Beyond essentialism: negotiating Alevi identity in urban Turkey

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In Turkey, the Alevi cultural ‘revival’ of the 1990s has been followed by a multifaceted identity-formation process that involves conflicting religio-cultural agendas, intersecting discourses and differing politico-ideological affiliations. Lacking a focus, this process continues to trigger an enriching public debate on Alevi identity, which has been coined an ‘enigma’ and is considered to be associated with ‘ambiguity’ and ‘ambivalence’ by many. What lies beneath the veil of ambiguity has to do with the ‘anti-essentialist’ transformation of Alevism, which reaches beyond religious, cultural and political orthodoxies. As a result of diverse political loyalties, contestation of discourses on Alevi culture and identity and the equivocal character of the Alevi subject, the Alevis seem to be resisting essentialism. In urban Turkey, an anti-essentialist discourse potentially influencing Alevism, I argue, enables the Alevi self to act with a sense of reflexivity and to search for ways to avoid political, cultural or religious orthodoxies.

Keywords: Alevi; Alevism; essentialism; anti-essentialism; syncretism; Turkey

The Alevi question has recently earned legitimate ground in the political public debate in Turkey. The Alevi, comprising roughly 20% of the population in Turkey (Shankland 2003, p. 20), is a term denoting various groups of Islamic heterodoxy in opposition to the Sunni-orthodox position of the state and majority of the population. Being inspired from a diverse range of local and historical elements, Turkish Alevism is quite different from the Shia tradition in Iran as well as the Alawites of Syria. The Alevis have been occasionally invited to make a statement about who they really are. Given the unique history of the interaction between the Alevis and Sunnis in Turkey, those concerned have been reluctant to do so. The rapid transformation of the Alevi identity over the past two decades is hard to ignore. Due to the Alevi revivalism of the 1990s, it has become possible to commonly discuss Alevi culture and identity in Turkey. However, despite high levels of political and cultural involvement within the public sphere, Alevis in Turkey do not seem to project the image of a unified group, acting as a single political agent, to the extent that would enable the community to be taken seriously by the government. Thus, the aim of this article is to demonstrate how ‘ambivalence’ with regard to Alevi culture is closely related to the recent course of Alevi identity. More specifically, I will analyse the ways that Alevism interacts and copes with
the religious and cultural pressures of essentialism coming from both Sunni and Alevi parties.

After an elaboration on the meaning of Alevi ‘cultural revival’, I will define and discuss the relevance of essentialism and syncretism in regard to the Alevi case in Turkey. I will then contextualise the state of ‘ambivalence’ in Alevism, which emanates from a culturally and politically diverse discursive agenda. By referring largely to in-depth interviews with young Alevis, I will argue that a certain discourse exists in Alevism that is shaped and strategically used by some Alevi individuals as part of an Alevi mindset. On this account, the discussion will attempt to contribute to the understanding of how some young Alevis counteract the Sunni policies of homogenisation and monopolisation of Islam in line with state-centric conventions inherited from the Ottoman past.

**Alevi revivalism**

The growing visibility of the Alevis and the emergence of a new Alevi identity during the late 1980s and 1990s have been referred to by different scholars as Alevi ‘revivalism’ (Çamuroğlu 1998), an Alevi ‘renaissance’ (White and Jongerden 2003) or a cultural ‘explosion’ (Sökefeld 2008, p. 10). During the 1980s, with the advent of liberalisation, the cultural sphere in Turkey began to attain legitimacy vis-à-vis strictly political discourses. Towards the end of the decade, the Alevis found a cultural space that would enable them to be more assertive in reformulating and publicising their collective identity. As the proliferation of identities gained momentum within the public domain and as the Alevi identity became particularly more visible by the 1990s, it became possible to discuss the existence of a new Alevi ‘revival’ in urban Turkey. Zeidan claims that as Kemalist secularism lost its appeal during the 1990s, political Islam raised its popularity in a manner similar to the revivalist movement in Alevi culture, which has highlighted the lost rituals of Alevism (1999, p. 75). According to Göker and Erman, four different sets of factors triggered the Alevi revival in Turkey (2000, p. 99). The first was globalisation, which had been created by the fall of the communist block and its impact on the leftist groups in Turkey. The second was the rise of Islamism, which had contributed to the formation of a secular reaction. The third was the politicisation of ethnic groups fostered by further migration to metropolitan areas. And the fourth was the rise of new media characterised by private TV channels and radio stations, which in turn opened up a representative space for various Alevi organisations and for the Alevis in general (Göker and Erman 2000, pp. 99–100).

By the 1990s, contrary to the efforts to assimilate Alevis into the wider Sunni society, a new generation of young Alevis began to rediscover their past and initiated the new Alevi revival in the city. For van Bruinessen, ‘there was among Alevis of all generations a strong reaction to the previous flirtation with left radicalism, which expressed itself in a desire to know more about their own religious traditions’ (2000, p. 37). The Alevi cultural revival involved a process of reinterpretation of Alevi history, culture and religion. By means of a wave of
‘invention of traditions’ (Hobsbawm 1983, pp. 1–14), the Alevi in urban Turkey seized the opportunity to ‘come out’ by speaking out and critically discussing issues on identity to an unprecedented extent (Zeidan 1999, p.78).

