The Alevi Kurds Prior to 2010: Identity, History, and Socio-Political Realities

Introduction

Defining the Alevi Kurds: An Overview of a Distinct Ethno-Religious Community

The Alevi Kurds represent a significant and historically complex ethno-religious community, situated predominantly within the borders of modern Turkey, with notable diaspora populations. Their identity is uniquely positioned at the intersection of Alevi religious beliefs and Kurdish ethnicity, a confluence that has shaped their distinct socio-cultural trajectory and political experiences. This dual identity has often rendered them a "double minority" [1]: distinct from the majority Turkish Alevi population due to their Kurdish language and ethnicity, and distinct from the majority Sunni Kurdish population due to their Alevi faith. This unique positioning has carried profound socio-political implications, particularly in the context of Turkish nation-building and state policies prior to 2010. Historically, the Alevi Kurds, like other Alevi groups, were often referred to by the term "Kızılbaş," a label that, while descriptive of certain historical affiliations, frequently carried pejorative connotations within the dominant Sunni Ottoman and later Turkish contexts.[4] Understanding the Alevi Kurds requires navigating these layers of nomenclature and the historical sensitivities attached to them.

Scope and Significance of the Report (Focus on Pre-2010)

This report aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the Alevi Kurdish community, focusing specifically on their history, religious beliefs and practices, socio-political conditions, cultural expressions, and identity formation in the period preceding 2010. The temporal boundary is crucial, as the socio-political landscape for minorities in Turkey, including Alevi Kurds, has continued to evolve. An in-depth examination of this group is significant not only for illuminating the experiences of a frequently misunderstood and marginalized community but also for its broader implications for studies of minority rights, ethno-religious dynamics in the Middle East, and the complex tapestries of Turkish and Kurdish history. By synthesizing available information, this report seeks to offer a nuanced understanding of the Alevi Kurds' journey through the centuries leading up to 2010.

I. Historical Roots and Development

The Genesis of Alevism: Syncretic Beliefs and the Kızılbaş Legacy

Alevism, as a distinct religious phenomenon, emerged in Central Anatolia around the 13th century, shaped by the teachings of itinerant Muslim mystics.[4] Its doctrinal and ritualistic framework is characterized by a profound syncretism, weaving together elements from pre-Islamic Turkic shamanism, esoteric interpretations of Islam, and significant aspects of Shia Islam, particularly the veneration of Ali ibn Abi Talib, Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law.[4] The very name "Alevi," meaning "adherent of Ali," underscores this deep reverence.[4] This term gained common currency in the early 20th century as a collective designation for various related groups, gradually supplanting the older, often derogatory, term "Kızılbaş" (literally "Red-Heads," referring to the distinctive red headgear worn by supporters of the Safavid order).[4]

The historical antecedents of Alevism are deeply entwined with the Kızılbaş movement, which took shape from the 11th century onwards as a complex response to the prevailing social, political, and religious currents in Asia Minor.[4] Initially, this movement drew strength from nomadic Turkoman tribes who were influenced by charismatic dervishes, many of whom hailed from Central Asia. These spiritual figures propagated doctrines that were themselves a blend of diverse traditions, including pre-Islamic Turkic shamanic beliefs, and elements of Manichaeism and Buddhism encountered in Central Asia.[4] The form of Islam practiced by these groups was, at this early stage, not clearly demarcated as "Sunnite" or "Shiite." Instead, it was characterized by a belief in miracles, the veneration of saints, a pronounced mortuary cult, and a distinctive, profound reverence for Ali.[4]

A pivotal development in the consolidation of the Kızılbaş movement was its association with the Safavid Sufi order based in Ardabil, Persia. Under leaders like Sheikh Junayd in the mid-15th century, and subsequently his son Haydar, the Safavid order increasingly adopted elements of what has been termed "ultra-Shiism" or *ghulat* Shiism (exaggerated devotion to Ali and the Imams).[4] It transformed from a contemplative mystical movement into a militant religious order, finding fervent support among the Anatolian Turkoman tribes who formed the backbone of the Kızılbaş. These followers often venerated the Safavid leaders not merely as spiritual guides but as saints, and in some cases, even as the Mahdi (the rightly guided one expected to appear at the end of times).[4]

The syncretic nature of Alevism also points to roots in the Khorasan region, a historical crossroads of cultures and ideas, drawing influences from Sufism, ancient Iranian traditions such as Zoroastrianism (with its concepts of dualism and reverence for nature), and other Indo-European belief systems.[5] This eclectic amalgamation of beliefs and practices inherently positioned Alevism as "heterodox" from the perspective of mainstream Sunni Islam. This foundational heterodoxy, rather than

being solely a product of later political conflicts such as the Ottoman-Safavid rivalry, was a key factor in the historical suspicion, rumor, and persecution Alevis faced.[4] For centuries, Alevis were compelled to practice their rites in secrecy, fostering a communal insularity and a tendency towards endogamy, often avoiding extensive contact with the state and its institutions.[4] The secrecy was, in many ways, a direct consequence of their perceived religious deviation and a strategy for survival in often hostile environments.

The Emergence and Evolution of Alevi Kurdish Identity

Within the broader Alevi phenomenon, a distinct Alevi Kurdish identity emerged, shaped by the intersection of Alevi religious beliefs and Kurdish ethnicity and language.[8] This created a unique cultural sphere where both Alevism and Kurdishness acquired new socio-political and ethno-religious dimensions. While sharing core Alevi tenets, such as the veneration of Ali, Alevi Kurds developed and maintained their own socio-religious organizations, distinct sacred place practices, unique mythological discourses, and specific ritualistic expressions.[8] Their religious tradition is sometimes referred to by its adherents as Raa Haqi (in Zazaki) or Riya Heqi (in Kurmanji), meaning the "Path of Truth" or "Path of God".[8]

Several characteristics distinguish Alevi Kurds from many Turkish Alevi communities. These include a potentially greater emphasis on the figure of Pir Sultan Abdal, a 16th-century folk poet and rebel, as opposed to a primary focus on Haji Bektash Veli (though both are revered).[10] Furthermore, Alevi Kurdish beliefs are often described as being more deeply rooted in nature veneration, and some Alevi Kurds perceive connections between their traditions and other ancient regional faiths like Yarsanism (Ahl-e Haqq) and Yazidism.[10] The languages of religious and cultural expression for Alevi Kurds are primarily the Zaza (Kırmancki/Dimli) and Kurmanji dialects of Kurdish.[1]

Historically, the identity of Alevi Kurds has been subject to various interpretations and political manipulations. In the early Turkish Republic, for instance, some state-affiliated amateur researchers and ethnographers described Alevi Kurds as assimilated descendants of pre-Islamic Turks.[8] This narrative, which focused on their religious identity (Alevism) as supposedly "pure Turkish," aimed to downplay their Kurdish ethnicity and facilitate their assimilation into the new Turkish national identity by portraying Alevism itself as an essentially Turkish and Islamic phenomenon with Central Asian roots.[1] The term "Kızılbaşlık" also became particularly associated in some contexts with Kurdish Kızılbaş communities residing in the rural and eastern provinces of Anatolia, distinguishing them from the more urbanized or

dergah-affiliated Bektashi Alevis.[11]

The development of a distinct *Kurdish* Alevi identity, rather than a monolithic, undifferentiated Alevi identity, underscores the significant role that ethnic and linguistic factors played in shaping religious expression and social organization. This differentiation was likely amplified by geographical concentrations in specific regions, such as Dersim, and by varying historical interactions with state authorities and neighboring Sunni Kurdish and Turkish communities. Academic inquiry has explored the nuances of Kırmancki (Zazaki) and Kurmanji-speaking Alevi tribes, examining their similarities and differences when compared to Turkish/Turkmen Alevism, despite strong structural associations within the broader Alevi framework.[12] This suggests that Alevism was not merely adopted wholesale by Kurdish populations but was indigenized, with its tenets interpreted and practiced through the lens of Kurdish language, culture, and historical experience, leading to the formation of a specific Alevi Kurdish variant.

