



Religious Pluralism and Social Boundaries: A Qualitative Study of Sunni-Alevi Interaction in Eastern Anatolia's Bayburt Province

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Abstract

Alevism is often perceived as a homogeneous belief system; however, research reveals significant internal diversity shaped by its dispersion across various regions and cities. Understanding the cultural and religious expressions of Alevis in different local contexts is essential to grasp the authenticity and lived experience of the faith. Despite the predominance of the Sunni-Hanafi population in Bayburt, a small Alevi community exists within the province. To date, this community has received little to no scholarly attention. This study aims to explore the cultural and social connections of Alevis residing in eight villages within Bayburt Province to the broader Alevi faith. It also examines their interactions with the surrounding Sunni population and investigates the challenges associated with the intergenerational transmission of their religious and cultural heritage. Employing a qualitative research design, data were collected through in-depth interviews conducted during field visits to these villages. The interviews provided insights into how Alevi individuals perceive their identity, construct their social world, and assign meaning to their religious practices. Findings indicate that Alevism in Bayburt is increasingly limited to symbolic practices performed at visitation centers, is largely disconnected from its ritual and ethical dimensions, and is facing serious challenges in terms of cultural continuity. The study concludes that Alevism in this region is at risk of cultural erosion and potential extinction if these patterns persist.

Keywords

History of Islamic Sects, Bayburt, Alevism, Faith, Worship, Culture

Abstrak

Alevisme kerap dipersepsikan sebagai sistem kepercayaan yang homogen; namun, penelitian menunjukkan adanya keragaman internal yang signifikan, yang terbentuk dari penyebarannya ke berbagai daerah dan kota. Memahami ekspresi budaya dan keagamaan Alevi dalam konteks lokal yang berbeda sangat penting untuk menangkap keaslian dan pengalaman hidup dari kepercayaan ini. Meskipun mayoritas penduduk Provinsi Bayburt bermazhab Sunni-Hanafi, terdapat komunitas kecil Alevi di wilayah



tersebut. Hingga kini, komunitas ini belum banyak mendapat perhatian ilmiah. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi hubungan budaya dan sosial masyarakat Alevi yang tinggal di delapan desa di Provinsi Bayburt dengan kepercayaan Alevi secara lebih luas. Penelitian ini juga menelaah interaksi mereka dengan masyarakat Sunni di sekitarnya serta menginvestigasi tantangan dalam pewarisan warisan budaya dan keagamaan mereka kepada generasi selanjutnya. Dengan menggunakan desain penelitian kualitatif, data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam yang dilakukan selama kunjungan lapangan ke desa-desa tersebut. Wawancara ini memberikan wawasan tentang bagaimana individu Alevi memahami identitas mereka, membentuk dunia sosial mereka, dan memberikan makna pada praktik keagamaan mereka. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa Alevisme di Bayburt semakin terbatas pada praktik simbolik yang dilakukan di tempat-tempat seperti pusat ziarah, terlepas dari dimensi ritual dan etikanya, serta menghadapi tantangan serius dalam hal keberlanjutan budaya. Studi ini menyimpulkan bahwa Alevisme di wilayah ini berada dalam risiko peluruhan budaya dan kemungkinan kepunahan jika pola ini terus berlanjut.

Katakunci:

Sejarah Sekte Islam, Bayburt, Alevisme, Iman, Ibadah, Budaya

Introduction

Alevism is a term used to describe the belief system of the Anatolian people, characterized by deep love and respect for the Prophet Muhammad and his lineage (Ahl al-Bayt), particularly for Ali and his family (Subaşı, 2003, p. 175). Since the late 19th century, the concept of Alevism has been used to refer to various groups living in Anatolia, such as the Kızılbaş, Bektashi, Tahtacı, Çepni, and Sıraç (Onat, 2009, pp. 23–24). Today, communities identified as Alevis in Anatolia reside in provinces such as Tunceli, Amasya, Tokat, Çorum, Sivas, Erzincan, Malatya, and Kahramanmaraş, as well as in major cities like Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir due to recent waves of migration (Üzüm, 2002, p. 25/550).