The revival of Alevi culture in Turkey is not entirely independent of a parallel process that took place in Germany during the 1980s, adding a transnational dimension to Turkey’s Alevi equation (Massicard 2007, pp. 76–77). The growing number of texts on Alevism, the transition from oral rituals to written materials in the city and the incorporation of secular, modern elements into the Alevi mindset triggered an Alevi cultural ‘boom’ that was initiated in the late 1980s and still seems to be in process. The Alevi went through a process of transformation from ‘a closed and persecuted minority sect into a “reinvented” public cultural community through the complex interplay of various actors at local, national and transnational levels’ (Şahin 2005, pp. 465–466). Urban Alevi, nowadays, read, discuss and criticise everything about the Alevi culture and religion and relate themselves individually to what they interpret as Alevism.

**On syncretism and essentialism**

There has been an ongoing discussion of how to agree upon an ‘authentic’ definition of Alevism. Approaches to define Alevism focus on two main questions: first, whether Alevism can be regarded as within Islam or outside of Islam; and second, whether Alevism is a religion or a culture (Şahin 2005, p. 479). Addressing these questions can potentially determine one’s political position in Turkey via Turkish nationalism, Kurdish nationalism, modernity, secularism, atheism, Islam and socialism. Thus formulating the frame of Alevi allegiance requires an inescapable encounter and a confrontation with various political and religious discourses in Turkey and thereby contributes to a bargaining process between Alevi and non-Alevi positions.

The controversial debate on the definition of Alevism is closely related to the question of essentialism in connection with the role of religion and ethnicity within the identity-formation process. Essentialism is an idea that is potentially influential, particularly in the making of a religious, cultural or ethno-national identity. It goes hand in hand with a certain degree of anachronism that redefines and crystallises an identity in a timeless space. The essential given can be a sacred text, an assumed blood tie with the ancient past or the privilege of being chosen as the special community. According to Herzfeld,

> The distinctive mark of essentialism . . . lies in its suppression of temporality: it assumes or attributes an unchanging, primordial ontology to what are the historically contingent products of human or other forms of agency. It is thus also a denial of the relevance of agency itself. (2002, p. 288)

A primordial attachment can sometimes manifest itself in the form of essentialism. For Pieterse, ‘primordialism is the essentialist view of ethnicity in which ethnic
groups are taken as givens’ (2007, p. 33). Primordial forms can be filled with different agents such as assumed blood ties, race, language, region, religion or custom (Geertz 1994, pp. 31–32). The idea of essentialism is associated with ethnic primordial ties as well as with religion. ‘Just as ethnicity is easily essentialised as if it were a matter of blood, rather than a pliable social creation’, claims Bauman, ‘so religion, too, is widely essentialised as if it were about immutable sacred texts, rather than the convictions of living and changeable people’ (1999, p. 67). ‘Cultural essentialism’ is about conceiving and distinguishing people as bearers of a certain, bounded, supposedly homogeneous culture, and in this sense, it is closely related to what is called ‘cultural anxiety’ (Grillo 2003, p. 158). Culture is essentialised by an act of reification and is assigned an essential origin and history, and in this way, it is presented as ‘a thing which can be owned and therefore, stolen and lost’ (Wade 1999, p. 15).

In the light of this discussion, it is interesting to look at how Alevism interacts with essentialism in Turkey. A key issue that can be associated with essentialism in relation to Alevism is the ‘syncretic’ nature of the Alevi religio-cultural heritage. The syncretic character of Alevism has often been cited as part of a religious heterodoxy where there is a lack of consistent Alevi theology and where a wide range of influences by Buddhist, Christian, Manichaean, Zoroastrian as well as Islamic elements contributes to the process of identity formation (Ocak 2000, Mélikoff 2004). Thus ‘syncretism’ is used to describe an ‘anomaly’, a distinctive mark in Alevi culture that has flourished as an idiosyncratic feature of a unique historical development. In turn, emphasising on the ‘syncretic’ character of Alevism implicitly refers to a specific cultural amalgamation of two or more religious traditions that are supposedly non-syncretic. Hence, the use of Alevi syncretism accompanies assumptions about cultural purity, origins and clearly defined borderlines (Dressler 2009, p. 18). Likewise, Karakaya-Stump discerns a certain ‘paradigm of syncretism’ in Alevi research (2002). In this sense, one can claim the existence of a discursive proximity between the specific uses of Alevi syncretism on the one hand and essentialism on the other. However, any culture or religious tradition can reflect syncretic accumulation (Dressler 2009, Stewart 2010, p. 298). Following a similar reasoning, Friedman questions the relevance and use value of ‘hybridity’ in anthropological research (2002, pp. 26, 32). If the argument that ‘no pure culture exists’ is taken for granted, can a discussion of syncretism in terms of Alevi identity be academically instrumental at all? I will readdress and further elaborate on the issue of syncretism in the final part of this article.

Contestation of discourses and anti-essentialism

In Turkey, the Alevi cultural ‘revival’ of the 1980s led to the creation of a public platform for the representation of the Alevis. This new platform has revealed the complexity and immense diversity of both Alevism and its course of transformation. In fact, this complexity and diversity have been coined an ‘enigma’ (White and Jongerden 2003) and are considered to be associated with ‘ambiguity’
(Erdemir 2005) and ‘ambivalence’ (Erdemir 2005, Açikel and Ateş 2011) by many. What lies behind the use of this terminology, I argue, are features of Alevism that stand in opposition to essentialism, be it cultural, religious or political. There are three basic areas from where we can grasp the roots of Alevism’s anti-essentialist position:

1. The deep impact of migration and urbanisation.
2. Lack of an intellectual consensus on the origins of Alevism and ambivalence surrounding the term ‘Alevi’.
3. The co-existence of a multiplicity of discourses that actively contribute to the meaning-making process in the absence of religious, cultural and political orthodoxies.

