A Comprehensive Overview of Alevism: Beliefs, History, and Contemporary Status

1. Introduction: Situating Alevism

1.1 Defining Alevism: A Syncretic Tradition on the Periphery of Islam

Alevism presents a complex and multifaceted religious tradition, often described as syncretic and heterodox, situated primarily within the broader landscape of Islam but distinct from its main Sunni and Usuli Twelver Shia branches.[1] Its core is deeply rooted in the mystical teachings of the 13th-century Anatolian saint Haji Bektash Veli, who synthesized the teachings of the Twelve Imams revered in Shia Islam with elements drawn from older traditions, including Turkic shamanism.[1] The very name "Alevi" signifies "Adherent of Ali" or "Pertaining to Ali," underscoring the profound veneration accorded to Ali ibn Abi Talib, the cousin and son-in-law of Prophet Muhammad.[2] This term became the common designation in the early 20th century, gradually replacing the older term "Kızılbaş" ("Red-Head"), which originated in the 15th century Safavid movement and often carried pejorative connotations imposed by outsiders, particularly the Ottoman authorities.[2]

Characterized by some scholars as a "relatively unstructured interpretation of Islam" [1], Alevism notably lacks rigid, binding dogmas. Its teachings have traditionally been transmitted orally through spiritual leaders known as *Dedes*, a method sharing similarities with Sufi orders.[1] This emphasis on oral tradition and lived experience, rather than strict adherence to scriptural literalism, is a defining feature.[2] Alevism is understood as having evolved over centuries through interaction with diverse beliefs, spiritual doctrines, and cultures spanning a vast geographical area from Central Asia to the Balkans.[9] It represents a gradual convergence of various mystical schools dating back to at least the 13th century.[9] Some interpretations trace its influences even further back, suggesting connections to ancient Anatolian shamanic and Zoroastrian beliefs potentially dating back 6,000 years.[8]

Beyond a purely religious definition, Alevism is often described as a unique Anatolian phenomenon – encompassing a distinct philosophy, a way of life, a rich culture, a specific teaching (*öğreti*), and a social framework.[9] It is notably anthropocentric, placing the human being (both man and woman) at the center of its worldview, and exhibits a deep respect for nature.[9] Adherents often refer to their path as the "Hakk-Muhammed-Ali yolu" (the Path of God-Muhammad-Ali), considering it the inner essence (*özü*) of Islam.[10] Academic perspectives frequently frame it as an Anatolian interpretation of Islam centered on the Ahl al-Bayt (the Prophet Muhammad's family), particularly Ali and the Twelve Imams.[10] It is crucial,

however, to distinguish Alevism from the Alawi (or Nusayri) communities found primarily in Syria and southern Turkey. While both groups venerate Ali, they have distinct historical origins, theological doctrines, cultural practices, and are predominantly Arabic-speaking, unlike the diverse linguistic groups within Alevism.[5]

The persistent ambiguity surrounding Alevism's precise definition—whether it is best understood as a heterodox sect of Shia Islam, a Sufi *tariqa*, a distinct cultural identity, or even a separate religion with pre-Islamic roots—is not merely an academic classification issue. It profoundly reflects the tradition's complex historical development. Alevism's origins lie in a syncretic blend of Islamic mysticism with pre-Islamic Turkic, Anatolian, and potentially Iranian beliefs.[1] Centuries of persecution and suppression under the Ottoman Empire forced Alevi communities into secrecy (*taqiya*) and fostered a heavy reliance on oral transmission rather than written codification, hindering the development of a single, unified dogma.[2] Furthermore, the 20th-century "Alevi revival" occurred within the context of rapid secularization, urbanization, migration, and the rise of modern identity politics in Turkey, including Kurdish nationalism and leftist movements.[2] This led different Alevi groups to emphasize varying aspects of their identity—religious, cultural, or political—contributing to the diversity of self-understanding. The lack of official state recognition in Turkey and the ongoing debate about the status of *cemevis* (Alevi houses of worship) further fuels these internal and external discussions about Alevism's nature relative to state-sanctioned Sunni Islam.[24] Thus, the fluidity in definition is a direct outcome of its syncretic origins, historical marginalization, reliance on oral culture, and engagement with modern socio-political forces.

1.2 Overview of Key Characteristics and Diversity

Alevism is not a monolithic entity; it encompasses a wide array of communities diverse in language and ethnicity, including Turkish, Kurdish (Kurmanji and Zaza/Kırmancki), Azerbaijani, and others, who nevertheless share fundamental belief components.[1] Despite this diversity, several core characteristics are widely shared. Humanism (*insan sevgisi*), egalitarianism, mutual assistance (*dayanışma*), and gender equality are prominent social values.[9] Alevi teachings emphasize the equal status of women and men, a principle reflected in practices like joint worship in the *Cem* ceremony and the use of the gender-neutral term *Can* ("soul" or "life essence") to address one another.[9]

A key philosophical orientation is the precedence given to inner spiritual meaning (*batın*) over external religious forms and rituals (*zahir*).[8] This aligns with Sufi mystical traditions and distinguishes Alevism from more literalist interpretations of Islam. Morality is considered a prerequisite for genuine belief and participation in rituals.[30] The ethical maxim *"Eline, Diline, Beline Sahip Olmak"* (Be master of your hand, your tongue, your loins) encapsulates this focus on ethical conduct as central to the Alevi path (*yol*).[30] This emphasis on human-centeredness and morality serves not only as a core theological principle but also functions as a means of differentiation from, and sometimes an implicit critique of, more orthodox forms of Islam perceived as overly focused on external rituals. Alevi discourse often highlights the human being as the locus of divine manifestation, exemplified by Haji Bektash Veli's saying, "My

Kaaba is the human being" [9], and the principle "Whatever you seek, seek within the human".[9] This contrasts with the emphasis on specific ritual obligations like the five daily prayers or Ramadan fasting common in Sunni Islam, practices which are often absent or significantly modified in Alevism.[17] By prioritizing inner meaning (*batın*) and ethical behavior codified in principles like *Eline Diline Beline*, Alevis can assert that they embody the true "essence" (*özü*) of Islam [10] while justifying their distinct practices and often positioning themselves as inherently tolerant, progressive, and humanist.[9]

Historically, Alevism was often practiced in secret (*sır*) due to centuries of persecution and suspicion from the dominant Sunni Muslim population and Ottoman authorities.[2] This enforced secrecy contributed significantly to the reliance on oral tradition for the transmission of beliefs and history, often through poetry (*deyiş*, *nefes*) and music (*saz*).[2] Beginning primarily in the 1980s, Alevi communities underwent a significant transformation known as the "Alevi revival" (*Alevi uyanışı*). This period, spurred by factors like urbanization, migration, increased political awareness, and a reaction against the perceived rise of Sunni Islamism in Turkish society, led to greater public openness, the establishment of Alevi cultural associations and *cemevis*, and a conscious effort to reconstruct and assert Alevi identity, culture, and rituals in the public sphere.[2] This revival, however, also brought internal debates about Alevism's definition and relationship with Islam, secularism, and various political ideologies to the forefront.[18]

2. Core Beliefs and Doctrines

2.1 The Alevi Conception of the Divine: Haqq, Allah, and the Unity of Being

The Alevi understanding of the divine is centered on the concept of *Haqq*, an Arabic term meaning "Truth" or "Reality," which is frequently used alongside or interchangeably with *Allah* as the name for God.[1] *Haqq* is one of the 99 names of God recognized in Islam.[32] In Alevi cosmology, God (*Haqq*) is the ultimate source of all existence, having created life so that the created world might serve as a mirror reflecting His divine Being.[1] A fundamental tenet is the belief in God's omnipresence; God is not confined to a specific location but is immanent within all things and all living beings.[40] This is expressed in the concept of God being *la-mekan*, meaning "placeless".[9] The only true domicile for *Haqq* is considered to be the human heart.[9]

Central to Alevi metaphysics is the doctrine of *Vahdet-i Vücud* (Unity of Being) or the closely related *Vahdet-i Mevcud* (Unity of Existence).[9] This mystical philosophy posits that ultimately, there is no reality or being separate from God; all of existence is a manifestation or emanation of the One Divine Essence.[9] Consequently, every human being is seen as carrying a spark or essence (*cevher*) from God, making humanity the most sacred part of creation.[9] This inherent divinity within the human is powerfully articulated in the famous saying of the 10th-century Sufi mystic Hallacı Mansur, *"Ene'l Hakk"* ("I am the Truth" or "I am one with God"), a phrase

deeply resonant within Alevi thought.[9] Haji Bektash Veli further emphasized the sacredness of the human with his declaration, *"Benim Kâbem insandır"* ("My Kaaba is the human being").[9] This understanding shapes the Alevi relationship with the divine. Rather than emphasizing fear of God's judgment, Alevism cultivates a path of love (*aşk*) and devotion towards *Haqq*.[9] Traditionally, Alevi belief does not dwell heavily on literal interpretations of paradise (*cennet*) and hell (*cehennem*). Instead, it often conceives of the soul's journey as an infinite circulation or cycle of existence, potentially involving reincarnation (*devriye*), until the individual achieves spiritual perfection as an *Insan-ı Kamil* (Perfect Human) and attains reunion (*vuslat*) with the divine source from which they originated.[9]

