Ideological or religious? Contending visions on the future of Alevi identity

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Establishing a coherent collective identity within the modern urban context among people who have different ideological, social and religious orientations, and social and economic backgrounds, is an ongoing struggle within the Alevi community in Turkey. This study tries to understand how alternative positions on Alevi identity dynamically construct the boundaries, moral contents and the new shape of Alevi identity in modern urban contexts through use of various discursive resources. At least two main contending 'positions' on Alevi identity try to institutionalise Alevi identity in modern urban contexts, which are 'Ideological Position' and 'Religious Position'. Those discourse positions constitute different visions about the past and the future of the Alevi community as well as the cultural and the political boundaries of Alevi identity. More importantly, those positions resonate in ordinary citizens' life stories as well as group narratives. This study utilises the analytical frame of 'positioning theory' to shed light on the complexities of identity negotiation.

Keywords: Alevi identity; negotiation; positioning theory; Turkey; political identity; religious identity

Introduction

Alevis, one of the largest communal groups in Turkey,[1] are spread throughout the country. The Alevi issue is one of Turkey's most complicated and commonly misunderstood identity-based issues. The Alevi identity traditionally has been a strong communal group identity[2] with cultural boundaries, moral values, rituals and shared collective emotions. This identity, historically and culturally, has origins as an esoteric Shiite maddhab[3] under Islamic belief system. Alevi identity has been maintained for centuries through an endogamous social order in rural contexts (Kehl-Bodrogi 1996, pp. 64–67). Specific rituals and cultural practices have played important roles in the maintenance of Alevi identity. Alevi identity has ethnic/madhhabic origins in rural contexts, but it has taken on a multiplicity of forms during the ongoing process of identity transformation, which is marked by modernisation and urbanisation.

Alevi identity in Turkey is communal in nature, which is historically, culturally and politically different from what it means to be Sunni. There is no madhhab-based data that would reflect the actual population of Alevis in

Turkey today, but estimates of Alevi population in Turkey range from 5 million to 20 million.[4] Islamic mysticism, Twelver Shiite mythology, pre-Islamic Turkish traditions and rituals, modern currents of thought and ideologies have influenced Alevi tradition (Dressler 2008). Starting from the 1960s, Alevi identity has sought to reconstitute itself in urban contexts with its institutions and social networks. The process of reconstituting Alevi identity and institutions in urban contexts led to controversies within the Alevi community over the nature and characteristics of Alevi identity. Some scholars define Alevi identity with its religious origins and sources, whereas some others with ethnic origins. Contemporary Alevi phenomena have been defined as 'faith-based collective activism' (Erdemir 2004), a 'transnational social movement' (Elise 2003, Şahin 2005, Sökefeld 2008), an 'ethnic identity' (Andrews and Benninghaus 1989, Okan 2004) and a socio-religious community (Dressler 2012).

There is an ongoing inner debate within the Alevi community about the meaning and the characteristics of Alevi identity. This debate is intertwined with the discussion related to the future of Alevi identity as a social and political movement. These differences become more visible in social conversations, debates as well as people's interpretations of their own life experiences in their life stories. The meanings which the different Alevi groups assign to social episodes that they experienced and collective processes that they have gone through, are very different from each other. This tacit competition also has practical implications in terms of shaping the modes of institutionalisation of Alevi community. A variety of discursive resources were utilised to corroborate these alternative moral positions on Alevi identity.

This study tries to understand how alternative positions on Alevi identity dynamically construct the boundaries, moral contents and the new shape of Alevi identity through use of discursive resources. More specifically, this study tries to understand how various discursive resources and institutions are practically and selectively utilised to constitute alternative visions for the future of Alevi community. Two dominant forms of discourses and understandings are more vocal in this debate; these two are political/ideological[5] and religious positions. While the religious position challenges the majority Sunni understanding of Islam, Ideological Position (IP) tries to challenge the meta-narrative of Turkish nationalism, which assumes an ethnically, linguistically and religiously homogenous society in Turkey. Though they share similar concerns related to assimilation and discrimination of Alevi community, ideological and religious positions try to orientate different paths for Alevi social and political mobilisation.

The use of discursive resources by alternative positions is not a descriptive enterprise, it is rather a practical component of identity negotiation. Alevi activists, scholars, intellectuals, community and religious leaders are active agents in the process of identity negotiation. There are taxonomies that try to classify the differences within the Alevi community according to institutions and social and religious positions. A distinctive feature of this study is its efforts to incorporate personal stories, as well as collective narratives and institutions in a nuanced way

with the use of positioning analysis. More importantly, the discourse positions that are presented in this study incorporates the normative and practical aspects of the identity negotiation process in a dynamic and flexible ways, thus keeping some space for a limited prospective change.

The contextualisation of Alevi identity negotiation

Starting from the early 1960s, Alevi citizens began migrating to the cities. Because of the processes of rapid urbanisation and modernisation, the traditional Alevi identity and social order are transforming. Today, the majority of the Alevi population live in cities and are organizing around new forms of institutions. This has had a tremendous impact on the meaning and implications of Alevi identity. The main challenge for Alevi identity politics is to create the conditions for the maintenance of Alevi identity in the modern urban context and to become recognised and accepted as equal actors by the Turkish state as well as by the other social and political actors and groups in Turkey.

Within this new social and political landscape, the ambiguous nature and character of Alevi identity has created significant confusion for the new generation of urban Alevis. Whether their identity is an ethnic, sectarian, religious or political identity is a matter of debate within the Alevi community. Different Alevi groups prefer to define themselves in different terms ranging from 'a sectarian group', 'an ethnic group', 'true humanists', to 'enlightened Muslims' or 'true Muslims'. This ambiguous debate on the 'definition', normative content, boundaries and the preferred future of Alevi identity and community competition, affects both the self-definition and modes of the social and political organisation and institutionalisation of Alevi citizens. Individuals and Alevi opinion-makers resort to the rich, cultural and narrative repertoires of the Alevi tradition and contemporary social and political discourses to justify their positions.