Dersim: The Historical and Spiritual Heartland

The region of Dersim, roughly corresponding to today's Tunceli province and surrounding areas in eastern Anatolia, holds immense historical and spiritual significance for Alevi Kurds.[8] It is widely regarded as their sacred and beloved land, often referred to as *Jaru Diyar* ("the Sacred Land") or *Herdu Dewres* ("the Land of Saints").[8] Dersim is viewed as the historical and religious epicenter of Alevi Kurdish culture, the core of their cultural geography, and the ancestral origin point for many of their sacred lineages (*ocaks*).[8] The region's rugged, mountainous terrain historically served as a relatively isolated redoubt, contributing to the preservation of the Alevi Kurds' distinct cultural and religious practices and fostering a reputation for their warrior characteristics.[8] This geography also created a degree of separation from the predominantly Sunni Muslim-dominated surrounding areas, reinforcing Dersim's status as a unique and sacred enclave.

This profound connection to Dersim made the events of 1937-1938 particularly cataclysmic. The Turkish military campaign in Dersim, ostensibly to suppress a rebellion but widely seen by Alevi Kurds as an attempt to forcibly assimilate and control the region, resulted in mass killings, forced deportations, and the widespread destruction of communities.[13] This episode, often referred to as the "Dersim Massacre" or, by the local population, as "*tertele*" (a Zazaki word implying great calamity or tragedy), is considered a pivotal and traumatic breaking point in Alevi Kurdish history.[8] It led to the decimation of traditional socio-religious institutions and leadership structures.[8] For many Alevi Kurds and human rights advocates, the events

of 1937-1938 constitute a genocide.[14]

The sacredness attributed to Dersim, combined with its historical role as a bastion of Alevi Kurdish culture and relative autonomy, meant that the state violence of 1937-1938 was perceived not merely as the suppression of a political or tribal uprising, but as an existential assault on their spiritual and cultural core. The targeting of the region, its inhabitants, and particularly its opinion leaders [14] aimed to eradicate a unique cultural-religious world. Consequently, Dersim has been transformed into a potent symbol of Alevi Kurdish identity, resilience, and profound suffering, deeply embedded in their collective memory and shaping their political consciousness and relationship with the Turkish state for generations.

II. Religious Landscape: Beliefs, Practices, and Social Organization

Core Tenets: The Veneration of Ali, Esoteric Knowledge, and the Path of Truth (Raa Haqi)

At the heart of Alevi belief lies an extraordinary veneration for Ali ibn Abi Talib, the cousin and son-in-law of Prophet Muhammad, whom Alevis consider the rightful successor to Muhammad and a manifestation of divine attributes.[4] Alongside Ali, the Twelve Imams, his descendants, are also deeply revered.[5] Alevism emphasizes a direct, personal, and experiential path to spiritual understanding, rather than strict adherence to exoteric religious law. A central concept is *Haqq*, often translated as Truth, Reality, or God, representing the ultimate divine essence with which humanity is intrinsically connected and can achieve unity.[5] The mystical utterance "Ene'l Hakk" ("I am the Truth" or "I am one with God"), famously associated with the 10th-century Sufi Mansur al-Hallaj, resonates deeply within Alevi thought, signifying this potential for union.[5]

Kurdish Alevis often refer to their spiritual path as Raa Haqi (in Zazaki) or Riya Heqi (in Kurmanji), "the Path of Truth/God," a system that traditionally emphasized the coherence of beliefs related to the natural world and hereditary kinship ties, particularly through the *ocak* system.[8] Alevi cosmology generally perceives a fundamental unity between God (Haqq), the cosmos, and humanity.[15] A key belief is the manifestation of the Creator within the human being, encapsulated in sayings like "Vech-i Âdemde tecelli eyleyen Allah'tır" ("It is God who manifests in the human face") [5], and Hacı Bektaş Veli's dictum, "My Kaaba is the human being".[15]

Morality forms the bedrock of Alevi spiritual life. It is considered a prerequisite for true belief and participation in communal rituals. This ethical framework is famously

summarized by the principle of "eline, diline, beline sahip olmak" – "being master of one's hand, tongue, and loins" – which enjoins adherents to refrain from theft and harm (hand), falsehood and slander (tongue), and sexual misconduct (loins).[15]

The syncretic nature of Alevism is evident in the incorporation of pre-Islamic Turkic shamanistic elements [4] and, particularly among Kurdish Alevis, a reverence for nature-based sacred places known as *jiare* or *ziyaret*. These often include ancient trees, prominent mountains, rivers, and springs, which are considered to be imbued with sacred power or connected to semi-deific beings or ancestral spirits.[8] Historical accounts also suggest that some ancient Kurdish groups, whose beliefs may have contributed to the Alevi substratum, engaged in practices such as creating images of revered or feared animals like snakes, tigers, and lions, and worshipping them for protection or as totemic symbols.[17]

Ritual Life: The Cem Ceremony, Semah, Music, and the Role of the Bağlama

The primary communal worship and spiritual gathering in Alevism is the *cem* ceremony, which takes place in a *cemevi* (literally, "house of gathering").[5] Significantly, *cemevis* are distinct from Sunni mosques in architecture and function, and the *cem* itself involves the co-participation of men and women, a hallmark of Alevi practice.[5] The archetypal model for the *cem* is the Kırklar Meclisi, the "Assembly of the Forty Beings," a mystical gathering that Prophet Muhammad is said to have encountered and joined during his heavenly ascent (Miraç).[15] During this assembly, Ali is believed to have revealed esoteric secrets to the Prophet.

The *cem* is a multifaceted ritual that includes communal prayers, the sharing of food (*lokma*), the reconciliation of disputes, and, most visibly, the performance of sacred music and dance. Central to the *cem* are sacred songs known as *nefes*, *deyiş*, or *beyit*, which convey spiritual teachings, historical narratives, and devotional sentiments.[5] These are accompanied by the *bağlama* (also known as *saz*), a long-necked lute that is considered a sacred instrument by Alevis, sometimes referred to metaphorically as the "Telli Kuran" ("Stringed Quran") due to its role in transmitting sacred knowledge.[5]

A defining feature of the *cem* is the *semah*, a ritual dance performed by both men and women, often in circular formations.[5] The *semah* is rich in symbolism, representing the cyclical movement of the planets, the turning of the cranes (a revered bird in Alevi folklore), the shedding of the ego, and the spiritual journey towards union with *Haqq* (God/Truth). The Alevi *semah* was recognized by UNESCO as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity item in Turkey in 2010.[21] The rituals, including the songs and discourses, are conducted in the vernacular languages of the community, which for

Alevi Kurds include Zazaki and Kurmanji, alongside Turkish in some mixed contexts.[5]