2.2 The Mystical Significance of Haqq-Muhammad-Ali

A cornerstone of Alevi belief is the concept of the unity of *Haqq* (God), Muhammad, and Ali.[9] This unity is frequently invoked in prayers and expressions like *"Hakk-Muhammed-Ali aşkına"* ("For the love of Haqq-Muhammad-Ali").[9] It is crucial to understand that this is explicitly *not* conceived as a trinity comparable to the Christian doctrine of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, nor the Hindu Trimurti, nor ancient Egyptian triads.[1]

In Alevi mystical thought, Muhammad and Ali are not regarded as independent deities or co-equal partners with God. Rather, they are understood as essential representations or manifestations of God's attributes, specifically His light (*Nur*) and His path or way (*Yol*).[1] *Haqq* represents the ultimate Truth and Divine Essence, the latent divine breath. Muhammad embodies the *Yol* (Path), the Sunnah, the prototypal human, and the spiritual way exemplified in the *Cem* ceremony. Ali represents the *Nur* (Divine Light), knowledge, and the reality of *Awliya* (sainthood or divine friendship).[42] They are seen as expressions of Allah's light and way, neither fully identical with God nor entirely separate from Him, because their existence derives solely from *Haqq*.[1]

The unity (*birlik*) of Muhammad and Ali is particularly emphasized in Alevi writings and oral traditions.[1] A frequently cited basis for this is the concept, sometimes expressed in Hadith-like sayings, that Muhammad and Ali originated from the same divine light: "The first creature of God was my light, and me and Ali are from the same light".[44] This implies that they form an inseparable spiritual entity or reality; one cannot be fully understood or accessed without the other.[1] This integrated understanding of *Haqq-Muhammed-Ali* forms the bedrock of Alevi spiritual identity and practice, distinguishing it significantly from Sunni orthodoxy, which rejects any elevation of Ali to such a status, and even from mainstream Twelver Shia theology, despite the shared deep veneration for Ali in both Alevism and Shiism.[1]

2.3 Cosmology, Creation, and Spiritual Beings

In Alevi cosmology, God (*Haqq* or *Allah*) initiated creation so that the created world could serve as a reflection of His own Divine Being.[1] A fundamental belief is the immortality of the soul, which continues its journey after physical death.[1] The Alevi worldview includes the literal existence of supernatural beings. These encompass both good angels (*melekler*) and fallen or bad angels (*şeytanlar*), with Şeytan (Satan/Iblis) seen as the entity that encourages and

tempts humans towards their negative impulses and egoistic desires (*nefs*).[1] Belief in *jinn* (*cinler*), other spiritual creatures, and the concept of the evil eye (*nazar*) are also part of the traditional Alevi understanding of the unseen world.[1]

Angels play a role in Alevi creation narratives, although there isn't one single, fixed account across all Alevi communities.[1] A commonly recounted theme involves God creating five archangels (often understood as the four familiar archangels of Islam plus Azâzîl) who are invited into the divine presence.[1] There, they encounter a profound light, representing the divine light (*Nur*) of Muhammad and Ali.[1] Echoing elements of the Quranic story of Iblis, one archangel (identified as Azâzîl) refuses God's command to prostrate before this created light, arguing that it is a created entity like himself and thus inappropriate to worship.[1] Although he remains in God's service initially, this refusal to submit to the divine manifestation in Muhammad and Ali leads to his fall from grace into darkness, establishing the primordial basis for the devil's enmity towards Adam and humanity.[1]

Another significant narrative features the archangel Gabriel (*Cebrail*). When asked by God, "Who are you and who am I?", Gabriel initially answers with arrogance, "I am I and you are you." For this display of ego, he is punished and cast away.[1] He is only accepted back into divine favor after Ali reveals a secret wisdom to him. When God asks the question again, Gabriel humbly replies, "You are the Creator and I am Your creation." Following this submission, Gabriel is accepted and introduced to the spiritual reality of Muhammad and Ali.[1]

Alevi thought also distinguishes between the outward, apparent aspect of reality (*Zāherī*) and its hidden, true, esoteric nature (*bāṭenī*).[8] Plurality, the separation of individual consciousness from the singular Divine Source, is seen as part of the *Zāherī* world, an illusion or veil (*perde*) that obscures the underlying unity. The *bāṭenī* represents the true, hidden reality of creation, which is ultimately unified with the Divine.[8] The goal of the spiritual path is to pierce through the veil of the *Zāherī* and realize the *bāṭenī* truth.

2.4 Sacred Texts: Quran, Buyruks, Makalat, and Oral Tradition

Alevis acknowledge the four major scriptures recognized within Islam: the Tawrat (Torah), the Zabur (Psalms), the Injil (Gospel), and the Quran.[1] They hold the Quran as a holy book.[28] However, their approach to scripture differs significantly from mainstream Sunni and Shia interpretations. Alevis are not opposed to drawing wisdom from other religious books and traditions beyond these four.[1] Key texts within their own tradition include Hadiths (sayings of the Prophet Muhammad), the Nahjul Balagha (a collection of sermons, letters, and sayings attributed to Ali), and, crucially, the *Buyruks* and Haji Bektash Veli's *Makalat*.[1]

A defining characteristic of the Alevi approach to the Quran is the emphasis on its esoteric, inner meaning (*batın*) over its literal, external meaning (*zahir*).[1] Unlike the vast majority of Muslims, Alevis generally do not regard contemporary scholarly or clerical interpretations of the Quran as infallible or legally binding.[1] They believe the true, profound meaning of the Quran was held as a secret (*sır*) by Ali.[1] This esoteric understanding cannot be grasped through literal reading alone but must be taught by a qualified spiritual guide (*Dede*, *Mürşid*, *Rehber*) who transmits the inner teachings (*Buyruk*) originating from Ali to their disciple

(*talip*).[1] This perspective legitimizes Alevi practices that may differ from orthodox interpretations by grounding them in a claim to deeper, hidden truths accessible through the lineage of Ali and the Imams. It simultaneously reinforces the indispensable role and authority of the *Dede* and the *Ocak* (hereditary lineage) system as the necessary conduits for this sacred knowledge, providing a theological basis for diverging from Sunni literalism and legalism while still affirming the Quran's divine origin.[1] This approach aligns Alevism with broader Sufi traditions that also emphasize esoteric knowledge and interpretation.[1]

The *Buyruks* (meaning "Commands" or "Decrees") are a collection of vital spiritual texts that form the foundation of the Alevi value system and practice.[1] These texts typically contain a mixture of Quranic verses, sayings attributed to Ali and the Twelve Imams (especially Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq, to whom the oldest *Buyruk* is traced), accounts of key figures like Haji Bektash Veli, allegorical stories, poems, hymns (*nefes*, *deyiş*), and guidance on core Alevi concepts and institutions such as *Müsahiplik* (spiritual brotherhood) and the *Dört Kapı Kırk Makam* (Four Doors, Forty Stations).[1] Historically, these texts were carefully guarded secrets, preserved within the *Ocak* families (holy lineages) and only made accessible to wider scholarship relatively recently.[44] While several versions exist, their general consistency in content lends them authenticity within the tradition, though the lack of a central canonical authority means other sources may also exist.[44] Haji Bektash Veli's *Makalat* is another foundational text, particularly known for elaborating on the *Dört Kapı Kırk Makam* system.[1]

Given the historical necessity of secrecy and the emphasis on lived experience and inner meaning, oral tradition plays an exceptionally vital role in Alevism.[2] Beliefs, history, and values are transmitted through generations via the poetry and songs (*deyiş*, *nefes*) of revered Alevi poets (*ozans*, *aşıks*) like Yunus Emre, Pir Sultan Abdal, and Hatayi (Shah Ismail I), often performed during the *Cem* ceremony accompanied by the sacred instrument, the *saz* (bağlama).[9] This reliance on oral and artistic forms contrasts with traditions more heavily centered on formal clerical exegesis of written scriptures.