Urbanisation and intense migration to the cities from the 1970s onward, which resulted in a process of ‘alienation’, has had an immense influence on how Alevism is perceived by Alevis themselves. With the advent of migration, the cultural rituals and religious articulation of Alevi belief declined significantly in urban centres. Being a figure of almost absolute authority in the village, the dede, as the spiritual leader, received everybody’s respect and admiration as the true model of a human being. But in the city this ceased to be the case, as the institution of dedelik lost its functional power. Shankland claims that the Sunni villages are better adapted to modern life by ‘keeping the patrimonial relationship between the citizen and the state’ (1998, p. 29). In other words, according to Shankland, by communicating and exchanging their own values with modernity, the Sunnis reached a point of reconciliation with the national authority of the central state. Alevis, on the other hand, being historically excluded from the official Sunni religious orthodoxy, lived in relatively remote villages, resulting in the preservation of local cultural traditions more or less in isolation from other villages and towns. Once this distance disappeared, some of them chose to leave their specific rituals and certain religious values in order to become ‘modern’. Whereas local and decentralised socio-cultural relations had worked well in rural Turkey, the dedes failed to address the young, educated Alevis in the city.

The institution of dedelik started losing its credibility among urban Alevi youth during the 1970s, especially with the impact of leftism, as dedelik was unable to find a modern space and urban language with which to express and transform itself. In metropolitan cities, in place of dedelik, Alevi institutions (dernek) and the cemevi took the lead, contributing to a process of making Alevism public on a national scale (Şahin Kaya 2009, pp. 451–453). Today, the authority of the dede is constantly challenged in the city by educated, questioning youth who are influenced by secular-atheist motives inherited from the leftism of the 1970s. One of the Alevi youth I interviewed, Burhan, articulated the indisputably weakening authority of the dede for his generation. ‘For my father, dede is a God-like figure’, he claimed. ‘If he says “die”, my father obeys; if he says “die” to us, we say “go away”’ (Burhan). Hence, the element of reflexivity can hardly be disregarded
in this context. Among the young Alevi themselves, apart from the academic discourse, there is a growing awareness of the widespread influence of migration and urbanisation on young members of the community as far as the ‘decline of tradition’ is concerned. From an academic point of view, the argument on the ‘decline of tradition’ is not without its problems. According to Karakaya-Stump, by overemphasising the decline of Alevi rituals and traditions in urban Turkey, Shankland fails to take into account the ‘adaptability of religious traditions’ (2005, pp. 149–154). Cem is now performed in a different manner in the city (Erdemir 2005, pp. 943–946), and the festivals actively contribute to the process of identity formation for the Alevi in the urban context (Soileau 2005, p. 102).

The second area where we can detect an anti-essentialist position in Alevism is the lack of a consistent view on the origins and the essence of Alevi and the ambivalence surrounding the term ‘Alevi’. Accordingly, in this area, the questions of what tradition is and where one should search for it seem relevant. From one angle, the Alevi revival refers to something ‘modern’ and at a distance from Alevism’s ‘origins’. Therefore, it preserves a strong sense of denial in relation to traditions (Subaşı 2001, pp. 147–148). However, ambivalence does not emanate solely from the wide-scale influence of migration and urbanisation. Field study can provide valuable information that goes beyond the familiar academic orthodoxies that assume a clear demarcation line between Alevi and Sunni communities. Anthropologists, in fact, have identified Anatolian villages associated with Sunni ways of Islam that do not refrain from Alevi rituals and religious practice (Shankland 1998, 2003). It is possible to observe a reaction among the urban Alevi against a certain form of politics of identity. Thus, the fear is that the imposition of a homogenous Alevi identity would automatically bring about the manifestation of ‘tradition’ together with a social and communal control mechanism, resembling the past rural and provincial Alevi way of life (Shankland and Çetin 2005, p. 20).

Another source of ambivalence is the fact that the term ‘Alevi’ is a fairly recent ‘invention’ dating back to the nineteenth century (Massicard 2007, p. 30, Okan 2004, p. 18). ‘Alevi’, as a blanket term, is used for groups with different lifestyles and cultural backgrounds in contemporary Turkey, such as Kızılbaş, Bektashi, Tahtaci, Nalci, Abdal and Sıraç (Koçan and Öncü 2004, pp. 474–475). In fact, it is possible to claim that the concept of Alevism historically preserves flexibility and that only in the twentieth century, as a result of the Turkish national project, did the term ‘Alevi’ gain a standard character signifying the unity of diverse groups of people in Anatolia, namely the Anatolian Kızılbaş, heterodox Islamic groups and the Bektashi Sufis (Livni 2002, pp. 5–15):

It is hard to identify the Alevi from the historical Ottoman texts between the 16th and 19th Centuries... Names like Kızılbaş, Fesatçı (conspirator), Rafizi (schismatic, heretic) were used instead of Alevi... Indeed, a researcher reading these documents could become convinced that there were people in the Balkans, Anatolia, and Arab lands whose loyalty to the Ottoman state and Islam was doubtful... But still, there is no evidence in the documents that these groups identified themselves or were
identified as a general society of Alevis whose religion was Alevilik. (Livni 2002, pp. 10–11)

Alevism hardly resembles a homogeneous, rigid category ‘frozen’ in history with a clear-cut definition that neutralises all differences pertaining to geography, culture, region or class (Okan 2004, p. 18). Alevism carries a flexible character that potentially opens a space for the Alevis to redefine themselves vis-à-vis the existing socio-political context without giving much credit to the essentialist narratives. Political categories fail to comply with sociological ones as far as Alevism is concerned, and it is because of this ambivalence, Massicard claims, that a break from an essentialist perspective is required (2007, pp. 21–22).

