THE ALEVI COMMUNITY IN CONTEMPORARY TURKEY: AN ALIEN FROM ABROAD IN AYDIN

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of this study is to explore and investigate what Alevism means nowadays and how Alevi people live their own identity in contemporary Turkey. The Alevi community represents 15-20 percent of the Turkish population and it is the second largest religious community in Turkey.\(^1\) They meanly live in central-eastern Anatolia, in small pockets in the rural areas along the southern and the western coasts and in the larger cities.\(^2\)

The Alevi identity is still a significant issue discussed in Turkey; therefore, it is not clear if it is a sectarian, ethnic, religious or political group. This is because the Alevi community represent a heterogeneous group in which different ethnic, linguistic and cultural sub-groups are put all together. In this study with the term Alevi, I will refer to all different groups composing the wider Alevi community. In fact, the Alevi community embraces different ethnicities such as Turkish, Kurdish and Arabs and different cultural groups such as Kızılbaş, Bektashi, Tahtacı, Abdal, Çepni and Zaza.\(^3\) Moreover, from a religious point of view, it is common to define them as a group, with a unique syncretic structure\(^4\), which was influenced by different beliefs such Shia Islam, Sufism, Shamanism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, and pre-Islamic Anatolian traditions. Despite the difficulty to comprehend what Alevi identity is, this heterogeneous group, in different ways and levels of intensity, has been persecuted since the Ottoman Empire and nowadays is still struggling for recognition.

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In order to reach my aim I spent six months as an Erasmus student at the Department of Sociology, Adnan Menders University, in Turkey, precisely in Aydın, a city in the western part of Turkey in the Aegean region. Aydın has a population of 207,554\(^5\) and is the seat of Aydın province. Aydın province is divided in 6 districts.\(^6\)

In the first four months, I conducted a theoretical research mostly based on material collected at the University Library. I was dedicated in researching the Alevi issue, through articles and texts, in order to collect as much data as I could. In the remaining two months, I conducted fieldwork in both Aydın and Yeniköy, an Alevi village in Aydın province, interviewing and submitting questionnaires\(^7\) to Alevi people.

When I returned to Italy, the first thing I did was to listen and transcribe the interviews. Secondly, I compared and contrasted interview material with the one of the questionnaires. The answers to the questionnaires were translated from Turkish to English while I was in Turkey.\(^8\) While examining data gathered through interviews and questionnaires, I realized that the responses indicated that there was a lot in common. This allowed me to emphasize some critical points about the Alevi issue, which were nevertheless already vastly discussed and confirmed by scholars.\(^9\) After this, I started writing the thesis. However, given the copious challenges I came across while doing fieldwork, the degree of personal involvement and, above all, the difficulties in penetrating the field and gaining informants’ trust, I have inserted an

\(^{5}\) [www.citypopulation.de/php/turkey-aydin.php](http://www.citypopulation.de/php/turkey-aydin.php)


\(^{7}\) See sample in appendix at page 82.

\(^{8}\) By colleges of the Department of Sociology, Adnan Menderes University.

additional section at the end of this introduction called “Challenges in Data Collections”.
Here below I will describe through a brief summary the content of each chapter, which composes the thesis.

In the first chapter, I will present a general definition of Alevism. Subsequently I will briefly talk about Alevi’s history starting from the XVI century to nowadays, emphasizing the political and social events, which influenced the Alevi identity. In doing so I will demonstrate that, the history of Alevi was marked by persecution and marginalization. This started during the Ottoman era when Alevi were considered “heretics”. Nevertheless, even in contemporary Turkey they are still struggling to obtain recognition by the state, which is Sunni-based.

In the second chapter, I will discuss the issue of identity, which concerns the Alevi community as a whole. Therefore, I will illustrate the complexity in describing the community while analysing the different ways of living Alevism. Secondly, I will concentrate on the main religious practices and ceremonies. Thereafter, I will describe the relations between the Alevi community and the state taking into consideration their main claims. I will demonstrate how the Alevi issue has not found an adequate solution in Turkish politics and society.

The third chapter is dedicated to the research I conducted in Turkey. My fieldwork took place mainly in Aydın city and in the village of Yeniköy. I will report the questions included in my questionnaire and some of the answers I received from the informants, giving space to their own words and opinions. My final observations include what I perceived and understood.
about Alevism and the Alevi identity as a result of data I received from my informants. Therefore, I will underline two main critical issues that emerged from the answers I obtained from interviews and questionnaires, that is, difficulties of living in a Sunni-based state and the differences between the Alevi group and the Sunni group.

Finally, based on data gathered through participant observation, fieldwork, interviews and questionnaires, I will describe the several reasons that made the Alevi issue still unsolved, what it means for my informants to be Alevi, and, my perception, as a result of the challenges I experienced in data collections by reference to the way Alevi live their own identity.

- Challenges in data Collections

Before my arrival in Turkey, which was in October 2105, I knew very little about the Alevi issue, and even less about the city, I was going to stay in for a period of six months. The day I left, I was quite certain that my purpose was to conduct an ethnographic research based on participant observation and that the city of Aydın was situated in the “European” part of Turkey. When I arrived in Aydın I tried to become acquainted as much as possible with the reality I was about to face. At the University, I was dedicated in thoroughly researching the Alevi issue, through articles and books. All was done in preparation to gain as much information and knowledge as I could, in order to start the real field research. This should have started once I had sufficient theoretical insights, allegedly more or less within two months. In my spare time, I tried to socialize with people from Aydın. However, a few weeks after my arrival, I decided not to confine my Alevi research only at the University but rather to ask some people I had already met their opinion
about Alevi and what Alevism represented for them. I elaborated this idea, mainly for two reasons, which are worth mentioning. First of all, from my readings, I perceived, that the Alevi issue today, even if it is still complex and controversial, is present in the public sphere. Indeed during the ‘80s-‘90s the “Alevi issue” came to the fore in the national socio-political scene. This issue appeared as a rediscovery of the Alevi community, later termed “Alevi revival”. Moreover, even recently, through the so-called “openings” of 2008, called upon by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the Alevi issue was again a topic of discussion. Secondly, it was simply the fact that people I had met in the meantime, seemed to be open to any type of discussion, that is to say that with these people we had already touched upon those themes.

Two topics were the most frequently discussed. The first topic was the issue of politics in Turkey, especially because it was pre-election time. In fact, for the second time in six months, the citizens were to vote again for the parliament, on the 1st of November 2015. Indeed, at the first elections, hold on the 7th of June of the same year, none of the parties had reached an absolute majority and the negotiations to form a coalition had failed. Consequently, on the 24th of August, President Erdoğan called for another election. The second topic was religion; or rather how it was perceived and lived by the people I was conversing with. During these conversations, it was emphasised many times that the city of Aydın tended to be politically toward the left and that religion was not highly considered in their lives. Therefore, I started asking with ease and tranquillity their opinion regarding the Alevi issue, the replies were quite similar, which I will summarize: “I adore their life style and Alevis are cool and relaxed, I have many Alevi friends and I have never encountered any problems with them.” Noting that
none of the people I had spoken to declared to be Alevi, most of them told me they were non-practicing Sunni. In light of these responses, I was convinced that a field research, which I would have conducted in Aydn, would have been carried out in an easy flowing manner. However, I had not given thought to the possibility of being faced with problems, other than a linguist one. Even if I was attending language intensive courses, my Turkish knowledge was not sufficient to sustain a proper conversation, so obviously I needed someone for translating. So days and weeks went by.

At the University, I was continuing the theoretical research, which lead to additional confusion regarding the Alevi issue. I realized that the topic was vast and related to history, politics, social transformations and religious aspects. Therefore, for a foreigner it was difficult to understand the complex dynamics. Hence, I felt the need to have direct contacts with Alevi, hoping to clear some ideas and concepts. Thus, I decided to do something that in that moment seemed to be both obvious and practical: I started to ask my friends if they could introduce me to their Alevi friends, seeing that I had never personally met any. Most enthusiastically, they replied they would help me. I was also proposed to travel to the east of Turkey, where the percentage of Alevi is higher. I replied, that for now I was interested in Aydn. I was told that it would require some time to arrange a meeting with them. As more days and weeks went by, I continued with the research at University, not bothering my friends who had not yet contacted me, regarding contacting Alevi people. Even December crept up and the need to meet with some Alevi was even stronger. I actually thought that at the time I had sufficient information and felt ready to move to fieldwork.

I asked my tutor at the University, when and how this would eventuate. I was told to be patient and in the meantime, to draw up the questionnaire, which would serve as a guide for the interviews, I would be conducting. Basically
I was told that I would not be conducting a field research and participant observations, rather I would have conducted, presumably, thirty interviews guided by a semi structured questionnaire. I was dumbfounded and could not understand why there had been a change in the methodology of the fieldwork. I thought this was perhaps because of insufficient recourses, e.g., no people could accompany me. Nevertheless, I drew up the questionnaire in a few days, hoping to start the interviews soon. It was already January, and none of my friends had contacted me and I was still waiting for the University to reply on my questionnaire. I was somewhat discouraged and I could not understand the silence that surrounded me, asking why after four months, nothing was happening especially at the campus. Angry and disappointed I asked my tutor why this was so. I was told that Turkey was going through some significant changes and the situation was taking a bad turn.

I was aware of the general situation in Turkey. During the months I spent there, many things had happened. The Development and Justice Party (AKP) had yet again won the elections, the Kurd situation got worse from day to day. The attacks on behalf of the Daesh (Islamic State) were increasing; while journalists from the opposition were being arrested and accused of violating the safety of the nation. However, what I could not understand was how this influenced the Alevi who live in Aydın?

For a while I was perceiving and describing Aydın as a “bubble”, a place which had not been attacked and not shaken by the events happening in the rest of the nation, this thought was conveyed through what I was told by locals. I referred to my tutor that I was waiting for a reply from some friends who had agreed to introduce me to some Alevi contacts. I broadly explained how
I reached this situation, emphasising more than once, that the people I had spoken to did not seem to be worried or fearful. I was advised to stop asking around and to wait for the interviews. The conversation with my tutor was somewhat disturbing. Therefore, I questioned myself as to whether or not I was underestimating the situation. However, I was not at all worried, as my friends were willing to help there was no need to allow fear to get the better of me. After all, none of those I spoke to had given me the impression that the tension in Aydın was so relevant to impede a chat in a bar with an Alevi. I was certain, that eventually I would come in contact quite easily with an Alevi in Aydın.

Nothing more than a mistake, in fact after a few days I received a message, which completely disturbed and upset me. A friend of mine referred, that none of the Alevi he knew, were willing to speak with me. I called him; I wanted to see him so he could tell me exactly what the Alevi had said. He replied that they are scared and did not want to speak to a foreigner, as they did not feel they could trust me. For security purposes, they also asked if I was a “spy” and why would someone be interested in Alevism. He added that he spoke to a person who was the president of an Alevi association, who initially replied that he was willing to speak with me. However, a few days later he said he did not feel that he could. It was then that I fully realized I had completely underestimated the situation. I felt somewhat stupid in that my naivety and my strong will to meet some Alevi was so important that I completely ignored what surrounded me.

I thought perhaps amongst some of the people I had met, one or more of them could have been Alevi but not willing to disclose their identity. I started feeling guilty, thinking if it was really like this, I may have offended someone by raising the Alevi issue with such ease. I started to cry and felt
the need to pour out my feelings. Therefore, I called a friend, someone I trusted, as I no longer knew who I was confronting. He was someone who knew the reason why I was in Turkey and has been present in many occasions where the Alevi issue emerged. I told him what had happened saying how deeply sorry I felt, referring to the fact, that without thinking I may have offended someone. He replied: “This could have been be possible”. I did not ask him anything else and he did not make further comments. I am still doubtful that perhaps someone wanted to hide his or her identity. Furthermore, I understood the methodological changes of my research did not depend on insufficient resources, but rather upon serious challenges I could face while conducting a fieldwork research. The following day I told my tutor what had happened the previous day and apologized for being impatient and perhaps somewhat bold, but I did not realize the reality I was living in. That same day I was advised that I would be starting the interviews. I was very happy, but on the other hand a bit scared, as I was no longer sure of being aware of what was happening around me. Nor was I sure anymore of how to conduct the interviews.

It was now February; with my tutor, we decided we would conduct 15 interviews. In less than a month, I was able to interview ten Alevi under university supervision.

The whole month was exhausting, but rich with emotions. The duration of some of the interviews was up to three hours. However, there were exceptional cases, for example, one of the interviews I conducted in Yeniköy lasted a whole day. For some interviews, I had the possibility to have a simultaneous translator; therefore, I could have asked ulterior questions at the end of the interview. For other interviews, we decided to translate the answers to the questionnaires after concluding the interviews. They
expressed different experiences, which were not to be found in any texts or articles I had read up to date. However, something was still not quite clear to me, something that was reoccurring by reference to Aydin city. Some informants had indeed said that they did not have any problems living as an Alevi in Aydin; they were feeling free and tranquil. In my opinion, this was evidently contrary to what I had discovered the previous month. Therefore, my doubts intensified. Just to complicate what is mentioned above, during this period two things had happened to me. I spoke with someone in a bar in downtown Aydin, who after I told him/her the topic of my studies, without hesitating he/she revealed to be an Alevi. In addition, another friend had confirmed a meeting with an Alevi. Therefore, I decided to pursue some other contacts, which were not passed on to me by the University. So I ventured out of the “safety zone” of the University. In doing so, I submitted questionnaires in a bar and spoke with an Alevi about Alevism along the streets of Aydin.

