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Concepts of identity in the Alevi diaspora

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There are two things in which the whole of Alevism is comprised. These are *cem* and *sema*.

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Introduction

This paper focuses on one of these two things which according to the Alevi Dede quoted above are at the core of Alevism: *Cem*. 'Cem is the school of Alevism. Without *Cem* there is no Alevism,' writes another Dede, Mehmet Yaman from Istanbul (1998: 5). In this chapter, I will explore the changes undergone by this Alevi ritual that parallel the processes of migration and the formation of diaspora. But my purpose is not a description and analysis of changing ritual. Rather I will discuss how a dispute about what Alevism means for Alevis in the diaspora or, to put it short, what Alevism *is*, is mirrored in discourses about *cem* and in the ritual practice. There is a fundamental disagreement among Alevis about what Alevism is, whether it is *religion* or *culture*. I will contrast the stereotypical representation of *cem* among Alevis with diasporic ritual practice and a case study of a particular *cem* in Hamburg. This enables me to point out a basic transformation in the character of the Alevi community.

In the final part of the chapter I will discuss a general issue of conceptualizing diaspora. Frequently, the formation and development is analysed with reference to questions of 'perpetuation and change' that arise *after* the moment of migration. The case of Alevis, however, gives some hints that this is a too narrow framework and that continuity and change have to be related to a more inclusive cultural continuum of ongoing transformations which connects country of origin and diaspora.

It is difficult to give a short introductory characterization of Alevism without apparently siding already with one of the two positions. One could start with a sentence like: Alevism originated as a religious minority in the power struggles which surrounded the formation of the Ottoman Empire in Anatolia. However, in order to avoid the contentious adjective 'religious' I will characterize Alevis simply as a minority.

As followers of the Safawid order and Shah Ismail who became ruler of Persia in 1501, Alevis or *Kızılbaş*, as they were called that time, were fought by the Ottomans for being strongly influenced by Shiite tenets of Islam, regarded as heretic by the rulers of Anatolia. The Ottomans managed to cut off influence from Persia in eastern Anatolia and Alevism was thereby also separated from the development of mainstream Shiism.¹ Today Alevis are very keen to point out their difference from the Shiites with whom they share, however, the strong reverence for Ali, the son-in-law of the Prophet Mohammad,² and the twelve Imams in general. Still greater is the difference from Sunni Islam. Because Alevis do not practise the 'five pillars' of Islam, strict Muslims regard them as heretics (*gavur*). Today some Alevis dispute that Alevism forms a (however distant) branch of Islam at all.

From the sixteenth century onwards Alevis were violently persecuted by the rulers of Anatolia. Consequently Alevis settled mostly in the more remote mountain areas where they formed tight communities to which outsiders were only rarely admitted. Alevis practised *takiya*, dissimulation. Their rituals, most importantly *cem*, could be practised only in secrecy.

Because of the suppression they suffered at the hands of Sunni Ottoman rulers, Alevis placed great hope in Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's revolution and his efforts to build a secular state in Turkey. This hope, however, was disappointed because Atatürk outlawed all religious orders and practices which did not conform with mainstream Sunni Islam by issuing the 'tarikat ve zaviye yasası' law in 1925. This law is still valid today, so that formally Alevi rituals continue to be illegal in Turkey, although the law is no longer enforced.³ Also the violence suffered by Alevis continued in the Turkish Republic. Most notably here was the brutal suppression of a revolt of Kurdish Alevis in Dersim in 1938 (Alte 1998), but violence against Alevis carried out by right-wing political forces, by Islamists or even by the police, have also occurred recent decades.⁴

Cem

Alevis normally do not practise the prayers (*namaz*, *salat*) prescribed for Muslims five times a day and that at least on Fridays and on special occasions should be conducted in the congregation of a mosque. 'Alevilerin ibadeti cemdir', Alevis use to say: 'the prayer of Alevis is cem'. And *cem* is very different from *namaz*. According to the Oxford Turkish Dictionary, *cem* means crowd; the derived verb *cem etmek* means bring together, to collect.⁵ The brief description of *cem* I am going to provide here is the characterization normally given by Alevis also in the German diaspora. The actual practice of *cem* in Germany today is, however, very different from this description. *Cem* as it is described by Alevis is always the *cem* of rural areas, which is supposed to have been celebrated for centuries by the village communities. The use of the ethnographic present in the following outline of the ritual does not intend to express that *cem* is practised in this manner even today. Rather, it conveys that according to Alevis themselves this description portrays a kind of timeless essence of *cem*.

A *cem* cannot take place without a *dede* (literally: grandfather). The *dede* is the religious specialist of Alevis. *Dedes* belong to holy lineages, *ocak*, which are believed to be genealogically derived from the twelve Imams and, ultimately, from the Imam Ali. Within these lineages religious knowledge is orally transmitted. Written sources play only a minor role in Alevism. Each Alevi family has a relationship fixed by hereditary with a *dede* lineage, i.e., every Alevi is supposed to be a *talip* (student, pupil) of a *dede* who is his *pir* (saintly teacher). In small villages sometimes all families owe allegiance to the same *dede*. Otherwise there are two or three *dedes* responsible for families. It is not possible to change one's *dede*, i.e., the *dede* is not a matter of choice. Every *dede*, in turn, serves a network of his *talips* which at times is spread over a considerable area. The *dede* is at least partially maintained by the endowments of his *talips*⁶ and he has the duty to visit his *talips* at least once a year. During these visits *cem* is celebrated. This means that *cem* normally takes place only once or a very few times each year.

As implied by the meaning of the term, *cem* is a communal ceremony in which several families or, in the case of minor villages, the whole village community takes part. In most places there are no particular buildings in which *cem* celebrated. Such special buildings, the *cemevi* (*cem* house) exist only in special places such as pilgrimage centres. In ordinary villages the ceremony simply takes place in a large room of a family house. *Cem* is most frequently celebrated on Thursday evenings.⁷ Both women and men participate in *cem*. Entering this room, the participants remove their shoes and show their reverence of the *dede*. Everybody contributes something to eat as an offering to the ceremony. These offerings are presented to the *dede* and collected. During the ceremony, the participants sit in a circle so that ideally all people face each other and nobody has his back to another person. Before the ceremony can start, the *dede* has to ask the permission of the participants to officiate in the *cem*. Only if this permission is granted, the *dede* is allowed to take seat on the *post* (a fur-skin marking his seat), thus taking the position of ceremonial leader. In a *cem*, twelve duties or services (*oniki hizmet*) are required. One of these is the duty of the *dede*, but he is supported by others like the *zakir* (singer and musician), the *süpiürgeci* (sweeper, responsible for cleanliness), the *kapıcı* (watchman, standing outside of the house, keeping watch against strangers that might approach) and the *şerağcı* (responsible for the candles). The ritual starts with songs, prayers and the ritual lighting of a candelabra by the *şerağcı*. After the initial phase a ritual takes place which emphasizes the function of *cem* as a communal ceremony. This is the *görgü* or *dara çekmek* in which the *dede* asks whether there are any disputes or strained relationships among those present in the *cem*. Popularly this ritual is today mostly referred to as *halk mahkemesi* (people's court). All disputes and contraventions have to be disclosed now, either by those directly involved or by others who know about them. Those who are said to be involved in conflicts are called before the *dede* who inquires about what had happened and whether accusations are correct. Everybody present may act as witness. If the *dede* together with the community comes to the conclusion that somebody indeed has done something wrong the *dede* and the community discuss an appropriate punishment or compensation. The guilty person is then asked whether he or she accepts this sentence or not. He may

be asked to compensate for any damage he caused, to offer a *kurban* (animal sacrifice) for the community or, in most severe cases, he is ostracized from the community (*düşkün*). A person found guilty either has to accept the punishment agreed upon by the community or to leave the *cem*. The *cem* cannot proceed until either all conflicts are solved or all those persons not willing to end their disputes and to compensate have left. Alevi use to tell, with a certain pride, that in their areas no other jurisdiction other than the *görgü* or *halk mahkemesi* was known and needed.⁸