2.5 The Path to Perfection: Dört Kapı Kırk Makam (Four Doors, Forty Stations)

A central pillar of Alevi spiritual philosophy is the doctrine of *Dört Kapı Kırk Makam* (Four Doors, Forty Stations).[29] This framework, widely attributed to the 13th-century saint Haji Bektash Veli and detailed in his work *Makalat* as well as in the *Buyruks*, outlines the progressive spiritual journey an individual undertakes to evolve from a state of spiritual immaturity (*ham*, raw) to the state of a perfected human being (*Insan-ı Kamil*).[29] Haji Bektash is quoted as saying, “The servant reaches God through forty stations, arrives, becomes His friend”.[30] The ultimate aim is to realize one's divine essence and achieve unity with *Haqq* (God/Truth).[29]

The path is structured as a progression through four distinct "Doors" (*Kapı*), each representing a major stage of spiritual development and understanding. Within each Door, there are ten "Stations" (*Makam*), representing specific virtues, practices, or levels of awareness that must be attained, making a total of forty stations.[29] The Four Doors, in

ascending order, are:

1. **Şeriat Kapısı (Door of Sharia/Law):** This initial stage represents conforming to the basic external rules and teachings of religion, analogous to being "born" into the path.[29] It corresponds to the *Bel Kapısı* (Gate of the Loins/Waist) and the *Mü'minlik Mertebesi* (Rank of the Believer).[63] Stations include: believing (*iman*), learning religious knowledge (*ilim*), performing worship (*ibadet*), earning lawful sustenance (*helal kazanmak*), avoiding the forbidden (*haramdan uzaklaşmak*), being beneficial to one's family, not harming the environment, following the Prophet's commands, being compassionate, maintaining cleanliness, and avoiding useless deeds.[48] This door is symbolically associated with the element of Wind or Air (*Yel*) [54] and the spiritual type of the *'âbid'* (worshipper).[54] The state associated with this door is described as "To you is yours and to me is mine".[67]
2. **Tarikat Kapısı (Door of the Path/Order):** This stage involves actively embarking on the mystical path, making a commitment (*ikrar vermek*), and following a spiritual guide (*Mürşid* or *Pir*).[29] It corresponds to the *Yol Kapısı* (Gate of the Path) and the *Zâhidlik Mertebesi* (Rank of the Ascetic).[63] Stations include: repenting (*tövbe etmek*), obeying the guide's advice, maintaining cleanliness (in dress, etc.), striving in the path of goodness, loving to serve others, fearing injustice, avoiding despair, learning from experience (*ibret almak*), sharing blessings, and cultivating humility (*özünü fakir görmek*).[48] A key aspect is the struggle against the carnal soul or ego (*nefs*).[64] This door is symbolically associated with Fire (*Ateş*) [54] and the spiritual type of the *'zâhid'* (ascetic, one who renounces worldly comforts for God).[54]
3. **Marifet Kapısı (Door of Gnosis/Knowledge):** This stage represents the attainment of deeper, intuitive spiritual knowledge and self-awareness (*nefsini bilmek*).[29] It corresponds to the *İl Kapısı* (Gate of Knowledge/Mystical Insight) and the *Âriflik Mertebesi* (Rank of the Gnostic).[63] Stations include: cultivating proper manners and etiquette (*edep*), overcoming selfishness/hatred (*bencillik, kin, garez*), practicing abstinence (*perhizkarlık*), patience and contentment (*sabır ve kanaat*), modesty (*haya*), generosity (*cömertlik*), acquiring deeper knowledge (*ilim*), tolerance (*hoşgörü*), knowing oneself (*özünü bilmek* or *nefsini bilmek*), and achieving enlightenment (*ariflik*).[48] This involves transforming basic knowledge (*'ilm*) into profound divine knowledge (*'irfân* or *ma'rifah*).[65] This door is symbolically associated with Water (*Su*) [54] and the spiritual type of the *'ârif'* (knower, gnostic).[54]
4. **Hakikat Kapısı (Door of Truth/Reality):** This is the ultimate stage, representing the realization of ultimate Truth and unity with the Divine (*Hakkı özünde bulmak*, finding God within one's own essence).[29] It corresponds to the *Gök Aman – Yer Ana* (Sky Mercy – Earth Mother) gate and the *Mûhiplik Mertebesi* (Rank of the Lover/Friend of God).[63] Stations include: profound humility (*alçak gönüllü olmak*, becoming like earth), seeing no fault in others, extending limitless kindness, loving all of God's creation, seeing all humanity as one (*yetmiş iki millete bir nazarla bakmak*), guiding towards unity (*tevhid*), revealing truth, understanding the inner meaning (*mana*), grasping the divine secret

(*sır*), and ultimately attaining union with the Divine Essence (*Tanrısal varlığa ulaşmak*, often linked to *Vahdet-i Vücud*).[29] This door is symbolically associated with Earth (*Toprak*) [54] and the spiritual type of the *'muhib'* (lover, devotee, one who has submitted).[54]

This entire framework functions not merely as a mystical path but as a comprehensive system for spiritual, ethical, and social development, akin to progressing through levels of education.[29] It provides a structured cosmology that integrates the individual's inner journey with their responsibilities towards the community and their understanding of the divine presence in the universe. The progression through the doors maps onto increasing levels of ethical refinement and social consciousness, moving from basic adherence to external laws towards internalized virtues like universal love, humility, and service. The symbolism connecting the doors to the four fundamental elements (Air, Fire, Water, Earth) further embeds this spiritual-ethical path within the natural world, reinforcing the Alevi holistic worldview.[54] Ultimately, the *Dört Kapı Kırk Makam* provides a coherent philosophical foundation justifying core Alevi values such as humanism, communal responsibility, and the pursuit of inner truth over outward formality.[9]

2.6 Ethical Foundations: Eline, Diline, Beline Sahip Olmak

A cornerstone of Alevi ethics and daily life is encapsulated in the succinct maxim: *"Eline, diline, beline sahip olmak"*.[30] This translates literally to "Be master/owner of your hand, your tongue, your loins," and serves as a symbolic summary of the core moral obligations expected of every Alevi.[30] Adherence to this principle is considered fundamental to being a true follower of the Alevi path (*yol*).[34]

The components are traditionally interpreted as follows:

- **Eline Sahip Olmak (Mastery of the Hand):** This primarily signifies abstaining from theft and respecting the property of others. It implies not taking what one has not rightfully earned or been given – "do not take what you haven't put down".[30] By extension, it can encompass avoiding any harmful actions committed with the hands, including violence.
- **Diline Sahip Olmak (Mastery of the Tongue):** This refers to controlling one's speech, specifically avoiding falsehoods, slander, gossip, blasphemy, and bearing false witness – "do not say what you haven't seen".[30] It emphasizes truthfulness and avoiding speech that harms others or disrupts community harmony.
- **Beline Sahip Olmak (Mastery of the Loins):** This pertains to sexual conduct, specifically prohibiting adultery and fornication, or engaging in any sexually illicit relationships (*haram*).[30] It underscores the importance of sexual propriety and respect within relationships and the community.

This tripartite code represents a powerful and demanding moral system, described within the tradition as being *"kıldan ince, kılıçtan keskindir"* ("thinner than hair, sharper than sword"), highlighting its subtlety and strictness.[30] Morality (*ahlak*) is seen not just as commendable behavior but as a prerequisite for genuine faith and participation in the community's sacred

life.[30]

Failure to adhere to these fundamental moral principles has serious consequences within the traditional Alevi social structure. An individual who violates this code, particularly in serious matters, can be declared *düşkün* – meaning "fallen," "sinner," or "outcast".[30] A *düşkün* person is effectively excommunicated from the community's ritual life, most notably being barred from participating in the *Cem* ceremony.[30] This status entails strong social isolation, and depending on the severity of the transgression and local customs, other forms of communal sanction could be applied.[30] The institution of *düşkünlük* demonstrates the potent social control mechanisms historically embedded within Alevi communities. In contexts where Alevis faced external persecution and lacked recourse to state legal systems, this internal system of judgment and sanction, often adjudicated by the *Dede* within the *Görgü Cemi* (ritual of accountability), was crucial for maintaining social cohesion, enforcing ethical norms, and preserving the integrity of the community and its path (*Yol*).[1] It underscored the collective responsibility for upholding the moral standards deemed essential for the community's spiritual and social well-being.

3. Historical Trajectory: From Origins to Modernity

3.1 Roots in Medieval Anatolia: Sufism, Shamanism, and Early Influences

The origins of Alevism are traced back to the complex religious and social environment of Central Anatolia during the 13th century.[2] It emerged and was propagated through the activities of itinerant Muslim mystics, often referred to as *babas* or dervishes.[2] These figures played a crucial role in the Islamization process of Anatolia, particularly among Turkic populations migrating from Central Asia.[2]

A key characteristic of the nascent Alevi tradition was its syncretic nature, blending Islamic teachings, particularly those emphasizing mystical experience (Sufism) and reverence for Ali and the Ahl al-Bayt, with pre-Islamic beliefs and practices.[1] These pre-Islamic elements often included Turkic shamanic traditions brought from Central Asia, such as nature veneration, specific folk customs, and belief in the spiritual power (*keramet*) of holy figures.[1] Some scholars also suggest possible influences from other religions encountered in Central Asia or Anatolia, like Manichaeism, Buddhism, or residual forms of ancient Anatolian or Christian beliefs.[2]

These mystical *babas* found fertile ground among the nomadic and semi-nomadic Turkmen tribes (*Türkmen*) who populated Anatolia during this period.[2] These groups were often socially marginalized, only superficially Islamized according to orthodox standards, and frequently in conflict with the established Seljuk central government and the settled agricultural populations over resources like pasture grounds.[2] The form of Islam practiced by these groups was initially less defined by strict Sunni or Shia categories and was characterized more by a "popular Islam" remote from literate culture, emphasizing belief in miracles, the veneration of saints (*Wali*), the importance of spiritual guides (*pir*, *baba*, *dede*), and mortuary

cults.[2] Nevertheless, a distinct reverence for Ali ibn Abi Talib appears to have been a feature from early on.[2]
The Bektashi Sufi order, formally associated with Haji Bektash Veli who lived in the 13th century, became deeply intertwined with these developing Alevi communities.[1] Haji Bektash himself is considered a pivotal figure in synthesizing these diverse elements and giving Alevism a more defined structure, particularly through teachings like the Four Doors, Forty Stations.[1] Some scholarly perspectives argue that Alevism represents a unique Anatolian religious synthesis, fundamentally distinct from orthodox Islam from its very beginnings [18], while others trace its roots more specifically to the folk Islam traditions prevalent in the Khorasan region of Central Asia from which many of these Turkic groups migrated.[33]