The meeting which had the most impact, was the one organized by my friend. He proposed to speak with his dear friend who was willing to help me. The location was again a bar in Aydin city centre, where I was able to distribute three questionnaires. Two of these who had completed the questionnaire, started to speak about Alevism and the critical situation they were confronted with under the incumbent Government. All this was explained in Turkish, in broad daylight and on a street, without any fear or hesitation. They also invited me to visit a cemevi [Alevis’ worship place]. No questions asked, but one, simply where I was from. At the end of the meeting, I expressed an air of perplexity to my friend, telling him that I did not expect that they would speak to me spontaneously and with a feeling of ease. He replied that if the liaison is a trusted person who they know well, there are no problems. Trust is very important.
It was then that I started thinking about the history of the Alevi. A group which has for centuries suffered persecution and discrimination by Sunni-majority establishment and recently by right-wing political parties to the point of still dissimulating their own identity. The dissimulation practice, as I will be mentioning in the first chapter, began among the Alevi population in the XVI century, following a violent repression by the Ottoman Empire. Through my own experience, I can testify that this is still present today, even if not among all the Alevis, as all the challenges and difficulties I encountered in meeting, or contacting, Alevi, do prove.
1. ALEVIS IN THE HISTORY

1.1. General definition

Defining and describing the Alevi community in Turkey is very difficult and restrictive. In fact, nowadays the Alevi identity is still a big issue in Turkey; it is one of the “most contradictory and commonly misunderstood identity-based problem”.¹⁰

Scholars, researchers and writers describe Alevism in different ways but also Alevis do not describe themselves in a unique way. Whether or not it is a sectarian, ethnic, religious or political group is still largely discussed.

The term Alevism, is quite recent. In fact it was occasionally used among the Kızılb aş to indicate their loyalty to Ali¹² in the last decades of the Ottoman Empire and it became prevalent later on, especially in the early 20th century¹³ to indicate:

“a new trans-regional identity linking previously only partially connected groups which shared similar narratives, beliefs, as well as social and ritual practices”.¹⁴

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¹¹ Kızılb aş literally means, “Read head” because they used to wear red turbans with twelve plates to show their allegiance to Ali and the twelve Imams, see on this Matti Moosa (1987). Extremist Shiites, Syracuse University Press, New York, pp. 33-35. Kızılb aş, is the name used during the Ottoman Empire to indicate Turkem tribes from Anatolia who were supporting Shah Ismail. The Ottomans used this term in a negative way, mainly to describe the Kızılb aş as heretics, see on this Krisztina Kehl- Bodrogi (2003). Ataturk and the Alevis: a Holy alliance? Turkey’s Alevi Enigma in, A Comprehensive Overview, ed. by Paul J. White and Joost Jongerden, Brill, Leiden, Boston, p. 54.
¹² Ali (d. 661) was the blood cousin and son-in-law of Prophet Muhammad. (Matti Moosa (1987). Op. cit., p. xiv). After the death of Prophet Mohammad, Ali was elected as fourth Caliph, proceeded by Abu Bakr, Umar and Osman. Ali was killed by the Khawarij, an extremist orthodox Muslim group. For Shi’as Ali was divinely inspired from the family of Prophet Mohammad. Therefore for Shi’as Ali is the first Imam. (Syed Minhaj ul Hassan, Sectarian Militancy in Pakistan and Its Implications in Marcello Mollica (2015). (ed.) Bridging Religiously Divided Societies in the Contemporary World. Pisa: University of Pisa Press, pp. 2-4). Alevis recognize Ali as the first Imam and his eleven descendants.
Therefore, nowadays, the term Alevism refers to a heterogeneous group in which different ethnic, linguistic and cultural groups are put all together. I would like to highlight that even in this thesis with the definition “Alevism-Alevi” all the different groups, which compose the Alevi community, such as Kızılbaş, Bektashi, Tahtacı, Abdal, Çepni and Zaza as 15 will be placed under the same umbrella. It may not be correct to generalize, but I need to take this path to simplify the description and the analysis of the phenomenon and because Alevi are often considered as a single group from outsiders despite their many sub-groups. Furthermore, in my research, while I was conducting my interviews, I came in contact with people belonging to different groups such as Tahtacı16, Bektashi17, half Alevi-half Sunni18, Arab, Kurdish, Turks, therefore I could not focus on a specific group, even though not everyone told me about her/his ethnic sub-group belonging.

These groups have generally similar, but not identical, beliefs; they differ in some practices, structures, and historical development, as Kızılbaş and Bektashi19, and in ethnic and linguistic origin such as Çepni and Zaza (Kurdish).

These heterogeneous groups, in different ways and different levels of intensity, were persecuted since the Ottoman Empire, and even today they are still not totally recognized.

18 I refer to my own data as I conducted tree interviews with people that told me to have one Alevi parent and one Sunni parent.
According to the estimates the Alevi community represent approximately 15-20 percent of the population; within them, 75 percent are Turkish, 20 percent are Kurdish and the rest belong to other ethnic minorities\(^{20}\), such as the Arab speakers in south-eastern Anatolia which are considered as an extension of Syria’ Alawi (Nusayr).\(^{21}\)

It is common to define them as heterodox group\(^{22}\), with a unique religious syncretic structure\(^{23}\), which was influenced by Shia Islam Sufism, Shamanism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism and pre-Islamic Anatolian traditions.

1.2. Alevis in history

1.2.1. The Ottoman era (XVI- XIX century)

Alevism originated as a distinctive group during the XVI century and are connected to the rise of the Safavids in Persia (contemporary Iran), guided by Shah Ismail (1501-1524). The Safavids were a Persian Sufi Order, which during the XV century became a militant movement fighting to extend their power.\(^{24}\) The Safavids were supported mostly by Turkmen tribes in Anatolia, named Kızılbaş (the former Alevi) because they used to wear red turbans with twelve pleats to denote their allegiance to Ali and the twelve Imams.\(^{25}\)

As these tribes were unsatisfied with the predominating conditions under the Ottoman Empire they were open to changes and saw these changes in Shah Ismail, who became venerated among the Kızılbaş and considered to be the

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\(^{22}\) “The Turkish politics of doxa that otherizes the Alevis as heterox, and ascribes orthodoxy to a domestical version of Sunni-Islam, has roots in an essentialist perspective on inner-Islamic difference that juxtaposes orthodox Sunnism and its heterox others”, see Markus Dressler (2015). Turkish politics of Doxa: Otherizing the Alevis as heterodox, Philosophy and Social Criticism, 41 (4-5): 449.


reincarnation of Ali. During his reign, Shiism became the “State religion” in Persia in doing so the Ottoman Empire perceived this as a political and religious threat. Throughout the struggle with the Safivids, the Ottomans, who previously were not fanatic believers, started to adopt the orthodox Sunnism as their state religion and to perceive all the heterodox groups in the Empire, such as the Kızılbaş, as a political opposition.

The Kızılbaş started a number of rebellions against the Ottomans because they were supporting the expansion of the Ismail’s influence over Anatolia. This tension came to an end in 1514 as a result of the Ottomans’ - guided by Sultan Selim I (1512-1520) - victory over the Safavids in the Battle of Chaldiran (1514) in Persia. The outbreaks were marginalized and a vast number of Kızılbaş were killed by the Ottomans whose methods were justified in terms of “Holy War” against heretics. Therefore, there was a religious legitimization for the persecution, which obtained an official blessing with a 1548 fatwā [legal opinion or learned interpretation that the qualified jurist can give on issues pertaining to the Islamic Law], when Seyhulislam Ebussuud Efendi announced the Kızılbaş as heretics and so their killing was allowed by Islamic law.²⁶

The violent reaction of the Ottomans, forced the Alevi to move to remote areas in order to escape the persecutions. This forced spatial and social marginalization, which subsequently implicated diverse consequences. On the one hand, distinctions between Sunni (orthodox) and Alevi (heterodox) became more defined; therefore, the socio-religious Alevi entity was reinforced.

The Alevi devised strategies to protect the community, for example through endogamy, or keeping its teachings a mystery and dissimulating their own

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religious identity, a practice known as *Taqiyya*. Furthermore, the advancement of a peculiar socio-religious organization based on the *Dedes*, who exercised both religious and political authority, allowed the Alevi to extend their independence from the rest of the world and its institutions.

On the other hand, the Ottoman State appeared to be “tacitly” tolerant even if Alevi were not recognized as a distinct religious community. Compared to non-Muslim minorities (Greek Orthodox, Jewish, Armenians), whose status was regulated by the *millet* system, no legal regulation existed in regards to Alevis. Legally they were looked upon as Sunni Muslims, therefore subject to the Shari’a courts run by Hanafi Law. In reality, the Alevi were, more or less, left alone and proceeded to live following their own values and regulations as well as adopting a specific form of jurisdiction, which strongly contrasted the Shari’a.

However, reciprocal prejudices and religiously approved taboos on both sides made social interactions extremely limited between the Sunni and the Alevis.

The situation changed during the XIX century during the reign of Abdulhamit II (1876-1909). The Ottoman Empire started a period of reforms in order to create a political and religious identity among the Muslims. In this scenario, Alevis were put under pressure and forced to abandoned their beliefs and practices. Furthermore, the Ottoman Empire started to suspect...
that Alevis were asking protection by converting to Christianity, consequently the Ottomans started to register and observe the Alevis and built mosques in their villages. Sunni imams were sent in each of this mosque to teach Alevis the “right faith”.\footnote{Ibidem, p. 56.}

In addition, apart from the assimilation policy, there was also violence inflicted upon the Alevis by the \textit{Hamidiye} (Cavalry) in the eastern provinces. The Cavalry was mainly established in order to contrast the Russians but in fact it attacked the Alevis in the region and confiscated their lands.\footnote{Ibidem, p. 56.}

\subsection*{1.2.2 Young Turks Movement}

As a result of the Young Turks Revolution\footnote{The Young Turks revolution was essentially the restoration of the 1876 Ottoman Empire which implicated introducing a multiparty politics in two electoral stages. On 24 July 1908, Abdulhamit II complied to and announced the restoration of the Constitution, which established the Second Constitutional Era.} the situation for the Alevis changed in the sense that it relieved relations with the state. The Alevis appreciated the Young Turks movement for different reasons. First of all, the Young Turks movement accelerated the secularization process of the state. For the Alevis, this meant, on the one hand, limitation of the influence of the Sunni Islamic establishment and, on the other hand, religious freedom. Secondly, the participation of Bektashis in the government might have led the Alevis to feel closer to the political centre. Therefore, relationships and feelings among the Alevi community with the power changed, from being oppositional to being supportive. Finally, the Young Turks movement idealized Alevis as “true Turks” so they did not follow the assimilation policy, which had been brought forward by Abdulhamit II, instead they highlighted the national Turkish culture and religion.\footnote{Krisztina Kehl- Bodrogi (2003). Op. cit., p. 57.}
1.2.3 Republic Era
In 1923, the Republic of Turkey was proclaimed. The leader, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, started various reforms with the aim to build a homogenized state based on a modern Turkish national identity. The idea of a modern Turkish national identity was based on “an ‘ideal citizen’, who can be depicted as ethnically Turkish, preferably from the Balkan peninsula; religiously Muslim, in terms of understanding and practicing Hanafi sect of Sunni Islam; and secular and westernized in terms of religious practice and worldview”. Therefore, Ataturk, with his Republican People’s party (CHP), abolished the Sultanate and after, in 1924, the Caliphate. In 1925, the Sufi orders and lodges were suppressed and the Islamic time and calendar system was replaced by the European ones. In 1926 the Shari’a law was replaced by the Swiss Civil Code Law and by the Italian Penal Law. Furthermore, a law legalized the consumption of alcohol by Muslims. In 1928, an amendment in the Turkish Constitution removed the article, which stated Islam as the official state religion and a Latin-based alphabet was introduced to replace the Arabic letters. Different policies led to the emancipation of women such as equal rights with men regarding divorce, ownership of property and custody of children. Furthermore, it was forbidden to wear religious dresses outside places of worship.

It is evident that many changes had the aim to secularize the state and appear westernized. From an Alevi prospective the emphasis on which the Republic was putting on the “secularization-modernization” was very important, that is the reason why many Alevis were enthusiastic supporters of the Republic. However, the Alevis were not completely suited to the “ideal citizen” format,

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basically for religious and ethnic diversities. In a religious prospective, the Republic tried to reorganize the boundaries of Islam with its own institutions and perceptions, in an effort to create a common religious identity. In this frame, the Sunni Hanafi belief was considered as the Turkish religious identity and the establishment of the Diyanet  

37 (Administration of Religious Affairs) somehow had reinforced this vision.

In an ethnic prospective, not all Alevi were Turkish, so the idea of an “ideal citizen” was excluding the Kurdish and Arabic Alevi population.  

38 Moreover, the Treaty of Lausanne (1923)  

39 recognized as minorities the Armenian, the Jews and the Greek Orthodox, thus implicitly excluding all other ethnic and non-Sunni minorities.

Indeed, the Alevi situation under the one-party system (CHP 1923-1946) was very controversial and complex. Alevi did not actually receive benefits from the modernization and secularization process, they did not acquire the same status as Sunnis; they were not recognized as a distinctive group from Sunni Muslims.  