Specific types of *cem* ceremonies exist, such as the *görgü cemi* ("rite of integration" or "seeing/questioning ceremony"), a particularly important communal ritual where members account for their actions over the past year and seek reconciliation. This ceremony often involves participants bound by *müsahiplik*, a sacred bond of ritual brotherhood or sisterhood, considered a cornerstone of Alevi social and spiritual life.[18] During the *cem*, *dem* (literally "breath" or "moment," often a consecrated beverage like fruit juice or sometimes red wine in certain traditions) may be consumed ritually, symbolizing spiritual intoxication or the divine love shared between the Creator and the created.[18] The *cem* typically concludes with a *sohbet* (spiritual conversation or discourse) led by the *Dede* (spiritual leader).[18] The structure of the *cem* also involves the "Twelve Services" (On İki Hizmet), specific roles and responsibilities undertaken by designated members of the community during the ceremony, each representing a companion of the Prophet or an early Islamic figure.[18]

Socio-Religious Hierarchy: The Ocak System, Pirs, Dedees, Anas, and Talips

Historically, and certainly until the significant social upheavals of the late 20th century, Alevi Kurdish socio-religious life was structured around a hereditary system of sacred lineages known as *ocaks* (literally "hearths").[8] These *ocaks* were considered to be descended from key saints, often linked back to the Prophet Muhammad's family (Ahl al-Bayt) or other pivotal figures in Alevi sacred history. The members of these lineages, who held religious authority, were known by titles such as *Dede* (grandfather, the most common term for a spiritual leader), *Pir* (elder, saint), or *Mürşit* (spiritual guide).[1] While predominantly male, spiritual authority could also be held by women, known as *Anas* (mothers), who played important roles in transmitting teachings and conducting certain rituals.[5]

The lay members of the community, who were affiliated with a particular *ocak* and its *Dede*, were known as *talips* (disciples or seekers).[8] The relationship between an *ocak* (and its *Dede*) and its *talips* was hereditary and formed the primary axis of religious guidance, ritual performance, and social cohesion. This system, sometimes described as resembling a caste-like structure due to its hereditary nature and hierarchical organization, was fundamental to the transmission of Alevi beliefs, practices, and esoteric knowledge.[8] The *Dede* was responsible for leading *cem* ceremonies, officiating at life-cycle rituals (births, marriages, deaths), resolving disputes within the community, and providing spiritual counsel. The *ocak* system also involved figures like the *rayber* or *rehber* (guide), who often assisted the *Dede* and acted as an

intermediary with the *talips*.[1]

The traditional *ocak-talip* system, which provided internal cohesion and a framework for transmitting esoteric knowledge, also rendered Alevi Kurdish communities particularly vulnerable to state policies aimed at dismantling traditional leadership structures. The secularization reforms of the early Turkish Republic, particularly laws such as Law No. 677 of 1925, which ordered the closure of dervish lodges, shrines, and the banning of religious titles and attire, directly attacked the institutional backbone of their religious and social order.[1] The weakening of the authority and functions of the *Dedes* and the disruption of *ocak* networks contributed significantly to the erosion of traditional Alevi Kurdish social organization. Large-scale destruction of villages, forced evacuations, and migration, especially during the intense periods of conflict in the Kurdish regions in the latter part of the 20th century, further disintegrated these socio-religious structures and the obligatory relationships between *ocaks* and *talips*.[8] In the face of these disruptions, however, other aspects of their religious life, such as the veneration of sacred places (*jiare*), became increasingly important as focal points for maintaining religious practice and cultural identity, offering a more diffuse and less hierarchically dependent means of spiritual connection.[8]

Sacred Texts and Orality: The Buyruk, Deyişler, Menkıbeler, and the Power of Spoken Word

Alevi spirituality places a strong emphasis on esoteric (batin) understanding over exoteric (zahir) legalism. While Alevis generally revere the Quran as a holy book, they also often accord respect to other sacred scriptures, such as the Torah, the Psalms, and the Gospels, sometimes encapsulated in the saying "Dört kitabın dördü de Hak" ("All four books are Truth").[5] Their interpretation of these texts, however, tends to focus on the inner, mystical meanings rather than literal adherence.

A significant written text within Alevism is the *Buyruk*, a collection of discourses, teachings, and traditional wisdom attributed to important figures like Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq or Sheikh Safi al-Din Ardabili.[5] The *Buyruk* manuscripts, often preserved within *Dede* families, contain important information on Alevi rituals, ethics, and cosmology. The scholarly work of researchers like Ayfer Karakaya-Stump has highlighted the critical role of these manuscripts found in the private archives of Alevi *Dede* families for understanding Alevi history and doctrine.[7]

Despite the existence of texts like the *Buyruk*, oral tradition has historically been the primary mode of transmission for Alevi beliefs, history, and cultural values.[15] This oral

corpus is rich and diverse, including epic tales (*destan*), religious hymns and poems (*deyiş*, *nefes*, *beyit*), songs (*klam* and *stran* in Kurdish), and mythical or didactic stories (*menkıbe*).[15] These are often performed with the accompaniment of the *saz* (*bağlama*), which serves not just as a musical instrument but as a sacred vessel for the spoken and sung word.[16] This vibrant oral literature functions as a living archive of communal memory, encoding spiritual insights, moral lessons, historical experiences of suffering and resistance, and devotion to Ali and other revered figures.[26] Pir Sultan Abdal, one of the "seven great bards" (*yedi ulu ozan*) of the Alevi-Bektaşi tradition, is a dominant figure whose poetry, embodying themes of social justice and spiritual defiance, is a cornerstone of this oral heritage.[20]

The strong reliance on oral tradition and esoteric knowledge, often transmitted through specific *ocak* lineages and within the sanctified space of the *cem*, served as a protective mechanism. It allowed for a degree of secrecy and adaptability in the face of external pressures and persecution, as knowledge was not solely dependent on easily accessible or destructible written texts.[4] However, this system was also vulnerable when those lineages were disrupted, or when the ritual spaces essential for transmission were closed or destroyed. In such contexts, the written texts like the *Buyruks*, carefully guarded within *Dede* families, likely assumed even greater importance as anchors of tradition, even if their direct accessibility remained limited to a few. The later "Alevi revival" and the move towards more public expressions of Alevi identity also brought these oral and written traditions into new public arenas, sometimes leading to new interpretations and debates about their meaning and significance.[4]

III. Alevi Kurds Under Ottoman and Republican Rule (Pre-2010)

Experiences in the Ottoman Empire

The history of Alevi communities, including Alevi Kurds (often referred to as Kızılbaş in Ottoman sources), within the Ottoman Empire was frequently marked by suspicion, persecution, and marginalization. A significant turning point occurred in the early 16th century with the rise of the Safavid Empire in Iran, a Shiite state that became a major political and ideological rival to the Sunni Ottoman Empire.[5] The Safavids had strong connections to and drew support from Anatolian Kızılbaş groups, which led the Ottoman authorities to view the Kızılbaş with deep distrust, often accusing them of heresy and political disloyalty. The reign of Sultan Selim I (1512-1520), in particular, is remembered for harsh measures taken against the Kızılbaş population in Anatolia, including massacres and forced displacements, in the context of his wars against the

Safavids.[9]

As a result of this sustained pressure, many Alevi communities were forced to retreat to remote rural and mountainous areas, such as Dersim, where they could practice their faith in relative secrecy and maintain a degree of autonomy.[4] They were often labeled as heretics (*rafizi*, *zındık*) by the Ottoman religious establishment and subjected to discriminatory policies. During the later Ottoman period, particularly in the Hamidian era (reign of Sultan Abdülhamid II, 1876-1909), official discourse often depicted Alevis as communities "living in ignorance and deviance." There were state-sponsored efforts aimed at "guiding" them towards orthodox Sunni Islam, effectively a policy of religious assimilation.[9]

Despite this general atmosphere of oppression and the state's efforts to impose Sunni orthodoxy, the interactions between Alevi Kurdish tribes and Ottoman authorities, as well as with other local groups, were not uniformly hostile. Local dynamics could be complex. For instance, some powerful Kurdish tribal leaders, even those aligned with the Ottoman state like Ibrahim Pasha of the Milan confederation (who led a Hamidiye regiment), are reported to have maintained good relations with Alevi tribes in regions like Dersim, sometimes offering them a degree of protection or alliance.[9] This indicates that local power structures and inter-tribal relations could sometimes mediate or complicate the central state's policies of persecution.