This brings us to the third area where one can detect an anti-essentialist stance in Alevism in the absence of dominant religious, cultural and political orthodoxies. There is a contestation between discourses that co-exist and actively contribute to the meaning-making process by which Alevism is being reformulated. One can rely on diverse categorisations as far as Alevism is concerned. There are leftist Alevi as well as, what can be termed, mystical-Islamic Alevi, centralist Alevi and Shia-inclined Alevi (Göker and Erman 2000, p. 105). Similarly, there are remotely diverse approaches to Alevism, including a Kemalist-humanist stance, a Marxist-liberationist tendency, a Sunni-Islamist orientation and a Turkish-nationalist approach (Göker and Erman 2000, p. 105).

For Okan, it seems hard to derive an orthodoxy from mutually exclusive parts of a single project (2004, p. 118). Many Alevis claim that Alevi belief has strong connections with the more spiritual aspect of Islam that developed in Anatolia with the help of the Sufi-Bektashi tradition and that it blended with the ‘shamanistic’ rituals of the Turkmen tribes as opposed to the Sunni roots of Arabic Islam. Some others claim that Alevism has little to do with Islam, while underlining the influence of ‘shamanism’, Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, Buddhism and Christianity. This rich cultural heritage provides an ingredient for both Turkish and Kurdish ethno-nationalisms. Thus, for some, the authentic Turks are Alevis because they migrated from Central Asia and formed a distinctive, unique version of Islam in Anatolia, distancing the Turks from Persian and Arabic-Islamic influences. Others trace the origins of Alevis to Zoroastrianism and the ancient civilisation of Medes in Mesopotamia in an effort to prove Kurdish roots.

The Alevi identity has always been attractive for various political projects. Politicised Alevism in Europe, which goes hand in hand with a leftist tradition, has a problem with the more widespread, popular Alevism that is loyal to republicanism in Turkey. Some Turkish nationalists and a group of ‘moderate left’ represented by the CHP (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi),5 to a certain extent, perceive the Alevis as ‘real Turks’ who can trace their origins back to the Central Asian rituals of ‘shamanism’. The CHP still attracts nationwide Alevi votes in parliamentary elections. Apart from the ethnic connection, Alevism is considered by many Alevis to be the culmination of Turkish Islam, which has been transformed under the influence of Sufi tarikats and tekkes6 from Central Asia to Anatolia in
opposition to the strict formalism of the ‘Arabic Sunni’ traditions. This is a view promoted by one of the major Alevi associations, Cem Vakfı, which pursues a policy of claiming a ‘share’ in, and a representational space in, the DIB (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı)\(^7\) for the Alevi. Other Alevi associations, such as Pir Sultan Abdal Kültür Derneği which comes from a more leftist background, do not recognise the DIB as a legitimate institution. For them, the DIB is an institution that should not exist in the first place in a secular country where the state not only has to be neutral but should also not deal with the regulation of religious issues.

Although there are a few historical elements that have been glorified and essentialised in the Alevis’ struggle to attain autonomy vis-à-vis the Sunni hegemony of Turkey, the Alevi for a variety of reasons have not come up with a consistent, commonly acknowledged, essentialist reaction against the Sunni-dominated world view. For the Alevi, in the metropolitan areas, it is hard to talk about a process of getting ‘back to origins’ in order to ‘rediscover the essence of Alevism’ as a reaction to the ‘degenerating influence of modernity’. Instead, modern Alevi identity faces competition between varying political, cultural and religious discourses, as the Alevi search for legitimacy in the absence of leadership and with no clergy in the Alevi movement. Unlike in the Sunni world, there is no official authority like the DIB to regulate the religious affairs of the Alevi. Politically, many Alevi still flirt with the leftist and the Kemalist ideologies. On the one hand, ‘Anatolian Alevism’ is celebrated as the special cultural product of a specific geography and as a ‘syncretic’ collage of different traditions and belief systems that go beyond Islam. On the other hand, the Alevi-Bektaşi position is praised as an integral part of Turkish Islam (Ocak 1999, p 155). It seems that the Alevi youth in the metropolis, which is quite fragmented at the moment, will determine how these separate discourses need to be rearticulated.

**Identity in narration: equivocal allegiances**

The ambivalence surrounding the question of what Alevism genuinely stands for reveals itself with the formulation of identities on a subjective level. The fact that the Alevi self today in urban Turkey is shaped by the contribution of multiple discourses in competition undermines the monopoly and legitimacy of any potential Alevi religious essence. Distinguishing Alevi upbringing and culture from religious aspects was a common theme among the most young Alevis I interviewed:

> Even though I’m not religious I always say ‘I am Alevi’. The religious dimension, for us and the next generation, is diminishing, it seems. But, in terms of origins, you will always know you are an Alevi. (Reha)\(^8\)

> We were raised with a fear like ‘do not say you are an Alevi, you attract trouble’, and we made the effort to conceal our identity. Gradually, when your personality is consolidated, I said to myself, ‘I am what I am, I don’t have to be the person people...
want me to be’. I now define myself as an atheist. Culturally though, regarding how I feel, how I think, I am undoubtedly an Alevi. (Burhan)

