# LOCALIST COSMOPOLITANISM: ALEVISM AS A ROOTED, UNIVERSAL DISCOURSE

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## Introduction

The present study is based on Turkish Alevis living in cities. In light of the dispersal of the communal ties of the village in the urban context, my interest is in investigating how urban Alevis relate themselves to their notion of an imagined Alevi community, as well as how the cultural and religious structure of Alevilik (a term coined under the Republic to denote their religion) has been transformed and adapted to a radically different environment. Moreover, given the fact that Alevis are a religious minority in Turkey, the implications of their encounter with the Sunni majority for their claims to identity will be considered. This article draws most of its content from an analysis of nine in-depth interviews of Alevi individuals, which I carried out in the Ankara area. Another section is dedicated to the other part of my fieldwork in Turkey, my visit to the town of Hacıbektaş, where the shrine of Hacı Bektaş Veli, the legendary founder of the order whose ideas gave rise to the Bektashi-Alevi spiritual philosophy, is situated. My observations in the field demonstrate how both the saint's teachings and Bektashi-Alevi traditions, rituals and myths are still highly valued today by Alevis. Throughout the discussion, it will be seen that, while the flexibility and anti-dogmatism at the basis of Alevism allow multiple understandings of it by its members, as well as their openness and adaptability to new conditions, at the same time 'certain sets of traditions, rules and symbols shape the collective space of Alevi communities' (Koçan and Öncü 2004: 273).

The analytical framework developed in this paper identifies parallels between the Bektashi-Alevi philosophy of humanity, which is based on the spiritual freedom of each member (Doja 2003: 353) and inspired by principles of universal love, tolerance and equality (Schwartz 2008: 51), and cosmopolitanism understood as an anthropological project

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promoting individual freedom, but also acknowledging the importance of difference (Rapport 2012). It will then be argued that, in maintaining their distinctive cultural and religious identity, as well as an open and tolerant attitude towards the Other, urban Alevis engage in a localist cosmopolitanism.

*The term 'Alevi'*

For the purposes of this study, it is necessary first to define the meanings of the terms 'Alevi' and 'Bektashi' and describe who is included in these two categories. In the Turkish context, 'Alevi' is understood as 'the person who loves and respects Ali and is faithful to him' (Özmen 2011: 73). The centrality of the figure of Ali can be connected to the great influence of Shiism on Alevism (Shankland 2003: 79; Erol 2010: 375). Alevi beliefs, institutions and practices are organised around the love of God-Muhammed-Ali, as well as of Ehlibeyt (the 'Prophet's family') and the Twelve Imams (Yaman and Erdemir 2006: 80).

Bektashis, who follow the Sufi Saint Hacı Bektaş Veli, laid the spiritual and philosophical foundations of Alevism (Melikoff 1998b: 6). Membership of the Bektashi order is voluntary and has a more intellectual-philosophical dimension, while traditionally membership of Alevism is determined by descent understood more in ethnic and cultural terms (Gokalp 1980: 753). Despite their historically divergent paths and some differences in practices between the two groups, the beliefs of the Bektashis and Alevis are identical (Steward 2007: 52). For these reasons, in academic writings as well as everyday conversations, the idea of a single Alevi-Bektashi identity has been adopted, and this term is frequently used (Wilson 2015: 77). In this article, the terms 'Alevi' and 'Bektashi' will be used interchangeably, while bearing in mind their appropriate usage according to different contexts.

Clarification is also needed regarding the widespread denomination of the Alevi and Sunni traditions as heterodox and orthodox Islam respectively. As Karolewski suggests (2008: 437), this classification reflects the power constellations within Turkish society, positing Sunnis as the legitimate majority at the centre and Alevis as the deviant minority on the periphery. Nonetheless, Alevi subjects seem to be aware of the power structure that sustains such a hierarchical schema and appropriate it intentionally in order to confront it (ibid.: 456). It is in accordance with this perspective that these terms will be employed.

No official statistics are available on the number of Alevis living in Turkey (Vorhoff 1998: 228). Although most Alevis are ethnically and linguistically Turkish, in Turkey there are small Alevi minorities of Kurdish and Zaza ethnicity (Kehl-Bodrogi 1997a: xi). It is

estimated that Alevis represent the second largest religious community after Sunnis, comprising around 25% of the Turkish population (Zeidan 1999: 74). There is also a considerably numerous group of Alevis-Bektashis living in the Balkans (Shindeldecker 1998). This study is based on Anatolian Alevis.

*Historical background*

In order to understand the status of Alevis today, it is crucial to contextualize it (Ocak 1997: 196). The very origin of Alevism is to be traced back to the succession crisis after the death of Muhammed. Alevis see Ali as the first Caliph after the Prophet (Yaman and Erdemir 2006: 34). The details of the historical circumstances that gave rise to the divide between Sunnis and Shiites cannot be discussed here for lack of space. Worth mentioning nonetheless is the Kerbala event – the murder of Husayn and his family, the descendants of the Prophet (ibid.: 36) – which still survives in Alevis' memories[2] and plays an important role in Alevi liturgy (Gokalp 1980: 752). Since then, Shiism and Alevism have developed throughout Anatolia, Iran, Iraq and East and Central Asia (Shindeldecker 1998). From the twelfth century, new heterodox and syncretic sects started emerging (Sufism) characterized by a shamanistic and spiritual philosophy and producing an understanding of Islam that challenged Sunni orthodoxy (Black 2011). The Turkmen tribes, who started penetrating central and eastern Anatolia at the end of the eleventh century, combined their traditional Sufi elements with Islamic concepts (Fletcher 1986: 42; Kasapoğlu and Ecevit 2004: 156; Aktas 2014: 148). Alevism is indeed associated with the phenomenon of folk Islam (Yaman and Erdemir 2006: 16). Moreover, it absorbed elements of other ancient religions and currents of thought circulating throughout Anatolia (Bilsel 2007: 13), namely pre-Islamic and non-Islamic beliefs, Buddhism and Manicheism Christianity, and it was later influenced by neo-Platonist and Nestorian elements (Ocak 1997: 197). The Bektashi fathers (*dedes*) – Hacı Bektaş Veli and his followers – played a critical role in spreading Sufi ideas and in socially organizing the peoples of Anatolia and later of the Balkans (Harmansah et al. 2014: 340). In fact, they have transmitted traditional Bektashi knowledge orally for centuries (Tee 2013: 2). These religious leaders, the Çelebis, are especially respected by Alevis since they claim descent from Mohammed through one of the Twelve Imams (Çamuroğlu 1998: 82).

Under Ottoman rule, the Bektashis were transformed into an organized order appointed to guide the Janissaries, the elite unit for the personal defence of the Sultan (Doja 2006: 430). In the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the ideas spread by the dervishes were gradually

embraced by the Kızılbaş Turkmens living in Anatolia (Vorhoff 1998: 230), and Kızılbaş, Bektashi and Alevi milieus merged (Dressler 2008: 284). The Kızılbaş, later known as 'Alevis', (Melikoff 1998b: 4), were great supporters of Shah Ismail, the leading figure of the Shiite Safavid Iranian state. Since all varieties of Shiism were forbidden under the Ottomans, the Kızılbaş were seen as a potential threat to the stability of the Ottoman Empire (Erol 2010: 375). Being 'highly vulnerable to persecution' (Stewart 2007: 51), the excluded Alevis had to keep their traditions and beliefs secret, and they organized themselves in their own social and religious institutions in rural areas away from major centres (Shankland 2003: 8).

The Janissaries were abolished in 1826 and Bektashism was prohibited (Yaman and Erdemir 2006: 41). Until then the Bektashis had benefited from the imperial protection of the Ottoman rulers, while the Alevis were isolated in rural villages (Steward 2007: 52). At the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, the Bektashi order experienced renewed popularity and 'came to play the role of an enlightened intelligentsia, open to progressive ideas' (Doja 2006: 444; also Melikoff 1998b: 7). Bektashi leaders were consulted by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the father of the Turkish Republic, who won great Alevi support for the war of independence following the fall of the Ottoman Empire (Elwert 1997: 67). With the secularization of Turkish society and the establishment of the Republic in 1923, the new term 'Alevilik' became increasingly prominent to denote Alevi religious practice (Dressler 2008: 284), since the new discourse of Turkish nationalism positioned Alevis as the 'true bearers of ancient Turkish Anatolian language and culture' (Zeidan 1999: 76).