40 Clearly, in this period the Alevi community became closer to national ideals such as secularization and modernization. It was an important moment because of the switch from being a group of opposition, very far from the

37 The Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı [General Directorate for the Religious Affairs] was founded in 1925 and was “entrusted the provision of religious services, the coordination of religious affairs and the management of places of worship to the state”, see Bayram Ali Soner and Sule Toktas (2011). Alevi and Alevism in the Changing context of Turkish politics: The Justice and development Party’s Alevi Opening, Turkish Studies, 12 (3): 420.

38 During Ataturk era two Alevi-Kurd rebellion took place. The first one in 1921 by the Kocgiri Kurd tribe, Zazaki-speaking Alevi. They did not recognize the authority of the leadership of Ataturk. Some Turkish Alevi and Armenians took part in the rebellion which was easily suppressed by the Turkish army, see Tahla Kose, (2013).Op. cit., p. 594. The second one took place in Dersim (Tunceli) in 1937-1938. The Dersim tribes, Zazaki-speaking Alevi, resisted attempts at state centralization until the late 1930s. The government reacted destroying a third of their villages, see Kerem Öktem (2008).Being Muslim at the Margins: Alevi and the AKP, Middle East Report No. 246, Empire’s Eastern Reach, pp. 5-7.

39 The 1923 Treaty of Lausanne was the final treaty concluding World War I. It was signed on July 24, 1923 by representatives of Turkey (successor to the Ottoman Empire) on one side and by Britain, France, Italy, Japan, Greece, Romania, and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes on the other.

political ideology under the Ottoman Empire, to a group which supported the political power. However, the relationship between the Kemalists and Alevis gradually started to fall apart. In the 1940s, the authoritarian CHP alienated many social and political groups (Socialists, Liberals, Islamists, Alevis) and these groups formed the basis for the Democratic Party (DP) electoral success in the 1950s.\textsuperscript{41} Even during the DP ruling, the Alevis were put aside. The DP did not hesitate to abandon the original liberal democratic position to move towards a pro-Islamist position. The DP insisted on religious topics like opening \textit{Imam-Hatip}\textsuperscript{42} high schools and reintroducing the call to worship (\textit{azan}) in Arabic. The DP’s rhetoric, that secularism is not being irreligious and his partisanship for Sunnis, created a legacy in Turkish politics through which right-wing parties de-emphasized Kemalist secularism in favour of “more freedom to believers”. In this political contest, Alevis were, of course, ignored and marginalized; in fact because they were considered guilty of having supported Kemalism they had been hold back from political life during the DP period.\textsuperscript{43}

1.2.4 The ‘60s-‘70s

In 1960, a military coup overthrew the DP. The coup was considered a liberal attempt to restore secularism and Kemalism. After the coup, a new Constitution was adopted in order to reaffirm secularist principles. This liberal Constitution recognised the existence of different social groups, guaranteed different rights such as the right to strike, association and publication and the freedom of thought and expression. As a result, different

\textsuperscript{42} Imam-Hatip schools are secondary education institutions that provides the training of Imams.
political groups emerged, new social and associative movements appeared, while creating differences in which social and political boundaries became more evident.\textsuperscript{44}

In this new social and politic context, the Alevi community appeared in the public space demanding that the principles of equality and brotherhood proclaimed by the Constitution be applied to them too. A general mobilization started among the Alevi community. In fact, in this period, many Alevi associations were created, especially in the big cities, in order to organize cultural evenings. For example, the first public \textit{Cem}, the essential corporate worship service, was organized by the Hacibe
taş tourism and information association in Ankara in December 1963.\textsuperscript{45} In 1966, a political and cultural newspaper, called \textit{Cem}, was created to defend of the Alevi cause. Later, other newspapers and magazines were launched in defence of republicanism, secularism, freedom of consciousness and thought. This cultural and intellectual mobilization was not appreciated by the radical Islamists, in fact in July 1966 several Alevis were attacked by Sunnis in the city of Ortaca, in the Aegean region. After this event the Unity Party (BP/TBP) was created by a group of Alevis. Actually, the party did not have a lot of success among the Alevi community who preferred to vote for the CHP. It was clear that Alevis were in line with the Kemalist ideology and because of the tension between Kemalist (centre-left wing) and the right-wing Islamic parties was growing Alevis started to be targeted. Alevi started to be labelled as leftists and Communist. They were considered as an internal threat due to their close affinity with the leftist movements by some ultra-nationalists and radical Islamist factions.\textsuperscript{46} Other attacks took

\textsuperscript{45} Ibidem, p. 13.
place: in 1967, Elbistan/ Maraş; in 1968, Hekimhan/Malatya; in 1971, Kirikhan/Hatay; in 1978, Malatya; in 1978, Sivas; in 1978, Maraş were “110 people of Alevi origin were killed”\(^{47}\); in 1980, Çorum.\(^{48}\)

1.2.5 The ‘80s-’90s
With the aim to restore the dysfunctional parliamentary politics and diminish the violence between the left and right wing, another military coup took place in 1980.
In reality, the military takeover was only a temporary end to the conflict between the left and the right. In order to eliminate political fragmentation and polarization and to control the left, which was considered the more dangerous of the two sides, the Military State used Islam and embraced a policy called “Turkish-Islam synthesis”.\(^{49}\) Therefore, using Islam as a unifying element in the Turkish society led to the support of Sunni-based religious policies, which in turn meant the consolidation of the Diyanet, the introduction of compulsory religious courses in secondary education and the increasing of religious schools.
In the 1990s, as a result of this political framework, the confrontation between Alevis and the State escalated. In this decade, the “Alevi issue” came to the fore in the Turkish political and social arena. The issue appeared as a rediscovery of the Alevi community and was called “Alevi revival”.\(^{50}\) Many factors influenced this phenomenon.
From a sociological point of view, migration effected the Alevi community. In the past years, especially during the 1970s, for economic and political

\(^{47}\) Ibidem, p. 351.
\(^{48}\) http://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/5833/secular-turkey.
\(^{49}\) Ali Çarkoğlu; Nazlı Çağın Bilgili (2011). A precarious Relationship: The Alevi minority, the Turkish State and the EU, South European Society and politics, 16 (2): 354.
reasons many Alevi migrated to the cities. Therefore, there was a mutation in the forms of expression of Alevism, which needed to re-adapt in a new, urban contest, very far from the original, rural one. The social structure of the Alevi was deeply modified; the emergence of Alevi bourgeoisies in the big cities and the great increase in the number of educated Alevi produced a new social stratification. From a political point of view, different facts were also relevant. First of all, the pre-1980 politicization of Alevi and their close position with the left wing came to an end after the military coup in 1980 and the decline of leftist ideology in the 1990s. Therefore, the Alevi community temporarily neglected the political elements, such as the affiliation to the left side, and focused on the religious and cultural aspects of their identity. It is since the late 1980s that many of them started to redefine themselves as Alevi. Secondly, as already mentioned, because of the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, Alevi were put on alert. The need to be more organized and to try to create political unity in order to contrast the rise of Islamists became evident. During the 1990s, two tragic events made clear the need to increase organizational capacity and counter political and social threats. The first event took place in Sivas in 1993, in which 37 participants, during a leftist Alevi cultural festival, were killed in a hotel, the Madımak Hotel, which was set on fire by Sunni fanatics. The second event took place in Gazi district 1995, in Istanbul, in which more than two dozen people were killed by security forces. In both cases, inadequate response by the state authority undermined trust among the Alevi community and revealed the need to set

up an effective network.\textsuperscript{54} In fact, after these events, in 1966 a new Alevi party was formed, called the Peace Party.

Thirdly, there was the Kurdish problem. Given that the 20 percent of Alevis are Kurds\textsuperscript{55}, they became more conscious of the fact that the tensions emanating from the nationalistic conflict could directly affect their community.

Another element of influences was the Alevi Manifesto. Written in March 1989 and published in 1990, it can be considered an important milestone in the re-politicization of Alevis in Turkey. The manifesto was written by several Alevi as well as by social-democratic Sunni intellectuals. The opening statement of the Manifesto declares:

“This manifesto aims to make the problems of Alevism, a branch of Muslimhood living in Turkey, known and to inform the public with the demands of Alevis. Alevis see other beliefs as true, beautiful, and sacred. However, they expect a similar positive sense and approach towards their own faith and culture [...] The recognition of the Alevi taught will be a source of peace and prosperity for Turkey”\textsuperscript{56}.

In 1989, the elimination of the laws, which ensured State’s monopoly upon TV channels and radio stations, meant that the Alevi communities have the power to represent themselves through the media channels.

A final element was the confrontation between the Alevi community in Turkey and in Europe. The latter, as a result of a better organization and more political and clever interaction with the European governments, has

\textsuperscript{54} Murat Borovali-Cemil Boyraz (2014). Turkish secularism and Islam: A difficult dialogue with the Alevis, Philosophy and Social Criticism, 40 (4-5): 481.


been crucial in raising awareness among the Alevi community in Turkey, apart from being a good example to follow. In addition, the “European Alevi” started to put pressure on the Turkish Government through the European Union Accession reports on Turkey, which often underlined the unequal situation of Turkish Alevis.

The Alevi revival was marked by the absence of a political-ideological leadership and was a natural reaction in response to the traumatic events of the 1990s. However, it was also a process, which built the path for a persistent stance of recognition. In fact, during the 1990s, many Alevi institutions emerged and many Cemevi began to operate not only as religious but also as socio-cultural centres of the Alevi community.

1.2.6 The 2000s

In 2002, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power. The AKP came from the tradition of political Islam, which was interrupted by the military intervention in 1997, presenting a mixture of economic liberalism, conservative social values and tolerance on religion while undertaking social and economic reform. As Borovali and Boyraz affirmed:

“during the period of the first AKP ruling (2002-2007), the Alevi problem was essentially ignored, and despite criticism in the EU Accession Reports on Turkey, there was very limited progress on only certain issues”.

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59 Ibidem, p.481.
In fact, in the first years the AKP presented a plan to introduce some rights for the Alevi community, such as “integrating Alevism into religious courses in school textbooks, yet officially announced in 2007”. The interest from the Government about the “Alevi issue” emerged with more emphasis in 2008 with what is commonly known as “Alevi Opening”. The process started in January 2008 when Reha Çamuroğlu, an Alevi Member of Parliament from AKP, organized an “Alevi iftars”, that is, a dinner where the Alevi associations were invited. After this event, seven workshops took place from June 2009 to January 2010. These workshops were hosted by the AKP Government and brought together 304 participants between members of the Alevi community and other people such as academics, labour union representatives, the media, political parties, experts on religion and members of the Diyanet. Even if many Alevis criticized these workshops as an attempt of assimilation from the Government, it is important to underline that with this process, for the first time, the State had given a public space for Alevi demands and brought together representatives of all Alevi organizations.

The final report was published in 2011; it included a number of recommendations. It suggested reconsidering the law related to religious agreements and dervish lodges as well as the law of unification of education in order to move the legal obstacles to the recognition of the Alevis.

It also suggested granting the right for the Alevi community to:

- use the services provided by the Diyanet;

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• add in the Constitution the “optional religious education” in order to eliminate the current compulsory religious classes and to verifying if, in the religious classes, the content is at equal distance to all belief categories;
• transform the Madımak Hotel into a commemorative monument for the Sivas massacre in 1993;
• give Cemevi legal status and their utility requirements, electricity and water, which should be provided by the State;
• recognize Ashura day (in the holy month of Muharram) as an official holiday for the Alevi;
• relaunch Hacıbektaş town, in the Central Anatolia region of Turkey and open a university with the same name as the town.
• remove insulting names given to some Alevi villages.66

The government did not actually put in practice all these recommendations, and this caused discouragement among the Alevi community. The “Alevi Opening” period was very controversial and unclear, especially regarding the real aims of the Government.
I will discuss this point later on for the debate upon the identity issue of the Alevi community, their demands and targets were taken into consideration by the Government in a rather ambiguous way. It actually describe the complex relationship, which is continuing, between the State and the Alevis.

1.3. Conclusions
It could be affirmed that the Alevi history is a history of persecution and marginalization: persecutions and long periods of marginalization and discrimination under the Ottoman Empire; the contradictory position of the

Kemalists; the tensions between left and right wings during the 1970s; the rise of Islamic fundamentalism and the ambiguous position of the incumbent Government. All the above mentioned illustrates how the Alevi community has never been recognized and basically considered as a second class group by the State.

Not having being recognized as a different group from Sunnis, the various attempts at assimilation, social and political changes and the slow development of the secularization process effected the Alevi community under different aspects.

On the one hand, living within the margins and in a segregated environment brought the Alevi community to develop different ways of living and perceiving Alevism, creating a huge problem in defining their identity in an unequivocal way. On the other hand, the exclusion from the political and social life, followed by the Kemalist “ideal citizen” and then by the Islamic Sunni-based political power did not give Alevi community an opportunity to build a solid opposition, even though, as their history illustrates, there were periods of mobilization and visibility. Nevertheless, tensions and fights between different sects within the same religion has marked the history of Islam, especially between the two major sects, Sunni and Shia.  

Political and social events in the history of Turkey effected the Alevi identity. The consequences are that nowadays Alevism represents a heterogeneous reality in Turkish society, as I will explain in the next chapter.

