of his anti-religious views and his support of the translation and publication of Salman Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses* in Turkish. Taking Nesin’s presence as an occasion to protest against the ‘enemies of religion’, on the second day of the festival, ten to fifteen thousand people surged onto the streets after the Friday prayer, demanding Nesin’s immediate death and the implementation of Islamic law. Then the mob stormed the hotel where Nesin and other guests of the festival were staying, showered it with rocks and finally set it on fire. The siege of the hotel went on for eight hours with neither the police nor the fire brigade interfering; a clear sign of the involvement of the city’s authorities in the event. While Nesin escaped alive, by the end of the day thirty-seven people had died in the flames.

<sup>16</sup> For a German translation of the Alevi manifesto see Kehl-Bodrogi 1993. For more detailed discussions of the Alevi revival movement and its causes see Kehl-Bodrogi 1992, 1993; van Bruinessen 1996; Çamuroğlu 1997.



What has become known as the ‘event of Sivas’ (*Sivas olayı*) has been evaluated and interpreted in different ways by different actors. Praising the ‘heroic Muslims of Sivas’ (*Taraf* (January 1994)), the radical Islamist media did not hide its satisfaction with the violence of the mob. The more moderate religious and right-wing media, though distancing itself verbally from the acts of violence, appreciated the ‘legitimate reaction of the people to the provocation caused by Nesin’ (*Söz* (August 1993)), a view which was also embraced by government circles and by most sections of the Turkish media. Liberal and democratic circles interpreted the event mostly as a riot against the secular state, planned far in advance by radical Islamist circles.<sup>17</sup> All parties were anxious, for political reasons, to stress that what had happened in Sivas was in no way a ‘denominational conflict’ (*mezhep çatışması*) between Sunnis and Alevis. As for the latter, however, there is not the slightest doubt that the violence was targeted against them as a collective and that Nesin served the Islamists merely as a pretence for subjecting the Alevis to a ‘massacre’ (*toplum katliamı*).

That the riot happened to take place during an Alevi festival and that, with one exception, all the victims were of Alevi origin makes it difficult to ignore its anti-Alevi bias. The fact that the demonstrators destroyed not only the statue of Atatürk, the founder of the secular Turkish Republic but also that of Pir Sultan Abdal, which had been erected by the festival organisers some time earlier, symbolically points to the character of the event as simultaneously anti-secularist and anti-Alevi.

The massacre had a strong mobilizing effect on the Alevis, who increasingly felt the necessity to strengthen their community in order to be able to defend themselves against the growing influence of radical Islamism in view of the inability - if not unwillingness - of the state to protect its Alevi citizens. The experience of becoming victimised again led to a dramatic increase in the number of Alevi associations both in Turkey as well as in the European diaspora, and there was a marked increase in the membership of the already existing organisations.<sup>18</sup>

Sivas caused a turnabout also among the Alevi combatants affiliated to militant leftist and Kurdish nationalist organizations. The leftists initially looked at the re-emphasis of Alevi identity with considerable scepticism, calling it ‘confessionalism’ (*mezhepçilik*) and its protagonists ‘leftist converts’ (*sol dönükler*). However, as it became obvious that, in the wake of Sivas, the Alevis decided to take control of their own cause instead of allowing themselves to be treated as the taken-for-granted basis of the political left, there came a gradual revision of opinion. Many feared that a continuing negative attitude toward the Alevi movement

<sup>17</sup> For an overview of media articles see Sivas Kitabı 1994.

<sup>18</sup> Thus for example, while prior to Sivas the Pir Sultan Abdal Association merely had three branch offices their number increased to more than thirty after the event. In 1993 the number of Alevi associations in Germany raised from 40 to 100.



could further distance the Alevis from the left. On the other hand, in the aftermath of Sivas, the remainder of the Alevi left tried to mobilize the Alevi movement to further their own political ideology. This point can be aptly illustrated by the following quote from a book written in jail by Hamit Baldemir, a member of the 'Unity of the Turkish Communist Party' [TKP(B)], <sup>19</sup>:

'As long as the leftists regard them [the Alevis] as their rivals, they only cause harm to themselves...It is necessary to turn these organizations into one mass organization...in order to position themselves against the political system in the interest of the realization of their claims.' (Baldemir 1994: 157; 159)