However, Atatürk's secularist project involved the exclusion of religion and various cultural identities from politics (Koçan and Öncü, 2004: 484; Salman 2005: 42). With the closure of all religious orders (*tarikat*) and dervish lodges (*tekkes*) in 1925, Alevis had to reorganize themselves without the support of the state (Doja 2003: 351). The ban also included the *dedelik*, central Alevi social and religious institutions, which entered a further period of decline from the 1950s, following intense urban migration (Tambar 2010: 654). As a result of close contact with the Sunni majority in the cities, the sense of difference on the part of Alevis increased (Güneş-Ayata 2004: 110; Göner 2005: 114; Tol 2009: 151), and the traditional bonds with the communal life of the village were increasingly weakened (Ballantyne 2012: 3). Importantly, the rural exodus signalled the end of Alevis' spatial and social marginality (Kehl-Bodrogi 1997b: 119) and a redefinition of the communal boundaries

[2] Alevis fast during the month of Muharrem in memory of this event (Kehl-Bodrogi 2000).

between the Alevi and Sunni communities. Living in cities also led to encounters with other Alevi communities, 'rendering the imagination of an Alevi society possible' (Es 2013: 31). In the 1960s and 1970s, the divide between Sunnis and Alevis became mainly ideological and political: Alevis started relying less on traditional knowledge and practices, and supported leftist ideas with the aim of achieving equal treatment with Sunnis under the rule of law (Köse 2012: 587).

After the military coup in 1980, the Turkish Prime Minister at that time promoted a 'Turkish-Islamic synthesis' which fused Islamic symbols with nationalism and aimed at unifying the Turkish state (Rabasa and Larrabee 2008: 37-8). The role of religion was strengthened, especially in the educational realm: the Directorate for Religious Affairs (DRA), which controls the teaching of compulsory (Sunni-centred) religious education in schools, is criticized by most Alevis for trying to assimilate them into mainstream Sunni Islam (Çamuroğlu 1998: 80). A new wave of discrimination against Alevis from ultra-right-wing organizations characterizes this period: the Maras Pogrom in 1978 and the Çorum Pogrom in 1980 caused hundreds of deaths and left a tragic mark in the memories of Turkish citizens (Yaman Erdemir 2006: 47).

In most of the literature, the 1990s are considered to represent the beginning of the so-called 'Alevi revival', characterized by a reawakened interest in Alevi traditions (Erdemir 2005: 940; Tee 2013: 10). Alevis started enjoying much more popular and state support. Furthermore, new forms of sociality and institutions, replacing the rural ones, were established with urbanization, such as Alevi foundations, village clubs, associations of mutual support and journals (Ballantyne 2012: 7; Borovali and Boyraz 2014: 481). The construction of urban *cem* houses (*cemevis*, or houses where *cem* rituals are held) was an important step towards obtaining legal recognition and the restructuring of Alevism as a public religion (Es 2013: 33; Sahin 2001: 3). Another development was the transition from a locally transmitted religion to a more formalized doctrine with written sources (Koçan and Öncü 2004: 478). However, these years were also marked by the devastating attack carried out in July 1993 by fundamentalist groups in the city of Sivas, where thirty-seven people were murdered (Yaman and Erdemir 2006: 49).

Over the past twenty years, there have been positive changes in attitudes and state policy towards Alevis (Poyraz 2005: 515). Nonetheless, Alevilik still has no official recognition as a religion (Hamrin-Dahl 2014: 116).

*Bektashi*[3] *humanity: cosmopolitanism as a discourse of tolerance*

It is widely assumed that to be a 'cosmopolitan' is an ethical process that requires rootlessness: 'to create the self, to re-socialise the self as a way of broadening non-tribal contact, one has to undo the spirit of seriousness that attaches to one's sociocultural inheritance' (Hill 2011: 3). By adopting an anthropological perspective, this paper will instead argue that to reach the cosmopolitan ideal does not preclude belonging to a specific community (religion, ethnic identity, national consciousness), nor imply the annihilation or transcendence of local ties, nor openness to cultural difference (Werbner 2006: 6). Cosmopolitanism as a human and anthropological project, then, is based on the very awareness and appreciation of differences both between and within human communities (Rapport 2012: 75). However, to claim a certain local loyalty does not imply the rejection of a human one (Appiah 2010: xv). Kant's notion of the cosmopolitan as a citizen of two worlds – the local community and the worldwide community of humankind (Rapport 2006: 23) – will be taken as a point of reference. However, the Eurocentric perspective adopted by Kant, reflected in the idea of the 'functional necessity of difference' for the creation of inequalities, hegemonies and antagonism between communities in human history (Hedrick 2008: 265; Papasthephanou 2002: 32), will be rejected here, and a reconceptualization of such conception of difference will be suggested instead. Nigel Rapport's argument for a Kantian anthropology of humanity is critical in this regard: while acknowledging the fact that 'the human exists as a complex singularity over and above proximal categorisations and identifications of nation, ethnicity, class, religion, gender, locale etc.' (2006: 24), he insists on the significance of the recognition of difference, with an emphasis on its individual and personal aspects (2012: 158).

The Alevi case is emblematic of this eclectic approach, which sustains the compatibility of cosmopolitanism with specific local identities. It is through this theoretical framework that the Bektashi spiritual philosophy will be analysed.

*The cosmopolitan subject: Anyone and the perfect man*

*Anyone* is the 'human-individual actor devoid of socio-cultural attachments', who is 'the basis for the social-scientific appreciation of the human condition and for the ethical securing of the rights of a human life' (Rapport 2010:85). In Rapport's view, the construction of such a figure is fundamental to the establishment of a 'morality of *anyone'* (my emphasis) – that is, to recognize anyone everywhere as the *same* but also as the *other* (Argyrou 2002). In other

[3] As explained, Alevis refer to the Bektashi spiritual philosophy of humanity, outlined in detail in this section.

words, the individual is to be seen as a manifestation of the singularity of humanity (Rapport 2012: 22). The idea that cosmopolitanism does not belong only to the domain of abstract philosophy, but also to that of everyday life, is interestingly also seen in Bektashi spiritual thought.

The Bektashi notions of the Spiritual Man and Perfect Man, the highest levels of the chain of emanation (after God/Truth and God/Universe), will be described here. The former refers to the fact that 'every human being on earth is an emanation of an astral, shining, or spiritual self' (Cornell 2006: 16). The belief that God is already present within all human beings (Wakamatsu 2015: 784) is connected to the idea that the individual is a 'perfect embodiment' of the human whole (Rapport 2012: 5). The Perfect Man (*Insan-ı kamil*) is the ideal person, a mature human being who has managed to acquire spiritual access to the hidden and universal Truth – the higher degree of knowledge, the *Hakikat* (Cornell 2006: 19).

The concept of 'Four Doors, Forty Levels' (*dört kapı, kırk makam*) is central to Alevi mysticism. This is the process through which an individual goes through all the necessary stages – *şeriat* (religious law), *tarikat* (spiritual path), *marifet* (spiritual knowledge) and *hakikat* (spiritual truth) – that characterize the path of inner, deeper spiritual insight (Gokalp 1980: 755). In the practical terms of everyday life, Alevis believe that a Perfect Human directs his or her heart towards humanity (Yaman and Erdemir 2006: 69): this requires the full moral control of one's desires and treating everyone equally, with kindness, honesty and sincerity (Shindeldecker 1998). Salvation is reached through the emulation of perfect models such as Ali, Hacı Bektaş Veli and other saints.

In a similar and comparable way, then, Anyone is the cosmopolitan subject who has transcended his or her cultural specificities and has achieved a universal morality. This universal morality in both Bektashim and cosmopolitanism is an act of toleration, and importantly it is embodied by those figures – Anyone and the Perfect Man – who represent sources of moral and spiritual guidance respectively for the rest of humanity.