The Turkish Republic: Kemalist Reforms, Secularism, and Unfulfilled Promises

The establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923 under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk ushered in an era of radical secularization reforms aimed at modernizing the state and society and creating a new, unified Turkish national identity.[1] Initially, these reforms generated a degree of optimism among Alevis, including Alevi Kurds. The abolition of the Ottoman Caliphate, the emphasis on secularism, and the promise of a modern, egalitarian citizenry led many to hope for an end to the religious discrimination and persecution they had endured under the Ottoman Empire.[28] Some Alevis, therefore, were early supporters of the Kemalist movement and its ideals.

However, the brand of secularism implemented by the Turkish Republic did not translate into full religious freedom or official recognition for Alevis as a distinct religious community.[29] While the state distanced itself from overt religious governance in some respects, it also sought to control and homogenize the religious sphere. Alevism was often not acknowledged as a legitimate religious faith comparable to Sunni Islam; instead, it was frequently categorized as a cultural tradition, a historical curiosity, or a heterodox folk belief.[29] The Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet İşleri

Başkanlığı), established to manage religious affairs, overwhelmingly catered to the Sunni Muslim majority, and Alevi places of worship (*cemevis*) were not legally recognized or supported by the state.[5]

Simultaneously, the Kemalist project of nation-building was predicated on the idea of a unified Turkish nation. This had severe implications for non-Turkish ethnic groups, including Kurds. The 1924 Constitution, while establishing a republic, did not grant political autonomy to Kurds; on the contrary, policies were soon implemented to suppress Kurdish ethnic identity and language.[32] The Kurdish language was banned from use in public spaces, and Kurdish cultural expressions were suppressed. For Alevi Kurds, this meant that the promise of secular equality was profoundly undermined by a dual assault: their Alevi religious practices remained unrecognized and often proscribed, while their Kurdish ethnic identity was targeted for assimilation into a monolithic Turkish nationality.

A key piece of legislation that directly impacted Alevi religious life was the "Law for Closing the Dervish Lodges and Shrines" (Tekke ve Zaviyelerle Türbelerin Seddine ve Türbedarlıklar ile Bir Takım Unvanların Men ve İlgasına Dair Kanun, Law No. 677), enacted in 1925. This law led to the closure of Alevi religious centers, including *cemevis*, *dergahs* (Sufi lodges, some of which were central to Alevi communities), and *ocaks* (sacred hearths/lineages), and banned the activities of religious leaders and the use of religious titles.[1] This dealt a severe blow to the institutional structures of Alevism, including those of Alevi Kurds, disrupting traditional forms of religious organization, leadership, and communal worship. The Kemalist project, while ostensibly secular, paradoxically reinforced a Turkish-Sunni cultural hegemony. The secular state, instead of liberating Alevi Kurds from previous forms of religious oppression, imposed new forms of cultural and ethnic assimilation, failing to deliver on the promise of equal citizenship and effectively marginalizing them within the new national framework despite their initial, albeit cautious, hopes.

State Policies: Non-Recognition, Assimilation Efforts, and Turkification

Throughout much of the Republican era prior to 2010, Turkish state policies towards Alevi Kurds were characterized by a consistent pattern of non-recognition of their distinct ethno-religious identity, coupled with active efforts at assimilation.[8] Neither Alevism as a distinct religious faith (separate from a state-defined Islam) nor Kurdishness as a distinct ethnicity were officially acknowledged for many decades. This resulted in Alevi Kurds experiencing what has been termed a "double exclusion" – marginalized both for their Alevi beliefs within a predominantly Sunni society and for

their Kurdish ethnicity within a state promoting a singular Turkish national identity.[1]

Assimilation policies took various forms. A core component was "Turkification," which involved the systematic promotion of Turkish language and culture and the suppression of non-Turkish identities. Until 1991, official state discourse often referred to Kurds as "Mountain Turks," denying their distinct ethnic heritage.[32] In a similar vein, Alevism was frequently portrayed in official or semi-official narratives as an ancient Turkish folk tradition or a heterodox form of Turkish Islam, with its Central Asian shamanistic roots emphasized to align it with a "pure" Turkish identity, thereby downplaying or denying the specificities of Kurdish Alevism.[1]

Forced resettlement was another tool of assimilation. The 1934 Resettlement Law (İskân Kanunu) was designed to promote cultural homogeneity by forcibly relocating populations deemed non-Turkish or resistant to assimilation into Turkish culture, while settling "Turkish-cultured" populations in their place.[32] The Dersim region, a heartland of Alevi Kurdish culture and identity, was one of the primary targets of this law, culminating in the violent events of 1937-1938.[32]

The suppression of the Kurdish language was a cornerstone of these assimilationist policies. Following the 1980 military coup, the Kurdish language was officially prohibited in both public and private life.[32] Speaking, publishing, or singing in Kurdish could lead to arrest and imprisonment. The use of Kurdish as a language of instruction in schools, whether public or private, remained illegal.[32] This linguistic repression directly impacted Alevi Kurds, for whom Zazaki and Kurmanji were primary languages of daily life and cultural expression.

The institutional framework of the state also reflected this exclusionary approach. The Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) primarily served and promoted Sunni Islam, providing funding for mosques and Sunni religious education, while Alevi *cemevis* received no state support and lacked legal recognition as places of worship.[5] This effectively rendered Alevi religious practices invisible or illegitimate within the official religious landscape of the country.

Legal Status and Enduring Discrimination: The "Double Minority" Burden

Legally and socially, Alevi Kurds endured a status of "double minority," facing discrimination and marginalization stemming from both their Alevi faith and their Kurdish ethnicity.[1] They were systematically subjected to oppression, alienation, and policies of forced assimilation by a state that largely refused to acknowledge their distinct identity.[1] This often translated into suspicion and mistrust from both the Sunni

majority population and state authorities.[4]

Numerous reports from international human rights organizations, such as Human Rights Watch, documented a wide range of human rights violations committed against Kurds in Turkey, many of which directly affected Alevi Kurdish communities.[30] These violations included forced displacement from villages, the destruction of homes and livelihoods, torture, extrajudicial killings, and severe restrictions on freedom of expression and association.[32] The official Turkish state narrative, for much of this period, continued to deny Kurdish ethnicity and sought to suppress or redefine Alevi religious distinctiveness within a Turkish-nationalist framework.[1]

The Turkish state's pre-2010 policies towards Alevi Kurds were thus marked by a fundamental and damaging contradiction. While the constitution espoused secularism and the state officially promoted a unified national identity, its actions and inactions fostered ethnic and religious hierarchies that systematically disadvantaged and persecuted Alevi Kurds. This environment of non-recognition, assimilation pressure, and discrimination constituted a form of "structural violence." It denied them fundamental cultural and religious rights and subjected them to societal prejudice and, at times, overt physical violence. Rather than fostering integration or loyalty to the state, these policies created deep-seated resentment, alienation, and a fertile ground for political mobilization as Alevi Kurds sought the recognition, equality, and justice that the state consistently failed to provide.