After Sivas, the initially rather reserved tone with which the Alevis publicised their claims, gave way to another, more offensive one. This change of tone could be observed especially during the annual festival in the central Anatolian town Hacıbektaş (named after the saint buried there), which since the end of the 1980s has become a large public event attracting masses of Alevis from all over the country and from Europe. In 1994, one year after the Sivas massacre, young men and women turned up for the first time in Hacıbektaş wearing red headbands with symbols of Zülfikar, Ali's legendary sword, and the names of Ali and Hüseyin. Although the Alevis usually reject the idea that there might be any similarity between them and the Shi'ites in Iran, my comment that they looked like Iranian holy warriors did not irritate the young people at all: 'If need be, we will fight like Hüseyin in Kerbela. There will be no second Sivas.'

In the preceding phase of politicization the Alevis used to draw an analogy between their fight for a universal proletarian revolution and the events of Kerbela. Following Sivas, Hüseyin's martyrdom in the desert served once again as the symbol of a struggle, this time, however, for the interests of their own community. However, as I shall try to show below, it was not the motif of fighting but the motif of suffering in Kerbela, which became central in the discourse of the increasingly strong Alevi movement.

### *History as the Repetition of Kerbela*

The return to the community and the demand for official acknowledgement forced the Alevis to explore consciously their defining characteristics and collective identity. To a great extent this is being achieved through reference to the past. Typically, the vast majority of the Alevi literature, which emerged in the course of the 1990s as the very product of the revival process itself, focuses on the question of history (cf. Vorhoff 2003: 99). That dissonant voices are heard in this process of discursive self-definition is hardly surprising, given the highly heterogeneous na-

<sup>19</sup> A splinter group of the Turkish Communist Party. In contrast to the latter's political stance often criticized as 'pacifist' by the former, the TKP(B) considered armed resistance legitimate.

ture of present-day Alevism. While back in the 1960s the majority was made up by peasants, industrial and seasonal workers, since then a middle class has emerged from the ranks of small entrepreneurs, civil servants, doctors, lawyers, teachers, academics, etc. In addition, there is yet another, albeit small group consisting of large industrial investors and capitalists. Individual Alevis have also successfully penetrated the highest echelons of Turkish politics. It is only natural that within such a large, heterogeneous group with an approximate membership of 15-20 million people there should be many disagreements concerning the collective interests of the community. In addition to the religious, political and ideological contradictions, at a time when ethnic and national discourses stand in the centre of attention, the ethnic and linguistic heterogeneity of the Alevis are also put to the test (cf. Kehl-Bodrogi 1998, van Bruinessen 1997).

Thus each individual or group that represents the Alevis in public claims to tell their true history. Appropriately, today, many competing histories of the Alevis are in circulation, according to where their respective narrators wish to position themselves in the contemporary political landscape of Turkey. Depending on which specific moment of the past is chosen at any given point in time, some narrators define the Alevis' historical role as the keepers of an 'original, pre-Islamic' Turkish culture, while others identify Alevism as a Kurdish national phenomenon. And while from one point of view, the Alevis may take on the role of the most loyal Kemalist allies in the early years of the Republic, from another perspective they appear as the victims of Kemalism itself. Here, like in the controversial discussion of the positioning of Alevism *vis-à-vis* Islam, discourses on history serve above all the discussion of contemporary issues and questions of the future.<sup>20</sup> But no matter how antagonistic the definitions of Alevism are, all historical reconstructions agree on the description of Alevi history as an infinite story of suffering and pain (*Leidensgeschichte*), the starting point of which is the murders of Kerbela. The following portrayal of Alevi history, taken from an Alevi web page is only one – if somewhat solemn – example of this self-image of permanent victimization:

For over 1400 years the mass murderers have not stopped massacring the Alevis. So much pain, cruelty, oppression, humiliation, butchery... Is this the fate of the Alevis? Oh, earth, are you not satisfied with so much blood?<sup>21</sup>

Though the victim discourse could be traced in the group's literature already at the beginning of the 1990s, it became particularly dominant in Alevi self-portrayals after the event of Sivas which was soon labelled as the 'second Kerbela'. Or, in the words of the bard (*aşık*) Yazıcıoğlu: 'The massacre of Kerbela / Happened in Sivas' (*Kerbela kıyımı / Oldu Sivasta*) (quoted in Dressler 2002: 253). Sadık Eral's book on anti-Alevi massacres (*Alevi katliamları*), published some months after the Sivas event, represents Alevis as the

<sup>20</sup> For a detailed discussion of the divergent positions held by Alevi writers and community spokesmen see Vorhoff 1995 and 2003.