*Rooted, vernacular and localist cosmopolitanisms*

Pnina Werbner challenges the idea that cosmopolitanism is not rooted in any culturally committed loyalty to a particular place (2006, 2008). Cultural or religious belonging, she argues, 'does not negate a sense of moral responsibility beyond the local and the relative' (2006: 7). 'Vernacular cosmopolitanism' is 'an oxymoron that seems to join contradictory notions of local specificity and universal enlightenment' (2008: 14), which is nonetheless more practically feasible than the elitist version of cosmopolitanism that assumes the

superiority of European liberal thought (Werbner 2006; Hannerz 1990). In fact, 'no local loyalty can ever justify forgetting that each human being has responsibilities to every other' (Appiah 2010: xiv). The 'rooted' and 'patriotic' cosmopolitanism described by Appiah is that of a subject who is attached to his or her own home and local particularities, while at the same time celebrating cultural variety and being loyal to humankind in general (1997: 618, 622). At the root of this perspective lies the idea that 'it is possible to treat others decently, humanely, *through* our differences' (ibid.: 638).

The Bektashi spiritual philosophy has at its core the notion of 'Love thy neighbour' (Cornell 2006: 17). The idea that love is the root and cause of all existence – that all human beings are created in God's image and that in them God manifests himself, regardless of race, language, religion or nation (Zeidan 1999: 82; Vorhoff 1998: 242) – is ideally to be translated into a tolerant, empathetic attitude towards one's fellow human beings (Bilici 2005: 53). Since what we see in ourselves is the very reflection of God, we are able to find 'the satisfying sense of Oneness', the very same human essence that all human beings share and that renders them equal (Hoxha 2007: 25). From here derives 'the social obligation to strive for the general well-being and welfare of humankind' (Cornell 2006: 18). This moral and social obligation is therefore cosmopolitan in that it involves the appreciation of the intrinsic sameness and difference of humanity, and it is supposedly translated into Alevis' claimed capacity to adapt to different contexts. At the same time, specific local loyalties are central to Alevis. I am therefore arguing for the possibility of a localist cosmopolitanism, which will be shown to be a viable human project. The reasons for adopting this approach are both analytical, as already discussed, and methodological, since this study cannot focus on the entire Alevi community, only on a selected group.

*A syncretic and anti-dogmatic identity*

'Alevi' and 'Bektashi' are not clearly defined categories of identity, and there is no homogenous or agreed definition of these terms even within the Alevi community itself (Karaosmanoğlu 2013: 582; Dressler 2013: 273): is Alevism a religion separate from or within Islam, a cultural identity, a lifestyle, a philosophy of life? This vagueness, ambiguity and plurality of interpretations is to be connected to the fact that Alevism is seen as a syncretic and non-dogmatic religious movement (Cornell 2006: 3; Tol 2009: 80) – that is, inclusive of several elements and groups, and not formally organized. The great theological variety displayed by Turkish Alevism (Bilici 2005: 51) has given rise to multiple, competing discourses within the movement itself, as well as outside it. Contemporary Alevism, then,

appears to be very heterogenous, since each member relates his- or herself differently to their imagined notion of Aleviness (Köse 2012: 582). Connected to its composite nature is the exaltation of ethics over formalism (Trowbridge 1921: 266): the lack of a formal organization reflects the belief that dogmas and rituals are worthless, since they are thought to lead ultimately to the establishment of hierarchies within the community and set boundaries to individual freedom (Cornell 2006: 17). Thus Alevis traditionally do not perform the five daily prayers, make the pilgrimage to Mecca, or fast during the month of Ramadan (Wilson 2015: 76).

*Alevi practices*

Traditionally, however, Alevis still follow certain other practices. Turkish rather than Arabic is the primary ritual language (Gokalp 1980: 761). The main Alevi and Betashi practice is the *cem* ritual, a collective religious ceremony officiated over by the spiritual authority of the *dede*, in which both women and men participate (Hurd 2015: 91). *Cem* means 'to gather', and its function is to reinforce social solidarity within the context of the village through the teaching of Bektashi doctrines (Hamrin- Dahl 2014: 122): in fact, everyone must be at peace and all disputes must have been resolved through the mediation of the *dede* for the *cem* ritual to be held (Shankland 2003: 112; Yaman and Erdemir 2006: 83). Through collective worship, Alevis believe they can see into each other's hearts and so become part of God (Wakamatsu 2015: 386). As I show below, with urbanization such practices, being tied to the village dimension, are radically changing (Erol 2010: 382; Kose 2012: 576), but this reconciliatory approach, the '*tarikat* way', still guides Alevis' behaviour in the wider society (Shankland 2003: 112).

*Engaging with the dominant Sunni discourse*

Karaosmanoğlu describes Alevis' avoidance of political, cultural and religious orthodoxies as evidence of the multifaced process of identity-formation and anti-essentialist transformation that is taking place in Turkey (2013: 580). Through a discussion of the interviews, it will be shown how, despite their different conceptions of identity, Alevis in Turkey are seen as a single though heterogenous group which is forced to confront the 'orthodox' dominant Sunni ideology (Doja 2003: 363).

As already mentioned, Sunni Islam has been central to the construction of the Turkish nationalist ideology since the last decades of the twentieth century (Dressler 2013: 272). The definition of 'Alevilik' by the Sunni majority has shifted from 'Alevism as a deviance from

Islam' (Ottoman Empire) to 'entity of groups that represent the Turkish folk tradition' (period of the Republic) (Karolewski 2008: 449). According to Dressler (2008: 294, cited in Atasoy 2011: 108), the 'grammar of Turkish laicism' employs a religious approach in locating Alevilik within society – drawing on notions of Turkishness, as well as a secular interpretation of Islam – but not as distinct in its own right.

It is crucial to explore the dynamics of power involved in the construction of such discourses. Conceiving Alevism within Islam is part of an anti-syncretic discourse based on the construction of authenticity and the defence of religious boundaries (Shaw and Steward 1994: 7; Göner 2005: 125; Massicard 2001: 12). Syncretism does not concern the religious realm alone (Colpe 1997: 46): 'religious phenomena at a given point in time may be later reinterpreted as merely cultural phenomena' (Stewart and Shaw 1994: 192). The definition of what is 'authentic' (orthodox) tends to be made by the dominant group (Sunnis), a process defined as 'syncretism from above' by Shaw and Steward (ibid.: 21). Such religious synthesis may become uncontested and be reproduced unconsciously (ibid.: 18). Koçan and Öncü (2004: 476) employ Nietzsche's concept of 'slave morality' in describing how Alevis reinterpret their moral codes and values in relation to their perceived other, Sunni Islam.

As discussed, the ways in which Alevi subjects engage with Sunnism (the practice of *taqiyya* or 'dissimulation') have been dictated by their geographical marginalization, as well as the denial by others of their distinct religious identity (Cornell 2006: 2). Crucially, the appearance of conformity with Sunni ideology is accompanied by an active rejection of its dogmatism and formalism. Rapport describes this phenomenon – 'the ability to ironise identities and to lead tumultuous lives beyond the conventional' – as 'passing' (2010: 90). Appiah's notion of a 'common culture' – the standard values that are universally recognized in a certain nation (1997: 626) – is also useful in this context. He argues that even those who do not share the common culture (the Sunni ideology) know what it would mean to act in conformity with it, and they probably do this anyway much of the time (ibid.). Also, Doja points out that, whenever there is opposition between conventional (Sunnism) and innovative forms of religious life (Alevism), the latter are likely to have to accept compromises with the outside world (2003: 378). Finally, the covert and anti-conformist engagement of Alevis with the Sunni discourse can be compared to Scott's use of the term 'hidden transcripts' to describe the ensemble of all the non-hegemonic, dissident and subversive discourses (Scott 1990: 25) of those who have to find alternative ways of constructing their relationship to the dominant discourse (the 'public transcript'). A much more openly confrontational approach is taken by those who posit Alevism as the authentic form of Turkish Islam, one based on the

proper interpretation of the Quran (Öztoprak 1990, as discussed in Wilson 2015). This discourse directly engages with the hegemonic Sunni narrative and adopts its terminology in order to challenge it (Tol 2009: 21).