Alevism has become one of the most discussed topics in Turkey in recent years, attracting attention from historical, socio-cultural, religious, and political perspectives. Contemporary Alevism faces numerous challenges due to the lack of a unified definition based on its own written and oral sources. These challenges can be summarized as follows: Alevism has undergone significant historical ruptures and transformations, resulting in the emergence of multiple forms rather than a singular tradition. There have been efforts to reconstruct Alevism as a religion independent of Islam and to frame it as a minority belief in Turkey. One major point of contention is the issue of representation of Alevism within the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet), particularly concerning the ambiguous legal and religious status of cemevis. Another debated issue is how Alevism should be incorporated into the national “Religious Culture and Ethics” curriculum (Kutlu, 2008, p. 11).

In light of these perspectives, the development of Alevism in Turkey is generally divided into three historical phases: the first phase includes the formation and development period, referred to as the Kızılbaş era; the second phase is marked by a heterodox character that differentiated Alevis from Sunnis through distinct rituals and lived experiences; and the third phase addresses the position of historical Alevism within the process of modernization (Subaşı, 2003, pp. 176–177).

Recognizing that Anatolian Alevism, which emerged from within Islamic culture and civilization, has historically been influenced by other religions is beneficial for a fuller understanding of the tradition. However, efforts to reduce Alevism to or equate it with other religions and cultures can lead to the construction of imaginary versions of Alevism that are detached from historical reality and societal context (Kutlu, 2012, p. 578). In order to prevent the rise of such imagined Alevi identities and belief systems, regional studies are of critical importance. Research focusing on communities that actively live and sustain Alevi culture and belief is essential to grasping both the authenticity and the practical expressions of the tradition.

The majority of Bayburt's population adheres to the Sunni-Hanafi tradition, with only a small portion comprising Alevis. In this predominantly Sunni society, topics such as the impact of Alevism on religious life, its influence on interpersonal relationships, and its integration into the city's sociocultural structure have not been addressed in either qualitative or quantitative studies. Existing research related to Bayburt has mostly focused on the tradition of *âşıklık* (minstrelsy), the economic livelihoods of Alevis in the region, and ethnographic analysis. A review of studies specifically on Bayburt reveals a lack of scholarly work on the religious position of Alevism, its relationship with the Sunni community, and the analysis of Alevi oral and written sources. The purpose of our TÜBİTAK 2209/A-supported research project is to fill precisely this gap.

This study seeks to identify Alevi villages in Bayburt Province, to uncover the cultural and social connections of the residents with Alevi belief, to evaluate their modes of interaction with the Sunni population, and to explore how this faith is transmitted to future generations. In Turkey, especially within the social sciences, a significant body of research has been conducted on Alevism. Many scholars within the academic field of the history of Islamic sects have studied Alevism, and their contributions have facilitated the examination of various forms of Alevism across Turkey. As a result, a substantial academic corpus has emerged concerning regional Alevi communities.

Regional studies have been conducted on Alevism in Adıyaman (Tanrıverdi, 2018; Dalyan, 2022), Tokat (Turan & Üçer, 2005), Sivas (Bozkuş, 1999), Erzincan (Babür, 2018), Çorum (Banaz, 2020), and Tunceli (Tuğrul, 2006). These studies have helped reveal the diversity of Alevi thought and the differing perspectives toward religious texts, rituals, the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet), and politics. Although Alevism is often perceived as a homogenous belief system, these investigations have revealed the multiplicity of views among Alevi communities across different regions. However, no academic research to date has specifically addressed Alevism in Bayburt.

Method

In our study, we employed a qualitative research method. Among qualitative data collection techniques such as observation, interviews, and document analysis, the interview method was chosen for this research. This approach allowed for the realistic and comprehensive identification of the status of Alevis in Bayburt. In accordance with the qualitative methodology, the study sought to interpret the experiences of Alevis—how they perceive themselves, how they construct their social worlds, and the meanings they assign to their experiences. The goal was to define the

understanding and culture of Alevism not from the researcher's perspective, but from the perspective of Bayburt's Alevi community.

In the interviews conducted, the social transformations experienced by Alevis in Bayburt, as well as their interactions with the surrounding culture, were explored through semi-structured questions (Demir, 2014, p. 291) and in-depth analyses. Participant consent was obtained during the interviews. The interview questions were generally centered on participants' knowledge about Alevism, teachings inherited from older generations, and the use of written sources. Following the general questions, further inquiries addressed the challenges faced by Alevis in Bayburt's social life, whether they had undergone any religious or cultural transformation, and whether they interacted with other Alevi traditions and cultures.