The ceremony continues with songs accompanied by the long-necked lute, *saz*, prayers and invocations of God, Ali and the Imams or other saints. Other important elements of *cem* are *lokma* (morsel), i.e., the communal meal in which all the offerings brought to a *cem* are distributed equally among the participants, and *semah*, a ritual dance of women and men which symbolizes the cycle of the universe. Singing of songs, the texts of which are frequently taken from famous historical poet-saints like Pir Sultan Abdal or Yunus Emre, takes much time during *cem*, as music and poetry are generally held in high esteem by Alevi. The ceremony lasts for several hours or even for a whole night.

As this short outline makes clear, *cem* is a ritual that creates a sacred space and time in which relationships both within a village community and between a *dede* and his *talip* are affirmed and reconstituted. Thus *cem* almost constitutes a textbook example for a Durkheimian understanding of religion in which the social is sacralized. In the case of *cem* the social is sacralized in the form of *communitas* in Victor Turner's sense (1995). Within the local community celebrating *cem* all mundane differences – in the dual sense of disputes and differences in structural positions – have to be levelled out. *Cem* reconstitutes not just an everyday social organization, but the ideal community among Alevi. The sacred character of the *cem* and its time-space has to be acknowledged by the participants, for example in that they remove their shoes and in that the participation in a *cem* cannot be interrupted. Whoever enters a *cem* has to stay until the end.

In accordance with the general practice of *takiya*, *cem* was celebrated in secrecy and very few outsiders actually knew what happened during *cem*. However, rumours that both sexes participate and even dance in the ceremony have given rise to slander that Alevi practice indiscriminate promiscuity in *cem*. Slander and secrecy reinforced one another.

Change and the end of community

This kind of *cem* is obviously a ritual which pre-supposes and renews long-standing and intimate relationships both within the village communities and between *dede* and *talip*. The village communities and the *dede-talip* networks can be identified as the crucial elements of Alevi social structure. The ritual developed when Alevi had taken refuge in rather remote areas, where they lived mainly among themselves. *Cem* reflects the dispersed, network-like and non-centralized character of Alevi communities. There is no central institutional hierarchy or organization of *dedes*.⁹ The social situation of most Alevi in Turkey today, not to speak of the diaspora, is, however, quite different. If the sort of community referred to above characterized

the life of Alevi in the past, we have to notice that this kind of community is only a remote reminiscence for most Alevi in the present.

Of the many changes which affected Alevism migration is perhaps the most important. By the first half of the twentieth century Alevi had started to leave their villages and to move into the cities of Turkey. There were many reasons for this migration: there was search for work, for educational opportunities, but there were also political conditions forcing Alevi to leave their home areas. The latter applies particularly to Kurdish Alevi, especially from the besieged area of Dersim/Tunceli (Firat 1997).¹⁰ This migration within Turkey disrupted both *dede-talip* networks and village communities. The disrupting effects of migration increased when migrants turned to foreign countries, moving especially to Germany.¹¹

Beside migration, political changes had a deep impact on Alevism. In the early decades of the Turkish Republic most Alevi had been staunch supporters of Atatürk and his party CHP (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, Republican People's Party) although both Atatürk and his successors did not fulfil Alevi hopes for recognition and equal rights. From the end of the 1960s, however, Alevi youth came increasingly under the influence of Marxism and adopted radical leftist positions. Many joined militant organizations and parties subscribing to various Marxist ideologies. Coincident with this shift to the left was both a rejection of all kinds of religion in general, and heavy criticism of Alevi *dedes* in particular. *Dedes* were quite indiscriminately denounced as exploiters who lived at the expense of the people. 'We have driven the *dedes* out of our villages,' one former member of the TDKP (Türk Devrimci Komünist Partisi, Turkish Revolutionary Communist Party) told me (cf. Mandel 1992: 423). These changes affected the two central elements of Alevi social structure: both the village communities and the *dede-talip* networks suffered highly disruptive influences.

Most Alevi in Turkey continued dissimulation as protection against possible anti-Alevi violence. Within the leftist groups of the 1970s, a new kind of *takiya* was practised: now Alevism was not only dissimulated in order to protect oneself, but also because religion was considered reactionary or, at best, simply irrelevant. Although there are no precise studies of the subject, it seems that the practice of Alevi religion in general and *cem* in particular declined considerably in the 1970s and 1980s. There are many Alevi migrants in Germany, now in their late thirties or forties, who never, or only a few times in their early childhood, witnessed a *cem* as described above in Turkey. Because Alevi traditions were transmitted orally, both within the *dede*-lineages and from *dede* to *talip*, this means that also knowledge about Alevism among Alevi was very much in decline.

Alevism and *cem* in the diaspora

The same development applies to the Alevi diaspora in Germany. In the early 1960s the first Alevi came as 'guest workers' to Germany, and in the late 1970s they were joined by an increasing number of political refugees, most of them various kinds of 'Marxists of Alevi descent'. I use this expression because most of these people probably would not have designated themselves simply as Alevi at

that time. Looking back to the 1970s, a former leftist activist explained: 'The great majority of the members of these left and revolutionary organizations came from Alevi families, but we did not ask for that. Being fervent Marxists, religion was completely irrelevant for us.' Most of the political migrants and refugees continued their political commitments in Germany, working in organizations like DEV YOL, DİDF or ATİF.¹²

Also non-Marxist Alevi migrants in Germany practised Alevism only to a very limited extent. In private meetings perhaps the *saz* was played and religious songs were sung, but there were no formal rituals, let alone celebrations of *cem*. In German society Alevis remained largely invisible and unrecognized.

In Hamburg (this probably applies to Germany in general) *cem* was celebrated only after Alevis had for the first time attempted to formally organize themselves.¹³ The first Alevi organization in Germany was called *Yurtseverler Birliği* (YB, Union of Patriots). Having been founded originally in Munich in 1974/75, it developed branches in several cities. The branch in Hamburg was opened after fascists had killed more than 100 Alevis in the Anatolian city of Maraş in the end of 1978.¹⁴

In 1984 the YB organized for the first time a *cem* in Hamburg. This *cem* was very different in character from what I outlined above. Of course, it did not take place in a house in a village but in a large school hall in a suburb, and instead of only a handful of families who knew each other intimately participating, there were but several hundred people. The *cem* was not conducted by a *dede* hereditarily related to at least a considerable part of the congregation, but by a *dede* flown in from Turkey whom only very few people knew personally. This event was among the first public meetings of Alevis in Hamburg. As most Alevis practiced *takiya*, many of them were not publicly known to be Alevis. Therefore many of the participants in the *cem* were surprised to see neighbours and acquaintances whom they did not know were also Alevis. This *cem* was obviously not an intimate ritual of community as it had been celebrated in Alevi villages in Turkey.