<sup>21</sup> From the website "Alevikonseyi", [www.alevikonseyi.com/katliam/katliam.html](http://www.alevikonseyi.com/katliam/katliam.html).

victims of history in an exemplary way. Eral too starts the *Leidensgeschichte* of the community with the ‘painful and unjust event’ of Kerbela, stressing that it ‘was the first massacre inflicted (...) upon them [the Alevis], but not the last’ (Eral 1993: 16). Eral continues the series of massacres with the Ottoman persecutions of Alevis in the sixteenth century, followed by the pogroms in Çorum and Kahramanmaraş in the late 1970s and concluding with the murders in Sivas some twenty years later (Eral *ibid.*).

For the Alevis, Sivas became, beside Kerbela, the event, which ‘cannot be forgotten and cannot be allowed to be forgotten’ (Assmann 2002). New commemorative rituals ensure that the imperative ‘We do not allow that our martyrs should be forgotten’ (*şehitlerimizi unutturmayacağız*) is upheld. Memorials and demonstrations are held on the day of the tragedy in Turkey and in the European diaspora; moments of silence to remember the ‘martyrs of Sivas’ (*Sivas şehitleri*) open association meetings, conferences and the like; black-edged photos of the thirty-seven victims of Sivas are hung in the lounges of associations and displayed on their web pages, and Alevi periodicals dedicate special issues to Sivas, this ‘bleeding wound of the Alevis’ (Yıldırım 2005: 86), every year. In 1994, Alevi associations even introduced a campaign aimed at turning the site of the tragedy, the Hotel Madımak in Sivas, into a ‘museum of deterrence’ (*ibret müzesi*) in order to ‘render the memory of our martyrs immortal’ (Öner 2004: 6). These acts of remembering and the fact that a large number of Alevis own the ‘Book of Sivas’, a comprehensive documentation of the event and its aftermath, bear witness that in the structuring of collective memory the new media have replaced the *ayn-i cem*. Or, as it is expressed on one of the numerous Alevi web sites: ‘As forgetful as human memory tends to be, as long as this book exists, the massacre of Sivas will remain fresh and alive in our collective memory and never be forgotten.’<sup>22</sup>

## Conclusion

As it has been shown in this paper, from the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century onward Alevism has undergone a process of radical transformation, in the course of which it has largely lost its main characteristics as a distinct socio-religious minority. Renewed interest in the community since the beginning of the 1990s has led to various efforts for the reconstruction of community structures and the re-strengthening of Alevi collective identity. In this process, the preoccupation with their own past has become a crucial issue, a phenomenon, which is described by Jan Assmann as generally characteristic for restoration movements:

Every drastic break with continuity and tradition can lead to the emergence of a past, if such a break is followed by an attempt to start everything anew. New beginnings, renaissances and restorations take the form of resorting to the past. To the degree that they open up the future, they also produce, reconstruct and discover the past. (Assmann 2002: 32)

<sup>22</sup> [www.aleviten.com/gunceltarih1208031.htm](http://www.aleviten.com/gunceltarih1208031.htm).

Consistent with the programmatic nature of the movement, its protagonists tend to focus on the (re-)construction of the history of the Alevis, aligning it with contemporary political conditions and strategies, rather than researching its history. The case of the Alevis thus supports understandings of the past as a 'social construction, which is informed by current means of reference and the need to attribute meaning to the present' (Assmann 2002: 48). The past as it is preserved in the collective memory of the group and elaborated today in Alevi literature, however, is not a mere invention but rather the product of a 'selective accentuation and reconstruction' (Bader 1995: 108). Defining Kerbela (680), Çaldıran (1514), Maraş (1978) and Sivas (1993) as the cornerstones of their past, the Alevis choose from a 'variety of possible pasts' (Giesen 1999: 49) those elements which seem to them relevant for the perpetuation of their identity and for the support of collective action in the present.