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2. IDENTITY ISSUES

2.1. Alevi: a heterogeneous group
2.1.1 General description

The Alevi community represents 15-20 percent of the population and it is the second largest religious community in Turkey, the first being Sunni Hanafi. It is a cultural religious group which embraces different ethnicity such as Turkish, Kurdish and Arabs. They mainly live in central-eastern Anatolia, in small pockets in the rural areas along the southern and the western coasts and in the larger cities.


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69 “The last survey of the about whole population of Turkey was held by KONDA (Research and Consultancy Company) in 2007. Judging from people’s responses in the survey to the questions about which religion and sect they affiliated with, one can see that the 99% of the population is Muslim and by sect, 82% are Sunnite Hanafi and the 5.73% are Alevi-Shiites”. Nurullah Gündüz (2015). Alevi Visibility in Turkey: Processes of Disenchantment Since 2000s, LAP Lambert Academic Publishing, p. 2.
To be more specific, Turkish Alevis mainly live in central Anatolia, but also in the Aegean and Mediterranean coastal regions and in the western part of Turkey. Kurdish Alevis live in the north-western part of the Kurdish settlement area with condensed groups in the southeast and in the west. The Arab Alevis live in southern Anatolia, especially in the cities of Hatay and Adana.71

Their troubled history, with a long time of isolation, the oral tradition of religious practices, the mixture of different beliefs, the endogamy practices, the separation from the Sunni majority and the social changes in the last fifteen years brought the Alevi community to be a heterogeneous group. This diversity between them does not allow to have a clear vision of their identity and tradition. Furthermore, there is a difference between those who live in the cities and those who live in the villages where, the social structure, the lifestyles and practices change according to the different environments.72

2.1.2. The different interpretations of Alevism

It is complicated and limiting trying to define Alevism in a single way. As Elise Massicard explains:

“Some define Aleviness as a religious phenomenon – as the true Islam, or a branch of Islam tinged with Shi’a elements and Turkishness, as a religion in its own right, or even as the essence of secularism. Others see it as a primarily political phenomenon – which can range from a philosophy of struggle and resistance against injustice, to a tolerant way of living or even as the epitome of democracy. Yet others emphasise its shamanistic (Turkish) or Zoroastrian

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(Kurdish) elements in order to define Aleviness in accordance to ethnic aspects”.73

This sentence clearly explains the difficulty to define Alevism in a unique way, in fact between the Alevi communities there is a significant fragmentation in their way of living and perceiving Alevism. During an interview, an informant74 affirmed “yol bir süre binbir” which means “way is one, paths are a thousand and one”. This saying shows the

“… great theological variety and wide religious range displayed by Turkish Alevism in both the theological and mystical realms”.75

Faruk Bilici76 affirmed that is it possible to trace four main groups of Alevism:

1. The materialist branch: Alevism as a “Liberation Theology”. In this branch Alevism is perceived as a popular movement supporting the oppressed. Alevism is not a religion, so it is not identified with Islam, but it is a way of life that came across through the influences of different religions. The basic ideology of this branch leads to the priority given to human beings.
   God is man himself or a part of man. The Kaba77 is not in Mecca but inside every man while the Koran is insignificant because it was

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74 Interview number 13 - 10/3/2016. Replied provided to my question “Do you think that there is a fragmentation in the Alevi community? If so, what are the consequences?”.
77 A building at the center of Islam’s most sacred mosque, Al-Masjid al-Haram, in Mecca. It is the most sacred Muslim site in the world and it is considered the “House of Allah”.

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written many centuries ago it cannot be used as a guide to worship in contemporary society. This branch emerged after the 1980 military coup. In the context of the “Alevi revival”, Alevi intellectuals and writers started to intensify their activities and material production about the Alevi identity. Also, this branch describes itself as a movement following the footsteps of Pir Sultan Abdal, a popular Alevi poet. Among intellectuals who joined the left-wing parties, there is a substantial support of this branch. Furthermore, this group embrace the Kurdish question, because many Alevis are also Kurdish.

2. Heterodox/Mystical Islamic Alevism. This branch is more connected with the figure of Haci Bektas Veli, a Turkish dervish, patron-saint. The religion devotion and the love for God come from an individual point of view. The idea is that God created the world because He wants to be known, so from this prospective love is the way and the cause of all existence. The value of a person is to be judged, not by his/her pity but by the love he/she shows to God.

3. Heterodox attitudes. This group emerged because of its demands of Alevi representation in the Diyanet and financial support from the State for cemevis. This branch affirmed that Alevism is an integral part of Islam, or even more that it is the true and genuine Islam. They have different elements which distinguish them from Sunnis such as the interpretation of the Koran and the hadith. It has its own fikih theory according to which every aspect of life should be based on judgments made from a combination between faith and life and

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78 For this branch the Koran in its present form it is not a miracle, this means that Koran was modified and reinterpreted during the centuries.
79 Hadith: sayings of the Prophet and Imams, who are considered to be divinely inspired.
80 Fikih is the Muslim canonical jurisprudence.
actions must be based on free will. Human problems are connected with the real world, indeed judgments arise from life itself, so they are against Shari’a and affirm that the orthodox fikih is a dogmatic system of divine origin which does not take into account changes in the “society dimension”.

4. Shi’a inclined Alevi. This branch declares to be followers of the Twelve Imams\textsuperscript{81}, they also follow the Koran and perform the namaz\textsuperscript{82}. They assert that Alevism and Bektashism are incompatible and that the second movement was established during the Ottoman period to prevent the spread of the doctrine of the Twelve Imams. They also believe that Dede or Sheikh Institution must be abolished, that Cem ceremonies are pure entertainment and have nothing to do with Islam and that cemevi should be avoided. According to them, all Alevi congregations should build an Ahl al-Bayt\textsuperscript{83} mosque completely independent from the Diyanet. They refused to have any kind of connection with the Diyanet because it goes against their own interest, so they claim that Diyanet follows the interests and made concessions only to Sunnis. They regard Turkish Islam synthesis as pure fascism.

These four groups do not have defined boundaries, this enhances difficulties to understanding the different ways of living Alevism.

\textsuperscript{81} Twelve Imams or Twelver Shiism is the most common form of Shiism today present mainly in Iran, Iraq, Lebanon and Bahrain. They accept the line of the Twelve Infallible Imams as Ali’s descendants and divinely appointed from birth. They also believe that the last Iman “disappeared” (Hidden Iman) and he is expected to return one day to lead the community, see Febe Armanios (2004). Islam: Sunnis and Shiites, CRS report for Congress, RS21745.

\textsuperscript{82} It is a canonical Muslim prayer. The worship is observed five times every day at prescribed times.

\textsuperscript{83} Ahl al-Bayt members of Mohammed family.
2. 2. Alevism and practices

The Alevi world is a mosaic, but in this diversity, it is possible to find common rituals and ceremonies.

2.2.1. Alevism and Islam

The five pillars of Islam (confession of faith, ritual prayer, fasting, offerings and pilgrimage) are a compulsory religious duty for every Muslim and represent the foundation of Muslim life. However, Alevis have a different way of following these rules, as shown below:

1. The confession of faith in Islam: any person who wants to be a Muslim has to say the creed: “There is no God but Allah and Mohammad is the Apostle of God.” Alevis will add the following statement to the creed: “Ali is the vice-regent of God and Ali is the trustee of Mohammad.” The trinity God-Mohammed-Ali is the base for the confession faith of the Alevi community. The faith to Ali distinguishes Alevis and Shiites from Sunnis. It is common to find Ali and Haci Bektash Veli pictures in Alevi’s houses.84

2. Prayer: it is not a religious duty85; almost none of Alevis perform the daily prayer namaz five times in a day. Most of them do not even attend the mosques for the Friday prayer. The Alevi prayer is spontaneous, very personal and private; it is a moment of spiritual connection with God. They use the word niyaz to describe their way of praying which is different from namaz. Despite this moment of personal prayer, Alevis meet for worship in a service called “Assembly Meeting’ (Cem or Ayin-i Cem).86

3. Fasting: Alevis mostly do not observe 30 days of fasting during the holy month of Ramadan (Ramazan in Turkish). Some of them observe 12 days fasting during the first 12 days of the month of Muharram. Some observe the “Hızır Fast” (13-15 February).87

4. Offerings: Alevis do not have a special rule for charity. They donate food, especially sacrificial animals, to worshipers and guests. They also donate money to help the poor, to provide scholarships for students and to contribute to Alevi centers and organizations.88

5. Pilgrimage: they do not go to Mecca but they visit the tomb of Haci Bektash at Kırşehir or the shrine of their saints, for example the sanctuary of Shaykh Khubayr in north east of Sivas.89

The differences between Alevism and Islam, above all by reference to the Turkey case between Alevism and Sunnism, are easily traceable in how these five pillars are followed and experienced between the two groups.

2.2.2. The Alevi ceremonies and rituals

Assembly Meetings

The essential Alevi corporate worship service, which brings together all the Alevi community, is called a “congregational” or “assembly meeting”, in Turkish cem or ayini cem. The cem has been traditionally held on Thursday evenings and called cuma aksamıları, literally, “Friday Nights.” However, nowadays, especially in the cities, they are held during the day on Sundays, which is the official weekly holiday in Turkey.

87 Ibidem, p. 8.
The *cem* take place in a building, a room or even in private homes called “Assembly House”, in Turkish *cemevi*. An assembly meeting is led by a *Dede*. The *Dede* is considered as the community spiritual and moral authority and has direct blood line connection to the family of Mohammed through one of the twelve Imams.

The congregation, which consists of both men and women and even children, sits in a circle on the floor facing each other. There is no physical separation between men and women neither a specific dress code is required. The service consists mainly of the *Dede* saying prayers, giving short religious messages, singing solo ballads, and leading the congregation in singing. Another key element is a circling ritual dance, called *semah*, characterized by turning and swirling, performed by selected men and women in a group that can vary in size. The *Dede* plays a seven stringed lute, called *saz* or *bağlama*, while singing and while the dance is being performed. The dance symbolizes the detachment of one-self in order to unite with God.\(^9\)

During certain parts of the service, the congregation assumes a worshiping position, kneeling and sitting on their ankles, occasionally bowing their heads to the floor in unison. The service is entirely held in Turkish, while the *namaz* is held in Arabic, including all the prayers and singing. The subjects of the ballads, prayers and speeches include encouraging the congregation to love God and other people, and to apply the teachings of Muhammed, Ali, the Twelve Imams, and Haci Bektash. To conclude the worship service, the members of the community shares a meal together, which usually includes a ram that has been ceremonially sacrificed. Because most Alevi forms and traditions have been passed down the generations orally rather than in writing, rituals and practices can change from region to region.

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region. A traditional Alevi *cem*, called *görgü cem*, is only open to those who have made a commitment to each other.\textsuperscript{91}

**The night of forgiveness**

Once a year Alevis confess their sins in public. The *Dede* acts as a mediator reconciling differences between the members of the community. If the offense is too serious the *Dede* could impose a penalty on the guilty party, for example a pilgrimage to the holy shrines at al-Najaf and Karbala in Iraq.\textsuperscript{92} According to John Shindeldecker a similar ritual is held before the *Cem* in which:

“[the *Dede*] acts as a judge in a kind of people's court (*halk mahkemesi*), reconciling differences between congregational members. Those who do not confess their personal sins or who are not reconciled with others are disciplined by the *Dede*, and are considered put out of fellowship (*düşkünlik*). They are not entitled to take part in the service or share in the community meal until they repent”.\textsuperscript{93}

**Spiritual Brotherhood**

A fundamental practice in Alevi faith and society is the spiritual Brotherhood, called *müsahiplik*, which is a covenant relationship between two married couples. In a ceremony, in the presence of a *Dede*, the two couples make a life-long commitment to care for the spiritual, emotional, and physical needs of each other and their children. The ties between couples who have made this commitment is at least as strong as it is for blood relatives.\textsuperscript{94}

\textsuperscript{91} Ibidem, pp. 9-10.
\textsuperscript{94} Ibidem, p. 10.
Fast of Muḥarram
This major Alevi fast is generally held the first twelve days of the month of Muḥarram. Many Alevis who fast from sunrise to sundown during these twelve days will also abstain from drinking water both day and night. They will intake liquids other than water during the evening, for example Ayran or tea, they also avoid to eat meat. During this fast, Alevis will also avoid any sort of comfort or enjoyment. The main purpose of this fast is to mourn the murder of Ali's son, Hüseyin, during the battle of Kerbela. At the conclusion of the fast of Muḥarram, a special food dish called Asure Günü is prepared from a variety of grains, fruits and nuts. Many events are associated with this celebration, including the salvation of Hüseyin’s son, Zeynel Abidin, from the massacre at Kerbela, thus allowing the bloodline of the family of the prophet to continue.

Fast of Ḥizir
Many Alevis fast for three days, the Ḥizir Orucu, in mid-February to honour Hizir, a supernatural being who they believe has been sent by God throughout history to save those who are in distress.