A decisive change in the organization of Alevis in Germany occurred in 1989. In this year, a number of Alevis organized an 'Alevi Culture Week' which also included a celebration of *cem*. A few months later the organizers of the week founded the *Alevi Kültür Merkezi* (AKM, Alevi Culture Centre). The Alevi Culture Week and the foundation of the Alevi Culture Centre marked a decisive turn in the development of the Alevi diaspora in Germany because now, for the first time ever, an event was publicly and formally labelled as 'Alevi'. What had happened here was a collective and organized break with *takiya*. It was a coming out that made Alevis for the first time recognizable as a community in Germany. A wave of foundations of Alevi organizations all over Germany and in other European countries ensued. Umbrella organizations, most importantly the 'Federation of Alevi Communities in Germany' (Almanya Alevi Birlikleri Federasyonu, AABF), were also established.

A few months after the registration of the AKM in 1990 a faction broke away and founded another association called *Hamburg Anadolu-Alevi Kültür Birliği* (Haak Bir, Hamburg Anatolian-Alevi Culture Union).¹⁵ In subsequent years these two organizations were bound to each other in a relationship of bitter rivalry. In the

second half of the 1990s they competed over the question of which of the two organizations would be the first to be able to establish a community centre of its own. Although the AKM was the first to start serious efforts in this direction, Haak Bir was the first – and still today the only one – to reach that goal. In 1997 the organization was able to buy a large building, formerly housing a company. However, the financial commitments entered into by this effort put Haak Bir under great pressure.

Today seven Alevi associations exist in and around Hamburg. Instead of former rivalry, the present leaders of the organizations have now taken a number of practical steps for increased cooperation. This includes the former rivals AKM and Haak Bir.

Cem: religion or culture?

One could speak of an Alevi revival in Germany (and in Turkey) since 1989, but this revival was not a simple renewal of Alevism as it had been practised until a few decades ago in Turkey. Instead, it implied a serious transformation of Alevism and its rituals which can be glossed over as a 'folklorization'. Although originally 'religious' rituals were practised, Alevism was reconstituted mainly as a secular culture. Most Alevi organizations in Germany have the word 'culture' in their names and few of the names give a hint to somebody not acquainted with Alevism that 'Alevi culture' could have something to do with religion.

I have never heard an Alevi giving an explicit definition of 'religion' and 'culture' or an explanation of the difference between the two things. Rather, the distinction is taken to be self-evident. Religion is understood to be mainly constituted by belief (*inanç*). Many of the former Marxists use to say things like: 'I am atheist. I don't believe in these things. These religious matters have no importance for me. It is old stuff. What is important for me is our culture.' The conceptualization of religion as belief is significant because it enables the performance of rituals outside of the sphere of religion, or at least the participation of non-religious Alevis in *cem* without automatically practising 'religion'. Thus, the practice of *cem* is not in itself a religious act. In accordance with anthropological theories of ritual after Victor Turner, Alevis describe *cem* as it is currently practised in Hamburg as performance, as a symbolic act. Frequently, *cem* is explicitly likened to drama. This is also accepted by more 'religious minded', believing Alevis. They, however, regret this state of affairs and contend that *cem* should be practised only with belief. For them, *cem* lacks authenticity without belief. A *cem* without belief is desacralized.

This desacralization can be detected in a number of aspects. Many of the *cem*s in Hamburg have taken place in a large lecture hall of the university. Here, the *dede* and his assistants are placed on the small stage in front of the hall whereas the other participants, sometimes more than five hundred, sit on the students' seats which rise towards the rear of the hall. However, it is quite debatable to what extent these people are actually *participants* and do not only constitute an observing audience. In the spatial arrangement of the lecture hall the sacred space is very much reduced. If we take the removal of shoes as an indicator for where the

sacred space begins, it is clearly limited to the stage, for only the *dede* and the *hizmet* who enter the stage take off their shoes. The audience is then actually seated outside of the sacred space. Further, in contrast to the village *cem*, the participants do not individually step before the *dede* in order to greet him and thus acknowledge his authority. Finally, the participants are also not bound (or actually confined) by a sacred time structure of the *cem*. They may come and go almost as they like, many coming late and leaving early, or leaving the lecture hall to have a break or to go to the toilet. There is a certain constant level of noise because many in the audience talk with their neighbours. A very simple kind of active participation like responding to the prayers of the *dede* with the exclamation '*allah allah*' is not practised by all members of the audience. In the case of this kind of *cem*, Leach's assertion that in ritual 'there is no separate audience of listeners. The performers and the listeners are the same people' obviously does not fully apply (Leach 1976: 45). Also the seating arrangement in rows, one behind the other, opposite the stage and the *dede*, reinforces the impression of a separation of audience and actors, very similar to the performance of a drama or a cultural show. Because of that arrangement quite different from the traditional circular, face-to-face arrangement, the audience is individualized rather than turned into a (sacralized) community by the performance of the ritual.

Many Alevis in Hamburg describe this arrangement of *cem* as 'symbolical'. Contrary to anthropological theories of ritual, however, they do not allude with this expression to the (community-building) power of symbols, but they contrast the symbolical with the *real*, the authentic. This kind of *cem* then is *only* symbolical. This 'only' symbolical character does not only refer to the character of the *cem* as a whole, but also to the concrete significance of particular elements of the ritual. Thus it is obvious that the question of the *dede* and whether there are any conflicts and misgivings among the hundreds of participants (i.e., in the audience) is only a rhetorical question which has to be asked because it is part of the ritual sequence and not because all disputes are actually expected to be solved in the *cem*. On the contrary, everybody knows for certain that not all people in the audience are reconciled with each other, but nobody feels compelled by the *dede's* question to step forward and to disclose conflicts and problems in order to solve them. It is important to keep in mind, however, that as a cultural ideal form the *cem* of the villages has maintained a remarkable continuity and stability. Whenever I have asked an Alevi to describe *cem* he or she has given me a description of a village *cem* – although the person in question may never have actually attended such a traditional *cem* but only the contemporary *cem* of diaspora. The real *cem*, the ritual at the core of Alevism, is not what is practised in Hamburg.

According to Alevi self-diagnosis, the changed, 'only symbolical' character of *cem* is not just a consequence of changed outward arrangements like the greatly increased number of participants but, more importantly, of a lack of knowledge about *cem* and its ritual elements among Alevis today. It is not only the lacking experience of 'real' *cem* but a general neglect or even rejection of religious education, still derived from the anti-religiosity of the leftist movements, which contributes to this perceived lack of knowledge.