The study's target population was determined based on frequency of occurrence, sensitivity, and group size, consisting of local Alevis residing in Bayburt and expatriate Alevis who return during the summer months. Participants from this population were selected using the snowball sampling method. This method enabled the researcher to reach accessible individuals through referrals.

Our research is based on data obtained through interviews with key informants. The responses to the prepared questions were recorded—either through audio recordings (with permission) or by taking notes in cases where recording was not permitted.

Before visiting the villages, the researchers contacted the village headmen (muhtars) and requested their assistance in organizing interview participants. Once in the villages, interviews were conducted with 25 individuals under the guidance of the muhtars or their designated representatives. The recorded interviews were transcribed, analyzed in accordance with ethical principles, and transformed into a scientific study.

Results and Discussion

Alevism in Bayburt

Bayburt is a city located in the Eastern Black Sea region of Turkey. It is bordered by Erzurum to the east, Gümüşhane to the west, Trabzon and Rize to the north, and Erzincan to the south. The city is surrounded by mountains such as Soğanlı, Vavuk, Otlukbeli, and Kop, and experiences harsh winters. With two districts, Bayburt holds the distinction of being one of the smallest cities in Turkey.

The Alevi villages in Bayburt consist of eight villages located in the city center and its districts. These villages are generally situated at higher altitudes, often on the slopes of mountains. In these villages, the inhabitants primarily sustain themselves through animal husbandry. Migration from these villages typically occurs to major cities such as Istanbul, Ankara, and abroad. The old and new names of these villages, along with their distances from the city center, are provided in the table below.

	Former Name	New Name	Distance from city centre
1	Gülalihayık	Damlıca	55 km.
2	Ağgi	Dikmetaş	48 km.
3	Doğanaslan	Otlukbeli	55 km.
4	Lipana	Yaylalar	29 km.

5	Mağara	Yeniköy	38 km.
6	Maçur	Harmanözü	14 km.
7	Çepe	Demişik	22 km.
8	Herortu	Kırathı	23 km.

In the interviews, it was found that the majority of people living in these villages of Bayburt are originally from Tunceli. Apart from those from Tunceli, some of the villagers mentioned that they came from Pulur village in Bayburt, Erzincan's Avuçanlar Lodge, Central Asia, and Muş. In some villages, it was also noted by the participants that the Zaza language is still spoken and used within the village.

Seven of the eight Alevi villages in Bayburt have a cemevi (Alevi worship house). Since there are no living dedes (spiritual leaders) in these villages, the participants stated that they are able to hold cem ceremonies when dedes come from nearby cities, especially from Erzincan. The cemevis are not only used as places of worship but also as locations where funeral meals are served, where people can distribute food for charitable purposes, and where socio-cultural solidarity is fostered.

During visits to the Alevi villages, phrases such as "Welcome to the land of Kızılbaş" and "We are also called Kızılbaş" were encountered. It should be emphasized that there is no objection to the term Kızılbaş among the villagers; it is a term that is widely accepted within the community. Similarly, it can be stated that the villagers also accept the Ja'fari school of thought.

Religious Beliefs of the Alevis in Bayburt

Alevilik, which can be considered as a socio-cultural differentiation associated with the process of the Turkification of Islam, emerged among the Turkmen tribes who adopted a nomadic and semi-nomadic lifestyle. After the events involving the Mongols in the 13th century, the migration of Turkmen communities to Anatolia led to the spread of Alevi thought through the regions of Horasan and Iran to Anatolia. (Yıldız, 2021, 175)

The foundational beliefs of Alevism are based on the concept of "Hak-Muhammed-Ali." (Yıldız, 2021, 175; Ünlüsoy, 2020, 176) This concept is sometimes expressed as "Allah-Muhammed-Ali" and sometimes as "Hak-Muhammed-Ali," and it has also found its place in Alevi literature with expressions like "the three." In this trinity, it is possible to say that "Hak" corresponds to the creator "Allah," "Muhammed" corresponds to "prophethood," and "Ali" corresponds to "sainthood" in Sufism. (Yıldız, 2021, 180)

One of the participants in the interview provided an interesting definition of their belief as follows:

"Alevism is not a religion. Alevism is what has been called the followers of Ali, meaning those who love 'the Lion of Allah, Ali.' Alevism refers to a community that knows Allah, sees Hz. Muhammed as the messenger of Allah, considers the Qur'an as the constitution of Islam, and walks on the path of Hak-Muhammed-Ali. We believe in Allah's angels and books. First and foremost, we are the followers of our Prophet, respecting all 124 prophets and the companions. If Jesus comes today, he is a prophet who preached for 900 years to the Christian world. Then came Hz. Musa, Hz. Dawood, and finally our last prophet Hz. Muhammed. We are a community that believes in them,

respects them, and follows the light they showed." (K1, Personal Interview, August 15, 2023).