IV. Demographic Profile and Changing Social Fabric (Pre-2010)

Population Estimates, Geographical Distribution, and Challenges in Data Collection

Determining the precise demographic figures for Alevi Kurds in Turkey prior to 2010 is fraught with challenges, primarily because official Turkish censuses did not collect data on religious belief (beyond a general Muslim/non-Muslim categorization implicit in identity cards) or specific ethnic affiliation.[16] Estimates that do exist are often based on academic research, surveys by non-governmental organizations, or extrapolations, and can vary significantly, sometimes influenced by political considerations.[32]

For the broader Alevi population in Turkey, estimates commonly ranged from 15% to 25% of the total population.[2] One source from 2021, referencing earlier data, suggested that Alevis constituted about 20% of Turkey's population [31], while another indicated that Alevis might have been around 30% of the Muslim population in the early 20th century, with this figure declining to approximately 15% of the total Turkish

population by more recent times, partly attributed to assimilation.[38]

Regarding Alevi Kurds specifically, they are generally estimated to constitute a significant minority within the larger Alevi community and a notable segment of the Kurdish population. Some sources suggest that Alevi Kurds make up about 20% of all Alevis in Turkey.[1] Another academic source indicates that, according to some modern research, Alevis could comprise up to 30% of the total Kurdish population in Turkey.[39] If the total Alevi population was, for example, around 12 million (a conservative estimate often cited), then Alevi Kurds might number approximately 2.4 million, based on the 20% figure.[1] However, all such figures must be treated with caution due to the lack of official data and the complexities of self-identification.

Historically, Alevi Kurdish populations were concentrated in specific regions of Anatolia, primarily in a wide arc stretching across parts of Eastern and Central Anatolia. Key provinces with significant Alevi Kurdish communities included Dersim (Tunceli), which is considered a cultural and spiritual heartland, Sivas, Malatya, Maraş (Kahramanmaraş), Erzincan, Adıyaman, Bingöl, Elazığ, Erzurum, Kayseri, and Muş.[1] Within these regions, Alevi Kurds often inhabited distinct villages or clusters of villages, sometimes in mountainous and relatively isolated areas, which contributed to the preservation of their unique cultural and religious practices.

Table: Overview of Alevi Kurdish Demographic Estimates (Pre-2010)

Source (Scholar/Organization/Reference)	Year of Estimate/Publication	Estimated Alevi Population in Turkey (Range or Figure)	Basis for Alevi Kurd Estimate	Resulting Estimated Alevi Kurd Population (Approximate)	Notes/Limitations
[31] (Hasan Kaya, citing "some sources")	2021 (comment on older data)	~20% of Turkey's population	Alevis are "both Turks & Kurds"	Not specified directly, implies a substantial Kurdish component	General statement; lacks precise methodology for Kurdish Alevi proportion.
[7] (Oxford Reference)	2016 (article date)	~15 million	Not specified	Not specified	Provides a general Alevi population

					estimate.
[1] (Gunes, citing various scholars)	2020 (article date)	~12 million (15% of Turkey's population)	Alevi Kurds estimated at 20% of Alevis in Turkey	~2.4 million	Based on scholarly consensus; acknowledges data difficulties.
[39] (Kaplan, citing modern research)	2014 (article date)	Not specified	Alevis are ~30% of Turkey's total Kurdish population	Varies with total Kurdish pop. estimate (e.g., 30% of 15-20M Kurds = 4.5-6M)	Highlights a different estimation approach; potentially higher figure.
[38] (Report cited by ArtiGercek)	Pre-2010 (report date implied)	Alevis ~15% of Turkey's population (down from 30% of Muslim pop. in early 20th C)	Not specified	Not specified	Focuses on overall Alevi decline due to assimilation; does not specify Kurdish Alevi numbers.
[2] (Massicard 2012, Vorhoff 2003, cited by Yildiz & Gunes)	2012, 2003	20-25% of Turkey's population (~16-20 million based on 80M pop.)	Alevis are ethnically heterogeneous (Turks, Kurds, Arabs)	Not specified directly	Provides a higher range for total Alevis; acknowledges Kurdish component.
[16] (Alevinet.org, citing academic research)	Pre-2010 (website info)	~20 million (out of 70 million population)	Not specified	Not specified	States Alevis are second largest belief community; notes lack of official stats.

Note: The table illustrates the variability and challenges in estimating Alevi Kurdish demographics. Figures are approximate and based on available snippets referencing

pre-2010 data or scholarly consensus formed before or around that time.

Migration, Urbanization, and their Impact on Traditional Lifestyles

Beginning in the 1950s and accelerating in subsequent decades, Alevi Kurdish communities experienced significant socio-economic transformations driven by large-scale migration from their traditional rural homelands.[1] This migration flowed in two main directions: internally, towards the rapidly growing industrial and metropolitan centers of western Turkey (such as Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir), and externally, towards Western European countries, particularly Germany, often as "guest workers" or later as asylum seekers.[1]

This movement was often impelled by a combination of factors, including economic hardship in underdeveloped rural areas, the search for better educational and employment opportunities, and, increasingly from the 1970s onwards, escalating political instability, discrimination, and direct violence. Forced evacuations of villages, particularly during the height of the armed conflict between the Turkish state and Kurdish militant groups (such as the PKK) in the 1980s and 1990s, also led to mass displacement, uprooting entire communities and fundamentally altering their rural way of life.[8]

Urbanization and migration had a profound impact on the traditional social fabric and religious practices of Alevi Kurds. The close-knit, village-based communities, where the hereditary *ocak-talip* system formed the backbone of religious and social organization, began to erode in the new urban environments.[1] The authority of traditional *Dedes* and the cohesion of *ocak* networks were often weakened as individuals and families became dispersed and exposed to new social influences and secularizing trends. However, despite the physical displacement and the disruption of traditional structures, many Alevi Kurds, particularly those from Dersim, maintained strong emotional and spiritual ties to their ancestral lands and sacred sites, which continued to serve as important symbols of identity and belonging.[8]

While migration and forced displacement were undeniably disruptive and often traumatic, they paradoxically contributed to new forms of Alevi Kurdish consciousness and mobilization. The concentration of Alevi Kurds in urban centers, both within Turkey and in the European diaspora, facilitated the formation of new communal associations, cultural organizations, and political networks. In these new settings, shared experiences of displacement, ongoing discrimination, and the challenges of adapting to urban or foreign environments often fostered a stronger sense of collective identity and a greater impetus for collective advocacy. Diaspora

communities, in particular, frequently found greater freedom to openly express their Alevi and Kurdish identities, organize politically, and articulate their demands for rights and recognition, often influencing and supporting similar movements back in Turkey.[1] This process was integral to the broader "Alevi revival" that gained momentum from the 1980s onwards, where Alevi Kurds actively participated in reclaiming and reasserting their cultural and religious heritage in new and often more politicized forms.