Parallel to the Kurdish and Islamist identity movements that resisted the homogenizing notion of the Republican identity-building project, the Alevis also initiated uncoordinated efforts to reinvigorate Alevi identity in modern contexts. However, those earlier efforts were on the periphery of the wide-scale ideological struggle (Massicard 2003). Although an earlier Alevi movement was initiated during the 1960s, many Alevis in urban contexts were more active in left-wing political activism until the early 1980s. During the 1970s, Alevis were victims of right-wing ideological violence in Malatya (1978), Maraş (1978) and Çorum (1980).

The 12th September 1980 coup curtailed ideological activism, and the fall of the Berlin Wall further restricted the ideological struggle. The 1980 military coup sought to establish a revised version of Kemalism compatible with the ideology of Turkish–Islamic Synthesis[6] (Toprak 2005). Sunni Islam and Turkish nationalism were incorporated into Kemalism. Ethnic, sectarian and ideological diversity of Turkish society was completely denied during this era. Alevi citizens felt the threat of assimilation from the ideological preferences of the social and political order.

These transformations paved the way for Alevi identity politics. European Alevis' contributions were crucial for the emergence and the institutionalisation of the Alevi identity movement in Turkey in the early 1990s. Alevi identity has taken its own shape among Turkish immigrants in Europe, but identity movements in Turkey and in Europe affected each other. Many analysts strongly argued that it would not be possible to understand the development of the Alevi movement without emphasizing its transnational dimension, meaning the European dimension (Sökefeld 2002, 2003, 2008, Massicard 2003, Rigoni 2003, Şahin 2005, Özyürek 2009).

With the Sivas Massacre (1993) and Gazi Riots (1995), Alevi citizens experienced direct violence. Thirty-seven citizens, most of whom were Alevi artists, writers and musicians who had travelled to Sivas to commemorate the sixteenth-century Alevi poet and rebel Pir Sultan Abdal, died on 2 July when the Madımak hotel was set on fire by a fundamentalist Sunni mob. Security forces failed to intervene in time to prevent the catastrophe. The second important shock for the Alevis was what happened in the Gazi neighbourhood of Istanbul on 13–15 March 1995. Gazi is a working-class neighbourhood, the residents of which are predominantly Alevi, and mostly Kurdish–Alevi citizens. On 12 March 1995, three unknown assailants executed a drive-by shooting at the Doğu Coffeehouse, three other coffeehouses and a pastry shop. Crowds gathered around the police station to protest the events. The police responded by shooting at them. Riots spread throughout the neighbourhood and the rioters destroyed the shops and the workshops owned by right-wing people (van Bruinessen 1996, p. 9). Those two events created widespread trauma and frustration among the Alevi communities in Turkey and even in Europe (Yildiz and Verkuyten 2011). They acted as catalysts for Alevi identity politics and Alevi institutionalisation in the post-1980 context.

The academic and popular literatures on *Alevilik* (Aleviness)[7] often refer to the period starting from the late 1980s as the 'Alevi revival' (Kehl-Bodrogi 1996, van Bruinessen 1996, Çamuroğlu 1997, Vorhoff 1998, 2003, Massicard 2007, Dressler 2008, Sökefeld 2008). This 'revival/transformation' has manifested itself in the form of heightened group consciousness, greater ease in expressing identity in the public sphere, increased public visibility and the making of political and legal claims based on Alevi identity in social and political arenas (Massicard 2003, 2007, Köse 2010). The debate and the ongoing competition on the core features and possible leadership and institutional of the modern, urban Alevi identity are still unsettled.

Positioning Alevi identities

In the case of Alevi identity negotiation, there is no agreement on the 'nature' or 'fundamental features' of Alevi identity. Those features are constantly negotiated in public and private debates and discussions. As a theoretical and analytical frame positioning theory will enable us to analyse this debate in a dynamic and interactive way. Positioning theory is defined as the study of local moral

orders as shifting patterns of mutual and contestable rights and obligations of speaking and acting (Harré and van Langenhove 1999, Harré and Moghaddam 2003a, Moghaddam *et al*. 2008). Harré and van Langenhove define position as a 'complex cluster of generic personal attributes, structured in various ways, which impinges on the possibilities of interpersonal, intergroup and even intrapersonal action through some assignment of such rights, duties and obligations to an individual or a group'. By assigning specific rights, duties and obligations, positioning also restrict and shape the modes of action. As it is described concisely by Benwell and Stokoe, 'positioning theorists examine the co-construction of identity between storyteller and audience' (2006, p. 139). Speakers adopt and oppose subject positions that were assigned to them in the master narratives and sometimes propose alternative subject positions through their own discourses and counter-narratives. Positioning of identities and subject positions is a dynamic and interactive process.

Positions are relational, in that for one to be positioned as powerful others must be positioned as powerless (Harré and van Langenhove 1999). Storylines are written and told from particular positions. This interactive and dialogic (maybe more complicated) process dynamically shapes relationships in various different forms. Contingent, flexible and dynamic attributes of positioning provide promising ways to conceptualise identity. Interpersonal, intergroup or intragroup conflicts may arise when storylines adopted by different actors are incompatible or in direct opposition to each other. It is in the constant interplay of mutual recognition of one's own and the other's position that the particular version of public self appropriate to the occasion is constructed (Harré and van Langenhove 1999, p. 15). Identities have associated norms defining the rights and duties of the subjects. The salience of the self- categorisation and interpretation of rights and duties are also dependent on social interactions (Moghaddam *et al*. 2008).