Thus, as will be demonstrated from the analyses of my informants' accounts, individual Alevis do exercise agency in that they actively engage in the appropriation, reproduction and reinvention of Alevi belief and practice (Werbner 1994: 212) through a selective use of history and traditions (Massicard 2000). Stewart and Shaw define this process as 'syncretism from below' (1994: 2). Given the extent to which different Alevis claim different self-definitions, there seems to be no single Alevi community except in the eyes of Sunnis (Sahin 2001: 3; Massicard 2001: 20). Following the methodological position adopted by White and Jongerden (2003: 14), this paper engages in a careful analysis of the complex social genealogy of Alevis' perceptions of their own identity that goes beyond mere dichotomies. It will be shown how the ongoing struggle to establish firm principles (Kenanoğlu 2014: 350) within the diverse modern urban environment is reflected in Alevis' everyday experiences (Köse 2012: 576; Erdemir 2005: 948).

**Fieldwork in Hacıbektaş**[4]

My fieldwork started with my visit to the Hacıbektaş district, situated in the province of Nevşehir (central Anatolia), where there is a shrine to the founding saint of the Bektashi order, Hacı Bektaş Veli (Schwartz 2008: 94; Wakamatsu 2015: 773). The main *tekke* or Dervish lodge of Hacıbektaş has been the belief centre for the Alevi community for centuries (Salman 2005: 34). Like all Sufi orders, the dervish lodge, the headquarters of the Bektashi order, was closed in 1925 and reopened as a museum in 1964 (Massicard 2000), and every year it attracts hundreds of pilgrims. During my brief stay, I visited the Hacı Bektaş Veli complex, where the shrine is situated, and the Çilehane, where, according to *Vilayetname*, the

[4] During my four weeks in Turkey, I first travelled to the central Anatolian town of Hacibektas. Even though I was not able to interact with the local people directly, I observed the general settings and the attitudes of people, especially in their places of worship. The main reason why I was not given access is connected with the sensitivity of Alevis' status in Turkey at the moment, due to the lack of recognition of their religious tradition at the national level. For the following three weeks of my stay in Turkey, I was hosted by my friends in the area of Ankara, where I carried out all the nine in-depth interviews. Throughout my fieldwork experience, questions recurred such as how to position myself when interviewing my informants, what terminology to use (mainly with regard to the religious sphere: *heterodoxy/orthodoxy*), to what extent it is legitimate to insist on some possibly sensitive topics (their relationship with the Sunni majority, their political inclinations), etc. (Jay 1969). I have also promised my informants confidentiality and, therefore, I guarantee their anonymity. I have replaced their real names with: Ahmet and Ece (first married couple), Deniz (their son), Gamze and Hasan (second married couple), Gül and Onur (their two sons), Sıla (family friend) and Barış (university student).

hagiography of Hacı Bektaş Veli (Melikoff 1998a: 58), Hacı Bektaş Veli went into retreat (Salman 2005: 38). I was accompanied and guided by my friends during these visits. All the photographs below were taken by myself.

*The Hacı Bektaş Veli complex*

Before entering the museum, my attention was caught by a long and disordered queue of people, some of them carrying basins to collect the sacred water from the fountains situated inside.


*Fig. 1. A big statue of Hacı Bektaş Veli in the square before the entrance to the complex.*


*Figure 2. 'Incinsen de Incitme': 'Even if you are hurt, do not hurt'.*

In the first courtyard of the complex, originally there were a number of service structures for the use of the Bektashi community (Castellum Publicus 2014). On top of the Ucler Fountain is a star with six points called Muhr-u Suleyman or 'Seal of Solomon' (Salman 2005: 35). I observed visitors drinking its water, washing themselves with it and collecting it:

*Figure 3. Ucler Fountain*

The second courtyard is called *Dergah avlusu*, the place where Bektashi dervishes and *babas* lived and performed their religious duties (ibid.: 35). There is a pool directly opposite the entrance that contains no water. On the right-hand side there is another fountain, the *Aslanlı çesme*, or 'fountain with a lion'. As my friend pointed out, its water is believed to be exceptionally 'good' and sacred in that it has a purifying function.

*Figure 4. The pool*

*Figure 5. Aslanlı çesme*

*Figure 6. The second courtyard.*

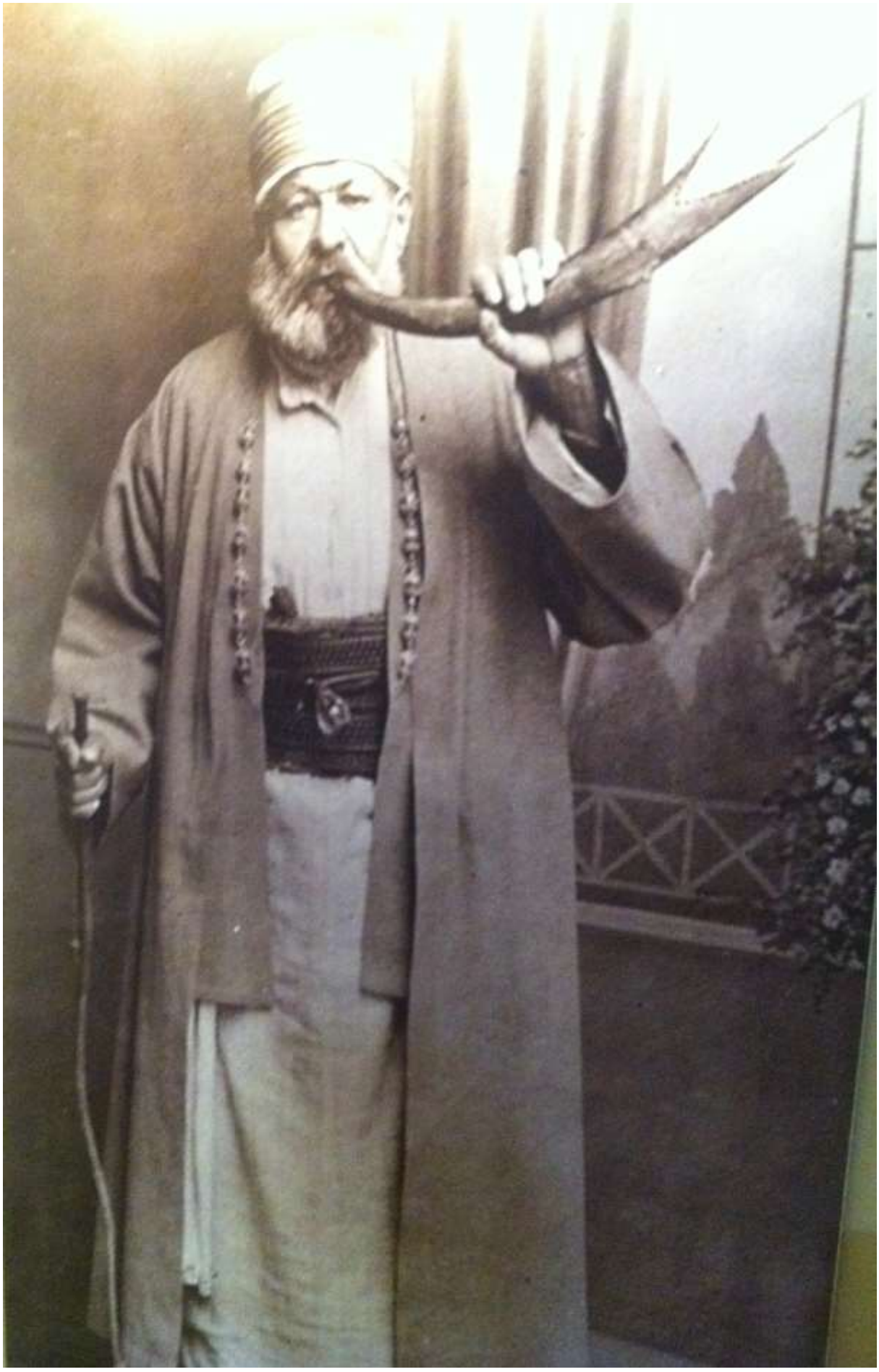
From here we entered the surrounding buildings: the quarters of the head of the refectory, a refectory and a mosque, built in 1825 by Mahmut II upon the abolition of the order, which is still in force today, a source of discomfort for many Alevis (Salman 2005: 35). The mosque was probably built in order to make the *dergah* and what it stood for more acceptable in the eyes of Sunnis (Faroqhi 1976: 188). Each room of the complex was very crowded: the hot weather did not prevent a great number of visitors from paying homage to the *türbe* or tomb of the saint (Schwartz 2008: 94). In general, people's attitudes were very respectful and devotional in the places of worship, whose sacredness they clearly felt. They kissed the jamb of each gateway before entering and carefully avoided stepping on the thresholds, as they are considered holy. Sometimes I could also hear them murmur prayers.