3.2 The Babai Revolt (1240) and its Significance

Occurring within this milieu of religious ferment and social tension was the Babai Revolt around 1240 CE.[2] This was a large-scale uprising of predominantly Turkmen tribes in Anatolia against the authority of the Seljuk Sultanate of Rum.[2] The revolt was led by a charismatic Turkmen dervish named Baba Ilyas Khorasani, who hailed from the Khorasan region and commanded significant influence among the nomadic groups.[2] Baba Ilyas reportedly claimed to be a prophet (*Rasul*) and the awaited Mahdi, asserting legitimate rule over Anatolia.[2]
Scholarly interpretations of the revolt's primary motivations vary. Some emphasize the political and economic factors, viewing it as a reaction by marginalized nomadic groups against Seljuk state control and economic pressures.[2] Others stress the significant religious dimensions, highlighting the messianic claims of Baba Ilyas and the heterodox religious fervor among his followers.[2] The revolt occurred precisely among the Turkmen populations where Alevi-Bektashi type beliefs, including strong pro-Ali sentiments and Sufi influences, were taking shape.[16]
Although brutally suppressed by the Seljuk state, the Babai Revolt is considered a landmark event in the historical backdrop of Alevism and Bektashism.[16] It demonstrated the potent combination of religious heterodoxy and social discontent among the Turkmen tribes of Anatolia. Its memory likely contributed to the later formation and identity of Alevi-Bektashi communities.[73] The revolt stands as an early, significant example of the anti-establishment, rebellious spirit often associated with Alevi history and identity, reflecting a deep-seated resistance to centralized, orthodox religious and political authority.[21]

3.3 The Rise of the Kızılbaş and the Safavid Relationship

The term *Kızılbaş* (Qizilbash), meaning "Red-Head" in Turkish, gained prominence in the latter half of the 15th century.[2] It originally referred to the followers of Sheikh Haydar (d. 1488), the leader of the Safaviyya Sufi order based in Ardabil, northwestern Iran.[2] The name derived from the distinctive crimson headgear (*taj*) with twelve gores or folds, symbolizing the Twelve Imams of Shia Islam, which Sheikh Haydar had his militant disciples adopt.[2]
The Safaviyya order itself had undergone a profound transformation. Founded in the early 14th century by Sheikh Safi al-Din Ardabili (1253–1334) as a more conventional, likely

Sunni-oriented Sufi order [32], it gradually shifted towards a militant, messianic, and heterodox form of Shiism under the leadership of Sheikh Junayd (d. 1460) and his son Sheikh Haydar.[2] This transformation was heavily fueled by the influx of devoted Turkmen followers (*murids*) from Anatolia, Syria, and Azerbaijan, who were often disaffected with the ruling powers in their regions (Ottoman, Aqquyunlu, Mamluk).[2] These followers developed an intense devotion to the Safavid Sheikhs, viewing them not merely as spiritual guides (*murshid*) but as saints (*wali*), divine manifestations, or even the awaited Mahdi.[2]

Sheikh Haydar's young son, Ismail (1487-1524), inherited this fervent following. In 1500, he issued a call to his loyal Kızılbaş disciples to rally, and an army composed largely of Anatolian Turkmen tribes (such as the Rumlu, Ustajlu, Tekelu, Shamlu, Dulkadir/Zulqadirlu, Varsak) answered.[7] With this Kızılbaş army, Shah Ismail I conquered Iran and established the Safavid dynasty in 1501, marking a pivotal moment in Islamic history.[7] Shah Ismail, who was also a significant poet writing under the pen name *Hatayi*, became a deeply revered figure within Alevi tradition, his poetry often recited in *Cem* ceremonies and embodying Alevi devotional and mystical themes.[11]

The Kızılbaş movement in Anatolia thus became inextricably linked to the Safavid cause. Anatolian Alevis viewed the Safavid Shahs as their supreme spiritual leaders (*Murshid-e Kamil* or Perfect Guide) and often as figures with divine authority.[7] Alevi sources suggest this bond was primarily understood in Sufi terms, emphasizing the master-disciple relationship.[87] However, a significant divergence occurred over time. As the Safavid state consolidated its power in Iran, it gradually distanced itself from the more extreme (*ghulat*) heterodox beliefs of its original Kızılbaş supporters.[7] Shah Ismail and his successors established orthodox Twelver Shiism (specifically the Ja'fari school of law) as the official state religion of Iran, importing Arab Shia scholars from regions like Lebanon and Bahrain to enforce conformity and propagate mainstream Shia doctrine.[6] This formalized state Shiism evolved into a system distinct from the folk beliefs and practices of the Anatolian Kızılbaş/Alevis.[7] Despite this theological shift by the Safavid state, spiritual communication and a sense of allegiance between the Safavid court and Anatolian Alevi communities persisted for some time, often facilitated through intermediaries, including Bektashi centers like the one in Karbala, Iraq. Safavid shahs continued to bestow spiritual diplomas (*hilafetnames*) on Alevi *Dedes* and send religious treatises to Anatolia until the late 17th century.[87]

This complex relationship with the Safavids stands as a crucial, yet paradoxical, element in Alevi history. The Safavid movement provided the initial catalyst and organizational focus for the mobilization of Anatolian Kızılbaş communities, grounding their identity in devotion to Ali, the Imams, and the charismatic Safavid leadership. Shah Ismail/Hatayi remains a venerated figure. However, the Safavid state's eventual adoption of orthodox Twelver Shiism, coupled with the political and military realities following the Ottoman victory at Chaldiran, created a fundamental divergence. This separation forced Anatolian Alevism onto its own unique trajectory, preserving older Kızılbaş, Sufi, and folk elements that became distinct from the more formalized, jurisprudence-oriented Shiism of Safavid and later Iran.[2] The Safavid connection was thus both foundational and, ultimately, a critical point of departure for the

distinct identity of Alevism.

3.4 Navigating the Ottoman Era: Persecution, Secrecy, and Resilience

The rise of the Safavid Empire created a direct political and religious challenge to the neighboring Ottoman Empire.[16] The Ottomans, who had embraced Sunni Islam as a unifying ideology for their expanding state, increasingly viewed the Kızılbaş/Alevi populations within their Anatolian territories with deep suspicion.[2] Alevis were seen not only as religious heretics deviating from Ottoman Sunni orthodoxy but also as potential political traitors loyal to the rival Safavid Shah.[16]

Shah Ismail actively fueled this conflict by sending missionaries (*khalifas*) into Anatolia to spread pro-Safavid propaganda and incite rebellion against Ottoman rule, often presenting himself as the awaited Mahdi.[16] This led to a series of Kızılbaş uprisings within the Ottoman realm during the late 15th and early 16th centuries.[16] The Ottoman response became increasingly harsh. Sultan Bayezid II (r. 1481-1512) conducted campaigns against Safavid supporters.[16] His successor, Sultan Selim I ("Yavuz" or "The Grim," r. 1512-1520), adopted a policy of brutal suppression.[15] Prior to his decisive military campaign against Shah Ismail, Selim obtained religious edicts (*fatwas*) from Ottoman Sunni scholars declaring the Kızılbaş/Alevis to be apostates (*mürted*) and infidels (*kafir*), thereby legitimizing warfare against them.[16] Based on these fatwas, Selim ordered the massacre of tens of thousands of Alevis in Anatolia in the years leading up to and following the Battle of Chaldiran in 1514, where the Ottoman army decisively defeated Shah Ismail's forces.[16] Selim I remains a deeply reviled figure in Alevi collective memory.[78]

The Ottoman victory at Chaldiran and the subsequent relentless persecution effectively severed the direct military and political links between Anatolian Kızılbaş communities and the Safavid state in Iran.[16] Facing intense pressure and violence, Alevi groups retreated into remote, inaccessible rural areas, particularly in mountainous regions, for safety.[2] They turned inward, developing a closed social structure often characterized by endogamy (marrying within the community) and minimizing contact with the Ottoman state and its institutions.[2] To survive in a hostile environment, Alevis widely adopted the practice of *taqiya*, a form of religious dissimulation permitted in Shia traditions, allowing them to conceal their true beliefs and outwardly conform to Sunni norms when necessary.[16]