In view of all these changes and the perceived shortcomings of *cem* in Hamburg today, the question arises why so many people at all join in the ritual. At first sight it seems quite surprising that hundreds of people come to every *cem* if many of them are not very much interested in Alevism as religion or even reject religion outright. The ongoing popularity of *cem* can be explained only if we understand that it has undergone a basic transformation: from an intimate, sacred ritual reconstituting community it has been turned into a public ritual affirming identity. Or, to put it differently, the community which is reconstituted by *cem* as it is celebrated in Hamburg is not an interactional face-to-face community, but an *imagined community* of symbolic cultural difference. Its intention is not only directed toward the members of the community, but also towards those outside, most importantly toward Sunnis. This kind of *cem* is a 'ritual implicating others' in Gerd Baumann's sense (Baumann 1992).

In consequence of the public affirmation of Alevi identity in the diaspora, Alevism has become a public marker of difference. To participate in a *cem* in Hamburg is to publicly affirm one's difference as Alevi from other Turks. It does not mean, however, to subscribe to specific and central elements of Alevi faith or to reaffirm one's affiliation with a religious authority. The affirmation of being Alevi is first of all the emphasis of a contrasting difference, a rejection of perceived repressive practices and ideologies of both the Turkish state and Sunni Islam. It is much less a positive difference implicating the affiliation with a certain (ritual/religious) praxis or cultural contents.¹⁶

Within the German context the expression of this difference is significant because in German public discourse all Turks are frequently identified as Muslims. Islam has acquired a generally negative image in German society, being equated with resistance to 'integration', with 'headscarf-problems',¹⁷ 'fundamentalism' and the like. Alevis generally share this stereotypical equation of (Sunni) Islam with fundamentalism and danger, but they are quick to point out that they are either no Muslims at all or at least a very different kind of Muslims. The assertion of Alevism in Germany is from the Alevi point of view also an effort to make Germans understand that not all immigrants are Sunnis and – by that token – fundamentalists.

For non-religious Alevis, as well as functioning as a public marker of difference, *cem* is at most understood as an enactment of secular values endorsed by Alevis. In this sense, a man I shall call Hüseyin, a declared atheist, drew an explicit parallel between socialism and Alevism:

The essence of Alevism is Socialism itself. Because in Socialism there is companionship [*yoldaşlık*], in Alevism there is *musahiplik*. In Socialism there is people's justice, and in Alevism, in *cem* there is people's justice [*halk mahkemesi*] too. Many things are very similar to one another in Alevism and Socialism.

I had asked him whether he perceived a biographical rupture between his earlier involvement in revolutionary politics and his current commitment to Alevi politics. Obviously, he saw no break. Indeed, the present popular use of the expression *halk mahkemesi* instead of *görgü* for the part of *cem* during which conflicts are solved is a

result of the attempt to re-interpret the Alevism from a leftist, socialist perspective. Hüseyin saw *cem* just as a kind of cultural show. According to him there is nothing sacred in the ritual.

However, not all Alevis are content with this understanding of Alevism in general, and *cem* in particular, as simply exhibiting and affirming socialist or general humanistic values. Others demand that the religious character of the ritual should be maintained or enabled. This requires that all people who attend a *cem* do so with faith and concentration. One should keep silent and remain with the *cem* from the beginning until the end in order to avoid any rupture. People who think like that insist that a *cem* is very different from a cultural show and demand that every precaution is taken in order not to confuse both types of performance. No part of *cem* should be folklorized.

An element of *cem* which is very susceptible to folklorization is the ritual dance *semah*. It is frequently emphasized that *semah* is not just a dance and that it should not be performed outside of the ritual sequence of *cem* on occasions like marriages or other secular festivities.¹⁸ *Semah* is regarded a central and distinctive element of Alevi culture/religion and many young Alevis took *semah*-lessons after Alevi associations had been founded. Young people fond of *semah* began to dance it everywhere, with complete disregard of the dance's original context and significance. When I asked Hüseyin whether dancing *semah* was folklore for him, he replied:

I am dancing *semah* because I dance well. Our fanatic *dedes* say that *semah* must not be danced outside of *cem*. Otherwise it is prohibited. Only in *cem*. But I say, we always dance at our weddings. Many *dedes* and fanatic Alevis say, you are Alevi, why do you dance (*semah*) at a wedding? But my son and my daughter have learned how to dance *semah* at weddings! Ten years ago it was all prohibited [in Turkey].

Now, as a public ritual of identity, *cem* offers a space for the contestation of identity, and the ritual itself becomes part of Alevi politics of identity. At stake is not only the debate on religion or culture but also the relation of being Alevi to other identifications like being Muslim, being Kurd, or being Turk. The question whether Alevism is a branch of Islam is still hotly debated among Alevis in Germany. In the Alevi Culture Centre it seems to have become a dominant view that Alevism is distinct and separate from although genealogically related with, Islam. But others continue to insist: 'In *cem* we invoke "Allah, Mohammad, Ali"', how can we say that we are not Muslims?' The relation with the Kurdish struggle for recognition became an issue already at the very first *cem* held in Hamburg in 1984. KOMKAR, a Kurdish political organization in Germany, sent a message of greeting on the occasion of that *cem* which should be read publicly in the course of the ritual. But the *dede* conducting the *cem*, who had flown in from Turkey, was very suspicious of this address. He insisted on seeing it before it was publicly read in order to be able to drop passages which deemed him too pro-Kurdish. At another *cem* it was fervently discussed whether Kurdish songs could be sung in the performance or not. Also,

the relation with the Turkish state and its national ideology became an issue in the context of *cem*. When the Alevi Culture Group organized the *cem* of the Alevi Culture Week in 1989 it was planned to invite the same *dede* from Turkey who had conducted the ritual in 1984. But this *dede* insisted that he would only lead the *cem* if a large portrait of Atatürk and a Turkish flag was displayed in the hall. The group which had the reputation of consisting mainly of former leftists rejected that demand and another *dede* was invited.¹⁹

A *cem* in October 1999

Beside this more general level of identification, the local level of competition between the different Alevi associations in Hamburg also invades the celebration of the ritual. This happened rather inadvertently in a *cem* which was staged on 30 October 1999. This particular *cem* was part of the celebrations commemorating the tenth anniversary of the Alevi Culture Centre. In the months before the celebration an unprecedented degree of co-operation between the different Alevi associations in Hamburg had been reached. Jointly the associations organized a function in memory of the victims of Sivas and a picnic for families. Because of the better relations between the associations, exceptionally large numbers of members of other associations attended the *cem*.

The *dede* invited to conduct the ritual was Mehmet Ocak from Pazarcık, a small town in the province of Maraş. Many of the members of the Alevi Culture Centre come from this province. Mehmet Ocak enjoys a considerable reputation not only among these people but also among others from adjacent areas because his mother, Elif Ana, was considered a saintly women with great healing powers. Her tomb has become a centre of pilgrimage. There was only one problem with Mehmet Ocak *dede*: he does not belong to an *ocak* (his surname notwithstanding) and therefore, in the strict sense of Alevi genealogical rationality, he is not *dede* at all. Mehmet Ocak derives his ability to conduct *cem* not from genealogical descent from a holy lineage, but from the personal spiritual charisma of his mother. The issue whether a *dede* who is not a 'real' *dede* could be invited to conduct a *cem* was discussed among members of the Alevi Culture Centre. Few people expressed serious reservations. It was argued that it was better to invite a *dede* who did not belong to an *ocak* but who was widely known among Alevis in Hamburg and therefore could draw more attention and more people to the *cem* than to bring a 'real' *dede* whom only very few people knew.

