

# On The Followers of the Path of Truth (Raa Haq)<sup>1</sup>

*Erdal Gezik*

*When it is the morning / Those who love their children / Who are devoted to the God / When the sun is greeting / The birds are chirping / Why are they chirping? / They are showing their gratitude to the God / Through the prayers of the birds / Find your own gratitude / Why are they chirping so gently? / They are showing their gratitude to the sun, to the light / Wake up / Wash your hands and face / Go and stand before the sun / Pray with the birds / In the course of the morning prayer / The birds are God's accepted ones.*

(Sodir ke / Kam ke ewladê xo ra haskeno / Duskinê îfîqatê Heqî / Rocî ke selam da / Mîrçikî wananê / Î mîrçikî qey wananê / Î Heqî rê minnete kenê / Wertê a dua mîrcikan de / Minneta xo bivînê / Hurdî hurdî qey wananê / Rocî rê, tîcî rê minnete kenê / Wircê ra / Dest û riyê xo bişuyê / Su vere roc / Î mîrçikan de minnete bikerê / Minneta wertê sodirî / Mîrçikî meqbulê Heqî yê.)

It was years ago in the Netherlands when I recorded this prayer in Kirmancki.<sup>2</sup> It was recited by Hatice K. who for the past two decades had been living far from her birthplace of Dersim (Tunceli). She was one of the few people I had met in western Europe who still observed the traditional rituals of the religion. For example, each morning her daily routine consisted of turning her face to the east and reciting this prayer. Despite feeling satisfied spiritually, there was a loneliness within her religiosity; because the rituals she preserved over the years were not experienced by her family members anymore. Even though, she had taught her children her own language, they would not follow her lead in the morning in reciting the prayer. During my interview, I found her husband's attitude towards topic of our conversation bit unnerving. He frequently interrupted our conversation by implying that his wife was telling superstitious stories. And if I had spoken to him, he would have told me the real history of how Alevis migrated once from Iran.

## Researching Alevism

The fact of the matter was that the conditions under which this elderly woman continued to practice her faith could be seen through out the state of Alevi religion. The isolation she endured did not only reflect the existing gap between the older and younger generation of this religion: but also the

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2 Kirmancki is the native designation for Zazaki.

marginalization of the traditional Alevism by the moderate Alevi intellect; as well as, defeating those whose knowledge was based on oral legacy and of those who had gained their knowledge through books. One can argue that all of this was an outcome of the depressed and unprivileged situation the religion had to endure in Turkey. However, this instant explanation will only prevent us from analyzing the structural problems Alevism had to face.

The Alevi revival in the last thirty years witnessed two parallel developments that often did not coexist in harmony. Most likely, for the first time in their history numerous initiatives, foundations, religious centers, journals (etc.) were established in different cities of Turkey and western Europe to bring ordinary Alevis from all regions together for an opportunity to become acquainted. During these gatherings it became apparent that there were differences existing between groups and the regions who called themselves Alevi. It is hard to ignore that this caused some what of a displeasure for the foreman of the revival whose favour was to create a unity within the Alevi religion. They certainly could argue this purpose was necessary to overcome the political weakness of the group. However, the developments of the past decades have shown us to look beyond this thought process.

Despite the fact that the designation “Alevi” is used indiscriminately for all Alid groups in Asia Minor, there exists other terms like Kizilbash, Tahtaci, Caferi, Nusayri, etc. Most of these names are historical, tribal, ethnically or regionally related. Exploring these groups with all their memories, rituals and nuances definitely would support our understanding of Alid formations in Anatolia. Nevertheless, the Alevi approach has been to neglect the differences while imposing a linear all covering history. This has had an adverse effect especially on the Kurdish Alevis. Although one of the two largest Alevi groups in Turkey, ignoring them was made easier by the political situation in Turkey where everything related to Kurdishness was banned and oppressed for a long time. Until recently, the Alevi revival did not challenge instead complied with this policy. Due to input of fieldwork carried out by activists and researchers (mainly living members of the community in Europe) in the last decade our knowledge of them increased rapidly. Currently, we are not only better informed about their authentic beliefs, religious organizations, ceremonies performed in Kurdish, but also have a better understanding of different designations used by them.