V. Eras of Conflict, Resistance, and Politicization (Pre-2010)

Early Twentieth-Century Uprisings: The Koçgiri (1921) and Dersim (1937-1938) Rebellions

The early years of the Turkish Republic were marked by significant uprisings in Kurdish-populated regions, with Alevi Kurds playing prominent roles in several key revolts against the nascent central government's policies.

The **Koçgiri Rebellion (1921)** erupted in the Koçgiri region, located in present-day eastern Sivas province, an area with a substantial Alevi Kurdish population.[5] While primarily an Alevi Kurdish uprising, it managed to garner some support from neighboring Sunni Kurdish tribes.[42] The leaders of the rebellion, who had connections with the Society for the Rise of Kurdistan (SAK), demanded political autonomy for Kurdish regions and the withdrawal of Turkish nationalist forces.[42] The rebellion was met with overwhelming military force by the Ankara government, led by figures like Nureddin Pasha. The suppression was brutal, resulting in the deaths of hundreds of Alevi Kurds and the devastation of the region.[31]

The **Dersim Rebellion (1937-1938)** stands as one of the most traumatic events in Alevi Kurdish history. This major uprising in the Dersim region was a response to the Turkish Republic's increasingly centralist policies, efforts at forced assimilation, and the imposition of state control over a historically semi-autonomous area.[8] The state's response was a massive military operation, involving tens of thousands of troops, aerial bombardment (in which Sabiha Gökçen, Atatürk's adopted daughter and one of the world's first female combat pilots, participated), and, according to some accounts, the use of poisonous gas.[13] The scale of the violence was immense. Official Turkish figures reported over 13,000 deaths, but other estimates from Kurdish sources and some scholars range from 40,000 to as high as 70,000 killed.[13] Thousands more were forcibly displaced and exiled to other parts of Turkey.[13] Key tribal and spiritual leaders of the Dersim Alevi Kurds, most notably Seyit Rıza, were captured and executed.[13] The Dersim events are widely considered by many Kurds, Alevis, and human rights

advocates to constitute a genocide or, at the very least, a state-perpetrated massacre of genocidal proportions.[13]

The brutal suppression of these early rebellions, particularly Koçgiri and Dersim, where Alevi Kurds were central figures, established a devastating pattern of violent state response to any assertion of Alevi Kurdish autonomy or resistance to assimilationist policies. This not only led to the physical decimation of communities and the elimination of their leadership but also instilled a deep-seated collective trauma and a profound mistrust of the state. This historical memory of violence and betrayal profoundly influenced subsequent Alevi Kurdish political attitudes, their engagement with leftist ideologies, and their later participation in various forms of resistance and political movements, including the Kurdish nationalist struggle. The experience of existential threat at the hands of the state fostered a powerful narrative of injustice that fueled ongoing demands for recognition, rights, and accountability.

A Legacy of Violence: The Maraş (1978), Çorum (1980), Sivas (1993), and Gazi (1995) Massacres

The pattern of violence against Alevi communities, often with Alevi Kurds being primary targets or significantly affected, continued into the later decades of the 20th century. These events, frequently instigated by Turkish nationalist and Sunni extremist groups, often with alleged state complicity or, at best, inaction by security forces, further entrenched feelings of vulnerability and alienation among Alevis.

The **Maraş Massacre (December 1978)** was a particularly horrific outbreak of violence in the city of Kahramanmaraş (Maraş). Over several days, organized mobs of Turkish nationalists, often associated with the Grey Wolves (Ülkücüler), and religious fundamentalists attacked Alevi neighborhoods, resulting in the deaths of at least 105 Alevis, many of whom were Kurdish Alevis.[1] Hundreds of Alevi-owned homes and businesses were looted and burned, with properties having been marked beforehand, indicating a degree of premeditation.[31] Eyewitness accounts and reports from the period describe extreme brutality, including stabbings, burnings, and other gruesome forms of murder.[31] Emma Sinclair-Webb of Human Rights Watch later noted that the perpetrators were often ordinary people and that religious affiliation became the central criterion for targeting victims.[31]

The **Çorum Massacre (May-July 1980)** involved a series of violent attacks and clashes in the city of Çorum, instigated by similar right-wing nationalist and Sunni extremist groups against the Alevi population.[16] These events resulted in numerous Alevi deaths (one source lists 80 killed [31]) and widespread destruction of property. The

Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) later sought to present itself as a defender of Alevis by claiming to target some of the nationalist perpetrators involved in the Çorum events.[10]

The **Sivas Massacre (July 2, 1993)** sent shockwaves through Turkey and the Alevi community. During the Pir Sultan Abdal cultural festival in Sivas, a large mob of Islamist protestors, incited by anti-Alevi rhetoric, surrounded and set fire to the Madımak Hotel, where many intellectuals, writers, and artists, a significant number of whom were Alevi, were staying.[1] Thirty-three individuals, along with two hotel staff, perished in the blaze. Security forces were heavily criticized for their failure to intervene effectively to stop the mob or rescue those trapped inside.[28] The Sivas Massacre became a potent symbol of the dangers faced by Alevis and secular intellectuals and was a major catalyst for the intensification of the Alevi revival and political mobilization.

The **Gazi Quarter Events (March 1995)** in Istanbul began with provocative armed attacks on Alevi-frequented coffee houses in the predominantly Alevi Gazi neighborhood.[1] These attacks sparked widespread protests by Alevi residents, which were met with lethal force by the police, resulting in numerous deaths and injuries. The events spread to other Alevi neighborhoods in Istanbul and Ankara. The Gazi incidents starkly highlighted the Alevi community's continued vulnerability to violence and the perceived bias of state security forces against them.

Other notable incidents of violence targeting Alevis mentioned in sources include a massacre in Malatya in 1978 and the Zini Gediği massacre in Erzincan in 1938, which also involved Alevi victims.[31]

Table: Chronology of Major Violent Events and Rebellions Affecting Alevi Kurds (Pre-2010)

Year	Event	Location	Brief Description of Alevi Kurd Involvement /Victimization	Estimated Alevi Kurd Casualties (if available)	Key Sources
1921	Koçgiri Rebellion	Koçgiri region (Sivas)	Primarily Alevi Kurdish uprising for	Hundreds killed.	[10]

			autonomy; brutally suppressed.		
1937-1938	Dersim Rebellion/Massacre	Dersim (Tunceli)	Major Alevi Kurdish uprising against centralist policies; met with massive military force, mass killings, deportations.	13,160 (official) to 70,000+ (other estimates).	[13]
1938	Zini Gediği Massacre	Erzincan	Alevi victims.	Not specified.	[31]
1978	Malatya Massacre	Malatya	Attacks on Alevis.	Not specified.	[31]
1978 (Dec)	Maraş Massacre	Kahramanmaraş	Attacks by nationalists/extremists on Alevis (many Kurdish Alevi).	At least 105 Alevis killed.	[10]
1980 (May-July)	Çorum Massacre	Çorum	Attacks by rightist militants on Alevis.	Dozens killed (e.g., 80 cited).	[10]
1993 (July)	Sivas Massacre (Madımak Hotel)	Sivas	Arson attack by Islamist mob on hotel housing festival attendees (many Alevi intellectuals/artists).	33 attendees + 2 hotel staff killed.	[22]

1995 (March)	Gazi Quarter Events	Istanbul (Gazi neighborhood)	Police violence against Alevi protestors following attacks on Alevi businesses.	17-23 Alevis killed.	[22]

This chronology of violence underscores the persistent persecution faced by the Alevi community, with Alevi Kurds often being directly targeted or disproportionately affected due to their dual minority status and geographical concentration in historically contested regions.