In interviews with individuals identifying with the Alevi identity, it was noted that they were accused of deifying Ali, but they clarified that this was a misunderstanding, as shown in the following statements:

"Our path is the path of Hak-Muhammed-Ali. Our religion is one. Some may claim that Hz. Ali was a prophet, but we do not accept that. The last prophet is Hz. Muhammed Mustafa (peace be upon him)." (K1, Personal Interview, August 15, 2023).

"We come from the path of Hak-Muhammed-Ali. We follow the path of the Twelve Imams. Some say we consider Ali superior to the Prophet, but God forbid, that is not true. Our guide is Hz. Muhammed, and our Pir (spiritual leader) is Ali. Our path is the path of the Twelve Imams." (K13, Personal Interview, August 20, 2023).

It is well known that Hz. Ali holds special significance in Alevi thought, where he is greatly loved and shown utmost respect. However, it is important to note that the love for Hz. Ali does not imply deification, but rather reflects a deep spiritual love and reverence (Yıldız, 2021, 180).

The understanding of the Twelve Imams also holds an important place in Alevi communities. When participants were asked about the Twelve Imams, they mentioned their names, and stated that these individuals were the grandchildren of the Prophet. They also noted that the names of the Twelve Imams must be recited for a marriage to be valid. It was observed that the photographs of the Twelve Imams are displayed in cemevis (Alevi prayer houses), where they are highly respected, though participants were not always well-informed about them.

The perception of the sahaba (companions of the Prophet) in Alevi thought, particularly regarding Hz. Ali, is also reflected in the Bayburt Alevi community. The following story shared by one participant provides insight into the perception of figures like Hz. Abu Bakr and Hz. Omar:

"We can't put the four caliphs on the same level. Islam blossomed on the shoulders of Hz. Ali. Omar became a Muslim at the age of 42. Before that, he used to bury his daughters alive and drink the best wine. In the movie 'The Call,' we see him on his way to kill the Prophet. Osman is from the Umayyad family, not from the Prophet's family. Abu Bakr was the leader of the Meccan polytheists. When they migrated from Mecca to Medina, Hz. Ali slept in the Prophet's bed. Why did the Prophet tell Hz. Ali, who was only 14, to lie in his bed, instead of asking Abu Bakr to do so? While the Prophet and Abu Bakr were hiding in a cave during migration, a snake had been waiting there for a long time to see the Prophet. Abu Bakr prevented the snake from seeing the Prophet, and the snake, because of the danger, couldn't give away their location to the enemies. Abu Bakr stretched out his foot, and the snake bit him right then." (K3, Personal Interview, August 17, 2023).

The importance of this story lies not necessarily in its scholarly value, but in its reflection of the prevailing view of the sahaba within Alevi thought, particularly how this view continues to be shaped by negative narratives about figures like Abu Bakr and Omar.

When asked about whether Alevis have a written culture through which they learn their beliefs, most responses were as follows:

"We pass it on orally, they learn it within the family."

"We pass on our tradition orally. How accurately it is conveyed is debatable. We don't have written sources."

"We don't have written sources; we have learned our traditions orally and we pass them on to our children and young people orally,"

it is clear that Alevis transmit their culture and beliefs through oral or verbal means. During the interviews, it was surprising for us that there was no mention of written Alevi cultural elements such as decrees or *cenknameler* (epic narratives or battle songs) which are sometimes part of the Alevi tradition. This absence suggests that, despite the rich oral traditions, written texts may not play a prominent role in the day-to-day transmission of Alevi beliefs and practices. The reliance on oral transmission underscores the deeply ingrained cultural importance of spoken word and storytelling within the Alevi community, where teachings and history are passed down through generations in a living, interactive manner.