The ambivalence manifests itself not only in politico-ideological positions or religious interpretations but also in the way that rituals are reimagined and practised in the city. Cem ceremonies in urban Turkey are experienced quite differently from the old village ceremonies. In the rural context, the ceremonies used to take place in the largest house of the village. In the cities, huge cem ceremonies can be organised that are of much shorter duration. These ceremonies no longer host public courts that once served as a social institution of justice in rural Anatolia. Most importantly, they now address crowds of Alevi in the city who form an imagined community, the members of whom hardly meet each other (Massicard 2007, p. 171). Centred around the baglama, the traditional Alevi music can now be enjoyed at concerts or on major television channels (Sahin 2005, p. 480). Moreover, for the Alevi audience at concerts, baglama can harmonise with guitar and Western instruments rather than being combined with instruments from Turkish classical music and Sunni Islam (Soileau 2005, p. 105). Thus rural cem rituals of the past seem to have lost their secret and esoteric character as a result of a process of urban demystification. The cemevi functions less strictly as the religious space in which to perform Alevi beliefs and sacred rituals (Tambar 2010, p. 674). In today’s metropolitan Turkey, the crowd attending the cemevi is heterogeneous, consisting of people from different careers as well as regional, social, ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. They are reinventing the tradition of Alevism by articulating differences and various discourses that have found a chance to interact in the urban context since the late 1980s and early 1990s (Okan 2004, p. 161).

The cemevi exists in the urban setting and carries a certain spatial symbolic value for Alevi religious practice in the city (Sahin 2005, p. 472). Distancing itself from an Ottoman architectural influence, a typical cemevi is expected to have a ‘religious’ feel without the minaret (Massicard 2007, p. 173). Unlike dergahs and tekkes, the cemevi, due to its new urban function and ‘modern’ character, is a new phenomenon that hardly existed in Ottoman history. Thus cemevis display a variety of architectural styles, and due to the absence of a central Alevi institution, they lack a hegemonic discourse (2007). The cemevi is clearly not a thing of the past and symbolises less a return to tradition than a distance from it. Cafer Solgun, an independent Alevi researcher, has come to terms with an anti-essentialist position in relation to traditions and lost rituals and thus avoids the feeling of cultural anxiety. ‘There weren’t any parking lots as well in the past’, says Solgun. ‘If something did not exist before in the past, it does not mean it should not exist today’ (2008, p. 100).

For the urban Alevis, this kind of ambiguity has contributed to the formation of a flexible attitude that enables them to question everything about the Alevi traditions, belief system and folklore and has led to a constant reformulation of identity. To reverse the decreasing authority of the dedes and to modernise the
institution of *dedelik* in the cities, Alevi youth sometimes come up with innovative ideas. A group of young Alevi has proposed, for example, that the *dedes* should learn to use the Internet in order to convey a more up-to-date, intellectual and urban image (Șık and Yaşar 2002). There is also a discussion questioning the role of the *dedes* as part of the patriarchal traditional structure. Thus, some Alevis even reject the principle that the Alevi *dedes* can only be male, so the female counterparts of *dedes*, the Alevi *annes*, have been introduced.

The once isolated rural Alevi identity seems to be weakening with the decline of the Alevi lifestyle based on rituals and customs that existed in remote Anatolian villages. Alevi identity was suppressed under the influence of the highly politicised Turkish leftist movements during the 1970s. I argue that today Alevi youth have a chance to ‘become’ something else, to transform into something unique, other than what the two discourses provide – one rooted in religious, rural customs and the other in political, leftist rhetoric. Werbner underlines the significance of reflexivity within cultures, as well as in the encounter between cultures (2001, p. 149). The element of reflexivity seems to facilitate new discoveries. By the (re)discovery of the Bektaşı link, one can claim the existence of a discourse on ‘Alevi-Bektaşı spirituality’ that stands out as an alternative for urban Alevis:

Bektaşı culture became fashionable with its close proximity to the Sufi traditions. The Alevis came to understand that the philosophical aspect of their culture was becoming popular, and they wanted to use this. In a rural context, it is hard to emphasise the Bektaşı dimension. After all, who would be interested in it in a village where there are strict divisions and the Alevis are looked down on? For our generation, there is little difference between an Alevi and a Sunni. Religion is not the primary concern for either group; that’s how we can share a common ground in the city. (Reha)

I like the philosophical side of the Alevi culture. It doesn’t force you to do anything. You do things voluntarily. Maybe the cultural aspect of *semah* attracts me. I have a nostalgia about it, I want to learn. (Burhan)

This flexible discursive ground for urban Alevis, partly inherited from the emergence of the Alevi movement in the early twentieth century, allows them to invent and reclaim their identities in the city in a reflexive manner. Enlightened Kemalist, Marxist–Leninist and Sufi-Bektaşı stances are adopted interchangeably, at times forming an eclectic narrative of identity. Massicard argues that particularly during special events, different points of view, diverse Alevi styles and distinct political groups gather around certain signs that maintain a common platform, participating in a form of fluidity that can be described as ‘productive misunderstanding’ (2007, p. 119). Thus Alevi symbolism in the city gains an equivocal character, producing diverse meanings for different groups in different contexts. It is possible to claim the existence of an arena of competition that influences the meaning-making process in relation to Alevism. In Alevi festivals, it is hard to disregard the symbolic diversity of the posters sold on the street. One comes across Pir Sultan Abdal, a legendary poet who lived in the sixteenth century and is idealised by
some as a ‘revolutionary’ poet; Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of modern Turkey; Hacı Bektaş Veli, a thirteenth-century Anatolian thinker and a poet whose legacy has been inherited by the Bektaşi sect; Ali, the holy character who is seen as Mohammed’s successor; Aşık Mahsun Şerif, a twentieth-century Alevi poet and musician; Deniz Gezmiş, an emblematic personality of the 1960s student movement and at the same time Che Guevera. I interviewed people who had an open affinity in an eclectic Alevi context for figures like Fidel Castro, Atatürk, Şeyh Bedreddin and Ali without any problems. The use of Alevi self-reflexivity is not limited to the issue of ‘eclecticism’. It includes a wide range of discursive practices in dialogue with the meaning of Alevism, one of which has to do with ‘assimilation’.