Intergroup positioning is fundamentally achieved through the use of linguistic devices such as 'we', 'they', 'us', 'them', 'I' (as a member of a certain group, 'you' (as a member of a certain group) and specific group names (Tan and Moghaddam 1999, p. 183). For understanding meaningful social interactions at any given episode, positioning theory combines background conditions in terms of storylines. Social forces, or in Austin's terms, illocutionary forces, play an important role in the actualisation of background conditions in any given situation. In intergroup relations, therefore, the relative positions of groups may change depending on the situation of storylines and the social forces that are active.

As a methodological framework, positioning theory is based on the position/act-action/storyline triad, which draws upon the analogy that all of social life is a manifestation of conversations (Harré and van Langenhove 1999). Positions within this triangle are defined as the cluster of rights and duties to perform certain actions with a certain significance as acts (Harré and Moghaddam 2003, p. 5). Positioning someone or a group of people as benevolent can be considered to be attributing to those actors a moral superiority in a particular context, and it may also encumber certain duties and responsibilities. In any case,

positions restrict a certain set of actions, whereas it makes others more likely to be actualised.

Various data sources have been used for this study, but the main data are the in-depth semi-structured interview transcripts of more than 70 Alevis who were actively involved (some of them holding key positions) in this process of revival. In order to protect the anonymity of the informants, I use capital letters.[8] Quotes without capitals are considered to be generic narratives, mentioned by more than five informants in similar forms. Transcripts and records of semi-academic discussions also are used to help outline general discussions. The interviews were conducted in three big cities, Istanbul, Ankara and Malatya, between February 2006 and April 2007. Other data sources such as Alevi journals, websites and some public events have been analysed in order to collect public narrative accounts. The informants were contacted based on snowball sampling, while some of the other interviewees were selected because of their key positions within Alevi associations and institutions.

Understanding the complexity of Alevi identity

Alevis are envisioned either as an integrated or homogeneous community by non-Alevis, or the fundamental differences between diverse Alevi understandings are exaggerated in order to deny some of their requests related to group rights. Within the context of Alevi identity negotiation, the discourses that are more vocal and publicly visible utilise media resources and mass communication instruments more successfully than the rest. This success does not necessarily reflect their intragroup influence or persuasiveness. The general state of confusion and competition has created splits even within the trans-generational realms of Alevi households. The editors of the volume *Alevilik*, which was compiled with the academic and political discussions from the mail group (*tahtacılar)*, offer an interesting question representing the confusion of the new generation of Alevis.

> My father thinks and says that "Alevilik is essence of Islam, in fact we are the true Muslims." I believe that Alevilik is a separate belief system, which has been influenced by Islam. My son says and believes that Alevilik is a philosophy and a way of life. What should we do now? (Engin and Engin 2004, p. 10)

The question 'what should we do now?' is a relevant one for many Alevi families. Each generation within this family adopted a definition and understanding of Alevi identity according to their specific identity needs, and according to what they want to do with their identity. Alevi places of worship and ritual performance 'cemevis' also have different functions and meaning for different positions. For some, cemevis should be primarily places of worship, and for others, cemevis should function as community centres. There are also some people who consider cemevis as archaic institutions that need to be reformed. Each people adopt a definition and normative content according to their own needs and vision of life.

Competing discourse positions on the contemporary urban Alevi identity can be classified under various categories,[9] but two of those discourses are currently more vocal at the public conversations. Ideological Position (IP) and Religious Position are not strictly separated from each other. There are more overlapping dimensions than contradicting dimensions; however, they have different interpretations of Alevi history and moral system, different visions about the future of the Alevi community as well as different perspectives in relation to how to engage with the 'other' and how to get institutionalised.

I see the Alevi creed *as a way of life*. (AA, journalist)

At the moment, I regard the Alevi creed as a *sect* [Madhhab]. The Alevi creed is a way of believing. (HŞ, anthropologist)

Islam also included the Alevi creed, but Islam's rules are clear, its practices too, we don't have any common ground left with Islam. (AE, president of an Alevi foundation)

The Alevi creed is an *ethnic identity*. Even if you were a Christian, they would call you a Christian Alevi. (DK, graduate student)

The four excerpts above, which were collected during the field research from four different Alevi citizens, represent distinctive perspectives regarding what the Alevilik is about and how those people relate themselves to their imagined notion of 'Aleviness'. In fact, the list is abridged and can be expanded with additional references and quotations.

Bilici[10] (1998), Ocak[11] (1996) and Erman and Göker[12] (2000) employ different taxonomies to grasp the complexity of contemporary Alevi phenomena. There are taxonomies that classify Alevilik according to institutions such as Alevi Bektaşi Federasyonu (ABF), CEM Vakfı, Pir Sultan Abdal Kültür Derneği and Ehl-i Beyt Vakfı. The people that position Alevi identity in religious terms assign different rights and responsibilities to Alevi identity than the ones who position Alevi identity in political terms. The debates and controversies in the current context are related primarily to the future as well as to the past of Alevi identity and community.

Alternative discourse positions are substantiated primarily with interviews on the life stories of Alevi citizens. This is the first study that examines the dynamic and pragmatic interaction of personal narratives/individual voice and the rich repertoire of collective storylines in the Alevi case. This dynamic interaction is crucial for understanding how Alevi individuals and Alevi communities discuss their boundaries among each other and vis-a-vis the other groups.

Besides the controversial themes related to the definition of 'self and other', 'important historical episodes' and the fundamental problems of the Alevi community, the narratives about Alevi identity are used to negotiate these significant unresolved internal controversies:

(1) *Debate on leadership of the community*
(2) *How 'other' is defined and how to engage with it*
(3) *The historical origins and cultural resources of Alevi tradition.*

There are irreconcilable arguments related to these mentioned themes, which leads to the diversification of the discourses on Alevi identity. Those positions are substantiated with rich repertoire of personal and collective narratives.