Newroz
The day of 21 March, called Nevruz, is known by most Alevis as a day of newness, reconciliation, and the start of spring. Many Alevis also believe that the 21st of March is the birthday of Ali. Some also believe that it is the wedding anniversary of Ali and Fatima, the day Joseph was pulled out of the

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95 Ayran is a cold yogurt beverage mixed with salt.
98 Ibidem, p. 10.
well, and the day God created the earth. *Nevruz* is celebrated with *cem* and special programs.99

2.2.3. Nowadays rituals and practices
Some of these practices are not used anymore, or are not performed in the traditional way, especially in the cities where the typical social structure based on the community life and the Dede guide is not possible. Urban life is not completely compatible with the “original” religious life style attended in the remote villages during the centuries. For example as Nil Mutluer (2014) stated:

“Urbanization has also harmed two other important mechanisms of the Alevi belief: musahiplik and düşkünlük. Musahiplik is the brotherhood among men and their families, who declare their intention to practice Alevism as a religious belief. Since these men are responsible for each other’s deeds, musahiplik is an important mechanism of social supervision. Düşkünlük, for its part, is a mechanism of crime and punishment; as such, it is an important instrument for the realization of justice in society. If a crime is committed, the accused is questioned during the cem ritual. As these two mechanisms are instruments of social supervision, the social and economic structure of society and the establishment of justice are also affected. Since müsahips now rarely live in the same city – even if they do, it is almost impossible for them to be informed of all the deeds of others – müsahiplik can hardly be considered a functioning mechanism under urban conditions. Likewise, due to the loosening of interpersonal ties under urban conditions, düşkünlük is almost extinct as an effective societal mechanism as well”.100

2.3. Alevis’ identity in Turkish society

2.3.1. The minority discourse

The concept of minority in modern Turkey is correlated to the struggle of Turkish nationalist claim, emerged during and after the Independence War (or Greco-Turkish War) of 1919-1922. In fact in 1920, in the Sevres Peace treaty, minorities’ rights were extended to Muslim and non-Muslim groups based on religious, racial and linguistic criteria. The Independence War was perceived as a struggle of Turkish/Muslim people against foreign and inimical non-Muslim forces. Therefore, in the Treaty of Lausanne (1923) which replaced the Sevres Treaty, the Turkish/Muslim nationalism was promoted. Consequentially, the minority discourse was based on the distinction between Muslim (here meaning the majority) and non-Muslim (here meaning the minority). Therefore, in the Treaty of Lausanne only protection for non-Muslim religious minorities was granted; meanwhile protection of ethnic, religious or language-based minorities in general was not recognized.

The Republic of Turkey, therefore, recognized minority status for Greek Orthodox, Armenian and Jews. In preparation of the 1924 Constitution, the question of where to place the non-Muslims was discussed. On the one hand, the Constitution affirmed that all inhabitants of Turkey are Turkish citizen; on the other hand, the concept of nationhood was based on religion (Muslim), ethnicity (Turk) and language (Turkish). In the first years of the Republic, many laws and policies revoked some citizenship rights to non-Muslim minorities. These actions were justified by the fact that non-Muslim groups

102 Ibidem, p.16-17.
were proclaimed “otherness” from Turkish nationhood. Thus these groups were considered as citizen outside the body of the Turkish nation.103 Alevi groups are considered by the state as Muslims and the Diyanet fold Alevism in the Sunni Hanafi interpretation of Islam, thus not as a distinctive and minority group. These two interpretations do not represent the several different positions and perceptions of Alevism by the Alevi. This is why the Alevi community mobilized itself in order to advance its own claims and the recognition of rights. Even if the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) defines Alevi as a collective non-Sunni Muslim subject of minority rights, the Alevi community, as my informants affirmed, do not feel as belonging to a minority group and do not want to be classified as such. Basically, the minority discourse in Turkey follows a path in which minority groups are made up of citizens but they are out of the body of Turkish nation. This goes against the idea of the Alevi to be “fundamental elements” of the Turkish Republic.104

2.3.2. Alevi and European court of human rights

Turkey accession to the European Union played an important role in launching the dialogue between the State and the Alevi community. It could be affirmed that the Alevi opening was a consequence of a process in which the Turkish state tried to improve and get closer to European Union requests.105 The pressure from Europe was clear because of two cases presented at the ECtHR by Alevi citizens.

In the first case, Hasan Zengin first asked Istanbul National Education Directorate to exempt his daughter from compulsory religious culture and

ethics knowledge, but the Directorate denied the request. Then he took the case to the ECtHR in 2004, which declared that the classes of religious culture and ethics knowledge did not respect objectivity and pluralism criteria for students and that the content was based on the Sunni-Hanafi denomination of Islam. The ECtHR claim that the Turkish educational system did not respect the beliefs of the parents that these classes were in violation of Article 9 of the European Convention of Human Rights related to freedom of conscience and of Article 2 of Protocol Number 1 which provide the right to education. Another violation was also found by reference to the Turkish Constitution at Article Number 24, which declares that no one should be forced to reveal his/her religious beliefs or orientation. The ECtHR imposed a fine on the Turkish State and asked to reconsider the status of the religious culture and ethics knowledge lessons.

The AKP Government replied that religious culture and ethics knowledge lessons were balanced and preferred, in 2008, to add five pages about the Alevi faith in the school books rather than removing the obligation to attend the class.

The second case involved another Alevi citizen, Sinan İşik, who asked the National Court to change from “Sunni” to “Alevi” the stated religion on his Identity Card. The Court rejected the request based on the argument of the Diyanet that Alevism is not a religion but a sect. After losing an appeal in the Supreme Court of Appeals, Mister İşik took his case to ECtHR in 2005. In 2010 the ECtHR declared that the lack of an “Alevi” option and in general the existence of a religion category on the Identity Card are a violation of fundamental human rights and asked the government to remove it.106

In the begging of 2016:

“The Turkish Parliament has decided to remove the religious affiliation component on Turkish identification cards. While Turkish citizens will no longer be required to display their religion on their I.D. cards, it may still be registered on the electronic chips on cards”.  

2.3.3. Alevis’ claims

Alevis’ objections and claims are based on the idea that the framework of citizenship is Sunni-centred, meaning that Alevis are excluded from state policies. The framework violates Article 10 of the Constitution which prohibits any kind of discrimination by the state toward its citizens and therefore it does not respect equal-citizenship treatment as guaranteed by the law.

The demands of the Alevi community are:

1. Recognition of the cemevi as places of worship. The cemevi is not only for Cem ceremonies but also for socio-cultural activities, thus it is a fundamental meeting place for the Alevi community. Once recognized by the state, the cemevi would be eligible to receive free water and electricity, a right that, for now, is granted only to mosques.

2. Revision or abolishment of the Diyanet. This state institution violates Article 136 of the Constitution, which requires Diyanet to exercise its duties in accordance to secularism and to be distanced from any political views or ideas. Actually, the presence of a religious body in the Constitution is problematic by itself, especially because since the multi-party era the Diyanet made large concessions toward Sunnis, expanding the role of Sunnism in both society and state. It is evident

107 http://armenianweekly.com/2016/02/18/turkey-id-cards/.
that the *Diyanet* is not neutral for it combines religion with politics, which goes against the laicism principle of the state.

3. Connected to the *Diyanet* issues, some Alevis claim that the Alevi religious leader, the Dede, should get a state salary, like Imams.

4. Revision or abolishment of the compulsory religious instructions at school. As already said by reference to the Hasan Zening case, compulsory religious teachings do not respect freedom of religious beliefs. As the ECtHR affirmed, the content is based on the Sunni-Hanefi denomination of Islam, which exclude all others beliefs or different interpretation of Islam.

5. Removal of all religious affiliation from the Identity Card. A process that is indeed taking place.


7. Converting Madimak Hotel into a museum.

8. An apology from the state for the wrong-doings committed in the past, such as the Dersim Massacre.

Many of these demands were took into consideration in the final report on the 2011 “Alevi opening”, in which some recommendations were given, as described in the first chapter. However, the government did not put in practice the recommendation.

2.3.4. The fragmentation in the Alevi demands

The fragmentation among the Alevi community - due to regional, ethnic, linguistic differences and so on - in the way they themselves perceive Alevism, does not allow them to create a solid and unique front. Even if Alevis are fully aware of the current situation, as some informants underlined, when their requests are brought forward to gain recognition as
Alevi by the state, the above-mentioned differences emerge. Therefore, this limits their possibility to enable valid and satisfactory requests for the entire Alevi community.

For example, during the “Alevi Opening”, the separation among Alevi NGOs on the way how these issues could be resolved became manifest when different approaches were put forward. It created additional difficulties on the management of the demands.

It is possible to separate the Alevi NGOs in two groups:

1. The Alevi Association *Cem* Foundation, with its affiliated groups, represent the religious-traditionalist part; it claims that Alevism is a pure form of Islam in terms of both theological roots and rituals.\(^{109}\) Indeed, the Association supports a more religious definition of Alevism and sees it as a sort of “Turkish interpretation” of Islam, while Sunnism is the Arab interpretation of Islam.\(^{110}\) This group, rather than asking for a fundamental change in state-religion relation, aims at a reconciliation between the state and the Alevis. They support the integration of Alevism in the *Diyanet* and ask for an allocation of public found for *cemevi* and Dede/Baba salary.

Their demands are more acceptable from a Government standpoint for these groups seek to solve the Alevi issues by integrating Alevi concerns into existing institutional structures.

2. The Alevi Bektasi Federation, and its affiliated organizations, represent the modernist-secularist part of Alevism. They consider Alevism as a “societal opposition and resistance” and view Alevism


as “a Socialist Liberation Theology”. They do not identify Alevism with Islam, therefore they see it as a syncretistic belief system, a philosophy, a lifestyle, a culture. Alevis have suffered of maltreatment by Sunnis first during the Ottoman Empire and then during the Republic. For them the role of religion should be radically changed and they ask the state to “adopt a form of passive secularism” which would separate religion from the state while emancipating “religious life”. The Diyanet represents Islam and it is an instrument to “Sunnify” the Alevi community, moreover it excludes all non-Muslim beliefs. For these reasons, they oppose representing Alevism within the Diyanet for this could harm the plurality of Alevism. Not even the Dede institution should be connected with Diyanet, thus they are against any sort of state-salary to precisely underline Dede’s independence from the State and not to go against the civil religiosity of Alevism. They are against compulsory religious classes and religion affiliation on Identity Cards, which are contrary to the principle of secularism and freedom of conscience.

The two groups criticize each other. The traditional-religious group accuse the modernist-secularized group to fallow into the trap of internalizing Sunni perspectives in Alevism if they continue to see Alevism as a culture. On the contrary, the modernist-secularized group claim that the traditional-religious group is supporting Republic’s aim, which is to keep under control all religious groups through official institutionalization.

This tension does not allow the creation of a unified and strong group capable to firmly impose their own demands. This is a noticeable problem in, and for, the Alevi community. Nevertheless, despite these differences in the conception of Alevism, both groups, and affiliated, formed a common front to call into question the status of the official orthodoxy, Sunni-Hanafi interpretation of Islam that had always excluded Alevis’ beliefs from the public sphere. Moreover, they refuse Sunni-Islamic interpretations, principles and practices. 113

2.3.5. The relation with AKP (after the “openings”)
Historical accounts prove that during the Ottoman Empire the Alevi community were left at the margins, labelled as heretics and not recognized as a different group from the Sunnis. With the establishment of the Republic, many Alevis supported the Kemalist principles of laicism and modernization with the hope to have a better place in the society, to be eventually recognized and considered from the State. However, the latter was not completely accomplished; history shows that the will to build a homogeneous and stable state was stronger than building a laic and modern state. The secularization process 114 in Turkey did not completely succeed; this can be traceable in the Turkish-Islam synthesis, in the rise of Islamic fundamentalism and in the Diyanet institution.
Assimilation attempts that started in the Ottoman Empire, continued in the Turkish Republic, influencing and challenging Alevis in maintaining and affirming their identity. In any case, the latest assimilation process by the

state was clear during the “Alevi openings”. The strong influence of a Sunni perspective and the absence of practical decision from the state did not allow to reach real solutions to the Alevi issues. As Akedmir (2015) asserted the “openings” increased the visibility of the Alevi community, but not in a positive way. AKP, instead of dealing with the demands of equal citizenship, focused on the internal differences in the interpretation of the Alevi faith. AKP’s recognition was based on defining Alevism in a unique way. In doing so:

“AKP’s discussion of Alevism always references back to Islam and constructs Alevis in relation to Islam, but not as a unique belief system with its own rituals and tradition […] Alevis are depicted as ‘Muslims that do not go to mosque; they are not defined through the pillars of their belief system but rather through they lack or difference from mainstream Islam. This perspective renders Alevis as the ‘Other’”.

On the one hand, the opening wanted from AKP tried to assimilate the Alevi identity trying to define it in relation with Islam, which in Turkey basically means within a Sunni Hanafi interpretation of Islam. Paradoxically, however, on the other hand, this attempt resulted in an over-emphasis of Alevis’ differences which brought them to be labelled as “Others”. Moreover, using the two main positions taken by the Alevi community, as explained above, the AKP created “good/cooperating” and “bad/critical” Alevis, emphasising that the last group refused to negotiate.

In such a scenario, Alevi’s claims and requests were not taken seriously and apart from not reaching a clear and defined solution, attacks against Alevis

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increased. By the year 2012, nine attacks targeted Alevi homes and *cemevis*. On the other hand, between 2012 and 2013, the Alevi community started to use the streets in Istanbul, Ankara, London and Strasbourg as a platform to express their claims for rights and recognition.\textsuperscript{117}

2.4. Conclusions

The Alevi community represents a group that challenges the idea of a State base on a Turkish-Islam synthesis with a remarkable emphasis on the Sunni-Hanefi group. This created a situation where, as David Shankland (2003) stated, the Sunni majority is incorporated and normalized by the state, while the Alevis are inclined to resist centralized rule because their myths, rituals and authority structure undermine the legitimacy of the Government.\textsuperscript{118}

The Alevi issue does not find a clear and simple solution within the discourse of Turkish nationalism where religion, Sunnism, and ethnicity, being Turk have been connected to notions of nationhood and citizenship. The management of groups that do not embrace these characteristics is very difficult.