Apart from groups with strict political agendas, many young urban Alevi seem to be quite flexible and open to change. Solgun claims that an Alevi mother who prays in Kurdish and Turkish and fasts during Ramadan is the new metropolitan reality of today’s Turkey (2008, p. 115). The ‘easy-going’ attitude of some of the new generation urban Alevi towards Alevism and their interaction with modernity seem like ‘assets’ rather than ‘weaknesses’. Some young Alevis today feel free to question and have the confidence to experiment with Alevism:

I never did the Alevi fasting, but I once fasted during Ramadan. According to my opinion, if you are an Alevi, this does not necessarily mean you cannot do the Sunni fasting. You can experiment with it, if we are talking about the Alevi tolerance. (Gül)

It is clear that the ‘ambivalence’ surrounding urban Alevi identities has its own price. Fasting during Ramadan easily triggers claims of ‘assimilation’ into the Sunni world in Alevi circles. Hybridity is often perceived as a threat to binary oppositions and cultural purity (Mabardi 2010, p. 250). However, it is interesting to observe how two young Alevis from differing backgrounds, who engage with the issue of ‘assimilation’ in opposite ways, stand against the ‘Sunni mentality’ in a reflexive manner that highlights ‘flexibility’ in support of their own version of Alevism:

Islam is something that doesn’t change. It is rigid, square and dogmatic . . . Alevism is flexible. The essence of Alevism is about change, transformation, evolution . . . Alevism has become dogmatic recently. If you want to be integrated into the system, you lose something. (Fikret)

For me Alevism is in Islam . . . My mom fasts in Ramadan. Maybe not for thirty days but a few days. . . She also does the Alevi Muḥarrrem (fasting). This is an internal experience she goes through. I can hardly say she has been assimilated. It is something that she feels like to do. (Gamze)
Alevism as an antidote to Sunni essentialism

Dressler argues that syncretism can be a way of associating Alevism with the project of Turkish nationalism. Dressler draws attention to the fact that Mélikoff’s (2004) search for the historical origins of Alevism in the pre-Islamic Turkic culture highlights elements of ‘shamanism’ despite Alevism’s expressions of the language of Shia-Islam (Dressler 2009, pp. 19–20). Thus the Anatolian people of Muslim Turkey are interconnected with the pre-Islamic Turkic people of Anatolia and Central Asia through Alevism.

However, in non-academic circles, the use of syncretism stems from tactical motivations on a discursive level. For some Alevi groups that primarily position themselves in relation to external political discourses such as ‘Turkish Islam’, ‘Kemalism’ or ‘Kurdish nationalism’, syncretism stands as a ‘problem’ that constitutes a threat to the essentialist search for identity. The ‘anthropology of syncretism’ requires that we look at the ways syncretism is received and evaluated at the local level and the contexts in which it is adopted, celebrated or denied by individuals as active agents in different communities (Stewart 2010, pp. 301–302). ‘Wherever syncretism occurs or has occurred’, argues Stewart, ‘it is usually accompanied by a parallel discourse that might be termed metasyncretic: the commentary and registered perceptions of actors as to whether amalgamation has occurred and whether this is good or bad’ (2010, p. 301).

When syncretism is negotiated at a local level, it can acquire a rather anti-essentialist character. In this sense, elements of self-reflexivity can hardly be disregarded in considering how syncretism is employed as a discursive tactic that is often opposed to the dominant Sunni viewpoint. In other words, the discourse of syncretism for the Alevis can be a valuable tool with which to avoid the essentialist pressure of the religious Sunni orthodoxy. Inspired by a diverse range of religio-cultural elements, syncretism helps Alevis to reposition themselves in relation to Sunni Islam by creating ad hoc binary oppositions: Shamanism and Turkish identity versus Sunni Islam and Arabic influence; humanity, secularism and universal values versus Islamic fundamentalism, particularism and xenophobia; Alevi-Kurdish origins versus Sunni-Turkish hegemony; Sufi spirituality and holism versus a methodical and formalistic Sunni mentality.

Alevi ‘opening’ (açılımı) is the name of a policy that has been waged by the current AKP (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi) government as part of a larger initiative to address the problems of the Kurds, non-Muslim minorities, the Romas as well as the Alevis in Turkey (Köse 2010, p. 143). Several workshops have brought Alevi intellectuals, Alevi NGOs and Alevi politicians and artists together with government representatives and people representing the DIB view. The aim of the whole opening process has been to hear and understand the Alevi cause in order to address Alevis’ problems and meet their demands through structural reforms. Although it first looked like a remarkable step by the government on the way to recognising Alevi claims for difference, I argue that the opening process has fallen short of its promises. During my recent interviews, Ayla, Gamze and Fikret expressed their distrust and discontent overtly. On 7 October 2012, an Alevi
demonstration in Ankara was organised with huge participation to protest the government’s failure to acknowledge and address Alevi demands. The Sunni mindset, which dominates the core of the Alevi-Sunni tension in Turkey today, is an obstacle to further progress in this arena.