Indeed many people, also from the other associations, attended the *cem*. The lecture hall was crowded and the arrangement was as usual: the *dede* was seated on the stage, facing the audience, together with the *zakir* and the *rehber*. They were joined on the stage by the other *hizmet* (duties) whenever they had a function to fulfil. In this *cem* the *rehber* ('guide', assistant of the *dede*) played a very important role. The *rehber* was Lütfi Kaleli, an elderly Alevi intellectual and writer from Istanbul.²⁰ Before the *cem* started, Lütfi Kaleli announced the ceremony as an 'eğitim cemi'. *Eğitim* means education, formation, training. The explicit intention of this *cem* was education: the teaching of the ritual's meaning and structure to the

audience. In his introduction Lütü Kaleli contrasted the *cem* to be performed with a *görgü cem*, i.e. a full ceremony in which only *musahips*, that is, people fully initiated into Alevism, are allowed to take part. In contrast to this, he said: 'Today we only want to show how *cem* is performed to those *canlar*²¹ who want to learn it and who do not know.' I think *only* (*sadece*) is an important word here, because it contrasts the performance with what is tacitly considered a real or full *cem*. Significantly, the *cem* did not begin with *halk mahkemesi*, the ceremony of reconciliation. In order to achieve the didactic purpose, the course of the performance was frequently interrupted by Lütü Kaleli who then explained what had happened so far and what was to come next. Beside the duties in the *cem* the songs and prayers said by Mehmet Oca were explained as were personages, such as the Imams, invoked in these prayers.

After the offerings had been symbolically presented to the *dede* and the *lokma*, the sharing of the meal among the participants, was being prepared, Lütü Kaleli again interrupted the performance and announced: 'Now we will present a little example of the Alevi judicial system in the *cem* ceremony. That is, we will have the so-called *halk mahkemesi*.' He then asked whether anybody had a complaint (*şikayet*) against anybody else in the audience. A man rose, one of the leading persons of the Alevi Culture Centre, and said that he had a complaint against the chairman of the Alevi Federation, AABF. He came to the stage and said that since his youth the chairman had been so committed to the cause of Alevism in Germany, investing all his time and never doing anything for himself, that he had not even found the time to marry. Therefore, he accused him of not being married. Obviously, this 'complaint' was rather intended as a – somewhat garbled – praise of the chairman and his commitment to the community. The chairman was called to the stage by Lütü Kaleli who asked him to give his statement in order that the complaint could be dealt with. However, he was quite reluctant to discuss the question of his marriage. He said that he did not know what to say about this complaint, but that he himself had another complaint. He continued: 'I am quite disappointed that after ten years of Alevi organizations in Hamburg we still have to celebrate *cem* in such an improper place like a university lecture hall. It is a pity that there are several Alevi associations now and still the Alevi Culture Centre which was founded ten years ago has no proper place of its own to celebrate *cem*.' He mentioned the case of Berlin where a few weeks earlier several Alevi associations had jointly opened a *cemevi* (*cem* house) in a former church and expressed his desire that Hamburg should follow the example of Berlin.

This was obviously a complaint of a different sort. The change in the course of the *halk mahkemesi* was explicitly acknowledged by Lütü Kaleli, saying that the ceremony had started as a symbolical example, but now had touched upon something real and important. He recommended that the Alevi associations of Hamburg should increase their co-operation and asked the audience of the *cem* to give a promise (*ikrar*) to support the leadership of the associations in their efforts for unity. Many people in the audience expressed their agreement by clapping hands. However, a man rose questioning the intentions of those willingly agreeing for more unity. He said: 'Alevism is no cheap thing. If you promise unity and co-

operation here in the prayer (*ibadet*), you are bound by your solemn promise. Many of you are not members of the Alevi Culture Centre but your promise means that all of you have to become members of the Centre as it is the first and most senior Alevi organization in Hamburg.' At that stage a member of the managing committee of Haak Bir rose and said that his association had already a very big place. He stated that it was a pity that the *cem* took place in the university. If the Alevi Culture Centre really wished greater co-operation, they could well have come to Haak Bir and celebrated this *cem* in the hall of Haak Bir. Again Lütü Kaleli tried to end the *halk mahkemesi* with some general remarks of recommendation, but again a man rose in the audience, a member of the Alevi Culture Centre who had been at the forefront of Alevi associations in Hamburg since the days of the Yurtseverler Birliği. In a very agitated voice he expressed that it was quite useless always to talk about co-operation between Haak Bir and the Alevi Culture Centre. He said: 'It was Haak Bir that broke away from the Alevi Culture Centre and thereby ended the unity of Alevi organization in Hamburg. So, if you want co-operation you should come back! But there have been so many occasions to do so and you never did. Five years ago in a *cem* we debated the same and at that time you promised in *halk mahkemesi* that you will come back to the Alevi Culture Centre. But you did not do so. You broke your solemn promise [*ikrar*]! It is futile to talk about co-operation!'

During the exchange of statements several people had been called to the stage: The author of the original complaint, the chairman of the AABF, the chairman of the Alevi Culture Centre as representative of the party accused by the second complaint, and the member of the managing committee of Haak Bir. All the persons on the stage stood in a semicircle with their heads bowed in front of the *dede* who remained seated on his *post*. The whole hearing was managed by Lütü Kaleli who now asked the chairman of the Alevi Culture Centre again to comment upon the accusation. He explained that the different Alevi associations in Hamburg had ended their rivalry and entered a phase of serious co-operation. He mentioned the example of events organized jointly so far and added that he hoped that in future the co-operation will be even more intense. He expressed the wish that the Alevi associations of Hamburg could do something similar to what had been done in Berlin. After that no additional statement was heard. The *dede* issued his judgement, asking the associations to increase co-operation and to bury competition. He expressed his hope that one day the associations could indeed have a *cemevi* together so that in future a *cem* in Hamburg would not take place in the university but in a proper place. Then all witnesses left the stage and after a prayer all persons left the lecture hall in order to take *lokma* in the entrance hall of the building. After *lokma*, the *cem* continued with a few more songs and prayers in the lecture hall.

Interpreting the *cem*

What had happened in this *cem*? The performance of the ritual was explicitly intended to be 'symbolical'. It was announced as a 'teaching example'. Many non-religious

Alevi say that teaching is a very important purpose and function of *cem*. What they have in mind is, however, not education about the meaning of the ritual and the meaning of Alevism as religion, but general teaching about norms and values, 'about what is good for humans', as one man expressed it. In the *cem* described here, in contrast, teaching was not of that secular kind but it was intended as enabling persons lacking the appropriate knowledge to learn something about *cem*.

The structure of the performance reflected this purpose in that the ritual sequence was repeatedly interrupted by commentaries, explaining what was being done. This structure already presupposed that the performance was not a real *cem* in which all those present actually participated, for it took into consideration that many of the people present were unable to follow the ritual and to understand its proper meaning without such exegesis. The *cem* happened in an imaginary showcase and was commented upon from the outside. Rather than simply being a *cem* it was a presentation of what happens if a *cem* is performed. Therefore it was not really a problem to start without the *halk mahkemesi* and to accept that the attending persons were not reconciled with one another. It was also no problem to show later what happens if *halk mahkemesi* is performed, and to show it in a phase of the ritual were, according to its traditional structure, this particular element of *cem* is totally misplaced.