*Figure 7. Visitors kissing the gateway's jamb.*

*Figure 8. Visitors kneel down to kiss the gateway's jamb.*

First, we visited the Maidan (*cem*) room. It is here that initiation, admission, concession and *cem* ritual ceremonies were performed. The portraits of Hacı Bektaş Veli and of other

important Bektashi leaders hang on the walls of the *cem*, and twelve posts with icons of the Twelve Imams are displayed on the wooden divans encircling the room, as are the dervishes' clothing, photographs of *dedes*, musical instruments and various objects:



*Figures 9, 10 and 11.*

When we reached the Hazret courtyard, I visited the small museum commemorating Atatürk's visit. On 19 December 1919, Mustafa Kemal travelled to Hacıbektaş in order to consult Bektashi leaders and receive their support for the foundation of the Turkish Republic (Melikoff 1998a: 275). In the buildings that belong to the third courtyard are also situated the graves of *baba*s and *dede*s, as well as the tombs of Haci Bektas Veli (Pir Evi) and of Balım Sultan, who is referred to as the Second Founder of the order. This is considered the most sacred part of the complex for Alevi-Bektashi practitioners (Harmansah et al. 2014: 354).

*Figure 12. The third courtyard*

In the premises containing the graves, especially the Saint's tomb, most people knelt down in front of them and mourned their deaths. Many also kissed the tomb and touched the textiles covering it, while walking in a clockwise direction around it. While in the other parts of the complex I could see people engaging in conversations and displaying a relaxed attitude (many were commenting on the ethnographic objects shown there and telling each other stories), there was a quite different and more reserved atmosphere in this context, as if visitors were trying to enter into close, personal contact with the holy figures:

*Figures 13 & 14*

*The Çilehane*

My friends also drove me to the Çilehane, called the ‘Arafat Mountain’, on the east side of Hacıbektaş. First we visited the renowned cemetery where Alevi and Bektashi members are buried, located at the bottom of the hill. We then walked through the path and reached the top of the hill, where the Delikli Taş is located. This is a hollow among large rocks where it is believed that Hacı Bektaş Veli went into retreat in order to meditate (Salman 2005: 38). People were queueing in order to enter the hollow and trying to pass through the hole. It is believed that those who are not able to pass through it are sinful, while those who manage to reach the other side are without sin.

*Figure 15. People standing in front of the cave, applauding and praising those who managed to pass through the hole.*

*Further reflections*

The fact that great majority of the Alevis who visit the *tekke* are those living in cities shows how much importance they accord to the saint and Alevi-Bektashi traditions. As Massicard points out (2000: 29), it is mostly city-dwellers who feel the need to 're-activate' local rituals and pilgrimages: the pilgrimage to Hacıbektaş then seems to represent 'a return to the origins, to tradition', for urban Alevis. From my observations of people's attitudes, it is possible to see how visiting these places seems to derive from Alevis' need to reinforce their own sense of identity, as well as to empower their sense of 'us' (Tol 2009: 36). Moreover, in treating the complex as an important and emotionally charged pilgrimage site, visitors are challenging the state's efforts to run this site as a secular institution (Harmansah et al. 2014: 347).

## Results and discussion

'*It's about humanity*'

The focus now shifts to the second part of my fieldwork, carried out in the area of Ankara. As mentioned above, in the urban context the Alevi community is necessarily much more *dispersed* than in rural areas (Shankland 2004: 46). My interest is therefore in exploring the ways in which Alevis relate themselves to their own notion of Aleviness. When asking them to define Alevism and what it means to them, all my informants seemed to share a coherent view:

> It is about humanity. Alevilik is more a philosophy rather than a religion. It becomes a way of life, of changing your dispositions towards others. (Ahmet)

> Alevism is the way we live. The first thing that comes to my mind is a tolerant, open and positive attitude towards life and other human beings. (Barış)

This emphasis on humanity, on the realm of actual experience and on everyday relationships is central to their understanding of Alevism. Ahmet significantly pointed out that the three principles of Bektashism ('be master of your hands, tongue and loins') – the very basis of Hacı Bektaş Veli's teachings (Shindeldecker 1998) – 'are about being human and respect [for] other human beings rather than religious obligations'. Sıla insisted on the centrality of universal and unconditional love as the moral guiding force for Alevis when interacting with others:

> I call this disposition empathy. To always answer with unconditional love, whatever people's attitude is.

This refers to the Saint's maxims: 'Don't hurt anyone, even though you've been hurt', and 'Don't forget that even your enemy is human' (Castellum Publicus 2014). Tolerance, openness and respect for others are seen as the very basis of any human relationship. The *Edeb*, the moral code of Bektashism, is in fact based on the purity of heart, self-knowledge, piety measured by life-style, love and forgiveness (Zeidan 1999: 79; Koçan and Öncü 2004: 475). When I was at their house, Gamze and Hasan showed me a very famous image of Hacı Bektaş Veli holding a deer and a lion in his hands in order to make me understand the importance of the message of tolerance and equality at the core of Bektashism: 'Even a deer and a lion can coexist!' (Gamze).

*Figure 16. Hacı Bektaş Veli's image in Gamze and Hasan's flat.*

Regardless of their age, my informants simply described 'being Alevi' as being *human*, as having the most instinctive and natural disposition towards other human beings. They also insisted on the fact that such a disposition should be inherent to every person:

> I respect everyone, that's how every human being should be anyway. Being part of Alevism, I do have that: equality, kindness, honesty, friendship. I do really value these principles. (Ece)

Alevis consider themselves to be honest, correct, straightforward and loyal (Güneş-Ayata 1992: 113). Given such a broad definition of Alevism, portrayed as 'appropriate behaviour in society' (Shankland 2003: 8), I then wanted to understand whether my informants feel the need to be part of the Alevi community, to be unified by a 'common imagination' (Erol 2010: 377) and to share their experiences with other Alevis. Interestingly, again, their responses expressed a similar view:

> I do not feel the need to be part of something. I am happy to say that I do not belong to anything in particular, but to myself. I do not need any specific label. (Gül)

It was at this point that I started to realize how different is the perception of Alevi identity in the urban milieu, the extent to which the communal ties of the village are considerably loosened (Tol 2009: 182) and how the individual and personal dimension becomes much more central in the definition of one's identity (Es 2013: 40):

> In cities Alevis are separate and independent individuals, although they still remain within the community. (Onur)

> Urban Alevis rely much less on those persons and practices that characterise life in the village. (Deniz)

The 'customary cultural states' (Rapport 2010: 89) associated with village life are therefore transcended, and Alevi members lead much more independent lives. The urban Alevi community can be described as an example of Anderson's 'imagined community' (2004), where members share the consciousness of being Alevi, while at the same time having an individualistic lifestyle (Vorhoff 1998: 251). Nonetheless, the idea that it is good to behave well towards others in the community does not disappear (Shankland 2004: 43). Gül and Onur's observations are critical in that they relate to Rapport's notion of 'provisional community': 'no categorical placement is absolute, and rights inhere in the individual, in Anyone, not in any particular affiliation' (2012: 8). As already discussed, the Bektashi spiritual philosophy celebrates the person (*insan*), as well as humanity (*insanlık*) (Tee 2013: 4). Not only are humans the very reflection of God, they have become same as God and finally himself: Man therefore becomes the centre of the universe (Melikoff 1998a: 256). It follows that human beings have great responsibilities towards each other (Schwartz 2008: 52). Harmony in the collectivity – in the urban context, 'the community of human beings' – can be reached only if such spiritual and moral stability and autonomy have been achieved by each

individual within themselves. In fact, the spiritual experience of God is deeply personal, and the inner focus of worship is highly valued by Alevis (Soileau 2014: 439):