The Religious Position

> Alevilik is the essence of Islam which has not been distorted by the Umayyad understanding and tradition. (Generic Narrative[13]/GN)

The Religious Position (RP) constructs an ethno-sectarian identity by defining Alevilik as the Turkish interpretation of Islam as opposed to 'Umayyad-contaminated Sunni Islam'. RP assumes that Alevi understanding of Islam is more 'Islamic' and 'authentic' than the Sunni interpretation of Islam. There is an attribution of double authenticity and legitimacy in the RP in terms of the origins of Alevi thought and lifestyle. First, because it is perceived to have come directly from the practices of *Ehl-i beyt* (the Prophet's family/lineage). The *Ehl-i beyt* is considered to be the second important source of Islam for Alevis, after the Quran. Second, it is also presented as a tradition of belief that is blended with the pastoral Turkoman tribes' simple, genuine and 'unpoliticised' understanding of Islam. In other words, the Alevi version of Islam is considered to be both 'more Islamic' and 'more Turkish' than its Sunni alternative.

As is demonstrated in Table 1, Alevi belief system is positioned as 'essence of Islam', 'Turkish version of Islam' and 'authentic, progressive and more modern' Islam. Some of those positions contradict, yet the moral superiority is attributed to the 'authenticity' and 'purity' of the Alevi tradition as a version of Islam. On the other hand, Sunni or other interpretations of Islam are positioned as 'Wahhabi', 'fundamentalist', 'retrograde' and 'Umayyad Islam'.

The essence of Islam

> The Alevi creed is not a sect [*Madh'hab*]. The Alevi creed is the essence of Islam. The Alevi creed is way of understanding Islam in view of its own [values] and sources. It is not a culture either. (AYK, retired bank manager)

The main problem for the RP is that the Sunni understanding of Islam in Turkey marginalises Alevis, their cultural practices, rituals and lifestyle. This marginalisation is even considered to have been an ongoing practice since the early years of Islam. Alevis consider the Presidency of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet İşleri*

Table 1.   Features of Religious Position.

Positions	Storylines	Action
Positioning 'self' Better understanding of Islam Essence of Islam Turkish version of Islam Authentic Islam Progressive Islam Modern world view	We are better and more authentic Muslims than Sunnis Sunni Islam represents oppressive side of religious orthodoxy Conservative Sunnis (Şeriatçı) misrepresent Islam Socialist struggle was a mistake deviation from Alevi values, it was a disaster	Traditional institutions (cemevis, dedes, dergahs, foundations) need to be revived Atatürk and republican reforms liberated us from religious bigotry and oppression we need to embrace and defend republican ethos We need to struggle with the challenges of marginalisation and discrimination
Positioning 'other' Sunni, religious orthodoxy Umayyad Islam Wahhabism Islamic fundamentalism Retrograde (gerici) world view	We pursue social democratic egalitarian world view Secularism is our common ground with Sunnis social and political order should be secular	

Başkanlığı or simply *Diyanet*)[14] to be the culprit of this marginalisation. The motive for the marginalisation, according to the RP, is the unwillingness of the established religious orthodoxies to give equal share in the distribution of material resources and social and political influence.

> Turkey needs to make a choice about whether to keep insisting on the homogeneous "Sunni" definition of Islam or to recognize and embrace other versions as equal partners in the making of the modern Turkish national identity. Turkish officials, bureaucrats, politicians don't want to share anything with us. They are unwilling give our share, our rights from the Ministry's budget. They continue the Umayyad traits. (KG, lawyer)

The Alevi revival in the RP is regarded as a return to the authentic culture, practices and rituals of 'Turkish Islam'. According to the RP, the Turks' understanding of Islam was Sunnified, politicised and contaminated during the Seljukid period, Ottoman times and the multi-party period of Republican Turkey, starting from the early 1950s and continuing after the 1980 military coup. The politicisation of both the Alevi creed and Sunni Islam is severely criticised by Alevi groups. RP also challenges IP for politicizing the Alevi tradition.

The politicisation of the Alevi creed

> The ones who insulted the Alevi creed in the gravest way were those who used the Alevi creed for their own political agendas. Muawiya cannot be side by side with Ali. One is a political [figure], the other a man of faith. (AR, dede)

The RD describes Alevilik as the Turkish interpretation/understanding of Islam. It is claimed that Alevilik is the essence of Islam as opposed to the Arabic and Persian interpretations that are depicted as Sunni and Shiite Islam. There is the belief that the Umayyad family distorted the essence of Islam and that Sunni Islam follows the path of the Umayyads. There is a strong emphasis on common Islamic values such as love for the *Ehl-i beyt* (Prophet's family/lineage).

> The Umayyad family introduced political controversies to the religion and they corrupted the Prophet's path and fought against the Prophet's family (*Ehl-i beyt*). Sunni Islam is the Arabic and Umayyad understanding of Islam; The Shiite version of Islam is the Persian understanding of Islam. Alevi Islam, which is the Turkish understanding of Islam, is definitely a way that fits Turkish society better. (CA, dede)

Furthermore, recently it has acquired a patriotic blend. This is a paradoxical situation because, on the one hand, this discourse emphasises the universal value and validity of the Alevi belief system and its potential as a liberation ideology that can contribute to the peace and prosperity of all humanity, while, on the other hand, it praises the authenticity and locality of the Alevilik for the nationalist and secularist Turkish regime. In this discourse, Alevilik is presented as a form of *Anatolian folk Islam*, the Turkish people's grassroots level (low Islam) interpretation of Islam, as opposed to the Ottoman or Turkish state's top-down imposed version of 'high Islam'.[15] In addition, it does not have any religious-oriented political claims in the public realm. The RP has a blend of local cultural emphasis and emphasises the importance of traditional ritual practices and traditional sources of Alevi identity.