This period of isolation, lasting for centuries, was crucial in shaping Alevism into the distinct religious tradition known today.[16] Separated from both the Sunni Ottomans and the increasingly orthodox Twelver Shia Safavids, Alevi communities autonomously developed their unique rituals (like the Cem and Semah), doctrines (emphasizing *batın* over *zahir*), social organization (the Ocak system), and reliance on oral tradition.[2] The experience of sustained persecution, which continued with varying intensity into the 18th century and beyond, fostered a deep-seated collective memory of suffering and martyrdom, reinforcing group solidarity and a tradition of opposition (*muhalefet*) to external religious and political authority.[16] Figures like the 16th-century poet Pir Sultan Abdal, who was executed by Ottoman authorities for allegedly fomenting rebellion, became powerful symbols of Alevi resistance and

cultural identity.[16]
The Bektashi Sufi order had a more complex and sometimes ambiguous relationship with the Ottoman state. For a long period, it enjoyed a degree of tolerance and even patronage, partly due to its strong institutional links with the elite Janissary military corps.[73] However, this connection ultimately led to the order's official abolition in 1826 when Sultan Mahmud II violently disbanded the Janissaries.[73] Despite the formal ban, Bektashi lodges (*tekkes*) continued to operate, particularly in the Balkans. It's important to note that while Bektashism and Alevism share deep historical and doctrinal connections, the experiences of the more organized, often urban-based Bektashi order sometimes differed from those of the rural, tribally organized Alevi (Kızılbaş) communities, who generally faced more consistent suspicion and persecution.[73]
This historical trajectory demonstrates a recurring pattern in Alevi history: periods of syncretic religious formation and relative communal autonomy (early Anatolia, Safavid alliance) are often followed by intense conflict with centralizing state powers (Seljuk, Ottoman) that perceive Alevi heterodoxy and communal structures as a threat. This conflict leads to suppression and persecution, forcing Alevi communities into retreat and isolation. Paradoxically, these periods of isolation strengthen internal cohesion, solidify distinct beliefs and practices, and reinforce an oppositional identity rooted in collective memory of suffering and resistance.[2] This cyclical dynamic of interaction, conflict, retreat, and reformulation is fundamental to understanding Alevi identity formation over the centuries.

3.5 The 20th Century and Beyond: Secularism, Urbanization, and the Alevi Revival

With the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923 under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, many Alevis initially embraced the new era with hope.[15] They largely supported Atatürk's secularist reforms, viewing them as a potential liberation from centuries of Sunni Ottoman domination and persecution, and aligning with the Republic's emphasis on Turkish nationalism and modernization.[15] Alevis actively participated in the Turkish War of Independence.[88]
However, the nature of Turkish secularism (*laiklik*) proved complex for Alevis. Rather than a strict separation of religion and state, it involved state control and management of religion, primarily through the establishment of the Directorate of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*, or Diyanet) in 1924.[15] The Diyanet, from its inception, focused almost exclusively on regulating and promoting Hanafi Sunni Islam, effectively marginalizing Alevism and other religious minorities.[24] Alevi *cemevis* were not recognized as legitimate places of worship (unlike mosques, churches, and synagogues), denying them state support and legal protections afforded to recognized religious institutions.[24] Furthermore, compulsory religious education in state schools focused solely on Sunni Islam, ignoring or misrepresenting Alevi beliefs and practices.[25] Adding to this, a 1925 law banned all Sufi orders and closed their lodges (*tekkes* and *zaviyes*), which directly impacted the Bektashi order and related Alevi structures.[71]

Consequently, despite their initial support for the Republic, Alevis continued to face significant challenges, including systematic discrimination, assimilation pressures, and periodic state violence.[15] The state often promoted a narrative that framed Alevism merely as a Turkish cultural or folkloric tradition, or a heterodox interpretation within Sunni Islam, rather than a distinct religious path deserving equal recognition.[15] The brutal suppression of the Dersim Rebellion in 1937-38, which predominantly involved Kurdish Alevis resisting state centralizing policies, remains a major trauma in Alevi collective memory.[71]

Starting in the 1950s and accelerating in the 1960s and 1970s, large-scale migration from rural Anatolia to major Turkish cities (and later to Western Europe) profoundly transformed Alevi society.[18] This urbanization process disrupted traditional village-based social structures, including the authority of the *Ocak* system and the *Dede-talip* relationship.[27] It also brought Alevis into more direct contact and competition with the Sunni majority in unfamiliar urban environments, sometimes leading to tension and conflict, but also fostering new forms of Alevi organization and identity expression.[18]

This period saw the emergence of what is termed the "Alevi revival" (*Alevi uyanışı* or *canlanması*), a process that began tentatively in the 1960s and gained significant momentum from the 1980s onwards.[2] This revival was fueled by several factors: the social dislocations and identity crises prompted by urbanization; increased political participation, often within leftist and socialist movements that resonated with Alevi traditions of social justice and opposition [19]; a reaction against the growing influence of political Islam and the state-promoted Turkish-Islamic Synthesis (*Türk-İslam Sentezi*) in the 1980s [2]; and the organizational efforts and political influence of the growing Alevi diaspora, particularly in Germany.[19] Tragic events of anti-Alevi violence, such as the massacres in Maraş (1978), Çorum (1980), the Sivas Madımak Hotel arson (1993), and the Gaziosmanpaşa riots in Istanbul (1995), also served as powerful catalysts, galvanizing the community and highlighting their vulnerability.[19]

The Alevi revival manifested in various ways: a conscious reconstruction and public assertion of Alevi identity, culture, and rituals; the establishment of numerous Alevi cultural associations (*dernekler*) and foundations (*vakıflar*); the construction of dedicated *cemevis* in urban centers; increased publication of Alevi literature and music; and more organized political demands for recognition, equal rights, and an end to discrimination.[19] This period marked a significant shift from historical secrecy towards public visibility and political engagement.

The Alevi embrace of secularism under the Turkish Republic presents a complex historical outcome. While initially seen as a path to liberation from Sunni dominance, the state-centric model of *laiklik*, with its inherent privileging of Sunni Islam via the Diyanet and its tendency to frame Alevism within a nationalist, cultural lens, ultimately failed to deliver full equality or recognition.[15] This experience of continued marginalization, even within a formally secular state that Alevis largely supported, contributed significantly to the Alevi revival. The revival can thus be understood, in part, as a response to the limitations and contradictions of Turkish secularism itself, driving Alevis to articulate their identity and demand rights more assertively in the public and political spheres.[2]

4. Pivotal Figures in Alevi Tradition

4.1 The Centrality of Ali ibn Abi Talib and the Twelve Imams

At the very heart of Alevism lies an extraordinary reverence for Ali ibn Abi Talib (c. 600-661 CE), the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad.[2] The name "Alevi" itself denotes this connection, meaning "of Ali" or "adherent of Ali".[2] Alevis share with Shia Muslims the fundamental belief that Ali was the rightful successor (*imam* or *veli*) to Prophet Muhammad, divinely designated to lead the Muslim community.[43] This belief is often expressed through the addition of the phrase *"Aliyyun Waliyyullah"* ("Ali is the Friend/Guardian of God") to the Islamic declaration of faith, the Shahada.[8]

In Alevi understanding, Ali is far more than just a historical figure or political leader. He is perceived as the embodiment of divine light (*Nur*), wisdom, and esoteric knowledge.[1] He is believed to hold the secret, inner meaning (*batın*) of the Quran.[1] Ali is considered a supreme spiritual guide for humanity [32] and occupies a central position in the core theological concept of *Haqq-Muhammed-Ali*, representing the manifestation of God's light and attributes alongside Muhammad.[9] His bravery, generosity, justice, and spiritual depth serve as the ultimate model for the *Insan-ı Kamil* (Perfect Human) that Alevis strive to emulate.[72]

Following Ali, Alevis deeply revere the Twelve Imams, the lineage of spiritual leaders descended from Ali and the Prophet's daughter, Fatima.[1] This veneration is a key point of convergence with Twelver Shia Islam.[104] Figures among the Imams hold particular significance. Imam Huseyn, Ali's son and the third Imam, is especially central due to his martyrdom at the Battle of Karbala (680 CE). This event is a foundational tragedy in the Alevi narrative, commemorated annually through the solemn Muharrem mourning fast (*Matem Orucu*) and shaping the Alevi understanding of suffering, injustice, and resistance.[34] Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq, the sixth Imam, is highly respected for his knowledge and is traditionally associated with the foundational Alevi texts, the *Buyruks*.[35] The collective term *Ahl al-Bayt* (Household of the Prophet), typically encompassing Muhammad, Ali, Fatima, and their sons Hasan and Huseyn (also known as the *Pençe-i Al-i Abâ*), signifies this sacred family lineage, which is the object of intense love (*aşk*) and devotion in Alevism.[5]

4.2 Haji Bektash Veli: Founder and Spiritual Guide

Haji Bektash Veli stands as a paramount figure in the formation and identity of Alevism, particularly for Turkish-speaking communities.[1] He was a 13th-century mystic believed to have originated from Khorasan (a historical region encompassing parts of modern-day Iran, Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan) who eventually settled in Anatolia, specifically in Sulucakarahöyük, the town now named Hacıbektaş in Nevşehir province, Turkey.[1]

His mystical teachings, which integrated reverence for Ali and the Twelve Imams with Sufi principles and Anatolian folk traditions, are considered foundational to the Alevi path (*yol*).[1] He

is widely credited with formulating or systematizing the central Alevi doctrine of the *Dört Kapı Kırk Makam* (Four Doors, Forty Stations), which outlines the stages of spiritual development towards becoming an *Insan-ı Kamil* (Perfect Human). This teaching is elaborated in works attributed to him, most notably the *Makalat*.[1] His famous sayings, such as *"Eline, diline, beline sahip ol"* and *"Benim Kâbem insandır"*, encapsulate core Alevi ethical and humanist values.[9] The *tekke* (dervish lodge or complex) built around his tomb in Hacıbektaş serves as the spiritual center and a major pilgrimage site for many Alevis and Bektashis.[1] Haji Bektash Veli is seen as a key figure not only in Alevi-Bektashi history but also in the broader process of the Islamization of Anatolia and the shaping of Turkish folk Islam.[51] His followers organized into the Bektashi Sufi order, which maintained close, albeit complex, relations with Alevi communities throughout history.[35] While Haji Bektash Veli holds immense importance, particularly within Turkish Alevism, it is noted that some Kurdish Alevi communities may place a comparatively greater emphasis on the figure of Pir Sultan Abdal as a symbol of their specific identity and history of resistance.[1]

4.3 Poet-Saints: Pir Sultan Abdal and Şah İsmail (Hatayi)

Alongside the foundational figures of Ali, the Imams, and Haji Bektash Veli, Alevi tradition places immense value on poet-saints (*ozanlar*, *aşıklar*) whose works serve as vital expressions of faith, history, and cultural identity. Two of the most prominent are Pir Sultan Abdal and Şah İsmail (Hatayi).