> The relationship with God is between the person and God, it is private and intimate. This is pure energy, pure sentiment of love, without the need to be helped by others. It is within oneself that God can be found. (Sıla)

Sıla and Gamze, who keep up ties with their villages because their families live there, insisted on the religious aspect of Alevism, and on the importance of the personal, spiritual path to achieve the highest degree of morality – that is, to become a Perfect Human: '*yol cümleden uludur'*, 'the path is the most exalted of all' (Yaman and Erdemir 2006: 69), but it differs considerably for each human being: '*yol bir sürek binbir*', 'the path is one, journeys a thousand and one' (Gokalp 1980: 750). Human personality is therefore at the forefront of devotion (Schwartz 2008: 51), and individuals 'should act on the basis of what feels most true to them' (Rapport 2012: 129):

> We have a saying, '*İnsanı insan yapan kendisidir'*. It means 'What makes one a human is oneself'. (Onur)

Referring to the same expression, Deniz commented:

> 'You build your own individuality as a human being' – I used to hear this a lot from my grandfather. Alevis use it to say that any free human being is not conditioned by anything.

While they equally acknowledge the importance of self-knowledge as the key to a 'universal, cosmopolitan morality', Ahmet, Ece, Deniz, Hasan, Barış, Onur and Gül de-emphasize the religious connotations of Alevilik. They consider it more as a cultural and philosophical framework, one that emphasises the universality of Alevi culture, the humanity of the person and the way in which it provides an appropriate way to live in the modern world (Shankland 2003: 135) and on which they draw in their everyday lives, using it to assert their identity. Gül and Barış respectively observed:

> I do not consider myself a religious person at all, but I call myself 'Alevi'. It means being open, helpful and respectful towards my family, friends... everyone really.

> Haci Bektas Veli said: 'I face humanity'. This is the core root of our Aleviness: humanity and human beings, our kindness towards each other.

The saint's expression, 'My ka'bah is the human being' (*Benim kâbem insandır*), signifies that Alevis pray towards the human person rather than towards a physical structure (Schtwartz 2008: 50). All of my informants emphasised their openness as inherent in Alevi philosophy:

> Alevi people do not aim at being the dominant discourse in society, they keep their identity respecting others. They are always themselves and loyal to themselves. They do not behave according to specific situations, they are true. (Hasan)

> Alevis are very open to exchange and to learn more, they fit easily in any environment because of their very own philosophy and open way of thinking. They keep their ideas, but do not want to impose them on others. (Gamze)

In order to validate her point, Gamze told me about her sister's Austrian husband, who expressed a desire to become Alevi and was welcomed and accepted into the community. She pointed out that there is no pressure from Alevis to make others convert, but there is great openness and acceptance of anyone who wants to come closer to Alevilik.

For Alevis, then, the acceptance and embracing of differences does not imply the annihilation of one's identity or imposing Alevism on others (Werbner 2008: 14). Crucially, this overture to universality is only possible through its legitimization by a local tradition (White and Jorherden 2003: 7): Alevism is therefore thought of as a 'local incarnation of a teleological universal message' (ibid.). Kant's theory of discursivity holds that this drive toward both specificity and universality allows the formulation of a unifying narrative (Godlove 2010: 1043). It is the 'cosmopolitan' attitude that arises from such legitimization that has guided and guides Alevis' behaviour in Turkey, as well as abroad. Most of my informants have travelled extensively, and some of them have lived in foreign countries for several years. I discussed with Ahmet and Ece their experience studying for master's degrees in the US, where they both built very strong friendships with people of different nationalities:

> Certainly our open-mindedness goes beyond the national border. Our different background and identity meant nothing to me. (Ahmet)

Moreover, Sıla pointed out that:

> Alevis are very open towards people of other nationalities. I have many international friends because I do not see them as different but as part of the whole.

These ideas are directly connected to Hacı Bektaş Veli's thought: 'Good people are good people regardless of their language, religion, race' (Yaman and Erdemir 2006: 29; Tol 2009:

51). Despite the changing historical conditions, Alevis refer to the saint's maxims and apply these ethical principles in their everyday lives. 'To be part of the whole', that is, of 'humanity', of 'human society', involves the positioning of all human beings on the same level, regardless of their differences:

> We are curious, we believe that there is much to learn from our differences. We have this willingness to accept everyone everywhere in the world. (Ece)

I now turn to exploring whether this tolerant and flexible disposition characterizes Alevis' relations with the Sunni majority, and what dynamics arise from the encounter with 'difference' for the definition of Alevi identity.

*The encounter with the Sunni majority*

All my informants showed great awareness of the events, discourses and power relations that have been brought to the perceived Sunni-Alevi divide. I came to realize how, in White and Jongerden's words (2003: 13), 'an actor that does not conceive him-/herself as a link of an historical chain cannot elaborate a discourse of legitimisation or a theological vision that gives sense to his/her actions'. For example:

> The very historical path of Alevism shows how they have always been and are still perceived as different, as distant by the dominant ideologies (Sunnism, Ottoman Empire). (Hasan)

> There are valid historical reasons for which Alevis do not practice *namaz*. For example, since Ali has been killed in a mosque, Alevis do not go to the mosque. (Gamze)

> It started with Sultan Mahmud, who wanted to get rid of the Bektashi army and declared that Alevis were not part of Islam. Then rumours started spreading around; people were saying 'Alevis do not pray, they burn candles'. Since then, people's attitude towards Alevis has been the same. (Barış)

My informants often referred to rumours as 'indicators of hostility' that arise 'when moral panic breaks out' (Hamrin-Dahl 2014: 112). My aim was to understand the motivations behind this moral panic, which can be connected to the competing discourses about religious syncretism in Turkey: 'Sunnism and Alevism are commonly defined as "orthodox" Islam and "heterodox" religious group respectively. How do you relate to these categories?'

> There is this big debate between Alevis and Sunnis about religious practices. Some Sunni people practice only for the form and appearance. But then, in their everyday lives, they feel justified to behave in an inappropriate way. (Ece)

> I find religious practices hypocritical. According to Sunnis, you have to do only five things, and once you have done them you become good and God will forgive you. It is not how it works, it is much harder than this: you have to be aware of your actions and feel responsible for them. Being good to other human beings is a hard task, and God cannot forgive that easily. (Ahmet)

> It seems that orthodox people need to be constantly reminded that they have to do things to prove their faith to others. But Alevi people say that behaviour, rather than prayer, is important. The way we live, the way we treat people. (Gül)

This criticism of Sunni orthodoxy was expressed by all my informants, especially those belonging to the older generation, who pointed out the need for the Alevi community to strive for the recognition of their religion as distinct from Sunnism:

> The imposition of the dominant Sunni ideology in Turkey works effectively through mainstream education: there is no critical thinking left to the young generations attending schools. The educational system must be changed. (Ahmet)

> I went to a state school. I was only taught about Sunni Islam in my religious classes. No wonder why Alevis are not accepted, it is because their beliefs are not known and understood. (Deniz)

Since Alevis have 'great religious tolerance and a non-confessional attitude' (Melikoff 1998a: 274), the demand for equal representation within the bureaucratic structure of the Directorate (Koçan and Öncü 2004: 479; Göner 2005: 130), and therefore for a pluralist and laic society (Hamrin-Dahl 2014: 114; Massicard 2001: 7), is urgent to them. Atasoy importantly argues that Alevis' notion of citizenship is inclusive in that it recognizes the existence of multiple and competing public discourses within society (2011: 120). To pursue such an objective requires a 'collective, coordinated and synchronised switching' (Elwert 1997: 72), that is, the agreement of all Alevi members on the very definition of Alevilik, including in relation to Sunnism.