> Alevi institutions, rituals and practices are essential. We have to revive those rituals and practices and *Cemevi*s are the right places to revive these. We have to return to the authentic sources and the ritual practices of Alevilik within the urban context. (HM, president of an Alevi foundation)

The RP tries to keep an open conditional space for dialogue with the other groups and the people and institutions that represent the official point of view. Some Alevi groups have criticised the RP for endorsing the 'Turkish–Islamic Synthesis' (*Türk İslam Sentezi*) theory, which implies a nationalist understanding of Alevi culture and identity. The memory of extreme nationalism (especially the events of the 1970s) has had a negative impact on the Alevi community, which explains why the nationalist elements of the discourses have been criticised severely. Being in alliance with the nationalists and followers of the Turkish–Islamic Synthesis, and trying to move from the periphery to the centre, represents a deviation from the

left-wing position of the Alevis in the social struggle. Indeed, almost no Alevi has sympathy for such a position.

> Involvement in the Marxist and Left-wing struggle was the worst thing that has happened to Alevis since Yavuz's Kızılbaş massacres in the 16th century. In this case we almost committed suicide. Fortunately, we survived the period, but it left deep and permanent damage and destruction in the Alevi community. Our dedes were insulted by our youth and some of our children became atheists or materialists and they started to fight against our traditional values. (RK, writer)

Although the overall political language of the RP is close to the secular social democratic understanding, they are against the extreme left ideologies and activists because of the negative memories of the pre-1980 situation. The Alevis often are perceived as the 'natural allies of the secularist/Kemalist regime'. This general perception is disturbing for the RP, as it locates the Alevis against other more conservative Sunnis and groups that have problems with the regime, and at the same time this does not totally reflect the reality. Atatürk, the father of the modern Turkish Republic, is considered to be one of the fundamental heroes of the Alevi community, and the early republican era is tightly embraced in the RP. There is full-scale appreciation for Atatürk, but there are hesitations about the regime, especially about the right-wing governments.

> The Alevi have never come out victorious. The Alevis have only come out victorious once. We won one time with Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, whom we call the last Jelali [reference to a 16th-century rebel movement]. Atatürk saved us from the sultanate, religious bigotry, and economic and political oppression. It is all but natural that Alevis would harbour warm feelings towards such a figure. (MK, vice president of an Alevi foundation)

One of the most important features of this discourse is that it communicates better with urban working-class Alevis and educated Alevis that appreciate the ritual and cultural aspects of their tradition. Besides their traditional legitimacy, dedes know the oral culture of the Alevi community, which is why they communicate better with working-class and lower middle-class Alevis.

> We never really lived [in accordance with] our faith, we never showed our children. The community has lost touch with the tradition. This organizing effort came like a flood, if you will allow the expression. Alevi folks around this neighbourhood and elsewhere are getting more attached to their belief and their community. (FG, lawyer)

Marxist and political discourse are foreign languages to the average Alevi citizen; therefore, they are not attracted by this discourse. Narratives such as that of the Karbala Disaster, the Martyrdom of Hüseyin, the atrocities of the Ottoman era and the heroic genre of narratives are popular in the Religious Position.

The institutionalisation of the RP is shaped along with the *dergah*s (dervish lodges) and *cemevi*s. Dedes are the leaders, social and religious authorities and

they have legitimacy because of their spiritual and social leadership. In addition, they are trained to perform some of the basic religious needs of the Alevi community. At the level of political and social activism, the ideological voice maybe heard more, but the religious voice is more dominant on the popular level and has more potential in terms of social mobilisation. According to the RP, the 'other' of Alevilik is not Sunnis in general, but ultra-orthodox Sunnis (*şeriatçı*), Wahhabis, Islamists and the '*derin devlet*' (deep or secret state, some paralegal groups within the civil and the military bureaucracy). Overall, the RP idealises a normative frame that embraces the elements of religion, tradition and secular nationalism and provides a cultural sense of belonging to urban Alevis from a wide variety of backgrounds. RP also challenges the vision that tries to organise Alevi movement along political or ideological lines.

The Ideological Position

> Resistance to state/political authorities that try to marginalize and oppress Alevis with religious and political arguments and struggling for social justice when the political systems deny us is an essential feature of the Alevi identity. (KG, lawyer)

For the Ideological Position (IP), it is not relevant to concentrate on the discussion of whether the Alevis are within or outside the definition of Islam, or whether Alevilik is a better or different interpretation of Islam than Sunni Islam. The reference points are the social, political and economic orientations of the Alevis, who are seen as being fundamentally different from the Sunnis, or other identity groups in Turkey. There is the perception that the contemporary Alevi identity movement is a social and political movement that is seeking equal treatment under the rule of law. There is an overall belief that the relationships of Alevis to the Turkish state and the rest of Turkish society should be based on a secular, democratic, egalitarian value system and the rule of law.

> We may or may not have common ethnic, religious, national or sectarian ties with other groups in Turkey. Those commonalities do not help to address the problems of our community. I think we should rather focus on our legitimate equal citizenship rights, the "real" rule of law and religious liberties. That is what other groups are trying to do. (AK, vice president of an Alevi foundation)

The IP constructs a politicised identity through dialectic political language. The relationship between the Alevi community and the other social and political groups in Turkey has been sustained via constant emphasis on the prevailing differences. Social and political struggle is an important theme in the narratives of IP.