Necdet Subaşı, a key facilitator in workshops with Alevi, draws attention to the irreconcilably diverse demands of the Alevi community. According to Subaşı, this ‘diversity’ stands as an obstacle to negotiating and communicating what the Alevis demand from the state (2010, p. 169). However, the central issue at stake goes beyond the existence of diverse Alevi views and positions that conceive of Alevism as outside of Sunni-Islamic theology (2010, p. 170). For Sunni theologians and researchers, the fact that Alevism lacks a shared theology is a problem that should be addressed by defining and repositioning Alevism within the wider theological picture of Islam. In this perspective, there may be minor differences within the cultural realm, but from a religious point of view, Alevism can and should be defined only from within Islam, a process that can hardly be conceived independently from the official DIB position. This critical link, established by the initiative of Sunni theologians and supported by some Alevi intellectuals, emphasises on traditions, written scripts and historical continuity. However, Alevism lacks a shared theology, which is probably one reason why oral cultural elements have been influential.

In this formulation, there seems to be two options for the Alevi. The first one is to go down the ‘radical’ route and to acknowledge the premise that Alevism has little or nothing to do with Islam. This option not only further marginalises the Alevi vis-à-vis the Sunni majority but also contains serious political repercussions inside and outside of the community. The second option, which is projected as the ‘common sense path’, is to define Alevism within Islam. Once Islam becomes a part of the Alevi problematique, official Sunni Islam via the DIB takes over. In this case, the Sunni emphasis on historical continuity reminds us of the fundamentals: religious orthodoxies and cultural essences. Subaşı sees this as an indication that the ‘religious, linguistic and cultural codes of the [Alevi] community have been [turned] upside down’, and he grieves the reconstruction of an identity independent of history and ritual (2010, p. 172). ‘Alevism should be understood through its own genuine definitions, criteria and nuances without disregarding its historical claims’, argues Subaşı (2010, pp. 175–176). The Sunni theologian Hasan Onat asserts that addressing the issue of Alevism by disregarding Turkish history and the tasavvuf reality is a political project aimed at forming a new Alevi identity (2010, p. 103). Ali Bulcaç, a prominent Sunni-Muslim columnist and researcher, has reached the conclusion that if Alevism is to be defined within Islam, the place of worship is definitely the mosque, not the cemevi (2010).

There have been numerous calls from the representatives of political Islam for the Alevi to identify themselves as a religious minority with a certain amount of loyalty to Islam (Shankland 2003, p. 172). If one can talk about a fear of assimilation on the part of Alevi, a similar kind of fear is experienced by the supporters of Sunni Islam. Thus, rather than fearing difference itself (not a problem
if Alevism is defined outside of Islam), the Sunni fears the application of difference (acknowledgment of the difference of Alevism within Sunni Islam) and the attendant prospect of interfaith ‘mixing’ (Grillo 2003, p. 164). Cultural anxiety can affect minority as well as majority populations (2003, p. 166).

‘The current field of Islamic studies suffers from essentialism’, claims Atabaki, which has been caused by overgeneralisation, Eurocentrism and reductionism (2003, pp. 7, 13). To rewrite Alevi history by highlighting the role of Islam is to imagine an Islamic ‘essence’ so that a ‘fixed, unique, undivided, and a-historical identity’ can be formed (2003, p. 13). According to Erdemir, Sunni-centric approaches to Alevism have common characteristics: they are essentialist, reductionist and emphasise on the primacy of written scripts (2010, p. 37). Thus, these perspectives share an effort to reduce Alevism to a theological essence by privileging written materials and establishing a link with Sunni Islam. In this picture, Alevism is reduced to a variant of Sunni Islam that, at best, preserves elements of cultural difference or, at worst, is interpreted as a pathology that has to be ‘treated’ (2010, pp. 36–37). Despite ‘good intentions’, workshops discussing the case of Alevism in Turkey seem to be dominated by a DIB mentality that resists acknowledging the importance of the cemevi for the Alevis and fails to recognise it as a place of worship (Çalışlar 2010).

In this context, Spivak’s renowned notion of ‘strategic essentialism’, which has been elaborated by Hall (1996, p. 475) can be a useful device with which to comprehend the position of the Alevis on the question of Alevism in Turkey. Strategic essentialism requires an ‘acting as if identities were stable for specific political reasons’ (Barker 2008, pp. 488–489). Thus, categories such as ‘woman’, ‘nation’ or ‘black’, for instance, are ‘strategically’ essentialised and defended against ‘patriarchal’, ‘colonialist’ or ‘white-supremacist’ positions. The hybrid character of cultures and identities is disregarded and de-emphasised for the sake of making the ‘right tactical move’. Some Alevis in Turkey seem to be following quite the opposite path. They employ a distinctive strategy that can perhaps best be described as ‘strategic anti-essentialism’ to counteract Sunni efforts to establish an essential link between Sunni Islam and Alevi Islam by defining the latter with reference to the former. Without an outright rejection of Islam, Alevism can counterbalance the Sunni obsession with origins, rituals, history and written tradition by emphasising on oral traditions, diverse positions on political, religious and cultural matters and an acknowledgment of the influence of modernity. This affinity with heterogeneity, which the Sunni-DIB world view regards as projecting an image of ‘inconsistency’, is often viewed reflexively by Alevis as a positive sign of diversity.