The older generation of my informants emphasized the oppositional nature of the relationship with Sunnis, which is to be traced back to the events they experienced at the end of the twentieth century:

> Alevis have been discriminated [against] for a long time because of their ideas. The reason for this is that there is a lot of ignorance about Alevism among Sunnis. Alevis are aware of being a minority. (Gamze)

> Alevis had to keep their identity secret in order to protect themselves. But in theory, of course, there is no need to hide your identity from the rest. (Sıla)

The 'us/them' dichotomy was expressed negatively by Ahmet, Ece, Gamze, Hasan and Sıla. They represented the intolerant and closed attitude of Sunnis towards Alevis as contrasting with the tolerant and open disposition of Alevis towards all human beings (Es 2013: 30). As Martens suggests (2009: 59), it is through this appeal to 'humanity' – that is, the use of terms such as 'human', 'modern', 'secular' and 'tolerant' – that Alevis distance themselves from Sunnis. As Ahmet, points out, this tendency derives from the discourse that emphasises the discrimination, marginalization and exclusion of Alevis throughout history (cited in Martens ibid.: 62; also Karolewski 2008: 455). At the same time, according to Shankland (2003: 169, cited in Poyraz 2005: 505), 'the emergence of Alevis as a secular community' is also to be understood as part of their process of integration into the modern nation. It is 'the very fact of learning to live with a dominant tradition [that] has resulted in the combination of a mystical philosophy and a doctrine of peace and equality' (ibid.: 515; also Tee 2013: 6).

The younger group of my informants expressed a much more embracing attitude towards Sunnis:

> To me, Alevism is modernity, modern cultural identity that can suit in every situation. Alevis can shape the future, a perfect modern world, where harmony between Alevis and Sunnis can really be established. (Barış)

> Alevis and Sunnis are part of the same thing: the Turkish nation. Myself, just like Atatürk, I believe in the unity of the Turkish society, where differences coexist peacefully. (Onur)

Since the foundation of the Republic, many Alevis like Onur have felt able to identify strongly with the aims of modern Turkey and the secularist position (Shankland 2004: 33; Borovalı and Boyraz 2014: 480). Most of my informants referred to secularism as a fundamental principle of democracy, freedom and equality in society, as well as to the important role of Atatürk as the father of the Turkish Republic (Tol 2009: 196), and of Hacı Bektaş Veli as the leader who 'turkified' Asia Minor (Sahin 2001: 182).

The idea that Alevism is progressive and compatible with modernity and that it stands for secularism is prominent among its members (Zeidan 1999: 81): it is the historicity of Alevis' 'universal values' that makes Alevilik 'modern' and more progressive than Sunnism (Martens

2009: 70; Vorhoff 1998: 234). The position expressed by Barış, Onur and Gül reflects the 'patriotic blend' described by Köse (2012: 585), that is, a discourse that emphasises Alevism's universal value and validity, as well as praising its authenticity and local significance for the nationalist and secularist Turkish state. It can therefore be said that Barış, Gül and Onur are 'cosmopolitan patriots' in that they accept their responsibility as citizens for nurturing the culture of their homes and are mutually committed to the organization of the state (Appiah 1997: 619), while at the same time they maintain their own identity and a *cosmopolitan vision* that translates into a tolerant attitude towards diversity. In fact, Alevis, especially the younger generations, as can be inferred from their accounts, aim at both inclusion into and recognition from society (Atasoy 2011: 120):

> There is this thought that the Turkish nation wants to assimilate Alevis in Sunni Islam. But I believe that it is about belonging to the same nation, and sharing the same essence: Turkishness. (Deniz)

Deniz's perspective is shared by a considerable number of Alevis in Turkey, including the Cem Foundation (Hurd 2015: 92; Wilson 2015: 94). It is based on the idea that Alevilik is a modern (*çağdaş*) synthesis of Islam, Central Asian Turkish traditions and the local culture of Anatolia (Martens 2009: 67; Erdemir 2005: 939). As mentioned above, this interpretation is in line with that of the Turkish government (Atasoy 2011: 108): that is, to characterize Alevis as maintainers of true Turkish culture and folklore (Massicard 2001: 16). Thus Alevis are recognized, but their recognition is limited since it concerns the cultural realm only (Salman 2005: 43), thus assisting in 'the folklorisation of an autochthonous culture to the service of a nationalist ideology of the state' (Gokalp 1980: 762). Nonetheless, Alevis seem to embrace this ideology of folklore strategically in order to legitimize Alevism as derived from the nation and therefore to consolidate it as a public religion (Tambar 2010: 675). According to Küçük (2002: 903, cited in Salman 2005: 43), 'Alevis' adoption of nationalism and emphasis on the authentically Turkish roots of Alevilik represents a conscious attempt to bring Alevi existence to the fore'. This 'patriotic turn' might in turn have been influenced and facilitated by the global discourse about identity politics (Göner 2005: 124; Tol 2009: 12).

Thus, as I could tell from my informants' different accounts, several factors have to be taken into account in understanding the complexities of Alevis' processes of identity-negotiation and categorical positioning:

> I do not feel the same division from Sunnis like most Alevis. I managed to bring that away in 2014. I lived abroad for seven years without coming back to Turkey, and I

> had what my parents taught me. At a certain age, everyone manages to break those chains that they have from their parents. Now, I am at the centre between Alevis and Sunnis. (Barış)

Barış's observation seems to be connected with the notion of the 'multilayered citizen' developed by Yuval-Davis (2003: 309, cited in Atasoy 2011: 109), which refers to the possibility of membership in multiple coexisting social categories. Elwert describes the phenomenon of belonging to different reference groups simultaneously as 'individual situational switching', or *polytaxis* (1997: 71). As Shankland notes, it is not always possible to be clear where Aleviness stops and Sunni Islam begins, since everyday boundaries are unclear (1998: 21).

Gül and Onur emphasised more the role of their personal histories in the 'discovery' of their own identities (Poyraz 2005: 514), rather than their relations with Sunnis:

> I can say that I am Alevi, I am Turkish, I am also culturally European as well as Middle Eastern. But ultimately, I am a human being. (Gül)

> I lived in different countries, got to know different people and ways of thinking. My Aleviness allowed me to take what I felt closer to myself, and to reject what I do not identify with. (Onur)

Important differences between my informants' perspectives about the meaning of Alevi identity became more visible in the interpretations of their own life experiences, as well as in social conversations (Köse 2012: 577). In fact, it was in the context of collective discussions that their divergent discourses took shape. Shankland's sociological argument (1998: 21, cited in Poyraz 2005: 504) is critical in this respect in that it holds that it is the very fact that individual believers can take up different positions within the Alevi faith ('the way is one, paths are thousand and one'; Tol 2009: 89) that allows their flexibility and dynamism.

*Erosion or revival of Alevi traditions? The transition from* köy *to* şehir[5]

Having considered the effects of the encounter with Sunnis on Alevis' conceptualization of their own identity, I will now explore how, in practical terms, Alevi traditions associated with village life have been adapted to the urban context, which inevitably imposes new forms of expression on Alevilik (Poyraz 2005: 505; Tambar 2010: 672).

[5] In Turkish, *köy* is 'village' and *şehir* is 'city'.

In contrast to the religious obligations that fall upon Sunnis, my informants highlighted the existence of important cultural and religious practices among Alevis:

> Alevis have their own Ramadan during the month of Muharran, which lasts around 12-15 days. (Gamze)

> The *cem* ritual is very important in Alevi culture. It is a reunion where people come together into these rooms, where they gather and spend time together, they experience community life. It is an atmosphere of tolerance and generosity; there is no selfishness. (Sıla)

> Alevi practices are very spontaneous. Every Thursday there is a *cem*, people play instruments and dance. *Cem* does not only mean a hundred people sitting inside together, but it also means having more than one family of Alevis gathering, having tea, sharing the same food, the same story. (Barış)

As already discussed, the *cem* ritual, as well as the institution of *dedelik*, traditionally have the function of enhancing social solidarity and fostering a sense of unity (*birlik*) and love (*muhabbet*) among community members (Koçan and Öncü 2004: 475). Informants belonging to the older generation remembered life in the village as, in Es's words (2013: 32), 'the locus of a pure, authentic, original, and real Alevism'. These institutions are specifically suited to the rural context, as Ece maintained:

> I think that the Alevi mode of life – which is a shared community, where everyone is equal, and everyone helps who needs assistance – is applicable only at the village level.