> The Alevi creed is a philosophically oppositional lifestyle and faith. I think that the Alevis were not assimilated in either the Ottoman [or] Republican periods because

of this. Alevis, who have not been assimilated throughout a thousand years, are today being assimilated at the hands of the Alevis [themselves]. It would be grave mistake if the Alevi creed is reduced just to a belief system. (AL, lawyer/ writer)

In many instances, these differences were essentialised through the use of conflictual storylines about all aspects of the boundary-making procedures. Alevilik was characterised as having a different worldview. This is an abstract and vague self-definition that has practical references to an ideological notion of Alevilik. This understanding is criticised by the RP for being a reductionist use of 'Alevilik' for political objectives that is stripped from its cultural and historical context and background. Overall, IP positions Alevi identity as peripheral, victimised, minority, marginalised, exploited and heterodox religion, thus accusing the bureaucratic establishment, Sunni ulama and majority, and the centre-right and Islamist politicians as the culprits of this victimisation and marginalisation (Table 2). IP assumes a historical continuity in their marginalised and oppressed situation and there is an assumed continuity in the locus of responsibility.

Alevilik is defined as a world view with its own culture, belief system, rituals, political rights and different historical experiences. There is even a perspective among the IP that defines Alevilik as a different religion.

Table 2.   Features of Ideological Position.

Positions	Storylines	Action
Positioning 'self' Periphery Victim Minority Oppressed Heterodox Marginalised Syncretistic religion Resistance movement	Islam is one of the many sources of Alevi identity, it is not the common ground for us with Sunni groups There might have been Alevilik without Islam Our struggle predates Marxism, there is an overlap in the objectives of Marxism and Alevilik that's why we were attracted to it	Civil society organisations, associations, foundations, publication houses, TV stations and all other instruments of social movement need to be emphasised for struggle for group rights Resistance to political, social, religious and economic orthodoxies
Positioning 'other' Oppressors Political centre State Ulema/religious orthodoxy Kemalist bureaucratic establishment Islamist	Secular democratic values and rule of law can be the only common ground with the Sunnis One can be Alevi without being a Muslim because Alevilik is more of an attitude philosophy	Egalitarian, libertarian and disobedient to unjust political and economic orders are essential elements of Alevi identity We need to struggle with the challenges of marginalisation and discrimination

> There exists a whole series of differences [between the Alevis and Sunnis] in understanding, from the way of looking at God to being determinative in your daily relations, to being authoritarian, to determining everything in the light of your faith. There are also differences in the parts of worship. (FG, lawyer)

The view that defines Alevilik as a separate religion is marginalised both within the IP as well as within the broader Alevi discourse. The distanced position against the 'political centre' established religious orthodoxies and the tradition of resistance is seen as an essential feature of Alevi identity, according to IP. The storylines that consider the Kızılbaş uprisings during the Ottoman times and the messianic revolts during the Seljukid era related to the social and economic discontent of the Anatolian people are emphasised in the IP.

> In Anatolia alone there have been about 400 uprisings. In the Seljuk and Ottoman periods, and of these about 300, I am not giving you any certain numbers, maybe it was even more . . . The basic cause of these uprisings was hunger and deprivations. The land was taken away from the citizen or a third was taken of that what he has produced. (AK, publisher)

A dialectical way of interpreting Alevi history is predominant in IP. The paradoxical situation is that even though there are limited references to the religious dimensions of Alevilik, in the IP some people argue that Ali and *Ehl-i beyt* were oppressed, as well as many of the family members because they resisted the unjust rule of the Umayyad order that tried to corrupt the teachings of the prophet Mohammed. In IP, the theme of continuity is the notion of resistance, rather than the essence of the belief.

The rise of the IP

The Alevi *dernek* (association) and *vakıfs* (foundation) were initially established in the late 1960s. These associations had been founded with misleading names such as Hacı Bektaş Turizm ve Tanıtma Derneği (Hacı Bektaş Tourism and Publicity Association) or Hacı Bektaş Kalkınma ve Yardımlaşma Derneği (Hacı Bektaş Development and Solidarity Association) or they were established as *hemşehri* (fellow townsman) associations. There were, however, very few associations that were founded mainly for the Alevi cause until the early 1990s. Before this, it was illegal to set up associations in the name of a sect, ethnic or religious group (Kaleli 2000). After a legal battle, the Alevis managed to succeed in their struggle to open associations with the Alevi name. The 1993 Sivas Events and the 1995 Gazi Riots accelerated the institutionalisation of these associations and foundations. The process of rapid institutionalisation after the Sivas Events of 1993 was reactionary and defensive in nature. The activists of Alevi background, who had experienced the left-wing struggle mobilised their organisational experiences in the service of Alevi identity struggle.

> . . . people inside yesterday's leftist movements, people who know how to get orga-
> nized, they started to re-organize the Alevi movement in a completely new way by
> means of foundations or associations in cities. Because they knew what an organiza-
> tion was about, they were aware of how to set up, of how to manage [a foundation]
> and in a way, they gave the Alevi creed a new breath of life. In this way, the Alevis
> owe the leftist, the revolutionary youth, a debt. (AL, lawyer/writer)

The problem relating to this rapid transformation was that some of those activists
tried to articulate their views on Alevi tradition through an ideological language.
This ideological language did not have a resonance with some ordinary Alevi
citizens' world views and life practices.

> I was a revolutionary socialist kind of man before 12 September 1980 [military
> coup]. I am still like that. I am a person who has accepted and come to terms with
> the struggle I've been through in those years. When talking about the revolutionary
> movement, when certain demands on a societal level were refused then such demands
> as human rights, democracy, equality, justice become society's [main] concern. (AB,
> head of an Alevi association)

> Now I do not feel any discomfort in saying that I am an Alevi, but I also have an
> upper-identity . . . My upper-identity is communist . . . The task of a communist to
> be respectful to sub-identities, to understand sub-identities, to be concerned about
> the problems sub-identities face. (AK, publisher)

Rather than completely redefining their identity, they redefined Alevilik in such
a way that would go together with their previous identities and political affili-
ations. These activists created a new political discourse, which was a blend of
the theoretical resources of the dialectical materialism, Marxism, the historical
and political sources of the Anatolian revolts, the practical instrument of iden-
tity politics as well as social movement approaches and resistance methods. Their
interpretation of the Alevi sources and theology is influenced by dialectic Marxist
discourses. It is common to encounter people from the political and intellec-
tual elite that define Alevilik as outside the domain of Islam or Alevilik without
'Ali'.