Political Awakening and Mobilization: Engagement in Leftist Politics, Kurdish Nationalism, and Alevi Rights Advocacy

The historical experiences of oppression and non-recognition significantly shaped the political orientation and mobilization of Alevi Kurds prior to 2010. Their voting patterns and political affiliations evolved over time, reflecting changing socio-political dynamics and their search for representation and rights. In the 1950s, during the early multi-party period in Turkey, a considerable number of Alevi Kurds reportedly voted for the Democrat Party.[10] However, by the 1960s, their support became more fragmented, with votes distributed among various parties, including the Republican People's Party (CHP), the New Turkey Party, the Justice Party, and notably, the Workers' Party of Turkey (TIP). The TIP was one of the first parties to openly address Alevi rights in its program, which garnered it some support in Alevi-populated areas.[10]

The 1970s witnessed a growing politicization across Turkish society, and Alevi Kurds were increasingly drawn to leftist political movements and ideologies.[1] The radical left, with its emphasis on social justice, equality, and anti-establishment rhetoric, found a receptive audience among Alevis, who saw parallels between their historical experiences of oppression and the leftist critique of the existing order. Conversely, the rise of politicized Islam and right-wing nationalism during this period often exacerbated tensions and pushed Alevi Kurds further towards secular and leftist political alternatives, including the CHP in some instances.[10]

A pivotal development in Alevi Kurdish political mobilization was their significant involvement in the Kurdish nationalist movement, particularly from the late 1970s onwards. Alevi Kurds played a notable role in the formation and ranks of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), with several individuals of Alevi Kurdish background emerging as

prominent figures within the organization, such as Mazlum Doğan and Sakine Cansız.[1] The PKK, in its efforts to build a broad base of support among Kurds, actively appealed to Alevi Kurds, often presenting itself as a defender of their rights and a force against state oppression and the nationalist groups that had targeted them (as in the Çorum and Maraş massacres).[10] Support for the PKK among Alevi Kurds reportedly increased, especially in the 1980s, following the 1980 military coup, which severely suppressed the Turkish left and created a political vacuum that the PKK partly filled.[10]

Alongside engagement in broader leftist and Kurdish nationalist movements, specific Alevi Kurdish organizations also began to emerge. For example, the Union of Alevis of Kurdistan (Kürdistan Dindarlar Birliği) was established in 1989, initially as part of the PKK's political front (ERNK), but later evolving into a more distinct organization focused on the Alevi community within Kurdistan. This organization also published the magazine *Zülfikar*, which specifically targeted the Alevi Kurdish community.[1] Later, in 2008, the Democratic Alevi Associations (Demokratik Alevi Dernekleri) were formed, drawing a predominantly Kurdish Alevi membership and establishing centers across Turkey.[1] Furthermore, pro-Kurdish political parties, starting with the People's Labour Party (HEP) in 1990 and its successors, provided important platforms for articulating Alevi political demands, including those specific to Alevi Kurds, as part of broader calls for democratization, minority rights, and equality in Turkey.[1]

The Alevi Revival: Reasserting Identity in a Changing Turkey

The 1980s and 1990s witnessed a significant cultural and political phenomenon known as the "Alevi revival".[1] This period was characterized by a new openness among Alevis, a more public expression of their beliefs and cultural practices, the widespread formation of Alevi associations and foundations, and the increasingly public performance of rituals like the *cem* ceremony, often in newly constructed or designated *cemevis*.[4]

This revival was, in part, a reaction to the socio-political climate in Turkey, particularly the state's promotion of a "Turkish-Islamic synthesis" following the 1980 military coup, which emphasized a nationalist interpretation of Sunni Islam and further marginalized non-Sunni and non-Turkish identities.[4] The perceived re-Islamization of Turkish society and public life spurred Alevis to assert their own distinct identity more forcefully. Traumatic events like the Sivas Massacre in 1993 and the Gazi Quarter incidents in 1995 acted as powerful catalysts, galvanizing Alevi communities and intensifying their activism for recognition, religious freedom, and an end to

discrimination and violence.[1]

For Alevi Kurds, the Alevi revival had specific and complex implications. It provided an important space for them to reclaim and articulate their dual identity – both Alevi and Kurdish – which had long been suppressed or denied. They began to form new religio-political institutions, develop theological discourses that reflected their particular experiences and perspectives, and adapt or revitalize rituals. In these new public expressions, Alevi Kurds often emphasized values such as gender equality (a traditional feature of Alevi practice), social harmony, environmentalism (reflecting their traditional reverence for nature), and a strong commitment to secularism, often defined in opposition to political Islam.[8]

The Turkish state's attitude towards the Alevi revival was ambivalent. In the early 1990s, there were some signs of state support for Alevism, or at least a greater tolerance for Alevi cultural expression. This was partly interpreted as a strategic move by the state to counter the growing influence of the PKK among Alevi Kurds by promoting Alevism as an alternative, less politically threatening, form of identity.[28] However, deep-seated suspicion of Alevis, particularly their historical association with leftist politics and their distinct religious practices, persisted within state institutions.

The Alevi revival, therefore, was not just a religious or cultural reawakening for Alevi Kurds; it was also an arena for navigating and asserting their complex identity in a political landscape increasingly polarized by the Kurdish conflict and the state's responses to it. This sometimes led to tensions within the broader Alevi movement, particularly with some Turkish Alevi groups, over the degree of emphasis that should be placed on Kurdish ethnic identity and specific Kurdish political demands. Alevi Kurds often sought to ensure that their unique concerns as both Alevis *and* Kurds were addressed within the larger Alevi rights discourse.

VI. Cultural Expressions and Identity Discourses (Pre-2010)

The Vibrancy of Oral Literature: Themes of Faith, Suffering, and Resistance in Klam, Stran, and Deyiş

Alevi Kurdish culture is deeply rooted in a rich and vibrant oral tradition, which has served as the primary vehicle for transmitting religious teachings, historical memory, cultural values, and communal identity across generations, especially in the absence of state-supported educational or cultural institutions.[15] This oral literature encompasses a variety of genres, including *deyiş* (religious hymns or poems, a term common in Turkish Alevi contexts but also used), *klam* and *stran* (Kurdish terms for

songs, often with epic or lyrical content), *menkıbe* (mythical, hagiographic, or didactic religious stories), and *destan* (epics).[15]

The themes explored in this oral corpus are diverse and reflect the core tenets of Alevi belief and the historical experiences of the community. Central themes include the profound veneration of Ali, Hassan, Hussein, and the Twelve Imams; the tragedy of Karbala and the suffering of the Ahl al-Bayt; mystical love for the divine (*Haqq*); the importance of morality, social justice, and humanism; reverence for nature; and narratives of resistance against oppression and tyranny.[15] The figure of Pir Sultan Abdal, the 16th-century Alevi poet and rebel, is particularly prominent in this tradition. His *deyişler*, which articulate themes of spiritual devotion, social critique, and defiance in the face of injustice, are widely known and sung, and his persona embodies the Alevi spirit of resistance.[10]

For Alevi Kurds, this oral literature also incorporates elements specific to their linguistic and regional context. Songs and stories often recount the deeds of local saints and revered figures, celebrate the beauty and sacredness of their ancestral lands (particularly regions like Dersim), and lament historical tragedies and massacres, such as the *tertele* of Dersim. These narratives serve as a powerful form of cultural memory, preserving the community's understanding of its past and shaping its collective identity. The performance of this oral literature is intrinsically linked to music, with the *saz* or *bağlama* being the indispensable accompanying instrument.[16] The *zakir* or *aşık* (bard/minstrel) who performs these songs and stories plays a crucial role as a carrier of tradition and a spiritual guide.