As Markus Dressler states:

\begin{quote}
“Historically, the nationalist fixation on ethnic and religious homogeneity worked toward the Turkification of the non-Turkish Muslim (e.g., the Kurds), and the Sunnification of the non-Sunni Muslim population (e.g., the Alevis), respectively”.\textsuperscript{119}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{117} Ibidem, pp. 71-72.
The consequence is that in contemporary Turkey, the State does not recognize different ethnic-religious groups, as the Alevi case shows.\textsuperscript{120} It will be through fieldwork and participant observation I have conducted in Turkey that in the following chapter I will precisely illustrate further aspects of Alevism. It will be above all by reference to stories and narratives and to the way they live their religious affiliation into an often hostile Sunni-dominated environment.

3. TALKING WITH ALEVIS

3.1. The research

3.1.1. Introduction

Alevis’ position in the Turkish society is very controversial. In my research I tried to understand what Alevism means nowadays and how Alevi people live their own identity. For the investigation, I used a semi-structured questionnaire, composed of fifteen questions. The questionnaire was very broad. The questions involved topics ranging from identity to rights and claims issues. Other topics involved Alevis’ conditions in history and their relationship with the incumbent Government. Furthermore, I tried to investigate their feelings of belonging to their community, how they perceived their community to be and how it is considered by others. Indeed, it was a very broad questionnaire meant to collect personal experiences about Alevism. After all, Alevism is a noted point of discussion in Turkey by scholars and writers. However, the academic world does not describe Alevism in a unique way although some aspects, such as their struggle of recognition, their political and social position in the wider Turkish society and the relationship with the state, recur frequently.

3.1.2. Fieldwork

My research took place mainly in Aydın, a city in the western part of Turkey in the Aegean region. Aydın has a population of 207,554\(^{121}\) and is the seat of Aydın province. Aydın province is divided in 6 districts.\(^{122}\) The total population of Aydın province is 1,041,979 people. In the province, the main

\(^{121}\) [www.citypopulation.de/php/turkey-aydin.php](http://www.citypopulation.de/php/turkey-aydin.php).

activities are agriculture (mostly figs, olives, strawberries and cotton) and tourism especially along the seaside. Recently the industrial sector is developing too.¹²³

It is important to underline that I lived in the western part of Turkey, which is considered the modern, westernized, secularized part of the country. This is because from what I learned, there is a substantial distinction between the West and the East of Turkey. In the latter area, people are more conservative and practice their religious faith, which they retain to be very important. Alevi in the West live mainly in cities and are well integrated in urban life, while in the East they live in Alevi villages or in cities where the relations with other groups are limited, as for instance in Çorum.¹²⁴ The city of Çorum, as an informant explained, is significant because it is literally divided in two parts: half Alevi and half Sunni, while contacts between the two groups are sporadic.

I also had the possibility to visit an Alevi village, Yeniköy, near Aydın, where I met and spoke with a number of Alevi.

I asked an informant, who is the president of an Alevi association, some information about the Alevi population in the Aydın province. He explained that in the Aydın province there are two big groups of Alevi, the first one is represented by the local Alevi and the second one by Alevi who have migrated from other parts of Turkey. The local Alevi population is around 50 thousand and 110 thousand are migrated Alevi. He also told me, that for example in Didim¹²⁵ two out of three people are Alevi, and in Kuşadası¹²⁶

¹²⁴ Çorum is a city located in the central Black Sea Region, in north-central Turkey.
¹²⁵ Didim is a city on the Aegean cost of western Turkey, in Aydın province.
¹²⁶ Kuşadası is a resort city on the Aegean cost of western Turkey, in Aydın province.
one out of three. Moreover, he told me that two out of three Alevi are democrat or social democrat, so they vote for the CHP.

Due to lack of time and language obstacles, I could conduct only six long interviews, guided by the questionnaire, and submitted the questionnaire to nine people. In total, I got in contact with fifteen people, ranging from 23 to 66 years of age, eight females and seven males. It was a very heterogenic sample, with different heritages and backgrounds.

From an ethnic perspective I met a Kurd Alevi, two Arab Alevi and the remaining twelve were Turk Alevi. The Turk Alevi group was composed of three Tahataci, one Bekatashi and three half Alevi and half Sunni. Not all of my informants were originally from Aydın or Yeniköy, but from other cities such as Çorum, Gaziantep and the Province of Hatay. This is the reason why these towns will be mentioned in the following pages. Some were students, teachers or professors, others farmers, employees and retirees.

3.2. Questions and answers

In this section, I will report the questions included in my questionnaire and some of the answers I received from the informants. Then, I will contrast the answers to identify similarities or dissimilarities.

- **Caveats** I also had the opportunity to ask additional questions (not originally included into the questionnaire), I have reported them in capital letters. Square brackets are used when I give my explanation for the translation from Turkish to English.

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127 Gaziantep is a city in the western part of Turkey, in the south-eastern Anatolia Region.

128 Hatay Province is a province in southern Turkey, on the Mediterranean coast.
3.2.1. The words of the Alevis

- **What does Alevism represent for you?**

With a few exceptions, for most of my informants Alevism represents a culture and a lifestyle. Therefore, it is not a religion but a culture and/or a lifestyle based on different elements: “Alevism is not a religion, it is culture for me”\(^{129}\); “Alevism represent for me real humanity, leniency, wellbeing and sense of fairness”\(^{130}\); “Alevism represents honesty, mercy and humanity”\(^{131}\); “Humanity is in the centre of everything in Alevism. Be master of your hands, tongue and lions – meaning: do not take what is not yours, do not lie, do not make love outside of marriage – is the main sentence that represents Alevism belief. Alevism is a lifestyle”\(^{132}\). Only two informants referred to religion: “Alevism is a comment of Islam, a sect […] not near Shia Islam but near Sunni Islam”\(^{133}\); and, “In our belief Islam starts with us [meaning that Alevism is the true Islam] and we are the follower of Ali”\(^{134}\).

- **What does it mean to be an Alevi for you?**

The key word is, again, humanity, be humane and be tolerant and respectful: “In the first it is respect and love in this lifestyle and the basic is be a human”\(^{135}\); “Being reliable is the most important thing for me”\(^{136}\); “In Alevism the basic is humanity, for this reason I adopt this part of Alevism”\(^{137}\); “Alevism is to be happy with nature, with humans and be respectful of living organisms”\(^{138}\).

\(^{129}\) Number 8 (conventional number used to indicate a personal, chronological database order in my interviews and questionnaires), M (male), 1/3/2016 (date of conducting the interview or submitting the questionnaires).

\(^{130}\) Number 15, F (female), 25/3/2016.

\(^{131}\) Number 5, F, 21/2/2016.

\(^{132}\) Number 12, M, 9/3/2016.

\(^{133}\) Number 3, M, 12/2/2016.

\(^{134}\) Number 11, F, 9/3/2016.

\(^{135}\) Number 13, M, 10/3/2016.

\(^{136}\) Number 1, F, 4/2/2016.

\(^{137}\) Number 8, M, 1/3/2016.

\(^{138}\) Number 12, M, 9/3/2016.
An interesting aspect emerged from this question, that is, freedom. Some of my informants affirmed that being Alevi means to have more freedom compared to Sunni: “If I were a Sunni girl I will have social pressures. Alevi girls are freer, especially in Çorum and Ankara. So I am happy to be an Alevi in Turkey because I am free”\(^{139}\); “Alevism for me means more tolerance and it is a more freedom sect rather than the Sunni Islam”.\(^{140}\)

- **How would you describe yourself, first Alevi or Turk (or Kurd)/or both at the same time?**

Some answered “Turk” mainly because they consider above all their citizenship, so the idea of belonging to a nation: “Only Turk because the most important thing is to belong to a nation and not to a religion”.\(^{141}\) Just in a few cases priority was given to the Alevi identity: “Alevi and then Turk. WHY ALEVI FIRST? Because my lifestyle and my culture in Ankara and Çorum was influenced by Alevism. I grew up in an Alevi environment”.\(^{142}\) In two cases, the ethnic group and the Alevi identity came together: “I am a Kurd Alevi”; “Only Arab-Alevi. WHY ONLY ARAB ALEVI? Arab Alevi means like Nusayr; so a different type of Alevis but at the same time different type of Arabs”.\(^{143}\) Other answers showed the difficulty to put their own identity in a specific “box”: “I grew up in a Kurdish tradition but originally I am an Arab Alevi Turkish girl”; “No, I would not describe myself as Alevi and Turk at the same time. It depends on the question which is asked! If it is about my nationality, I’d say only Turk. But if it is my sect which is asked, I’d say that I am an Alevi”.\(^{144}\) Some informants do not use any of the terms presented by

\(^{139}\) Number 7, F, 23/2/2016.

\(^{140}\) Number 2, F, 9/2/2016.

\(^{141}\) Number 2, F, 9/2/2016.

\(^{142}\) Number 7, F, 23/2/2016.

\(^{143}\) Number 12, M, 9/3/2016.

\(^{144}\) Number 8, M, 1/3/2016.


\(^{146}\) Number 15, F, 25/3/2016.
the question: “I do not use any of them, I do not need these kind of words to introduce myself” \textsuperscript{147}; “I am not Turk, not Kurd, not Alevi, I am a human being”. \textsuperscript{148}

- Do you think that there is a fragmentation in the Alevi community? If so, what are the consequences?

For most of my informants, there is a fragmentation in the Alevi community, but the reasons differ. Some affirmed that the fragmentation is a consequence of the ethnic/cultural differences in the Alevi community: “Yes, there is a fragmentation but it’s only cultural. For example, Turk, Arab and Kurd Alevis are very different […] For example, for Arab Alevis namaz is everywhere, there are no mosques or cemevis. Turk Alevis go to cemevi or cami [mosque], but Arab Alevis do not go. If you do not want to go somewhere to pray, you can do it at home [meaning that for my informant, Arab Alevis do not need a specific place of worship, meanwhile Turk Alevis need to go to cemevi or mosque to say their prayers]. The important thing is that there are not significant arguments about Alevism, but just cultural differences. ARE THE DIFFERENCES ONLY IN THE PRACTICES OR ALSO IN THE WAY OF LIVING ALEVISM? Arab Alevis are more radical and conservative than Turkish Alevis. Arab Alevis do not give their daughters away for marriage to Sunnis; Turkish Alevis are more relaxed. For example, in central Anatolia, Turkish Alevis played the saz, Arab Alevis do not play the saz, they only read the Koran. Turkish Alevis play, sing and read poems.” \textsuperscript{149}

Others claim that the fragmentation depends on how you live Alevism, that is to say that the fragmentation is visible because there are radical/conservative Alevis and modern/secular Alevis.

\textsuperscript{147} Number 9, F, 3/3/2016.
\textsuperscript{148} Number 4, M, 21/2/2016.
\textsuperscript{149} Number 8, M, 1/3/2016.
This phenomenon changes if you live in cities or villages or if you live in the west or in the east of Turkey. Someone pointed out that the fragmentation is caused from the lack of information about Alevism: “Alevism is not handed down from one generation to another; people do not tell their children what Alevism is. For example, my lifestyle is Alevi but I do no go to the Cem, I do not do Semah. Because Alevis are more relaxed and free they are more sensitive to changes, Sunni are more closed, and are more traditional. The new Alevi generation do not follow religious roots because they are modern, secular, relaxed, cool, so they do not go to cemevi, they do not do Semah. The first rule is friendship, to be together and to help others. Now there is a new style of Alevism”.  

Another interesting element is the transformation, therefore modernization and urbanization; even if it effects the whole society, it has a greater impact on Alevism. Only two informants do not think that there is a fragmentation in the Alevi community: “I do not think that there is fragmentation in the Alevi community. These days, because of the political speeches, as I can observe, Alevi are unifying. I come from an Alevi village near Gaziantep and, as I observed, these kind of political speeches bring the people to act together. Alevi people are aware about these speeches and they behave according to this, so they unify and they come together. WHAT KIND OF POLITICAL SPEECHES? Because of Sunni power, they say that Alevism is a minority group, and they describe Alevis like others thus creating differences, they do the same thing with other groups, for example with the Laz. The Government is creating differences between Sunni and Alevi, and Alevis are unifying to oppose these speeches”; “I do not think that Alevi

150 Number 7, F, 23/2/2016.
society is breaking down. Wherever we are, we recognize our self and we connected to each other”.152

- **Have there been any cases where you felt you had to hide your identity? How often? In which circumstances?**

The answers to these questions contain personal experiences. Some of the informants had to hide their own identity; others never felt the need to do so. In general, from what I understood, it depends on timing: “Many years ago yes, there was sometimes that I had to hide my identity when people talked about religion or sect! But at the present time I do not hide it, I can say it very proudly”.153 For those who grew up in an Alevi environment where the majority is Alevi there is no need to hide their identity: “I never hide my identity because in Hatay the majority, about 60 percent, are Arab-Alevi”.154

If you were born and grew up in a Sunni environment, especially in the east of Turkey, in some situations Alevis hide their own identity: “In Ankara and Aydin no, but when I was in high school I lived in Çorum, which is a conservative city. I was attending a basketball course, we were 25 girls in the team, 24 of them said “I am Sunni” so I thought to not say that I was Alevi, because we were young. SO WHAT DID YOU SAY? That I was Sunni. The environment there is bad because people say that Alevis do not believe in God, and that Alevis are not Muslims. So in that case I hide my identity. Çorum is a traditional city”155; “Yes. Until I was 14 I lived in an Alevi village, I went to an Alevi school in the village. In this time, I was aware about other identities like Sunnis and Kurds and I had relations with them. However, in 2006 I moved to the city centre (Gaziantep), and there Sunni power was high, in a political and cultural way. In the city, I noticed that there was

152 Number 6, M, 21/2/2016.
154 Number 8, M, 1/3/2016.
155 Number 7, F, 23/2/2016.
fragmentation, so I started to ask myself who am I? In Gaziantep I was attending high school, in the neighbourhood I was the only Alevi and because I used to go to a school where only Alevi children go all the neighbourhood knew that I was Alevi. The situation is that people attack cemevis or follow people that go to cemevis, so I was scared, I had fear about this. I was asking myself am I doing wrong things?” [meaning that when she moved to Gaziantep, she came in contact with a new reality. The big separation among different groups, e.g., Alevi, Sunni, Kurds, led her to question her religious identity and she started to feel different from the others because she was an Alevi. She highlighted that in Aydın this does not happen anymore, she no longer questions her religious identity and she does not feel different from the others; she put aside her Alevi religious identity].