Pir Sultan Abdal was a highly influential Alevi *ozan* (bard or troubadour) and folk hero who lived during the 16th century Ottoman period.[16] His birth name is believed to have been Haydar, and he is traditionally associated with the village of Banaz in the Sivas region of Central Anatolia.[84] Pir Sultan is renowned for his powerful and passionate poetry (*deyiş*, *nefes*), written in vernacular Turkish, which vividly expresses core Alevi beliefs: deep love for Ali, the Ahl al-Bayt, and the Twelve Imams; mystical concepts; themes of social justice and resistance against oppression; and defiance towards the Ottoman authorities who persecuted Alevis.[11] His life ended in martyrdom; he was executed by the Ottoman governor Hızır Pasha for allegedly inciting rebellion and supporting the Safavids.[16] This transformed Pir Sultan into an enduring symbol of Alevi resistance, martyrdom, and commitment to social justice.[16] His poems remain central to the Alevi repertoire sung in *Cem* ceremonies and are particularly cherished by Alevi communities, including Kurdish Alevis who see him as a potent symbol of protest against state oppression.[1]

Şah İsmail I (1487-1524), the founder of the Safavid dynasty in Iran, holds a unique and complex place in Alevi history and veneration.[80] Beyond his political role as Shah, he was the hereditary spiritual leader (*Pir*, *Murshid*) of the Safaviyya order and the Kızılbaş movement that brought him to power.[2] Many of his Kızılbaş followers, particularly in Anatolia, viewed him with messianic fervor, sometimes considering him the Mahdi or even a divine manifestation.[2] Şah İsmail was also a gifted poet who wrote under the pen name **Hatayi**.[11] His poetry, composed primarily in Azerbaijani Turkish, is considered a major part of the Alevi-Bektashi literary canon. Like Pir Sultan's work, Hatayi's poems express profound devotion to Ali and the

Imams, explore mystical themes of divine love and unity, and reflect Alevi cosmology and beliefs.[35] His *nefesler* and *deyişler* are frequently performed with *saz* accompaniment during *Cem* ceremonies, connecting contemporary Alevis to their Kızılbaş/Safavid historical roots.[35] The specific constellation of figures revered in Alevism—Ali and the Imams, Haji Bektash Veli, Pir Sultan Abdal, and Şah İsmail (Hatayi)—illuminates the tradition's unique synthesis. It firmly anchors Alevism within the broader Shia devotional world through its focus on Ali and the Imams.[1] Simultaneously, it highlights its deep roots in Anatolian Sufi mysticism and folk traditions via Haji Bektash.[1] Furthermore, the prominence of Pir Sultan and the historical role of Hatayi underscore a defining legacy of socio-political struggle, resistance against oppression, and messianic expectation.[2] This particular blend of devotional, mystical, and socio-political elements distinguishes Alevism from both orthodox Sunni Islam and mainstream Twelver Shiism. While the relative emphasis on these figures might vary among different Alevi groups (e.g., Kurdish Alevis' preference for Pir Sultan [1]), the combination itself constitutes the unique spiritual landscape of Alevism.
Moreover, the central role of poet-saints (*ozanlar/aşıklar*) like Pir Sultan and Hatayi, whose compositions form a living part of ritual practice, particularly the *Cem* ceremony [35], underscores the profound importance of oral tradition, vernacular language (Turkish, Kurdish, Zaza), and music (especially the sacred *saz*) in preserving and transmitting Alevi beliefs, history, and identity.[2] This reliance on performed poetry and music was especially critical during long periods of Ottoman suppression when engagement with formal written texts might have been limited or dangerous, ensuring the continuity of the tradition through embodied practice and collective memory.[2]

5. Ritual, Worship, and Community Life

5.1 The Cem Ceremony: Collective Worship and Social Integration

The *Cem* (also *Ayin-i Cem*, pronounced "Jem") stands as the fundamental and most significant collective worship ritual within Alevism.[1] It is often described by adherents as the "school of Alevism," signifying its central role in education and spiritual formation.[17] Traditionally, *Cem* ceremonies were held periodically, often during autumn and winter months after the harvest season, or when an itinerant *Dede* visited a community.[17] While historically conducted in various locations including large village houses (*meydan evi*), homes of *Dedes*, barns, or even outdoors under secrecy [17], contemporary *Cems* typically take place in dedicated buildings known as *Cemevis* (Houses of Gathering).[20] A defining feature is the joint participation of men and women, who sit together, often in a circle, fostering a sense of equality and community.[17] Participants customarily bring food offerings, known as *lokma* or *niyaz*, which are blessed by the *Dede* and shared communally at the end of the ceremony.[17] The *Cem* is believed by Alevis to be modeled on, or a symbolic reenactment of, the *Kırklar Meclisi* (Assembly of the Forty).[30] This mystical gathering is said to have been witnessed by Prophet Muhammad during his heavenly ascent (*Mi'raj*), where he found forty enlightened

saints (*erenler*) led by Ali, engaged in spiritual discourse and ritual.[57]
The *Cem* serves a multitude of interwoven purposes. It is a form of collective worship (*ibadet*) involving prayers (*gülbank*), remembrance of God (*zikr*), and invocation of Haqq, Muhammad, Ali, and the Imams.[17] It functions as an educational forum where Alevi teachings, history, and ethics are transmitted through sermons (*sohbet*) delivered by the *Dede*, and through the recitation of sacred poetry and hymns (*deyiş*, *nefes*, *düvaz*).[17] The *Cem* is also a vital space for socializing, strengthening community bonds, and reaffirming collective Alevi identity and values.[17] A particularly important type of *Cem* is the *Görgü Cemi* (Ritual of Integration/Manners/Accountability).[1] During this ritual, the *Dede* presides over a process where community members can voice complaints or disputes against one another. The aim is reconciliation (*rızalık*) and the maintenance of social harmony. Individuals found to have committed serious moral transgressions (violating the *eline, diline, beline* code) without showing remorse or making amends can be declared *düşkün* (fallen/outcast) and temporarily or permanently excluded from the community's ritual life.[1] Other specific types of *Cem* include the *İkrar Cemi* (for initiation into the path), *Musahiplik Cemi* (for establishing spiritual brotherhood), and *Abdal Musa Cemi*.[39]
The ritual itself follows a structured sequence, though variations exist between regions and *Ocaks*. It typically begins with the *Dede* seeking the consent (*rızalık*) of the congregation to lead the ceremony.[17] Key elements include the ritual lighting of candles or lamps (*çerağ uyandırma*), often three, symbolizing Haqq-Muhammad-Ali or divine enlightenment [37]; the performance of the Twelve Services (*Oniki Hizmet*); the playing of the *saz* and singing of devotional hymns by the *zakir*; the performance of the *Semah* dance; the communal sharing of the blessed food (*lokma*); and the consumption of a symbolic drink (*dem*), which might be water, fruit juice, milk, or sometimes mildly alcoholic beverages like wine or *rakı*, representing divine love or the wine shared at the Assembly of the Forty.[17] The ceremony concludes with final prayers and often a period of informal conversation (*sohbet*).[57]
The *Cem* ceremony thus functions as a living microcosm of the Alevi worldview. It seamlessly integrates spiritual devotion (prayer, remembrance, connection to sacred history like the *Kırklar Meclisi*) with social ethics (accountability in the *Görgü Cemi*, shared responsibility in the *Oniki Hizmet*), communal solidarity (shared *lokma*, joint participation), and cultural expression (poetry, music, dance). The structure and content actively enact and transmit core Alevi values such as the pursuit of inner truth, equality between participants, the importance of community harmony, and the understanding of the human being as the locus of the divine. It is far more than just a worship service; it is the central institution where Alevi philosophy is practiced and perpetuated.[1]

5.2 The Twelve Services (Oniki Hizmet)

A distinctive feature of the *Cem* ceremony is its organization around the performance of Twelve Services (*Oniki Hizmet*).[1] These twelve distinct roles and functions are carried out by designated members of the congregation during the ritual, symbolically representing the Twelve Imams and ensuring the smooth and sacred progression of the ceremony.[1] The

performance of these services underscores the Alevi emphasis on collective participation and shared responsibility in worship and community life.