Music and Dance as Pillars of Cultural Continuity and Expression

Music and dance are not merely artistic expressions within Alevi Kurdish culture; they are integral components of religious worship, communal life, and cultural continuity. As noted, music, particularly the sound of the *bağlama* and the singing of *deyişler* and *nefesler*, forms the spiritual core of the *cem* ceremony.[5] This music is not for entertainment but is a form of prayer, meditation, and spiritual instruction, conveying profound theological and ethical messages.

The *semah*, the ritual dance performed by men and women together during the *cem*, is another pillar of Alevi cultural and spiritual expression.[5] With its often circular movements, the *semah* is rich in symbolism, representing the harmony of the cosmos, the cyclical nature of existence, the spiritual journey of the soul towards union with the Divine, and the shedding of the ego. The *semah* is performed to the accompaniment of the *bağlama* and sacred songs, and its forms can vary regionally,

reflecting local traditions and interpretations. For Alevi Kurds, the *semah* and the music of the *cem* are vital means of connecting with their heritage, expressing their faith, and reinforcing communal bonds. In a context where their religious practices were often suppressed or misunderstood, these performative arts have been crucial for maintaining identity and transmitting core values across generations.

Navigating Identity: Internal Debates, the "Alisiz Alevilik" Discourse, and Diaspora Influences

The Alevi revival and the increasing politicization of both Alevi and Kurdish identities from the 1980s onwards led to intensified discussions and sometimes debates about the nature of Alevi identity itself, including its relationship to Islam, its ethnic components (Turkish, Kurdish, Arab), and its political orientations.[8]

Within this context, some Alevi Kurds increasingly emphasized their distinctiveness not only from the Sunni majority but also from Turkish Alevi communities and, in some respects, from Sunni Kurdish nationalist narratives. They highlighted their unique historical experiences (such as the Dersim *tertele*), specific cultural practices, linguistic heritage (Zazaki and Kurmanji), and particular interpretations of Alevi belief.[8]

An interesting and sometimes controversial discourse that emerged, particularly within the Alevi diaspora in Europe (especially Germany), was the concept of "Alisiz Alevilik" or "Alevism without Ali".[5] This notion suggested an interpretation of Alevism that de-emphasized or reinterpreted the centrality of Ali and other Islamic figures, framing Alevism more as a humanistic philosophy, a cultural heritage, or an ethical system rather than a strictly religious faith tied to Islamic personages. For some, this was seen as an atheist or agnostic interpretation presented under the guise of Alevism.[41] For others, particularly in the European context, it may have been a strategy to achieve greater recognition and acceptance from secular host societies by distancing Alevism from Islam, which itself was sometimes viewed with suspicion.[41] There were accusations that the AKP government in Turkey later used this "Alisiz Alevilik" concept to try and create divisions within the Alevi community, portraying the European Alevi movement as inauthentic or politically motivated.[41] This discourse, while perhaps offering a way for some Alevi Kurds to navigate their complex identity in new contexts, also risked alienating more traditional Alevis and sparked considerable internal debate about the core tenets and future direction of Alevism.

The Alevi Kurdish diaspora, which grew significantly from the 1960s onwards due to labor migration and later political asylum, played a crucial role in shaping these identity discourses and in organizing Alevi and Kurdish rights advocacy.[27] Often

enjoying greater freedoms of expression and association than their counterparts in Turkey, diaspora communities established numerous cultural centers, associations, and media outlets. They became important hubs for political activism, cultural preservation, and the reinterpretation and reassertion of Alevi Kurdish identity in a transnational context. These diaspora activities, in turn, often had a significant influence on the Alevi movement and Kurdish politics within Turkey itself. The "Alisiz Alevilik" discourse, for example, while perhaps more prominent in Europe, reflected broader trends of secularization and re-evaluation of religious traditions among migrant communities and their descendants grappling with issues of identity, belonging, and recognition in multicultural societies.

VII. Conclusion

The Alevi Kurds by 2010: A Synthesis of Resilience, Enduring Challenges, and Evolving Identities

The history of the Alevi Kurds leading up to 2010 is a profound narrative of resilience in the face of sustained adversity. As a distinct ethno-religious community, they navigated a complex terrain shaped by their unique position at the confluence of Alevi religious identity and Kurdish ethnicity. Their syncretic faith, rich oral traditions, and distinct socio-religious structures, centered around the *ocak* system and the spiritual heartland of Dersim, were preserved for centuries despite often hostile political and social environments. From the suspicion and persecution under the Ottoman Empire, particularly after the rise of the Safavids, to the unfulfilled promises of secular equality under the Turkish Republic, Alevi Kurds consistently faced pressures of assimilation, non-recognition, and violence.

The 20th century was particularly tumultuous. Early Republican reforms, while ostensibly secular, led to the suppression of their religious institutions and Kurdish identity. The brutal crushing of the Koçgiri and Dersim rebellions in the 1920s and 1930s left an indelible scar of trauma and mistrust towards the state. This legacy of violence continued with horrific massacres in Maraş, Çorum, Sivas, and the Gazi Quarter of Istanbul in the later decades, events that underscored their vulnerability and fueled their political awakening. In response, Alevi Kurds engaged significantly in leftist politics and the Kurdish nationalist movement, with many playing key roles in organizations like the PKK, while also striving to articulate their specific rights as Alevis.

The Alevi revival of the 1980s and 1990s provided a crucial avenue for cultural and religious reassertion. For Alevi Kurds, this revival was intertwined with their struggle

for ethnic recognition, leading to the formation of their own institutions and a more public articulation of their distinct identity, often emphasizing values of social justice, secularism, and gender equality. Migration to urban centers and the European diaspora, though often born of hardship and displacement, paradoxically contributed to this politicization and the development of new forms of communal organization and identity expression. Discourses around identity, including debates such as "Alisiz Alevilik," particularly in the diaspora, reflected the ongoing process of adaptation and redefinition in response to historical experiences and contemporary challenges.

By 2010, the Alevi Kurds stood as a community that had demonstrated remarkable fortitude in preserving its cultural and religious heritage. However, they continued to face enduring challenges. The lack of full and unambiguous state recognition for Alevism as a distinct faith and for *cemevis* as legitimate places of worship persisted. The quest for justice and accountability for past atrocities, particularly the Dersim, Maraş, and Sivas massacres, remained a central and painful demand. Systemic discrimination in various spheres of life, coupled with the ongoing pressures of assimilation, continued to impact their daily lives and opportunities. Navigating their dual identity as both Alevi and Kurd in a political climate often hostile to both remained a complex endeavor.

Thus, as the Alevi Kurds entered the second decade of the 21st century, their identity was a dynamic and evolving construct – deeply informed by a historical memory laden with suffering and resistance, shaped by ongoing struggles for rights and recognition, and expressed through vibrant cultural forms and new modes of activism. Their story is a testament to the enduring power of cultural identity and the unyielding human spirit in the quest for dignity and justice.

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