Political arguments and language, and legal instruments are dominant in their
mode of interaction with the state and other official institutions. The Ideological
Position is also more reactionary towards the majority Sunni population as they
are perceived as having hostile feelings about Alevis. Some of the legal concepts
they have been using in their appeal to the European Court of Human Rights
(ECHR)[16] are related to the minority rights framework. Attorneys and writers who
were previously active in the leftist-Marxist struggle are able to practice the lan-
guage of political and legal struggle more skilfully; therefore, they have activated
their comparative advantage for a new cause within the changing political context.
The language of previous activism has been translated into the new Alevi cause in
different forms.

Alevilik as social and political activism

The social and political activism dimensions of Alevilik are accentuated in comparison to the belief dimension. Alevi heroes such as Hacı Bektaş Veli, Pir Sultan Abdal, Şeyh Bedrettin, Anatolian Dervishes, Shah Ismail and the famous Alevi poets are presented as the champions of this activism in the IP. There are references to the ethical teachings of these important figures, but the Islamic dimension and teachings have been overlooked. The sources of this branch of ethics have been attributed to a transcendental, humanist value system, which is associated with pre-Islamic Anatolian-/Turkish-originated values. It is common to hear, 'Islam is just a flavour in this transcendental blend of values in the Alevi worldview. Alevilik might have existed even if the Turcoman tribes were not introduced to Islam' (AE, president of an Alevi foundation).

There is also a widely shared notion within the IP that assumes that Islam was not a natural tendency of the nomadic Turks, and that the Turcomans were forced to convert to Islam by Arabs between the ninth and thirteenth centuries. Their way of dealing with Islam is by presenting it as a deviation and imposition that has not been internalised by the Turcomans.

For the IP, the disruption of promising relations started earlier, even during Atatürk's presidency. 'When the regime started to consolidate its power, it turned into an oppressive structure imposing its own understanding of a homogeneous Turkish nation (UO, publisher)'. The IP is also critical with regard to the common myth that assumes that Alevis have always had a good relationship with the Kemalist regime, and that the Alevi community is the guarantor/insurance of the regime's secularist principles. The subject of Atatürk is an important taboo: he is like a messianic figure in the RP. He is also highly regarded as an important hero in Alevi culture. The IP, however, is more critical in its evaluation of Atatürk. While the RP tends to blame the right-wing politicians for the problems of the regime, the IP makes more fundamental criticism of the regime as well as of Atatürk.

> Bektashi lodges were shut down during Atatürk's time; indeed the Bektashi Baba's were the biggest supporters of Atatürk during the period of national struggle. The Dersim operation is also planned while Atatürk was still alive. How can you argue that Kemalism favoured us? (AN, academic)

The influences of dialectic Marxism and dialectic discourses about the self and other are dominant in IP. There seems to be a very limited space for a dialogic encounter with the 'Sunni other' when you talk to an Alevi that prefers the language of the IP. The IP claims that if the Alevis stop the struggle, their authenticity and differences will disappear and they will be assimilated into the majority Sunni-Turkish population. The use of 'Human Rights discourse' is instrumental in the overall Alevi struggle for recognition. Some Alevi leaders are also critical of the instrumental use of Human Rights discourse, which would end up 'distorting' Alevi ethos with some other sources.

> For instance, what can we hope from those who define the Alevi creed in terms of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights? This came up in Turkey during the 1960s, when it was claimed that [the Alevi creed] contained [elements of] Marxism and after the fall of Marxism what was left was the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the old Marxists could [very well] defend this position without having to preserve Marxism, but this is an attitude which sees the Alevi creed as social or political. (RK, writer)

Cemevi for IP is instrumentally defined as a cultural and political space for the aggregation and expression of economic and political interests. There is a tendency to see cemevis as functional spaces and a distinctive cultural feature that helps to shape Alevi identity. They argue that cemevis should not turn into just a space for worshiping. This, they believe, is contrary to the Alevi world view. The attitude towards traditional Alevi institutions has been transformed into a more positive one; however, here is still a feeling that says, 'we should not insist on some of the rituals and practices that may seem archaic within the modern urban context' (İM, lawyer/businessman).

The IP is more popular among emerging, non-traditional Alevi elites, lawyers, and politicians and educated professional with secular lifestyles, people who are more integrated with urban life and the Kurdish/Zaza Alevis. Unlike the dergahs and cemevis in Istanbul, these associations and foundations do not attract ordinary citizens who have no social and political agenda. The IP and associations were more active and popular in the late 1990s, but have been losing ground against the RP and traditional Alevi institutions since then. The belief dimension is still one of the most significant elements of the Alevi community and purely political discourses are either losing ground or transforming themselves incorporating the elements of cultural dimensions more.

Conclusion

The negotiation of collective identities is a complicated process that involves the negotiation of the past, present and future; group histories; heroes and villains of the group, normative boundaries and the ways to relate to other communities. The main difference between these sometimes competing and sometimes complimentary positions on Alevi identity is that they have different practices and parameters of boundary making and ingroup/outgroup definitions as well as interpretations of history and visions for the future. For the RP, cultural practices, traditional Alevi rituals and an 'un-orthodox' understanding of Islam are the main parameters of boundary making. Beliefs, rituals, moral values and communal rapport are essential elements of the RP. In terms of group definition, the RP represents a religiously oriented 'communal group' approach. The belief dimension of the Alevi tradition and the ritual performances are crucial for the RP.