Expanding our understanding of these groups is an important addition to attempts to free the Alevi history constricted within “Alevi-Bektashi” dichotomy. This is an important acknowledgement of the Alevi studies. The Bektashi order, for extensive period of time tolerated by the Ottomans, could integrate many of Schia, Alid or heterodox groups active between 16th and 19th century, into their own organization. The literature produced by the sufis or dervishes associated with the order is accepted as Alevi-Bektashi heritage. These sources, that had a substantial influence on the Alevi Studies had in fact disregarded the traditional heritage of rural Alevi communities, which was mostly transmitted by orality. It also caused not sufficiently exploring the role holy lineages (“ocaks”) played in the creation process of Alevi identity. Understanding the contribution of these families (also called “sayyids”) like Ağucan, Kureşan, Baba Mansur, Şah İbrahim Veli, Hubyar Sultan, Dede Garkın and others to carry on the tradition, can not be realized under the shadow of Bektashi order. This is due to a simple reason that the dynamics both entities were settled on differed.

Seen by Ottoman state as heretics, the Alevis inhabited mainly rural areas, far from administration centres. Despite this, one should not forget that they were politically, economically and religiously subjected to an empire. Being labelled as Shia did not mean that they could exclude themselves from these. Par excellence, the sayyid families themselves were part of a religious activity that shared common interests, doctrines and locations in Anatolia and beyond. For instance, up to the beginning of 20th century a sayyid from Dersim could travel among his disciples (“talibs”) in different parts of Anatolia and regularly visit the holy places in Syria and Iraq. The Bektashi

order, including the shrines connected to it, were only one of the stations in the holy lineage network. That these were not indispensable was shown when the order was closed by the Ottomans in 1826. This would not have any effect on the activities of the sayyids. On the contrary, during the 19th century they would expand their territorial influence once more.

For the ordinary rural Alevis, the religion was mainly passed through orality. However, underscoring this aspect did not mean that written sources had no impact on the establishment and protection of the Alevi religion. Regardless of the oppression that existed, the Alevi families had in their possession an important corpus of written sources. The fact that the 20th century was an era of contradictions and poor intellectual activity for Alevism, should not lead to general presumption. For example, an impressive part of written sources of Alevis did emerge in the 16th century. Also, the emphasis some have put on the relation between literacy, heterodoxy and inconsistency of rituals and doctrines should be re-evaluated. The, inconsistency existing between different Alevi communities may also be a natural outcome of uncommon cultural and historical backgrounds rather than their literacy.

Lastly, the history of Alevis organized by holy lineages should not be written solely based on religious matters. Social and tribal structures should also be included in the history. This dependency did influence more than we presume the religious organization, local identity and memory. In addition to this, the mobility, conflicts and deportations the nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes experienced did not only strengthen the Alevi community, but added a dynamic dimension to its development. At the same time tribalism also played a role in the relationship between the Alevis and the state. Not to forget that the conflicts between the tribes and the state or oppressing of tribal activities did not always have a religious ground.

All of these assessments can be collaborated by more than one Alevi group.

## **Kurdish Alevis**

If attributing Ali, the cousin of prophet Mohammed, and his descendants (imams) an exceptional value and having cem-ceremonies as main ritual gathering, are considered as the two basic distinct characteristics, the term Alevi may include the following subgroups in Turkey and Middle East: Kizilbash, Bektashi, Ehl-i Haq, Kakais, Shabeks, Tahtacis. Recently, another term was added to this popular list: Raa Haq or Riya Heqi (the Path of Godh/Truth).<sup>3</sup> This is a Kurdish designation that had been used in the past by the eastern Alevis for their religious beliefs. As a result of field research this information came to light and captured the attention of the public quickly. The question then arose: who are the disciples of Path of Truth and do we have enough arguments to list them as a separate subgroup?

To be able to answer this question, I will mainly concentrate on the consistency of the religious organization.<sup>4</sup> The Kurdish Alevis are settled in the eastern districts of Anatolia like Maraş, Adıyaman, Malatya, Sivas, Elazığ, Dersim (Tunceli), Erzincan, Erzurum, Bingöl, Kars and Muş. Some enclaves are also located in Central Anatolian districts of Çorum, Amasya, Kayseri (Sarız) and Gümüşhane (Kelkit). The areas to the West mainly speak Kurmanci and in and around Dersim Kırmancki. The social structures until the second half of 20th century were dominated by tribalism. The religious organizations were totally controlled by sayyid families whose villages were centrally located in Dersim. They believed themselves to be a descendants of Imam Husayn lineage and

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3 “Ewladê Haq” (Children of the God/Truth) or “Ewladê Raye” (Children of the Path) were also used as designations for themselves.