As part of the traditional Alevi 'culture of remembering' (*Gedächtniskultur*), Kerbela is best suited for these purposes. It helps to maintain Alevi identity as a 'counter-identity', understood as an identity, which is 'developed and maintained against the dominant culture as it is typically the case with minorities' (Assmann: 2002: 154). Kerbela is perceived as a line of demarcation between one's own group and the outsiders, between those who remember the tragedy and those who do not care about it. Or, in the words of a web article: 'The Alevis commemorate even today the injustice committed against them, while the Sunnis hardly ever take notice of that massacre.'<sup>23</sup> Kerbela, and with it the past constructed as a story of suffering, constitutes the brackets which hold the community together beyond the many controversies. It engenders a sense of belonging upon its members, which turns them into a collective. In the reactivation of the memory of Kerbela and the interpretation of all subsequent attacks on Alevis as its re-enactment, the past begins to influence the present and assumes a permanent character. As for the outside world, portraying themselves as the eternal victims of the respective political elite and the majority society helps to underline the legitimacy of their claims, i.e. the end of discrimination and equal participation in mainstream society.

The replacement of the interpretation of Kerbela as the symbol of resistance with its interpretation as the symbol of victimization corresponds altogether to the overall shift in Alevi political orientation taking place since the mid-1980s. The Alevis' current struggle for recognition came about following a long period of active involvement with socialism. This development mirrors the overall 'paradigm change of contemporary politics' (Benhabib 2002: 49) since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As Nancy Fraser (1997: 2) pointed out with respect to post-1989 developments:

---

<sup>23</sup> [www.alevi-bochum.de/massaker/kerbela.htm](http://www.alevi-bochum.de/massaker/kerbela.htm).

Many actors appear to be moving away from a socialist political imaginary, in which the central problem of justice is redistribution, to a 'postsocialist' imaginary, in which the central problem of justice is recognition. With this shift, the most salient social movements are no longer defined 'classes' who are struggling to defend their 'interests', end 'exploitation', and win 'distribution'. Instead, they are culturally defined 'groups' or 'communities of value' who are struggling to defend their 'identities', end 'cultural domination' and win 'recognition'.

Since the beginning of the 1990s, after centuries of invisibility, Alevism has become an indispensable element of Turkish politics and society, and Alevi identity has lost much of its stigmatized character. By demanding their *de jure* recognition, the Alevis have abandoned *takiye* once and for all and have come to the fore. By making previously concealed beliefs and practices public, Alevism has been transformed into a written - if not yet codified - public religion. Even if the Alevi movement has not yet achieved its main goal, the official recognition of the community or the legalization of its religious practices, the state meanwhile largely tolerates community based organizations and their manifold cultural, political and religious activities. This is not at least due to the support of secular circles even inside the state apparatus, which see in Alevism a necessary bulwark against Islamist tendencies.

### *Works Cited*

- Assmann, J. 2002: *Das kollektive Gedächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen*. München: C.H. Beck.
- Bader, V.-M. 1995: *Rassismus, Ethnizität, Bürgerschaft: soziologische und philosophische Überlegungen*. Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot.
- Baldemir, H. 1994: *Din ve Alevilik Üzerine*. Istanbul: Nam Yayıncılık.
- Benhabib, S. 2002: *The Claims of Culture. Equality and Diversity in the Global Era*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Bumke, P. J. 1979: Kızılbaş-Kurden in Dersim (Tunceli, Türkei). *Anthropos* No. 74. 531-548.
- Çamuroğlu, R. 1997: Some Notes on the Contemporary Process of Restructuring Alevilik in Turkey. In: K. Kehl-Bodrogi, B. Kellner-Heinkele, A. Otter-Beaujean (eds.), *Syncretistic Religious Communities in the Near East*. Leiden: Brill. 25-33.
- Dressler, M. 2002: *Die alevitische Religion*. Würzburg: Ergon.
- Eral, S. 1993: *(Çaldıran'dan Çorum'a) Alevi Katliamları*. Istanbul: Yalçın Yayınları.
- Fraser, N. 1997: *Justice Interruptus. Critical Reflections on the "Postsocialist" Condition*. New York & London: Routledge.
- Giesen, B. 1999: *Kollektive Identität. Die Intellektuellen und die Nation 2*. Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp.