The IP has more of a political and ideological mode of boundary making. The concepts and implications of the arguments are highly politicised. The IP acknowledges that being in the left and taking part in the social and political struggle

against oppressive structures is an essential feature of Alevilik. Boundaries have been drawn over the themes of social and political contentions with the state estab-lishment, and the other groups, mainly conservative Sunnis in Turkey, and to a certain extent 'capitalism' and 'imperialism'. The Alevi community's experiences of direct violence in the 1970s and 1990s and the impact of socialist ideology were influential on the dialectical position of the IP on political issues. There is often a political gist even in personal stories. In the case of RP, differences in the interpretation of Islam with the majority Sunni understanding was balanced with their commitment to secular republican values, thus creating a common ground with secular Sunni's. Whereas in IP, there is a more limited common ground with the Sunni 'other' since oppositional ethos is considered as the essence of Alevi identity.

The way Alevis tell their personal stories, their storylines about the 'identity group (us)' and the 'other' is not just a descriptive enterprise. Those storylines have significant pragmatic function for calling actors for certain kinds of actions as shown in Tables 1 and 2. Those actions and institutional activities and discourses also reproduce and strengthen the positions, which they are related to. At this point, there is no one 'hegemonic position', or a discourse that would convince all segments of the Alevi community. Alevi identity will rather continue to be a hybrid identity[17] that incorporates the elements of multiple positions including the ones that are not mentioned in this study. Alevi citizens will not abandon their pre-existing ideological, economic and cultural priorities and loyalties for the sake of creating a homogenous Alevi social identity. This diversity and hybridity will continue to influence Alevi social and political activism.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. It is impossible to figure out the exact population of Alevi citizens in Turkey because of the lack of census data based on ethnic and sectarian factors. Estimates range from 5 million to 20 million; exaggerations of the size of the population is also a part of identity struggle.
2. According to Gurr, communal groups define themselves based on common descent, shared historical experiences, valued cultural and normative traits and belief systems (Gurr 2007).
3. Madhhab is a term with multiple meanings defined as 'a way, course, mode, or man-ner, of acting or conduct or the like' and as a term of religion and philosophy. It is also defined as 'a doctrine, a tenet, an opinion with regard to a particular case'; in Islamic law specifically, a technical term often translated as 'school of law' ('Madhhab.' Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition. Brill Online, 2012). The first meaning of madhhab 'a way, course, mode, or manner of acting or conduct' is a suitable term to define Alevi community, which is preferred in this study.

4. Arguments about the population of Alevi citizens are part of identity politics; therefore, it is best to assume a population somewhere between those two figures.

5. I prefer to use the ideological position rather than political position in this text since religious discourse also have certain social and political claims over Alevi identity.

6. The Turkish–Islamic Synthesis is a state discourse that was institutionalised after the 1980 coup. The three pillars of the Turkish–Islamic Synthesis are the family, the mosque and the barracks.

7. I prefer to use the term Alevilik as a broader term that refers to the Alevi community as well as the broader cultural community, rather than the term 'Alevism', which sound more like a political ideology.

8. Those capital letters are not necessarily the initials of the persons that are interviewed.

9. In the original field research, there were five discourse categories: 'İstanbul,' 'Ankara,' 'Ethnic,' 'Bektaşi' and 'Post-Alevi.' The main debate within the Alevi identity politics is between the first two discourses; this study focuses on the 'Istanbul Discourse', which I defined as 'Religious Position', and 'Ankara Discourse', which is defined as 'Ideological Position'.

10. Bilici (1998) uses the categories of '(i) Left-Alevilik; (ii) Mystical-Islamic Alevilik; (iii) Centre-Alevilik and (iv) Shii-inclined'.

11. Ocak's taxonomy (1996) classifies the approaches to Alevilik into four main categories: '(i) Kemalist-humanist, (ii) Sunni-Islamist, (iii) Marxist-liberationist and (iv) Turkish-nationalist'. Ocak's categorisation is based on the differences in ideological positions and world views.

12. Erman and Göker (2000) adopt a similar version of taxonomy: (i) 'Kurdish Alevi populists; (ii) Social-Democratic Alevis; (iii) religiously conservative Alevis and (iv) Alevis emphasizing Turkish patriotism'. The taxonomy of Erman and Göker is also related to the classification of political ideologies in Turkey.

13. 'Generic Narrative' (GN) is defined as a narrative that is mentioned by at least five informants in similar forms.

14. Turkey needs to make a choice about whether to keep insisting on the homogeneous 'Sunni' definition of Islam or to recognise and embrace other versions as equal partners in the making of the modern Turkish national identity.

15. Gellner (1997) defined 'high Islam' as a tradition based on unitarianism, scripturalism, individualism and puritanism. High Islam excludes spiritual/sufi and heterodox interpretation.

16. Two major cases where Alevi citizens resorted to ECHR were on compulsory religious education (Eylem Zengin vs Turkey) and the required religious designation on Turkish ID cards (Sinan Işık vs Turkey). Hasan Zengin, an Alevi citizen, alleged that the compulsory classes in religious culture and ethics were essentially based on the fundamental rules of Hanafite Islam and that no teaching was given on his own faith, appealed to the ECHR on his daughter Eylem Zengin's behalf. The court found Hasan Zengin's appeal valid (decision on 9 October 2007). Sinan Işık applied to a court requesting that his identity card feature the word 'Alevi' rather than the word 'Islam'. The Court decided on the removal of the religion category on ID cards (2 February 2010).

17. Hybridity is used to describe cultural phenomena that allows for the coexistence of different lifestyles, behaviours, practices and orientations that result in multiple identities. Hybridity deconstructs the essentialist and static notions of belonging to a group (Werbner 1997, Verkuyten 2005).

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