While analysing the meaning and the role of ‘creolisation’ in Mauritius, Eriksen draws a parallel between the concept’s anthropological use and its everyday use in the Mauritian context: ‘In Mauritian public discourse, notions of change, flux, personal choice, and hybridity are routinely contrasted with tradition, stability, commitment to fixed values and purity’, a contrast made possible through a ‘Creole self-reflexivity’ (2007, p. 163). Although Alevis are unlike Creoles in Mauritius in many respects, I argue that a similar mechanism that can be coined ‘Alevi self-reflexivity’ assigns Alevis a ‘strategy’ that distances them
from religious essentialism. It is true that different points of view within the Alevi community seem ‘unbridgeable’ at times; however, many Alevis are aware that an easy consensus may be reached only at the high price of being assimilated by the Sunni world. For many, ‘cultural diversity’, although dismissed as ‘cacophony’, is preferable to a compromise that could lead to Sunni domination.

In workshops on Alevi discussions, the element of diversity has been underlined and acknowledged, but it has been hard to ignore the effort to convince members of the Alevi community to make up their mind about who they are (Matur 2009). This ‘invitation’ to make a decision on identity lies at the heart of the Alevi problem because it exists as a reminder of a hegemony in the dialogue between the Sunnis and the Alevis that arises from the almost unquestioned existence of the DIB mentality in Turkey and its normalisation of state intervention in religious affairs. The diverse positions on Alevi culture and religion have empowered and enabled the Alevis to strategically resist what they regard as ways of reducing Alevism to a mere variant of Sunni Islam and can be read as an attempt on their part to avoid essentialist terrain.

Notes

1. Despite being used interchangeably, ‘Alevism’ cannot be taken as an exact translation of ‘Alevilik’. The former emphasises an idea, a movement or an – ism, whereas the latter carries an additional connotation of ‘the state of being Alevi’. However, for the sake of convenience, Alevism rather than Alevilik will be used in this article to refer to Alevi culture and religion.

2. The roots of Kurdish nationalism precedes the recent conflict between the Turkish state and the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK, Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan) that cost more than 30,000 lives. Kurdish nationalism in modern Turkey was particularly influential by the 1980s with the advent of the PKK, which aimed to reach the Kurdish population in Turkey that is predominantly Sunni. However, the PKK attempted to incorporate, at times, the Alevi to the Kurdish cause by granting Alevism a special place within the Kurdish myth of origins.

3. The interviews covered in this article make up only a small part of a larger empirical study carried out by the author between 2003 and 2008 in Istanbul and Ankara. About 20 interviews were conducted with young Alevis between the ages of 18 and 35. Recent interviews comprising part of new research conducted in Istanbul in 2012 are also used. The names of the interviewees are pseudonyms.

4. Burhan (interviewed on 10 August 2003 and again on 6 March 2006), a Kurdish-Alevi in his late twenties at the time of the interviews, is originally from Malatya, where he lived until his university education in Istanbul. He described his parents as ‘coming from a rural peasant background’. Recently, he became interested in the Alevi rituals.

5. The CHP, or Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi (Republican People’s Party), is currently the main opposition party and was founded by the republican regime.

6. Tarikat refers to an Islamic religious order or to the mystical path of this order. Tekke refers to the building of an Islamic order where rituals take place and where the leader and the members of a certain tarikat reside.

7. The DIB, or Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı (Directorate for Religious Affairs), is a state institution operating under the Prime Ministry.

8. Reha is originally from the eastern city of Erzincan. He was born and raised in Istanbul and visited his village in Erzincan only once. When he was young, he became accustomed to the Alevi rituals in Istanbul; however, Reha considers his generation
to be totally different from that of his parents (interviewed three times: on 26 October 2003, in 2006 and in 2008).

9. Anne means ‘mother’ in Turkish; in this case, it refers to the female counterpart of dede. Anne, as a new Alevi symbol, was presented in the television programme called 32.Gün in 2002.

10. The phrase ‘Alevi revival’ has been used by the Alevis to refer to a range of distinct political and philosophical positions: modernisation, the movement away from modernisation, the return to tradition, the destruction of tradition and the end of modernity as a transition to post-modernity (2005, pp. 939–940). Thus, in a relational sense, the terms ‘modern’ and ‘tradition’ have ambiguous connotations; they accompany each other, being equally fluid and elusive, and they preserve an emic character (2005, pp. 940–948).

11. Gül, originally from the eastern Anatolian city of Sivas, was working for the Ankara branch of a daily newspaper at the time of the interviews (28 June 2003 and 8 April 2006). She considers herself a ‘conscious’ Alevi ‘but only as long as it is not about religion, but philosophy’.

12. Assimilation has been used in different ways by the interviewees. For Ayla, it has something to do with the ‘lost children of Dersim’. Ayla (interviewed on 17 October 2012) is a student in her early twenties who lives in Istanbul, Gazi Mahallesi. She thinks real ‘assimilation’ took place in her hometown of Dersim (a Kurdish-Alevi region of eastern Turkey), following the 1938 purge when many young children were adopted by Sunni parents.

13. Fikret (interviewed on 16 October 2012) is a musician in his early thirties who plays bağlama and guitar for a band. He thinks Alevism becomes dogmatic when it mimics Sunni Islam. Thus the cemevi should not simply be experienced as a space equivalent to the Alevi version of the mosque for him.

14. Gamze (interviewed on 25 November 2012) is 25 years old and works for an insurance company in Istanbul. She is also from Sivas but has been living in the predominantly Alevi neighbourhood of Gazi Mahallesi.

15. The term ‘shamanism’ is, in fact, problematical and anachronistic when used as a general term for diverse practices that refer to different periods and geographies, as is commonly the case in the historical literature on Turkey (Markussen 2005, pp. 72–73).

16. The AKP, or Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (Justice and Development Party), has been the ruling political party in Turkey since 2002 and was founded as an institution in tune with the political (Sunni) Islamic legacy.

17. Tásavvuf refers to Islamic Sufi thought and practice.

References


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