The Twelve Services and their designated roles typically include:

1. **Dede** (or **Mürşid**): The spiritual leader of the *Cem*, presiding over the ceremony. They represent the authority and wisdom of Muhammad and Ali.[1] The Dede receives confessions, delivers sermons (*sohbet*), leads prayers (*gülbank*), and officiates other life-cycle rituals outside the *Cem* (funerals, *müsahiplik*, marriages).[1]
2. **Rehber** ("Guide"): Assists the Dede and guides the participants (*talipler*). This role represents Imam Huseyn.[1]
3. **Gözcü** ("Watchman" or "Overseer"): Responsible for maintaining order and tranquility during the *Cem*, ensuring participants remain focused and respectful. Represents Abu Dharr al-Ghifari.[1]
4. **Çerağcı** (or Delilci): The "Lamp Lighter," responsible for lighting and tending the candles or lamps (*çerağ*, *delil*) that illuminate the sacred space, symbolizing divine light and knowledge. Represents Jabir ibn Abd-Allah.[1]
5. **Zakir** ("Remembrancer" or Musician): Plays the sacred *saz* (bağlama) and sings the hymns, prayers, and poems (*nefes*, *deyiş*, *düvaz*) that form a core part of the *Cem*. Represents Bilal al-Habashi (or Bilal ibn al-Harith).[1]
6. **Süpürgeci** (or **Ferraş**): The "Sweeper," responsible for the ritual sweeping and cleaning of the *Cemevi* floor or carpets, symbolizing purification of the space and the hearts of the participants. Represents Salman the Persian.[1]
7. **Meydancı**: Responsible for the *meydan*, the central sacred space of the *Cem*, including spreading the symbolic sheepskin rug (*post*) where the Dede sits. Represents Hudhayfah ibn al-Yaman.[1]
8. **Niyazcı** (or **Lokmacı**): Responsible for collecting the food offerings (*lokma*, *niyaz*) brought by the participants and distributing the blessed communal meal at the appropriate time. Represents Muhammad ibn Maslamah (or Mahmoud ibn Maslamah Al Ansari).[1]
9. **İbrikçi**: Responsible for pouring water for the ritual washing of hands, symbolizing purification. Represents Kamber (Qanbar), Ali's loyal servant.[1]
10. **Kapıcı** ("Doorkeeper"): Guards the entrance to the *Cem*, ensuring only initiated members enter and maintaining the sanctity of the gathering. Represents Ghulam Kaysan.[1]
11. **Peyikçi** ("Messenger"): Traditionally responsible for communications related to the *Cem*. Represents Amri Ayyari.[1]
12. **Sakacı** (or Sakkâ): Responsible for distributing water or other sacred drinks (*dem*, like sherbet or milk) during the ceremony, symbolizing quenching spiritual thirst and recalling the thirst of Karbala. Represents Ammar ibn Yasir.[1]

The execution of these twelve distinct functions by different members of the community highlights the collaborative and participatory nature of Alevi worship, where the ritual's success depends on the harmonious contribution of all involved.

5.3 The Semah Dance: Embodied Mysticism and Cosmic Symbolism

The *Semah* is a unique and essential element of Alevi ritual practice, particularly within the *Cem* ceremony.[17] Described as a family of ritual dances involving mystical and aesthetic body movements performed in rhythmic harmony, it is considered an inseparable part of any *Cem*.[57] Both men and women (*semahçıs* or Semah dancers) participate together, moving side-by-side or across from one another, typically accompanied by the sacred music of the *saz* played by the *zakir*.[27]

The *Semah* is rich in symbolism, embodying core Alevi mystical concepts.[31] The turning and swirling motions are often interpreted as representing the cyclical nature of existence, the revolution of the planets around the sun, and the soul's journey – coming from God and returning to God.[31] It can also symbolize the putting off of the individual self (*nefs*) and achieving unity with the Divine.[57] Specific hand gestures carry particular meanings: one palm facing the sky and the other the earth signifies the connection between the divine (*Haqq*) and the human, expressing "You are God, I am human, I came from You and bear Your essence".[36] Turning the palms towards one's own face is interpreted as seeing the divine beauty reflected in the mirror of the self.[36] Bringing both palms to the heart signifies the presence of God within the human ("God is in Man").[36] The movements are sometimes likened to the flight of cranes (*turnalar*), birds held sacred in Alevi folklore.[31]

While styles can vary significantly depending on the region and community [31], a common structure involves three main phases:

1. **Ağırlama:** The initial phase, characterized by slow, deliberate movements.[31]
2. **Yürütme:** The dance becomes more lively and fluid, with dancers often moving in a circular pattern while making swooping arm gestures.[31]
3. **Yeldirme:** The final phase, which is the fastest, most energetic, and technically demanding part of the dance.[31] Throughout the dance, participants maintain a respectful orientation, often ensuring they do not turn their backs to the *Dede* presiding over the *Cem*.[36] Dancers typically wear clean, everyday clothes, although sometimes symbolic colors like red and green are favored; there isn't usually a specific uniform costume, though regional variations in attire exist.[36]

The *Semah* is considered a crucial medium for transmitting the Alevi-Bektashi tradition and its values, including unity, tolerance, and the quest to reach God.[36] Its performance, integrating music, movement, and deep spiritual meaning, plays a vital role in fostering and enriching traditional music culture in Turkey.[36] Recognizing its cultural significance, UNESCO inscribed the Semah, Alevi-Bektaşi ritual on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2010.[68] Efforts continue within Alevi communities and organizations to preserve this tradition by teaching the *Semah* and the accompanying *saz* music to younger generations.[31] While Alevi tradition often links the *Semah*'s origins to the mystical *Kırklar Meclisi* [57], some observers note similarities to Central Asian folk dances, suggesting possible syncretic roots.[114]

5.4 Fasting Practices: Muharrem Matem Orucu and Hızır Orucu

Alevi fasting practices differ notably from the obligatory Ramadan fast observed by most Sunni and Shia Muslims, which Alevis typically do not perform.[28] Instead, Alevi religious life includes several specific periods of fasting, the most important being the *Muharrem Matem Orucu* (Mourning Fast of Muharram) and the *Hızır Orucu* (Fast of Khidr).

Muharrem Matem Orucu: This is the central fasting period in Alevism, observed annually during the first part of Muharram, the first month of the Islamic lunar calendar.[34] The fast typically lasts for twelve days, commemorating the Twelve Imams.[43] Its primary purpose is to mourn (*matem* or *yas*) the martyrdom of Imam Huseyn, the Prophet Muhammad's grandson, along with his family members and followers at the Battle of Karbala on the 10th of Muharram, 61 AH (October 10, 680 CE).[105] Some Alevi communities extend the mourning period by starting the fast three days earlier, dedicating these days to the memory of other figures associated with the Karbala tragedy, such as Masum-u Paklar (innocent children related to the Imams) or Muslim ibn Aqil.[107]

The Muharrem fast is characterized by specific abstentions reflecting its nature as a period of deep mourning and spiritual reflection.[106] Key practices often include:

- **Abstinence from Water:** Perhaps the most distinctive feature is refraining from drinking plain water throughout the fasting period, in remembrance of the thirst suffered by Imam Huseyn and his companions who were denied access to water at Karbala.[106] Fluid intake is typically maintained through other liquids like fruit compotes (*hoşaf*), *ayran* (yogurt drink), tea, or coffee.[107]
- **Dietary Restrictions:** Consumption of meat is generally avoided, as no living creature (*can*) should be harmed during this sacred mourning period.[106] Some also avoid eggs (containing a life embryo) and pungent foods like onions and garlic.[108] Knives might not be used at the table.[108]
- **Avoidance of Pleasures:** Fasting individuals refrain from worldly pleasures, entertainment, celebrations (like weddings), listening to music (except for devotional mourning hymns), and excessive laughter.[108] Personal grooming activities like shaving or looking in mirrors might also be avoided.[108] Sexual relations between spouses are typically abstained from during the fast.[109]
- **Timing:** Unlike the Ramadan fast with its pre-dawn meal (*sahur*), the Muharrem fast often begins after midnight, following a final meal and intention (*niyet*). The fast is broken (*oruç açma*) after sunset, without the elaborate *iftar* meals common in Ramadan.[105] Some may undertake particularly strict fasting (*uğundurma*) on certain days, such as the seventh day, consuming only minimal sustenance like grape seeds.[107]
- **Spiritual Focus:** The emphasis is on inner reflection, remembrance of the martyrs of Karbala, expressing grief and loyalty to the Ahl al-Bayt, and cultivating virtues like patience and compassion.[107] Alevi teachings stress that the fast is invalidated not just by eating or drinking, but by unethical actions like lying, cheating, gossiping, or holding grudges.[109] Reconciliation with anyone one is estranged from is considered essential

before starting the fast.[109]

The Muharrem fast culminates on or after the 12th day with the preparation and communal sharing of *Aşure*, a special sweet pudding made from grains, fruits, and nuts, symbolizing survival, abundance, and the unity of the community after the period of mourning.[107] The specific practices of the Muharrem fast, particularly the abstinence from water, serve as a powerful, embodied way for Alevis to identify with the suffering of Imam Huseyn and the Ahl al-Bayt. This annual ritual reinforces the collective memory of historical oppression and martyrdom that is central to Alevi identity, distinguishing their practice sharply from Sunni observances around Ashura and strengthening group solidarity through shared mourning and remembrance.[53]