Yet, this intention notwithstanding, the *cem* exemplified that a strict separation between the 'real' and the 'as if' performance cannot be maintained. In the *halk mahkemesi* 'reality' proved to be uncontainable. The *halk mahkemesi* was again announced as simply an 'example' and it started with a rather inappropriate complaint intended only to enable the presentation of the form of performance and not to provoke an actual negotiation of serious problems. However, it gravitated, apparently inexorably, towards the most serious split within the Alevi community in Hamburg.

I have said earlier that *cem* has changed from a ritual of face-to-face community (in the villages) to a ritual of an imagined community in diaspora. It is in *cem* that Alevi become visible as a community. It is no surprise then that *halk mahkemesi* in the diasporic *cem* does not negotiate problems and conflicts between individuals but, as in our case, pretences for precedence between organized communities. Behind the dispute lies the question, which of the Alevi associations in Hamburg in fact represents (in the dual sense of the word) the Alevi community of the city. Is it the Alevi Culture Centre because it was the first and original organization whereas Haak Bir originated simply as a split-off faction? Or is it Haak Bir because it possesses a proper place for the Alevi community to celebrate *cem*, thus offering a kind of home for the ceremony – a facility which the Alevi Culture Centre so far was unable to accomplish?

The dispute is certainly not purely symbolical but has a serious material aspect. Haak Bir had taken on a considerable financial commitment in the acquisition of its building and had accrued substantial debt. It would of course be a considerable lightening of this financial burden if the obligations could be shared and the building be used by other associations too. However, a number of members of the Alevi Culture Centre expressed the sentiment: 'Why should we solve their problem?'

The efforts to acquire a large building were indeed perceived as a competition between Haak Bir and the Alevi Culture Centre.

It is significant that in retrospect nobody was surprised about the course which that *halk mahkemesi* took. Some observing the case more from the outside even hinted at the possibility that the whole thing was staged and provoked by either Haak Bir or the Alevi Culture Centre in order to put pressure on the other group. From the outside both cases seemed to be perfectly plausible. I asked whether, assuming that the 'drama' was indeed voluntarily provoked by one of the groups, it was staged in the context of a *cem* in order to give a possible solution a more binding value, being acknowledge by a *dede* in the solemn atmosphere of a *cem*. But my interlocutors rejected this possibility and argued that the important matter was a possible public acknowledgment, in front of the whole congregation. I am sure, however, that the *halk mahkemesi* was not planned, but developed spontaneously. It is significant, then, to note that *cem* also offers space for the expression of dissent. The dispute which surfaced in the *halk mahkemesi* was not simply a dispute between the two associations. On the contrary, the chairmen of both organizations tried to promote co-operation and to put an end to the old rivalry. They attempted to co-operate first on issues where consensus was easier and deferred the more loaded issues to the future. Both chairmen belonged to a younger generation and were not actively involved in the split of the associations and the subsequent competition. But the associations were not two homogenous blocks. Members have differing views and sometimes pulled into different directions. Sometimes people changed from one association to the other and there were even a few people with dual membership.

In discussions following the *cem*, the question of Alevism as religion versus Alevism as culture surfaced again. Interestingly both positions share the view of *cem* as performance and drama. A *dede* in Hamburg explained to me: 'Cem is a game, it is a drama. But all participants play together. One plays *saz*, another dances *semah*, one cleans the floor, one brings *lokma*, all play together.' I asked him how this was concerning the *cem* described here and he answered: 'What we do in Europe, in Hamburg or elsewhere as *cem*, it is OK, everything is shown, but it is not real.' According to him, it is not real because a deep, spiritual involvement of all the participants is missing. Some *dedes* refuse to conduct such *cem*s because of that lack of concentration and seriousness. A religious-minded Alevi criticized Dede Mehmet Ocak for playing *saz* on the subsequent night when a purely cultural event took place. According to this criticism the *dede* himself weakened the boundary between religion and culture by participating in both performances.

A lack of seriousness in the *cem* was also noted by many non-religious Alevi. It was criticized because the *halk mahkemesi* was introduced with a quite ridiculous complaint, which, according to many, bordered on simply making fun of the ritual. Also the fact that the audience did not keep silence, that many came and went as they liked, was regretted by both religious and non-religious Alevi, for it was interpreted as a lack of respect towards Alevism, be that culture or religion. It seems that many Alevi, religious or not, are quite unhappy with the present form of *cem*.

Non-religious Alevi too acknowledge the powerful, community-building function of the traditional *cem*. They like to relate that in the past all kinds of

conflicts among Alevi, including blood feuds, were solved in the ritual. But they also express the opinion that this power of *cem* is a matter of the past, admitting that today, under the changed contemporary circumstances, *cem* can only be a symbolic presentation of what once was the core of Alevism. It has become an emblem of identity constructing community symbolically, by imagination. This emblem suffices to express difference and one may use it without knowing what it originally implicated within the system of Alevi faith, just as one may wear the Imam Ali's sword as a piece of jewellery without knowing much about the Imam. However, this emblematic practice is a serious break with the Alevi tradition because *cem* was always a matter of secrecy, it was not something to be displayed. The secrecy of *cem* is most frequently explained with the prevailing oppressive conditions in Turkey. But the *dede* in Hamburg gives that secrecy also a spiritual meaning: 'The Imam Cafer said: Keep your prayer secret. Don't show others how you pray, just pray for yourself. Why do we criticize Sunnis for doing so many things, going to the mosque, fasting in Ramadan and so on. This is between God and yourself, nobody else has to know about it.' Here the new, public character of *cem* appears almost as a victory of the assimilation pressure of Sunni Islam.

Re-emphasizing religion

Whereas at the level of individual members, the question whether Alevism is religion or (only) culture remains debated and undecided, at the level of institutions and outward representation religion is acquiring priority. Partly this is the case because, within the German political and societal context, religious communities are more easily recognized than 'cultural' or 'ethnic' groups. When Germans (non-Alevi)²² inquired about Alevism, the chairman of the Alevi Cultural Centre always introduced Alevism as a religion, although he personally was quite disinterested in religion and saw Alevism more as culture. Experience has shown that a categorization as 'religion' is better understood and accepted, even if knowledge about that particular religion is lacking. Also, in an institutionalized context, the Alevi Culture Centre presents itself as a religious community. For instance, since nine years the Centre is part of the 'working group on inter-faith religious instruction' in Hamburg in which members of diverse religious communities (Protestants, Muslims, Buddhists) work for the reform of the religious instruction in Hamburg's public schools. In this context Alevi never appear as anything other than a religious community. Such institutionalized exchange and communication with other (non-Alevi) groups happens only in a field defined as religious.