- **On the base of your identity, have you ever faced discrimination?**

Even here, personal experiences differ from informant to informant. Almost everyone faced discrimination or had the feeling to be discriminated: “Yes of course. There are some people that have entrenched ideas and whenever they hear about Alevi they start to discriminate”\(^{157}\); “I met discrimination especially from close village neighbours”\(^{158}\); “Between the ages of 12-16 I was doing taekwondo [in Çorum] and I was supposed to enter in the national team. The coach asked a lot of questions, I did not enter in the national team immediately, I think because of my identity”\(^{159}\); “Yes, I faced discrimination. During high school I was scared about my identity, my religious identity. **SO YOU USED TO HIDE YOUR IDENTITY?** Yes, and I faced discrimination. In the first year of high school my enrolment documents were processed last out of all the documents by the school administration. Mainly in public

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\(^{156}\) Number 9, F, 3/3/2016.
\(^{157}\) Number 4, M, 21/2/2016.
\(^{158}\) Number 5, F, 21/2/2016.
\(^{159}\) Number 7, F, 23/2/2016.
spaces I do not face discrimination because people do not know who I am, they do not know my identity, but if someone knows about my village, which is an Alevi village, the discrimination starts, as it happened for the school documents”\textsuperscript{160}; “Yes. I faced discrimination at work because my colleagues were not speaking well about Alevis”.\textsuperscript{161}

There were three answers, I personally found very interesting, which, unfortunately, I could not investigate. Somehow, they revealed the feeling of a general approach of Turkish society regarding Alevism: “No, but some of my Alevi friends even if they deserved a promotion at work it was not given. In AKP period, because they like conservative Sunni people, they discriminate, and make discriminatory speeches” [meaning that during AKP period people are hired according to the religious beliefs]\textsuperscript{162}; “For years, because of our identity, we were potential criminals, scapegoats for everything and it still continues”\textsuperscript{163}; “Discrimination is an indispensable law of this country. The problem is not in us, the problem is in their discriminatory mentality”\textsuperscript{164}

- **Have you ever felt being or belonging to a minority group? If so, could you please articulate on it?**

The majority of informants do not feel they belong to a minority group. Some argued that Alevis helped to build the Republic, so they are an important part of the nation: “I never felt like this because the establishment of the Republic was Alevi”\textsuperscript{165}; “No, Alevi, Sunni and Kurds are building a stone of Turkey”.\textsuperscript{166}

An informant said that it depends from city to city: “Only in Çorum. WHY?

\textsuperscript{160} Number 9, F, 3/3/2016.
\textsuperscript{161} Number 10, F, 7/3/2016.
\textsuperscript{162} Number 2, F, 9/2/2016.
\textsuperscript{163} Number 12, M, 9/3/2016.
\textsuperscript{164} Number 11, F, 9/3/2016.
\textsuperscript{165} Number 2, F, 9/2/2016.
\textsuperscript{166} Number 13, M, 10/3/2016.
In Çorum Sunni are very radical, they do not like secular people, Alevi people, they do not like differences; they want that everyone is like them. During Ramazan in Aydın restaurants are open, in Çorum everything is closed, only in the Alevi area you can find something open, and radical Sunni came there and say to close”.  

Others argued that they do not feel as part of a minority group but they are aware of the fact that Alevis do not come together: “I do not feel that I am a minority but Alevis do not get together. For example, how nomads camel and Tahtacis mules do not get together and graze in the same field this happens to Alevi, they do not get together”. An answer surprised me because it did not describe the Alevi community as a minority group but as a group that has power and rise in certain circumstances: “We are just marginalized, this is very difficult but on the other hand it gives Alevis power. In every injustice events we are the first community to be insubordinate”.  

- Do you feel that some of your rights are not recognized? If so, which ones? Please explain.

All informants affirmed that some rights are not recognized. Some of them affirm that the lack of recognition of cemevi and the compulsory religious classes violate Alevi rights: “I do not think any of our rights will be guaranteed until cemevi receive legal status, until compulsory religion classes and Diyanet are not abolished; only then we will have our rights”. Others sustain that the Government, which is Sunni based, does not employ Alevi for specific jobs nor do they supply goods and services such as roads or infrastructures in Alevi areas, although Alevis pay taxes: “There are problems for governmental jobs, because they think Sunni [meaning that

167 Number 7, F, 23/2/2016.  
168 Number 6, M, 21/2/2016.  
Sunni people are privileged since they enjoy Government positions. In the Alevi villages streets are not good, Alevis go to Municipality and ask for good roads but the Municipality replies ‘later, later’ or it never fixes it”; “The taxes of Alevis and non-believers are not returned as a service.”

- **In your opinion, if there were any, what would be the major differences between Alevi and Sunni lifestyles?**

Just one informant said that there is are no differences between Alevi and Sunni lifestyle. Some answers concerned more with religious ritual and practices, for example: “Niyaz and namaz”; or the different way of living their own religion and practices: “The Sunni worship is just for show, but Alevi do not like this, they are more realistic”; “The Sunni just worship because they want to go to heaven [meaning that for Sunni the most important thing is to pray]”; “For Sunnis, the most important thing is worship, for the Alevis the most important things are morals.” Other answers concerned the differences in freedom and tolerance between the two groups: “Sunni discriminate strongly, Alevi do not discriminate so much because they are more relaxed. Woman’s position is different, in an Alevi family mother and father eat and drink on the same table, in Sunni family no. In Çorum, Sunni woman are not allowed to drink alcohol or to drink with men. In Alevis family the husband ask the wife “what do you think about this subject?”, but Sunni do not ask. The position of Sunni women is ‘low’. The family pressure, in Sunni families is high, in Alevi family it is low; this is the reason why boys and girls can choose their own way”;

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171 Number 8, M, 1/3/2016.
172 Number 14, M, 21/3/2016.
173 Number 5, F, 21/2/2016.
174 Number 13, M, 10/3/2016.
175 Number 14, M, 21/3/2016.
176 Number 3, M, 12/2/2016.
177 Number 7, F, 23/2/2016.
radical-conservative Sunni you do not like peace. Radical Sunnis think that if someone does not believe in God or believe in another God it is right to kill him/her. Radical Sunnis kill, radical Alevi do not think that it is necessary to kill”\(^\text{178}\); “In our belief, friendship is very important. You never tell a lie to a friend and you never talk behind his back but we see that this happens a lot among Sunni”\(^\text{179}\).

- **As an Alevi, do you think that there is a threat of assimilation?**

According to the majority of my informants, there is a threat of assimilation. Some argued that the threat of assimilation derives from state policies: “What happened in the south-east is now happening to us. There was assimilation and there is now too. I am scared of that, our young people will be assimilated, and they will forget their own identity. The assimilation process starts from the Government”\(^\text{180}\); “The Government forces us to learn Sunni ideas, they are taking from us our freedom of thought”.\(^\text{181}\) Others affirm that the assimilation is more related to social and global changes: “I think that urbanization and modernization effect Alevism more than state policies. And this is the same for Sunni, urbanization and modernization affect them too”\(^\text{182}\); “Alevism follows the world changes, for this reason Alevism wants to adapt to this process. Everything is changing. The assimilation threat came not from state policies but from world changes. The world dynamics effects everything. The general changing is effecting Alevism, for example my parents need to hide their own identity, I do not need to do this” [the informant actually answered previously that she needed to hide her identity.

\(^{178}\) Number 8, M, 1/3/2016.

\(^{179}\) Number 4, M, 21/2/2016.

\(^{180}\) Number 6, M, 21/2/2016.

\(^{181}\) Number 10, F, 7/3/2016.

\(^{182}\) Number 8, M, 1/3/2016.
in Gaziantep, but now, in Aydın, she does not feel the need to hide her identity]. 183

- How do you think that non-Alevi people see and perceive the Alevi community in general?

Essentially almost everyone affirmed that Sunni people have prejudices and do not like Alevism: “Eight Sunni out of ten can see us as bad, only two see us as good” 184; “Negative. From the highest educated ones to the non-educated, Sunni do not see us in a good way. Sunni exclude Alevi, this is the discrimination”. 185 However, it is important to underline that some informants made a distinction inside the Sunni group: “There are two groups of Sunnis, one radical and the other secular. For secular Sunni no problem, no differences. For radical Sunni they think that Alevis do not believe in God, Alevism is not a religion, they think that Alevis are not essential for the country” 186; “Conservative Sunni think that Alevis do not believe in God or that Alevism is not a religion. The modern-secular Sunni think that there is no problem between Alevis and Sunni and that Alevis are a modern and ‘humanity’ community so no problem between sects”. 187 Others did not directly refer to Sunnis: “They see us outside Islam and ungodly and their prejudices are far more. What is strange is that whoever reads Koran they say this kind of things, outside of Islam and ungodly, but if they really know Koran and Islam they would not say those things” [meaning that a Muslim who knows Koran would not exclude Alevism from Islam]. 188 Referring to Muslims, which from what I understood means Sunni: “Those Muslims that live their religion and not mix politics with religion are respecting Alevis.

183 Number 9, F, 3/3/2016.
184 Number 4, M, 21/2/2016.
186 Number 7, F, 23/2/2016.
187 Number 8, M, 1/3/2016.
Nonbelievers are respecting Alevis. Some of them, even if they are not Alevis, want to live following Alevi lifestyle. Political Muslims sees Alevis like a threat and in every situation they attack them”.\(^{189}\) Just in a few cases the answers were not referring to a specific group such as Sunnis or Muslims: “It depends from people to people. But I think that most of the non-Alevi people are more resigned to accept to see us, that we are also humans!”\(^{190}\)

- **How did the establishment of the Republic change the life of Alevi people?** So, how was it before the Republic, in the first years of the Republic with Atatürk and after Atatürk?

My aim was to understand the changes in Alevis’ conditions through history. Generally everyone agrees that during the Ottoman Empire, especially during Selim Sultan period (1512-1520), the situation for Alevi people was not good: “Selim took a fatwā from Seyhulislam to kill Alevi people”\(^{191}\) With the foundation of the Republic the situation got better: “With the Republic, big democratization, equality and citizenship helped Alevis. So, of course, Alevis preferred the Republic then the Ottoman Empire”\(^{192}\) However, someone said: “At the start of the Republic the situation was a bit better, but not enough”\(^{193}\)

- **What do you think about the process of “opening” that the government started in 2008?**\(^{194}\)

The opinion about the “opening” is negative and their vision of the incumbent Government emerged: “It is a trick, a lie, it is only to get votes”\(^{195}\); “I never believed in this. The Government, Erdogan, wants to give a

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\(^{189}\) Number 14, M, 21/3/2016.
\(^{190}\) Number 15, F, 25/3/2016.
\(^{191}\) Number 2, F, 9/2/2016.
\(^{192}\) Number 3, M, 12/2/2016.
\(^{193}\) Number 9, F, 3/3/2016.
\(^{194}\) See second chapter.
\(^{195}\) Number 5, F, 21/2/2016.
democratic image of the party, but he is not democratic, AKP is not democratic”196; “It is a funny question. For eight years AKP did nothing for Alevis. AKP is funny, they just talk and do nothing. When I heard about the Alevi opening I did not believe in this process”.197

- **What do you think about: 1) recognition of Cem Houses as places of worship; 2) Dede status; 3) Director of Religious Affairs (Diyanet); 4) compulsory religious courses at school; 5) Identity Cards.**

This list represents the general demands of the Alevi community. Everyone agrees that cemevis must be recognized as a worship place: “Cem Houses, of course, have to get real rights as house of worship like all mosques”.198 For the status of the Dede, not everyone agrees that they should be payed from the State, like Imams, but from the people: “Foundation or community should pay Dede's salary. I want separation between religious places and State because the biggest State budget goes to Diyanet, this budget is more than Army and Education budget”.199 The Diyanet institution is largely criticized because it is not equal and makes Government or Sunni interests: “Diyanet is not equal, it's a discriminatory institution”200; “Diyanet is a Government organization and serves the Government”201; “Now Diyanet is only Sunni” [meaning that the Diyanet is controlled by Sunni and invest only in Sunni interests].202 Someone affirms that Alevisim and other religions should be included in Diyanet; others affirm that this institution should be abolished.