Hızır Orucu: Another significant fast is dedicated to the mystical figure Hızır (identified with the Quranic Khidr), who is revered in Alevism as an immortal saint or prophet, an emanation of God or Ali, who wanders the earth helping those in distress.[94] The Hızır fast is typically observed for three consecutive days, usually in mid-February (often stated as February 13-15).[34] Some communities may fast for seven days.[115] The fast is followed by a *Hızır Cemi* and the sharing of special foods, such as a roasted wheat pilaf called *Gavut*.[115]

Other fasting periods mentioned in some Alevi contexts include fasting on 48 Thursdays throughout the year, a fast for Fatma Ana (Fatima), and a three-day mourning fast for Imam Ali observed by some during Ramadan.[109]

5.5 The Cemevi: Evolution of Alevi Sacred Space

The *Cemevi* (literally, "house of gathering") is the central institution and designated space for Alevi collective worship and community life in the contemporary era.[20] It serves as the primary location for the performance of the *Cem* ceremony.[24]

Historically, however, dedicated *Cemevi* buildings did not exist in the way they do today.[37] Due to centuries of persecution and the need for secrecy, especially in rural Anatolia where Alevism was traditionally based, *Cem* rituals were typically conducted in discreet, often multi-purpose locations.[17] These might include the largest room in a village house (*meydan evi*), the residence of the local *Dede*, repurposed structures like barns or stables, or even secluded outdoor spots.[17] These spaces would temporarily transform from the profane to the sacred during the time of the ritual.[37]

The emergence of the modern *Cemevi* as a distinct architectural form and permanent institution is closely linked to the profound social changes experienced by Alevis in the latter half of the 20th century, namely mass urbanization and the Alevi revival.[20] As large numbers of Alevis migrated from isolated villages to cities, they faced challenges in maintaining their traditions and communal structures in new, often unwelcoming urban environments.[18] This created a need for new, visible, and permanent centers where Alevis could gather, perform their rituals, preserve their culture, and organize collectively.[27] The Alevi revival, starting in the 1980s and intensifying in the 1990s, saw the establishment of numerous Alevi associations and foundations, which then spearheaded the drive to build dedicated *Cemevis*.[2] The first purpose-built *Cemevi* in Turkey is recognized as the one constructed in the Kartal district of

Istanbul in 1993, designed to evoke the architecture of a traditional dervish lodge (*dergâh* or *tekke*).[39] Since then, hundreds have been established across Turkey and in diaspora communities, particularly in Europe.[70]

Modern *Cemevis* often serve as multifunctional community centers, extending their role far beyond just hosting *Cem* rituals.[27] Their functions typically include:

- Providing space for regular *Cem* ceremonies and other religious services like funerals.[39]
- Offering educational programs, such as courses on Alevi beliefs and history, *saz* playing, *Semah* dancing, as well as secular subjects like language, computer skills, or academic tutoring for students.[39]
- Hosting cultural events, concerts, conferences, and art exhibitions related to Alevi culture.[39]
- Organizing social assistance and solidarity activities, including distributing food and clothing to the needy, providing scholarships for students, running soup kitchens, and supporting families facing hardship.[39]
- Serving as administrative centers for Alevi associations and foundations.[39]

The evolution from hidden, temporary ritual spaces to permanent, public *Cemevi* buildings signifies a major transformation in Alevi identity and public presence. The *Cemevi* has become a potent symbol of Alevi visibility, resilience, and the community's assertion of its right to exist and practice its faith openly in modern society.[24]

However, the legal status of *Cemevis* in Turkey remains a major point of contention and a key demand of the Alevi community.[24] Unlike Sunni mosques, Christian churches, and Jewish synagogues (which are implicitly recognized under the Lausanne Treaty framework or explicitly supported by the state), *Cemevis* are not officially recognized by the Turkish state as places of worship (*ibadethane*).[24] They are often legally classified as cultural centers, association buildings, or simply remain in a legal grey area, sometimes built without official permits due to bureaucratic obstacles.[26] This lack of recognition has tangible consequences, including difficulties in obtaining zoning permits, lack of state funding (which the Diyanet provides for mosques), and denial of legal benefits afforded to recognized places of worship, such as exemption from electricity bills.[25] Although the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) has ruled in favor of Alevi applicants on issues like the right to electricity bill exemptions for *Cemevis* (recognizing them as places where religious rituals are practiced) and the right to exemption from compulsory Sunni-focused religious education, the implementation of these rulings by the Turkish state has been inconsistent or lacking.[25] Recent government initiatives, such as the establishment of a Directorate of Alevi-Bektashi Culture and Cemevi under the Ministry of Culture and Tourism in 2022, have been met with significant criticism from major Alevi organizations, who argue that this move reinforces the state's view of Alevism as merely a cultural phenomenon rather than granting it the religious recognition and equal rights they seek.[26] The ongoing struggle for the legal recognition of *Cemevis* thus encapsulates the broader political dimension of Alevism's transformation and its quest for equal citizenship in contemporary Turkey.

6. Social and Religious Organization

6.1 The Ocak System: Hereditary Leadership and Spiritual Lineage

The traditional social and religious structure of Alevism is fundamentally organized around the *Ocak* system.[1] *Ocak*, literally meaning "hearth" in Turkish, refers to hereditary lineages that hold spiritual authority within the Alevi community.[27] This system of hereditary leadership distinguishes Alevism from many Sufi orders, including the formal Bektashi *tariqa*, which typically rely on an initiatory chain (*silsila*) of master and disciple.[1]
Members of these lineages are known as *Ocakzades* ("children/descendants of the hearth").[10] They are believed to be descendants of the Prophet Muhammad, primarily through his son-in-law Ali and the subsequent Twelve Imams, or occasionally through other highly revered saints and figures from Alevi history.[49] This lineage grants them the status of *Seyyid* (descendant of the Prophet).[98] *Ocakzade* families often possess written genealogies (*secere* or *şecere*), sometimes historically approved by Ottoman authorities like the *Nakibüleşraf* (chief registrar of the Prophet's descendants), to validate their sacred ancestry.[98]
The *Ocak* represents more than just a family line; it embodies a source of inherited spiritual charisma, authority, and power.[27] It forms the basis of the relationship between the spiritual guides (*Dedes*, who must belong to an *Ocak*) and their followers (*talipler*).[97] Every Alevi is traditionally born into an affiliation with a specific *Ocak*, inheriting their spiritual connection through kinship.[27] There are numerous distinct *Ocaks*, often geographically concentrated or associated with particular founding saints or historical figures, contributing to the regional diversity within Alevism.[97] Examples include well-known *Ocaks* like Ağuiçen, Sarı Saltık, Dede Garkın, Baba Mansur, Hubyar Sultan, and Şah İbrahim Veli.[98] Kurdish Alevism also has its own specific *Ocax* lineages, such as Axûçan (Ağu İçen), Babamansûr, Kurêsû (Kureyşan), and others.[94] The *Ocak* system, with its emphasis on lineage traced back to Ali and the Imams, likely solidified or became more formalized during the Safavid period, when reverence for the Prophet's family was strongly emphasized by the Kızılbaş movement.[1]
The *Ocak* system, based on inherited spiritual status (*seyyidlik*), represents a unique form of charismatic authority institutionalized through kinship ties. This hereditary structure provided a stable framework for leadership and continuity within Alevi communities, especially crucial during long periods of isolation and persecution when access to external religious centers or formalized training was impossible.[2] The *Ocak* ensured that communities maintained recognized spiritual guides connected to the sacred lineage. However, this inherently hierarchical system, placing *Ocakzades* in a position of spiritual authority over *talipler* [97], stands in some tension with the strong egalitarian ethos also central to Alevi discourse, such as the principle of seeing all humanity as equal (*yetmiş iki millete bir nazarla bakmak*).[9] The significant transformation and decline of the *Ocak* system and the traditional *Dede* role in modern, urbanized contexts partly reflects this inherent tension, as well as the impact of modern social structures that challenge hereditary privilege.[27]

6.2 The Role and Transformation of the Dede

The *Dede* (literally "grandfather") is the traditional title for the socio-religious leader within Alevi communities.[1] Other titles like *Pir* (elder, saint), *Mürşid* (spiritual guide), and *Rehber* (guide) are also used, sometimes indicating different levels within a functional hierarchy among *Ocakzade* families who share responsibilities for guiding a community.[1] The *Dede* must belong to a recognized *Ocak* lineage (*Ocakzade*).[49]
Traditionally, the *Dede*'s role was multifaceted and central to the life of the Alevi community.[1] Their functions included:

- **Ritual Leadership:** Presiding over the *Cem* ceremony and other important rituals like funerals, weddings, initiation (*ikrar verme*), and the establishment of *Müsahiplik*.[1]
- **Spiritual and Moral Guidance:** Providing religious teaching (*irşad*), interpreting Alevi doctrine and tradition, and serving as a moral exemplar (*mürebbi*) for the community (*talipler*).[49]
- **Judicial Arbitration:** Acting as judges or arbiters to resolve disputes within the community, often presiding over the

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