4 For the other aspects, see my forthcoming work “Geçmiş ve Tarih Arasında; Alevi Hafızasını Tanımlamak” (Between Past and History: Redefining the Alevi Memory).

claimed to have the right to carry the title of 'sayyid'. From these sayyids, whose authority and the number of disciples varied, most well-known were: Ağuçan, Baba Mansur, Kureşan, Derviş Cemal, Sinemilli, Şeyh Delil Berxecan, İmam Rıza, Şeyh Hasan, Cemal Abdal, Şeyh Ahmed, and Seyit Savun.

The organization of this religion was based on inherited positions ("maqam") and allegiance ("ikrar"). This led to an interlinked organization on three levels: 1) between tribes and sayyids; 2) between different sayyid families; 3) between the subfamilies belonging to the same sayyid lineage. The maqams themselves were also divided over three services. Each disciple, whether belonging to a tribe or holy lineage was linked to a rayber (the guide), pir (elder one, master) and murşid/pirê piran (master of masters). The centre of this organization was situated around the axes of pir-talip. At least once a year, the pir would visit his talib, and if needed assesses his allegiance, and then calls his prayers to his meal. The rayber is the closest one to the disciple and is responsible for his religious education. He also gives him daily support with problems and prepares him to be presented before the pir. Mursid, on the other hand, is the one who has a dominant position. He is actually not directly related to the disciple; as the pir of disciple's pir he may visit once in every seven-years and has the right to intervene between the disciple and his pir.

The position of the mursid brings us to the second pillar of this organization; that of the allegiance relationship between different sayyid lineages. The threefold of religious allegiance between the tribes and holy lineages exists also between different sayyid families. Each pir or rayber himself is also linked to a rayber, a pir and a mursid. These are not always serviced by different sayyid lineages and can also come from the same sayyid family. In the last case, the connection between different families is made only by representative members. The allegiance links between subfamilies belonging to the same sayyid lineage is the third pillar of this organization.<sup>5</sup>

On all the three levels the allegiances were predetermined by ancestors (fathers side) and could not be changed for personal preferences. Although exceptions were observed, it was determined that this rule was preserved on a large-scale in the last centuries. It is remarkable that although this stratification of allegiances has led to the creation of a complex socio-religious organization on different levels, it has provided a very important function. First of all, it prevented the disintegration of the whole structure which could have been caused by migrations or re-settlements of tribes. Secondly, it averted fragmentation that could be caused by the competition between different segments of a lineage or between different sayyid families.<sup>6</sup> Due to this, all the Kurdish Alevi tribes or sayyids living in the previously listed districts were grasped within a network of religious links. To give an example: a large amount of the tribes in eastern Dersim (Nazmiye, Pülümür and Tercan) are disciples of Kureşan sayyids. The Kureşanis themselves are disciples of in Pülümür living Seyit İbrahim branch of Baba Mansuris. The pirs of Seyit İbrahim come from the Seyit Kasim branch of Baba Mansuris, living in Mazgirt. These Seyit Kasimis on the other hand have allegiance links to Seyit Savun and Şeyh Ahmet sayyids, who live in Elazığ and Mazgirt. The latest ones are further linked to Ağuçan ocak, residing in Hozat and Malatya. The protractedness of this system is shown by the Kurdish Alevi tribes living in Central Anatolian district like Çorum and Amasya. The tribes here most likely were deported to these areas in 17th century, still have an allegiance to the same ocak (Imam Rıza) as their pirs.

Religious ties also had a unique influence on language of the sayyid families. Kirmancki is the mother tongue of most of the Kureşan families; The Mazgirt branches of Baba Mansur use Kurmanci, but many subfamilies of Baba Mansur are bililingual (Kurmanci and Kirmancki). The

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5 To be noted, the occupiers of these services get a material contribution ('çiralık') from their disciples. This enables them economically to continue their religious activities.