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196 Number 7, F, 23/2/2016.
199 Number 2, F, 9/2/2016.
200 Number 8, M, 1/3/2016.
201 Number 10, F, 7/3/2016.
For the religious compulsory classes almost everyone agrees that they should be optional or should, at least, include Alevism or all religions. The Identity Card (ID) has been changed, but at the time of my research it was obligatory to declare the religious affiliation. For different reasons everyone is against the writing of their own religious identification: “Remove the religious ‘place’ from ID because in your life when you grow up you can change sect or religion”203; “It is absurd. ID card is only a procedure; the important thing is only the number. It is not important, everyone writes Islam but maybe they do not believe in God […] I have an Armenian friend, on his ID card he wrote Islam but he is Christian Orthodox, this is wrong”204; “In the ID card there should not be any religious section. The ID card represents citizenship. The religious section creates discrimination”205; “A friend of mine from Istanbul is an atheist so he went in an office to cancel the religious affiliation. But now for him it is a bit hard to find a job. So it is necessary to delete the religion affiliation on ID, it is dangerous to have it because people can write Islam just to find a job”206.

- **What are your expectation for the future?**

Different expectations, emerged of course, so I will just report some of them: “All religions and religious sects should be equal on the base of citizenship and status, and discrimination should not exist. State should not discriminate”207; “In the future, I think that Alevis will be assimilated by the Government. But I hope that Alevis in the future will be more secular then now. I hope that in the future Sunni and Alevi will live together, not like in Çorum. I do not want polarization, I want secularization. However, perhaps

203 Number 2, F, 9/2/2016.
204 Number 3, M, 12/2/2016.
206 Number 8, M, 1/3/2016.
207 Number 2, F, 9/2/2016.
Alevis will forget Alevism and Sunnis will not forget Sunnism; they will maybe became more traditional, more hard, like in some Islamic countries”208; “I hope we will learn how to live humanly, this is our society bleeding wounds, because now we are not humane. This is my only wish, to live humanly”209; “Turkish Government do not make denominationalism”210; “I am hopeless. The world is moving toward a religious war, in the end we [Alevi] will be the one who will suffer”211; “My expectation about Alevi rights, I want to believe we will have more rights, as well as Dede. If there is democracy in Turkey, we must have our own rights everywhere. But as long AKP government stays, I do not think Alevi people will have rights”.212

3.3. Personal Observations

There is a preliminary observation I want to make. During and after the meetings with my informants, I started to realize that probably my will to understand what Alevism means nowadays and how Alevi people live their own identity would not be an easy task. I want to underline that when I arrived in Turkey my knowledge about the Alevi community was very limited, perhaps pretending to understand such a complex and lasting issue was far beyond my capabilities.

However, I tried to put together all the information that I collected in order to grasp at least a general understanding about the Alevi issue nowadays, with major considerations upon the reality, with which I came in contact in Aydın and Yeniköy.

208 Number 7, F, 23/2/2016.
210 Number 13, M, 10/3/2016.
211 Number 14, M, 21/3/2016.
As I mentioned my informants live Alevism as a culture, a lifestyle. Being Alevi means to be humane, tolerant, open minded, secularized, respectful, available and caring. Of course, not for all Alevi people Alevism is a culture, a lifestyle, as I explained in the second chapter. There are indeed many ways to live Alevism, and some branches include the religious aspects of Alevism. Nowadays, the major tension, I would say, is generated by the State, or better State policies. In saying this, I do not want to affirm that the tension is only between Alevis and the State, but this relationship has a knock-on effect on the social dynamics between Alevis and Sunnis too.

It appears, from my observations and field data, that the incumbent Government favour the Sunni group, especially through the Diyanet and the compulsory religious classes, which are Sunni based. My informants also added that the Government gave discriminatory speeches regarding the Alevi Community. Indeed, the complex and tense relationship with the Sunnis, especially nowadays, is a consequence of state policies on one hand, and of political speeches on the other, not forgetting, of course, about all historical events that lead these groups to be in contrast with one another.

According to my informants, nowadays where the AKP is stronger and has more power, discrimination is widely spread from work environment to social daily life. Moreover, there is not an equal attention by the state. My informants affirmed that even if they behave as model citizens, and pay taxes, many services are not guaranteed by the State or the local City Councils.

Another reason of tension and differences between the two groups is lifestyle. Some of my informants stated that Alevis are more open, relaxed, modern and secularized compared to Sunnis as well as “free” because their ethics and morals are a priority. On the contrary, Sunni are seen as more
closed, conservative and traditional because they consider religious rules as a priority.
I would like to underline that some informants told me that this difference is not always evident. A moderate secularized Sunni has a similar life style as an Alevi, emphasising that the differences in their life style emerge with the traditional and conservative Sunnis. These differences clash in real life, in which the Alevis seem to be more flexible, e.g., in family dynamics, including woman’s role and children’s education. Concerning the above mentioned it was interesting to compare the differences between living in a Sunni conservative environment (such as the one in cities of Çorum and Gaziantep) and living in Aydın. Aydın is considered to be more progressive and open-minded. Therefore, according to my informants there are no differences between Sunni and Alevi lifestyle in Aydın. From what I understood from them, it is different to live in Aydın because they do not feel the pressure coming from a Sunni environment.
Indeed, from what I learned from my informants, major problems emerge when living in a Sunni based State where differences between Alevi and Sunni come to the surface. Both elements create a situation in which Alevi people do not feel they are fully recognized, respected and protected by the State. The lack of trust in the incumbent Government emerged from many of my informants’ accounts, such as the idea of never being fully recognized under the AKP ruling.
Data I collected with interviews and questionnaire somehow corresponded to what I studied about Alevism on texts. Personal experiences narrated by my informants added much more, but what really made the difference in my research were the difficulties that I faced to get in contact with Alevi. The challenges I met while doing fieldwork played such a role in my research that they have become a source of data by their own right. Indeed, if those
challenges are contextualized in a city like Aydın, where I thought it would have been relatively easy to speak with Alevi people (as described in the Introduction) the many obstacles I came across invariably impacted all my research.
CONCLUSIONS

In order to conduct my research I spent six months in the western part of Turkey, precisely in Aydın, a city in the Aegean region. During the first four months, I conducted a theoretical research while Erasmus student at the local Adnan Menderes University. Therefore, I researched textbooks and articles about the Alevi issue. I spent the last two months interviewing and submitting questionnaires to Alevi people. This part of the work took place in Aydın, and Yeniköy, the latter is an Alevi village in Aydın province. For lack of time and language obstacles, I conducted six interviews, guided by a semi-structured questionnaire which was submitted to nine people. In total, I got in contact with fifteen people, ranging from 23 to 66 years of age, eight females and seven males.

The aim of my research was to try to understand what Alevism means nowadays and how Alevi people live their identity in contemporary Turkey. Data I collected somehow correspond to what I studied about Alevism. Indeed, in the first place, I can assert that the Alevi issue is still unsolved. Not having being recognized as a different group from Sunnis, the various attempts of assimilation, social and political changes effected the Alevi community under different aspects.

First, living for a long time within the margins of a closed environment, brought the Alevi community to develop different ways of living and perceiving Alevism. It created a substantial problem in defining their identity in an unequivocal way. Secondly, the exclusion from political and social life, by the Kemalists first and by the Islamic Sunni-based political power later, did not give the Alevi community an opportunity to build a solid
opposition. Consequently, their demands have not been channelled in a univocal way and the consequential responses by the State deemed unsatisfactory. Alevis’ objections and claims, nowadays, are based on the idea that the framework of citizenship is Sunni-centred, meaning that they are excluded from state policies. In any case, the latest assimilation process by the state became manifest during the so-called “Alevi openings”, where the attempt to define the Alevi community failed because of the lack of a real dialogue with the State. The pressure of the Sunni point of view and the absence of practical decisions from the State did not allow to reach real solutions for the Alevi issues.

I argue that today Alevism can mean different things. As I explained in the second chapter, there are different ways to live Alevism. Based on my ethnographic material, interviewers and questionnaires, I envisaged Alevism as both a culture and a lifestyle. Therefore, I could understand from my informants that “being Alevi” means to be humane, tolerant, open minded, secularized, respectful, available and caring. Based on my informants’ accounts, I also submit that there are major problems living in a Sunni based state, including those inherent to the differences between Alevi and Sunni groups. Both components create a situation in which Alevi people do not feel they are fully recognized, respected and protected by the state. The lack of trust in the incumbent Government clearly emerged in my interviews, above all the idea of never being fully recognize under the AKP ruling.

Concerning the way how the Alevi identity is lived, I believe I can contribute to the debate based paradoxically on the challenges and difficulties I came across to penetrate the field and meet Alevi people. In Aydın I thought it would have been easy to conduct my research, nevertheless I encountered
several obstacles. Slowly it became clear to me that the Alevi identity was not lived in the same way for all Alevi, neither was it lived in a transparent or carefree way. Not all the Alevis are willing to disclose their own identity. Historical memory is very difficult to erase, nor possible to ignore in current Turkey. I perceive the fact of not wanting to be exposed to people unknown to them, but only to those they can really rely on. Generally they do not want to disclose their identity, probably based on an “ancient” fear that today is somehow slowly reappearing. This fear could again include persecution and marginalization.

The Turkish state seems to be constantly less and less tolerant concerning those who are not in line with its politics and ideologies. In the past, the Alevis were considered as a threat by the State. For example, during the 70’s the Alevis were considered one of the three major threats to Turkish state’s national security, together with Kurdish nationalism and Communism. Considering that some Alevi are Kurds and that, as my informants underlined, the Alevi, generally, do not support or trust the incumbent Government, why not assume that the state will see them as a threat, as it was in the past? Therefore, dissimulation of their identity or disclosing their identity only to those they trust seem to be the best way to defend themselves beyond a metaphoric sense, as if in a protective “bubble” like Aydın … although a “bubble”, by its very nature, can always change or, worse, explode.
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APPENDIX A

SURVEY QUESTIONS

1. What does Alevism represent for you?
2. What does it mean to be an Alevi for you?
3. How would you describe yourself, first Alevi or Turk (or Kurd)/ or both at the same time?
4. Do you think that there is a fragmentation in the Alevi community? If so, what are the consequences?
5. Have there been any cases where you felt you had to hide your identity? How often? In which circumstances?
6. On the base of your identity, have you ever faced discrimination?
7. Have you ever felt being or belonging to a minority group? If yes, please describe it a bit more.
8. Do you feel that some of your rights are not recognized? If yes, which ones? Please explain.
9. In your opinion, if there were any, what would be the major differences between Alevi and Sunni lifestyles?
10. As an Alevi, do you think that there is a threat of assimilation?
11. How do you think that non-Alevi people see and perceive the Alevi community in general?
12. How did the establishment of the republic change the life of Alevi people? So how was it before the Republic, in the first years of the Republic with Atatürk and after Atatürk?
13. What do you think about the process of “opening” that the government started in 2008?

14. What you think about:
   - the recognition of Cem houses as place of worship;
   - the Dede’s status;
   - the Director of religious affairs (Diyanet);
   - the compulsory religious courses at school;
   - the ID card;

15. What are your expectation from the future?

We have concluded the interview, is there anything that you want to ask or add?
APPENDIX B

TURKISH TRANSLATION OF SURVEY QUESTIONS

1. Alevilik sizin için neyi temsil ediyor?
2. Alevi olmak sizin için ne anlama geliyor?
3. Kendinizi nasıl tanımlıyorsunuz, ilk olarak Türk/Kürt ya da Alevi mi yoksa ikisi aynı anda mı?
4. Alevi toplumunda bir parçalanma olduğunu düşünüyor musunuz? Eğer varsa, bunun sonuçları nelerdir?
5. Kimliğinizi saklamak zorunda hissettiğiniz oldu mu? Hangi sıklıkta? Hangi şartlar altında?
6. Kimliğiniz temelinde hiç ayrımcılıkla karşılaştınız mı?
7. Hiç bir azınlık grubuna ait gibi hissettiniz mı? Eğer hissettiyseniz bu durumu biraz tanımlayabilir misiniz?
9. Size göre Alevi ve Sünni yaşam biçimleri arasında farklılıklar var mıdır? Eğer varsa ne gibi farklıklar mevcuttur?
10. Bir Alevi olarak, bir asimilasyon tehdidi olduğunu düşünüyor musunuz?
11. Sizce Alevi olmayanlar genellikle Alevileri nasıl görüyor ve algılıyor?
12. Cumhuriyetin kurulması Alevilerin yaşamını nasıl değiştirdi? Cumhuriyetten önce nasıldı, Cumhuriyetin ilk bir kaç yılında nasıldı, Atatürk’ten sonra nasıl oldu?
13. Hükümetin 2008’den bu yana düzenlediği Alevi ahlâmi hakkındaki düşüncelerinizi nelerdir?

14. - Bir ibadet mekanı olarak Cem evlerinin tanınması
   - Dedelerin statüsü
   - Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı
   - İkşöretimdeki zorunlu din dersleri
   - Kimlik kartları

Hakkında ne düşünuyorsunuz?

15. Gelecek hakkındaki beklentilerinizi nelerdir? (Kısaça neler düşünüyorsunuz?)

Görüşmamız burada sona eriyor sizin sormak ya da eklemek istediğiniz bir şeyler var mı?
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