- Hacı Bektaş Turizm Derneği (ed.) 1977: *Hacı Bektaş. Bildiriler, denemeler, açık oturumlar*. Ankara: Yeni Sanat.
- Karolewski, J. 2005: Ayin-i Cem - das alevitische Kongregationsritual: Idealtypische Beschreibung des Ibadet ve Öğreti Cemi. In: R. Langer, R. Motika, M. Ursinus (eds.) *Migration und Ritualtransfer. Religiöse Praxis der Aleviten, Jesiden und Nusairier zwischen Vorderem Orient und Westeuropa*. Frankfurt/ Main: Peter Lang. 109-132.
- Kaygusuz, I. 1991: *Son Görgü Cemi. Savaşlı Yıllar I*. Istanbul: Alev Yayınları.
- Kehl-Bodrogi, K. 1988: *Die Kızılbaş/Aleviten. Untersuchungen über eine esoterische Glaubensgemeinschaft in Anatolien*. Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag.
- 1992: *Vom revolutionären Klassenkampf zum "wahren" Islam. Transformationsprozesse im Alevitum der Türkei nach 1980*. Sozialanthropologische Arbeitspapiere, FU Berlin Institut für Ethnologie. Berlin: Das Arabische Buch.
- 1993: Die „Wiederfindung“ des Alevitums in der Türkei. Geschichtsmythos und kollektive Identität. *Orient* Vol. 34, No. 2. 267-282.
- 1998: „Wir sind ein Volk!“ Identitätspolitik unter den Zaza (Türkei) in der europäischen Diaspora. *Soziologus* No. 10. 111-135.
- Kippenberg, H. G. 1981: Jeder Tag 'Ashura, jedes Grab Kerbala. Zur Ritualisierung der Straßenkämpfe im Iran. In: K. Greussing (ed.), *Religion und Politik im Iran*. Frankfurt/ Main. 217-255.
- Kohlberg, E. 1995: Taqiyya in Shi'i Theology and Religion. In: H. G. Kippenberg & G. G. Stroumsa (ed.) *Secrecy and Concealment. Studies in the History of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Religions*. Leiden: Brill. 345-380.
- Öner, C. 2004: Şehitlerimizi unutturulmasına izin vermeyeceğiz. *Alevilerin Sesi - Die Stimme der Aleviten in Europa*, No. 86. 6-10.
- Şahhüseyinoğlu, N. 1999: *Yakın Tarihimizde Kitleli Katliamlar. Malatya, K. Maraş-Çorum-Sivas Katliamların İçyüzüne Dönük bir İnceleme*. Ankara: İtalik Kitaplar.
- Sivas Kitabı. Bir Topluöldürümün Öyküsü*. 1994: Ankara: Edebiyatçılar Derneği.
- Sökefeld, M. 2005: Cem in Deutschland: Transformationen eines Rituals im Kontext der alevitischen Bewegung. In: R. Langer, R. Motika, M. Ursinus (eds.): *Migration und Ritualtransfer. Religiöse Praxis der Aleviten, Jesiden und Nusairier zwischen Vorderem Orient und Westeuropa*. Frankfurt/ Main: Peter Lang. 203-226.
- van Bruinessen, M. 1996: Kurds, Turks and the Alevi Revival in Turkey. *Middle East Report* (July-September 1996). 7-10.
- 1997: 'Aslını inkar eden haramzadedir!' The Debate on the Ethnic Identity of the Kurdish Alevi. In: K. Kehl-Bodrogi, B. Kellner-Heinkele, A. Otter-Beaujean (eds.), *Syncretistic Religious Communities in the Near East*. Leiden: Brill. 25-33.
- Vorhoff, K. 1995: *Zwischen Glaube, Nation und neuer Gemeinschaft: Alevitische Identität in der Türkei der Gegenwart*. Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag.

- 2003: The past in the future: Discourses on the Alevis in contemporary Turkey. In: P. J. White and J. Jongerden (eds.) *Turkey's Alevi Enigma. A Comprehensive Overview*. Leiden: Brill. 93-111.
- Yaman, M. 1998: *Alevilikte cem*. Istanbul: Ufuk Matbaası.
- Yıldırım, A. 2005: Sivas Katliamı: Alevilerin kanayan yarası. *Alevilerin Sesi - Die Stimme der Aleviten in Europa* No. 86. 32-33.