A similar drift towards religion can also be observed at the highest level of Alevi organization, i.e., at the level of the AABF. In 1995 the AABF has filed an application for the legal status accorded to churches in Germany, i.e., the status of a public corporation (*Körperschaft öffentlichen Rechts*).²³

It is wrong, however, to interpret this drift toward external self-representation as religion only as an instrumental or strategic move aiming at greater recognition within German society. Internally religion is also acquiring increasing importance. For instance, several '*cem*-houses' (*cemevi*) are being established in Germany. The one in Berlin, which is housed in a former church, has already been mentioned. A

second has just been constructed in Augsburg. This is a very new development because previously only Alevi 'culture centres' or 'culture associations' have been opened in Germany. At the centre and focus of the new *cem* houses is not culture in general but quite literally *cem*. Some of the former marxists are indeed recognizing the importance of religion as a basis of the continuity of Alevism. The chairman of the AABF explained to me:

From Turkey we knew only associations [*Vereine*] as organizational model. There were no *cem*-houses. And maybe, because originally we came from leftist political organizations, we were also a little ashamed to represent ourselves as a religious community. Earlier, we have been seriously criticized because as democrats we have started religious work. But today we say that Alevism existed in this [religious] form for a thousand years in Anatolia, why should we reject that form and create something else now? We have learned that Christians cannot organize without churches, Muslims cannot organize without mosques and Alevi cannot organize without *cem*-houses.

Similarly there are also discussions about the future function of *dedes* among Alevi in Germany. Very few of the descendants of *ocaks* in Germany do any kind of religious work. There are only a few young *dedes* in Germany because no facilities for the training of *dedes* exist and the old way of education within the family, transmitting knowledge from father to son, is defunct (Sökefeld 2002a).

Considering diaspora

By now it has been accepted by a majority of scholars that the concept of diaspora should not be restricted to the 'classical cases' like Jews and Armenians but that the concept is useful for the comparative discussion of many more and diverse instances.²⁴ Here I do not want to debate whether it is justified to designate Alevi in Germany as diaspora too, although this certainly has to be done. Supposing that Alevi in Germany can be considered a diasporic community, I want to discuss the example of Alevi in the light of a few other cases. Most authors now seem to agree that a central feature of diasporas is a triadic relationship between a community which somehow has been relocated from a place of origin, that former home land (which still may be imagined as home) and the present host country (e.g. M. Baumann 1995; Vertovec 1997). Within this framework many studies of diasporas discuss questions of preservation: How is the 'original' culture of a group preserved in the new, diasporic context? This question has been frequently discussed especially in cases of south Asian diasporas. Focusing on religion, Martin Baumann (1995: 22) argues that 'in this context the preservation and perpetuation of one's religious identity becomes a core issue'. A page later he writes about the 'preservation and transformation of a religious tradition in a diaspora situation' (ibid: 23). In these and other works a fundamental perpetuation seems to be presupposed, although it is emphasized that what is retained (e.g., identity, tradition, culture, religion) is of course changed and transformed. What we have to grasp is a diasporic duality of preservation and change.

Within the triadic model of diaspora the changes which are mostly focused upon are the changes starting with the movement of migration or, rather, the moment of arrival. This kind of perspective seems problematic to me in the case of Alevism. It is too restricting simply to focus on transformations affecting traditions *after* the arrival of Alevis in Germany. In the case of the south Asian diaspora in Britain, for instance, a central aspect of the transformation occurring in the diasporic situation is, according to Steven Vertovec (1997: 287), an 'emergent distinction between "religion" and "culture" among diaspora groups'. Among other sources, Vertovec draws upon Knott and Khokher (1993: 596) who have found that young south Asian Muslims in Britain reflect explicitly on religion, thereby separating religion from the body of all-encompassing 'ethnic' traditions. In the Alevi example, this separation of culture and religion is not a transformation affecting religious (or other) traditions only *after* the spatial dislocation of these traditions. To understand the debate on religion versus culture among Alevis in the German diaspora we have to go back long before the beginning of worker's migration from Turkey to Germany. The roots of this issue have already been laid by Atatürk's politics of secularism which demanded the strict separation of religion from the political and public sphere. This secularism was very much welcomed by Alevis in the early decades of the Turkish Republic because they hoped that the separation of religion from politics would result in greater freedom for Alevis (Kehl-Bodrogi 1988: 56ff.). After all, the earlier, intimate connection between political power and religion in the Ottoman Empire had only resulted in violent oppression of Alevis as a heterodox community. The reform intended but never completely implemented by Atatürk was only radicalized by the strict anti-religious politics of the leftist movement in the 1970s which attempted quite successfully to purge Alevi culture of all religious aspects, and which considered religion irrelevant if not dangerous. The disapproval of religion including the discontinuing of *cem* and the rejection of *dedes* that provided the basis for the present difficulties of ritual practice could be observed in the home country at the same time as the lasting process of emigration. It was perhaps intensified in Germany because, due especially to political oppression before and in the wake of the military coup of September 1980 in Turkey, many anti-religious leftist Alevis had to leave Turkey and went into exile in Germany.

These changes affecting Alevism in diaspora not only originated so obviously in the pre- and extra-diasporic context of the country of origin, but also in the attempt to revitalize Alevism almost simultaneously in Turkey and Germany, although in different forms. In Turkey, there was the so called 'explosion' (*patlama*) of a debate on Alevism in the media and especially in intellectuals' discourse which started in 1989 (Vorhoff 1995), and the movement to establish formal Alevi associations in Germany began in the same year. Both developments are of course closely related. Their difference reflects the different conditions in the political and cultural contexts of home and host countries: due to legal prohibition it was not possible to form explicit Alevi associations in Turkey, whereas in Germany the scope of Turkish media was much smaller.²⁵ However, to a lesser degree, developments in one country were mirrored in the other. The development of new forms

of ritual performance is also quite similar in Turkey and Germany. Martin Stokes (1996) writes about a secularized or 'culturalized' *cem* in the Turkish town Iskenderun and I once witnessed a similar kind of 'didactic *cem*' in Istanbul in 1998 – a *cem* performed especially to show the ritual to a visiting group of young Germans and Alevis from Germany.

I cannot go into detail about the relationship between developments among Alevis in Turkey and in Germany – much work remains to be done in this field. But already from these few remarks, it becomes clear that a model of diaspora emphasizing perpetuation and change as framed primarily in an opposition or contrast of home and host countries is too restricted. The case of Alevis I would rather conceptualize as a broad cultural continuum of ongoing change in both home country and diaspora. Speaking simply of preservation and change (of identity, tradition, culture or whatever) is too closely related and similar to a rhetoric of essentialism which activists of diaspora so frequently like to employ and which is dangerously close to older, reifying anthropological rhetorics of culture and identity.²⁶ In this rhetoric, in spite of all changes, something essential remains the same. After all, it seems that Hindus in Britain are still Hindus and Alevis in Germany are still Alevis. But is this simply true? The rhetoric of preservation obscures the fact that actors constantly re-constitute and re-invent (or refuse to re-constitute) in diverse ways what is imagined as simply continuing. Imagining Alevism as culture is different from imagining Alevism as religion, and there are sufficient 'Alevis' in Germany (probably in Turkey too) who, continuing the kind of thought which almost became hegemonic in the 1970s, argue that there is no meaningful way to imagine Alevis as forming a community at all.