6 Unravelling this kind of hereditary structures could also contribute to a general understanding of the dynamics of these systems in the past.

pirs of Kureşan, coming from Tahsini (Pülümür), speak only Kirmancki. On the other hand, Seyit Kasimi's first language is Kurmanci. Seyit Savun's native language is Kurmanci, and Şeyh Ahmed is again bilingual. Though the Ağucans speak mainly Kurmanci, they also have branches who are bilingual or who only speak Kirmancki.

Definetly, it was not the organization alone which made it possible to keep a body of tribes and saints together. Persistency of this complex system was made easier by some historical facts.

## **A Historical Overview**

At least three important periods should be reviewed here to explain the historical background. To be noted that on all the three headings discussions are in progress. The first one is about the historical origins of Alevism in Anatolia. The academic (as well popular) studies are for the most part focused on developments after 13th century. Thereby, these thesis are mainly concentrated around the figure of Hacı Bektash-i Veli (and the Bektashi Order) and Safavids (or the Order of Ardabil). The latest were active in Anatolia in the 15th and 16th centuries. New studies in the last decade point out to the importance of Abu'l-Wafâ' Tâj al-'Arifîn (d. 1107) and sufis and dervishes belonging to the Wafâ'iyya order as the previous organizers of Alevism in Asia Minor. This is especially apparent in the genealogy (silile) of the active Kurdish and Turcoman ocak families in the earliest period in eastern Anatolia where references are made to this order. The Ağuçan ocak, which has a center position within these families, legitimizes itself directly by Abu'l-Wafâ'. Although in the course of time the Bektashis and the Safavids did have a significant impact, apparently, the ocak families belonging to the line of Wafâ'iyya could have saved their independence.

Second critical chapter is determined by Ottoman-Safavid conflict. To see the competition between Sunni Ottomans and Kizilbash-Shia Safavids as an era when marginalization and oppression of Alevis began would be justified. Nevertheless, this should not blind us to overlook regional developments. At least for Dersim, this has to be taken into account. Though, beacuse of political and religious preferences of Chemishgezek notables (under which Dersim belonged) the relation with the Ottomans began problematic, the agreement Idris-i Bitlisi reached with Ottomans to grant Kurdish principalities autonomy did also include Chemishgezek. Due to this, the tribes and sayyids in Dersim could preserve their power and could even expand their influence around Dersim. This relative self rule in the area likely made it possible for Dersim to become a geographical center for the most of the Kurdish sayyid families. During the 19th century the self rule Dersim enjoyed increasingly became unsustainable. The Ottoman reforms to centralize the administration ended up with the elimination of Kurdish principalities. A social and political period of difficulties started. For Dersim this would continue till the first decades of the Republican era and would end with heavy military operations in 1937 and 1938. During the massacres of 1938, members of the ocak families also suffered extensively. After 1938, Dersim lost its central position and the sayyids their grip on Alevi tribes in and around the area.

It is also noteworthy to point out that the nationalistic movements of the end of 19th century and afterwards had different impact on the Alevis. For instance, while the Bektashis sympathized with İttihat ve Terraki Cemiyeti (Committee of Union and Progress) and later on with the Republic, the Kurdish Alevis regularly came in conflict with both of them. The uprising of Kochgiri in 1920-21 against the founders of the Republic illustrates this at its best. Again, although the unfavourable policies of the Kemalists against religious orders after 1924 was not objected by Bektashis, these were seen in Dersim as an attack on their identity.

## **Final remarks**

Although the Bektashi Order was banned in 1925, its name and ideas developed in the name of the order continued their impact afterwards. Often, these are served to legitimize a nationalistic view of Alevi history. There are also Alevis who are opposing this tendency.

Rediscovering of Raa Haq cannot be seen separately from this. The religious organization with Dersim as a historical centre is a fact. But, nevertheless one should also not neglect the destruction it went through during the Republican time. The faith is not practised any more as it did before. The younger generations never experienced the original rituals of their creed and most of them do not even know their native language.

Despite these, one can not over look the interest it has attracted. But, it seems to be politically, academically or symbolically motivated than a genuine interest in practicing the religion. Whether this is sufficient to discuss the revitalization of authentic rituals remains to be seen. It is more like the Dersimi woman who woke up in the morning everyday to pray to the sun on her own in the Netherlands; also in the original heimat of the religion itself the religion is forsaken and it wrestles with all sorts of obstacles.