Others of my informants instead sustained the feasibility, as well as the necessity, for Alevi communities to create conditions for the maintenance of their identity in cities. However, they also acknowledged the difficulties encountered in trying to do so:

> External pressures have prevented Alevis from being able to participate in community life in cities, and sometimes they have to keep it hidden. (Sıla)

Both Sıla and Gamze displayed great awareness of the limitations of the urban context, since in cities it is no longer possible to recreate the exclusivity and social intimacy that characterize village life (Erdemir 2005: 945; Tee 2013: 9). Nonetheless, as already mentioned, the urban context provided opportunities for the emergence of new Alevi networks that represent novel spaces for identity and community formation, as well as a platform for expression in the dominant public sphere (Sahin 2001: 6; Göner 2005: 119).

These transformations should not be seen as a 'decline of tradition' or as the 'erosion of Alevilik', but rather as its very rethinking and further revival (Karaosmanoğlu 2013: 584; Bozkunt 2005):

> Do we feel part of the community in cities? Yes, we do. Even only within our families we always feel Alevi. Alevis usually live with their grandparents: I used to live with my grandmother, and to hear her stories every day. (Deniz)

> There is community life in cities. For example, my brother organizes events, reunions, meetings at his house for a few people. They are very spontaneous and driven by a sentiment of humanity and love. (Sıla)

In villages, *cem* ceremonies are held in the houses of the *dede* or of one of the community members (Es 2013: 28). Sıla's brother initiative therefore seems to represent an attempt to adapt a village custom to the urban milieu. It can be seen how high intra-community solidarity is in cities (Günes-Ayata 1992: 113; Borovalı and Boyraz 2014: 480). Ahmet and Hasan's suggestions refer to facilitating Alevi settlement:

> I believe that in the urban areas the only way to recreate the *köy*-like community is in the form of a *mahalle* [neighbourhood], as in the case of Gazi, in Istanbul. This smaller dimension facilitates exchanges between people, and allows them to be more cooperative towards each other. (Hasan)

> Alevi cultural organizations and religious centres can be built in a way that allows people to sit in a circle instead of looking at each other's back, so that you can see everyone and have a more intimate relationship with them. (Ahmet)

Indeed, as Hasan notes, there are associative forms in cities that have as their setting the neighbourhood and cafés as places of socialization and community life (cf. Gokalp 1980: 759). Moreover, to sit in a circle and to pray face to face, emphasised by Ahmet, is traditionally an integral part of the *cem* ceremony (cf. Wakamatsu 2015: 785). This illustrates how past practices are reimagined in accordance with contemporary transformations (Es 2013: 34). From my informants' accounts, it can be concluded that, through the rural exodus, a radical change has occurred in the way in which Aleviness is experienced by its members, as Alevi institutions, knowledge and rituals have assumed a symbolic value for urban Alevis (Sahin 2001: 112). The loss of the 'mystical function' of the *cem* can be seen as part of the process of the culturalization of Alevism. In general, young Alevis seem to be largely

independent of the communal values and institutions that structured life in the rural areas (Ballantyne 2012: 3; Tol 2009: 162):

> Until she was twenty, my mother lived between village and city, and I have grown up in the city. My peers tend not to keep strong ties with their villages. (Onur)

This lack of familiarity with traditional Alevi customs does not necessarily translate into an abandonment of Alevi identity, which is instead strongly reclaimed as their own 'culture' by urban Alevis. The new educated Alevi elite is in fact intensely involved in the Alevi revival (Çamuroğlu 1998: 94; Stewart 2007: 50), and it engages in continuous efforts to formulate a strong set of cultural references and to recreate Alevism with the aim of strengthening it (Subaşi 2010: 174). At the same time, Alevi revivalism is also 'religious' in that it is characterized by the reconstruction of community structures, beliefs and rituals (Kehl-Bodrogi 2000; Tambar 2010: 672; Dressler 2008: 281). The challenge for Alevis today within the contemporary urban context is thus to establish a coherent collective identity between the different inter- and intra-generational understandings of Alevism (Köse 2012: 576). Such agreement on a unified position within the community is critical to tackling the 'sustainability crisis' in Alevilik (Tol 2009: 239) and to formulating concrete demands to the Turkish government (Borovalı and Boyraz 2014: 487; Özmen 2011: 86).

## Concluding remarks

Through my research, I was able to understand why social actors respond to calls for cultural reassertiveness and to explore the mechanisms they use to do so (Sahin 2001: 265). While in the village context Alevis' communal and collective identity is embodied in everyday relationships and exchanges, in the urban environment it turns into an acquisition of their own by gaining self-awareness as a group (Göner 2005: 123).

On the one hand, it has been seen how urban migration has given rise to a process of individualization and diversification of the constructions of Alevism (Massicard 2000). This development should be connected to the open, tolerant, flexible and anti-essentialist disposition inherent in the Bektashi philosophy of humanity (Karaosmanoğlu 2013: 583), which Alevis attempt to translate into practice in their everyday lives in the city. This is demonstrated by the fact that my informants interpret the essence of Alevism as an outlook on life rather than a religion (Bilici 2005: 52), as well as emphasizing the individual path as crucial in achieving moral maturity and freedom from any specific tie. At the basis of this

'cosmopolitan disposition' lies the idea that what ultimately defines individuality is one's humanity (Rapport 2012: 5).

It is in this light that the accommodation of traditional roles and practices to the urban environment has been analysed: it derives from Alevis' tenet that 'in the human community, as well as in the national community, it is necessary to develop habits of coexistence' (Appiah 2010: xvii). Reflected in my informants' accounts is a great curiosity and openness to new exchanges and ideas. In this sense, then, it can be argued that urban Alevis are rethinking their local, cultural and religious traditions for the sake of embracing *otherness*.

On the other hand, this cosmopolitan attitude is still vernacular (Werbner 2006: 496), rooted (Appiah 1997: 618) and localist in that it does not involve a rejection of Alevi identity. The encounter with the Sunni majority and the conflicting modern discourses about the very definition of Alevilik threaten the integrity of the community and make the quest for identity a necessity for Alevis (Hamrin-Dahl 2014: 118). In this article, it has been discussed how, in their urban struggles, members of the imagined Alevi community engage in complex processes of category-negotiation (Erdemir 2005: 945) and make use of common symbols in order to reassert their identity (Massicard 2000). Following Elwert (1997: 81), it is possible to say that Alevis engage in the very adoption of 'ours', in the nostrification of their own identity. As illustrated by my observations in the field, pilgrimage to the Hacibektas *tekke* can itself can be interpreted as a ritual act for urban Alevis (Harmansah et al. 2014: 355).

All my informants showed they were fully aware of the division between Alevis and Sunnis that characterizes urban life. However, the ways in which each informant engages with the dominant Sunni discourse vary considerably especially in terms of the generation to which they belong. By analysing their accounts, I was able to determine that they converge around both the religious-traditional interpretation (emphasising the Turkish-Anatolian as well as Islamic roots of Alevism) and the cultural-ideological interpretation (based on the syncretic Bektashi philosophy of humanity which gives priority to the individual) (Köse 2012; Tol 2009: 83).

This discussion has also shown how these two conceptualizations of Alevi identity are compatible in that they emphasize both the locality and universality of Alevism as its defining features. In fact, Alevilik is understood by its members as a local resource that allows access to universality (White and Jongerden 2003: 7). To root Alevis' present claims of identity and recognition in their local specificity and history, as well as in the Bektashi spiritual philosophy based on universal love and individual freedom, allows it legitimization as a distinct cultural and religious structure and as a 'universally valid and modern form of faith'

(Kehl-Bodrogi 2000). For this very reason, this article has argued that this embracing of Alevilik by its members and its embodiment in the realm of actual experience represent the very basis for the realization of the cosmopolitan project in that it is 'an aspirational outlook, as well as a mode of practice' (Werbner 2008: 2).

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