I use the rather lengthy expression 'cultural continuum of ongoing change' intentionally in order to avoid implications of boundedness, closure and persistence still so easily associated with the concept of culture.²⁷ This cultural continuum has to be conceptualized as fundamentally open, as multi-stranded, as possessing many 'plugs' where other continua, originating in the contexts of both host and home country, can 'log in'. At a micro level this continuum is constituted by the multitude of actors in their respective positions in networks and institutions producing and reproducing a variety of discourses and practices. From this perspective, a community, be it diasporic or not, cannot be taken for granted but becomes an open question. The question of community is answered by actors from a number of different points of view, leading to diverse propositions about what Alevism is. This conceptualization also allows us to take into account a multiplicity of actor's identifications (Sökefeld 1999b). Alevis are not simply Alevis, they may practise, temporarily or continually, a host of other identifications which of course reflect upon each other. In this chapter, dealing with identifying Alevism as 'religion' or 'culture', I have shown how actors' identifications as politically left bear upon concepts of what Alevism is. These concepts are not individual, private ideas, but they enter into public discourse and practice and contribute to the ongoing debate about how to understand and practise Alevism. The diversity of ideas and identification, related to each other in a process of contestation, becomes itself an essential aspect of Alevi culture.

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Notes

- 1 For an overview over the history of Alevism see Kehl-Bodrogi 1988.
- 2 The word 'Alevi' is derived from Ali.
- 3 In 1998 the Kemalist faction in the Turkish parliament attempted to tighten this prohibition and to increase the punishment of contraventions.
- 4 The most important and, among Alevis, most frequently commemorated events of the last decades are the following: in December 1978 fascist 'Grey Wolves' attacked houses in the town of Kahramanmaraş; in June 1993 an Alevi culture festival was attacked by Islamists in Sivas; and in March 1995 several Alevis were assassinated by unknown terrorists in the Gazi, a quarter of Istanbul; and in subsequent demonstrations more people were gunned down by police forces.
- 5 The word is derived from the Arabic root *jama'a*, to gather, to collect, to unite, to combine.
- 6 In my paper I omit the Turkish plural forms *-ler/-lar* if only single words are quoted and use the English plural(s) in order to make reading easier.
- 7 For both Muslims and Alevis a day starts after sundown so that a 'western' Thursday evening is already Friday according to Alevi time-reckoning.
- 8 There is another community-building element of *cem* which today is frequently mentioned as an essential part of the ritual although it rarely practised. This is the rite in which two young couples enter into *musahiplik* or partnership for life. It is a relationship which requires partners to take great responsibility toward each other and to share virtually everything in case of need. For a discussion of *musahiplik* see Kehl-Bodrogi 1988: 182ff.
- 9 There are hierarchical relations between the different *ocaks* because every *dede* is himself the *talip* of another *dede* from another *ocak*. These are again personal hereditary relations between *talip* and *pir* which are not framed within a general hierarchy or organization. This is different for the Bektāşi order of dervishes which is today generally simply counted among Alevis. About the Bektāşi order see Birge 1937 and Melikoff 1998.
- 10 Half of the villages of Tunceli have been destroyed in anti-PKK campaigns by the Turkish armed forces (Nigogosian 1996: 42).
- 11 For the effects of migration on the practice of Alevism in Turkey and especially *musahiplik* see also Naess 1988: 182.
- 12 For an overview over such organizations see Özcan 1989.
- 13 For a more complete discussion of the development of Alevi organizations in Germany and Hamburg see Sökefeld and Schwalgin 2000.
- 14 The fact that the designation 'Alevi' did not appear in the name of this organization is significant and can be seen as part of the dissimulation strategy. Also in Turkey there were no explicit Alevi associations because they are prohibited by law.
- 15 The reasons for this division were diverse. Explanations given range from the personal ambitions of the leader of the break-away faction to the opinion that the leaders of the original AKM were 'atheistic' and pro-Kurdish.
- 16 A striking example of this 'emblematic Alevism' can be found in little golden replicas of *Zülfikar*, the Imam Ali's mythical sword, worn openly by many young Alevis,

especially after new acts of violence had been committed in the 1990s. As a demonstration, young Alevis exhibited their being Alevi without knowing very much about what it could mean to be Alevi. In late 1999 I spoke with a fifteen-year-old Alevi-Kurdish boy about how he understands himself. He explained me: 'Earlier I saw myself as a Turk or Kurd and sometimes I also said I am Alevi. But now I say only I am Alevi.' He even spoke of Alevis as a people [*Volk*]. The boy's father was deeply involved in Alevi politics of the diaspora, and together with his family he regularly attended *cem*, but the boy knew virtually nothing about Alevism. For instance, he even had never heard about *musahiplik* before I asked him whether he could explain the concept to me.

- 17 For the position of Alevis in the debate about headscarves, see Mandel 1989.
- 18 İlhan, for example, emphasizes that *semah* is part of *cem*. He concludes: '*Semah* is not an instrument of show but a service. Therefore the *dede* says a prayer after *semah*' (İlhan 1998: 52, my translation). The Union of Alevi Youth in Germany (AAGB) issues the following statement on its internet homepage: 'We do not dance *semah* at amusements, [cultural] nights, weddings and similar locations!' A similar, bi-lingual reminder can be found in Anonymous 1997: 20.
- 19 Mandel interprets the display of a portrait of Atatürk and a Turkish flag at a *cem* in Berlin in the 1980s as a part of *takiya*/dissimulation (Mandel 1988: 242f., 1992: 425). I regard this as an overdrawn interpretation because at least until a decade ago many older Alevis continued to hold Atatürk in high esteem, for example because of his supposedly strict secularist policy. Backhausen and Dierl (1996) show that in the late 1980s it was a common practice to display portraits of Atatürk in *cem*. One of the *dedes* conducting the *cem*s described by Backhausen and Dierl was the same *dede* who refused to officiate in the *cem* of the Alevi Culture Group. Dressler (1999) analyses demands that some Alevi authors make of Atatürk, giving him a quasi-religious meaning and implicitly identifying him with HacıBektaş. Kurdish Alevis especially have, however, always been much more critical and current Alevi youth in the diaspora unanimously reject Atatürk and his nationalist ideology.
- 20 Lütfi Kaleli was among those attacked by Islamists at the culture festival in Sivas, 1993. Fortunately, he could be saved.
- 21 *Can*, meaning soul, life, beloved friend, is an form of address frequently used by Alevis to each other, especially in a ritual and formal context. *Canlar* is the plural form.
- 22 There are now many German Alevis because among Turkish immigrants Alevis especially have acquired German citizenship.
- 23 Also several Muslim communities have submitted applications for this legal status, but whereas their applications have almost immediately been rejected, the AABF's application is being considered and it seems that the status will be granted (cf. Erbektaş 1998).
- 24 Not only scholars but also leaders of other religious communities themselves deem it useful to expand the model of the Jewish diaspora. Thus the Pramukh Swami, head of a branch of the Swami Narayan movement in London advised his followers to 'emulate the example of the Jews' (Pocock 1976: 342).
- 25 During the last few years an 'explosion' of Alevi representation in the new medium of the internet could be observed. The majority of this representation is authored from the diaspora although the condition of diaspora is rarely reflected upon in Alevi websites (Sökefeld 2002b).
- 26 See Handler 1985.
- 27 For the intended critique of the concept of culture see Sökefeld 1999a. Although many writers now argue against an essentialized concept of culture (for an example in the context of diaspora see Burghart 1987) the concept continues to be very prone to reified imagination.

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