Bayburt'taki Alevilerin İbadet Anlayışları

It is observed that in Alevi communities, the worship and rituals present in the Islamic religion, such as prayer (namaz), alms-giving (zakat), fasting (oruç), pilgrimage (hajj), and sacrifice (kurban), are not rejected. However, in Alevi communities, it is observed that there is either indifference or neutrality towards these acts of worship and rituals, or these acts of worship and rituals are understood differently. (Yıldız, 2021, 187; Üzümlü, 2007, 136)

While Alevis do not adopt a negative stance towards the prayer (namaz) ritual, they exhibit a more uninterested and indifferent attitude. (Üzümlü, 2007, 137) The following statements regarding the prayer ritual in interviews conducted in the Alevi villages of Bayburt support this issue:

"For us, prayer does not have a specific time; wherever we wish, we turn to Allah and perform our prayer. Prayer is this for us. We criticize the Sunni community regarding acts of worship. For example, when we go to the center of Bayburt, when the call to prayer (ezan) is recited, they take their cardboard, spread it in the mosque courtyard, perform their prayer, and leave without performing the sunnah or making their supplications. Where is the Prophet's sunnah left? Where is your love for the Prophet?" (K3, Personal Interview, August 17, 2023).

"Why don't we perform prayer? After the Prophet passed away, the supporters of Abu Bakr, Osman, and Omar slandered our master, Hz. Ali, the Lion of Allah, so much that they wrote on the doors of mosques: 'Whoever does not spit on the face of the Ahl al-Bayt and does not humiliate the Ahl al-Bayt should not enter this mosque!' For this reason, Alevis have avoided mosques." (K1, Personal Interview, August 15, 2023).

In the interviews conducted in the Alevi villages of Bayburt, it was stated by the participants that an application similar to that in Sunnism is accepted regarding funeral prayers (cenaze namazı), that there is no difference in terms of prayer, but that they differ from the Sunni funeral prayer in terms of reciting the names of the Twelve Imams.

“When there is a deceased person, we call it the ‘bed of truth’ (hak döşegi), they are laid there and then taken to the morgue. Relatives are waited for, and when they come, the body is taken for washing. According to Islamic procedures, water is poured three times on the right side and three times on the left side. Then, ritual ablution (abdest) is performed, and afterwards, relatives come and pour ‘permission water’ (helallik suyu). After that, the body is shrouded; the shroud for a man is three pieces, and for a woman, it is five pieces. Then, the funeral prayer begins. Salutations are offered to our Prophet, takbir is recited, and we mention the names of our Twelve Imams. Then, we ask for permission (helallik), and afterwards, the funeral prayer is performed with four takbirs. Then, the body is taken and placed in the grave lying on its right side, and the Qur'an is recited. Condolences begin, and we have a ‘charity meal’ (hayır yemeği). Guests who come from outside are fed for the deceased’s benefit, and the funeral process ends. Seven days later, the ‘seventh day’ ceremony is held, followed by the ‘fortieth day’ ceremony, and after a year, the grave is visited. Charity is given to the poor and needy. Serving the deceased is common among us.” (K13, Personal Interview, 2023).

At the same time, it was stated that in some villages, due to the absence of an Alevi Dede (spiritual leader) and a competent person to lead the funeral prayer, Sunni imams requested from the mufti’s office come and perform the funeral prayers. From these aspects, it can be concluded that they converge with the Sunni belief regarding the performance of funeral prayers.

The fast of Ramadan is one of the forms of worship accepted by all Muslims. Within Alevism, a distant and liberal approach is exhibited towards the fast, as in other forms of worship. (Üzüm, 2007, 141) Indeed, in interviews conducted with the Alevis of Bayburt, it was learned that they do not deny the fast of Ramadan, but they do not fast for the entire 30 days, and they generally fast for 3 days during this month.

“We observe the fast of Muharrem, and we also observe the fast of Ramadan for 3 days. There are those who fast for a month, but generally, we fast for 3 days. Because why do we fast? Ramadan means the name of the month; the month of Ramadan is the month when the Qur'an came to the Prophet.” (K8, Personal Interview, August 18, 2023).

From these statements, it is understood that the belief has arisen that the fast of Ramadan originates from its name, and they perform this act of worship by fasting for 3 days. As a result of the interviews, it is stated that the fast of Muharrem is very important for Alevis and that this fast is considered obligatory (farz). At the same time, it should be noted that the fast of Hızır also has a separate importance for Alevis. They believe that the fast of Hızır originates from the Qur'an and the Ahl al-Bayt. (Maden, 2017, 122) Indeed, the Alevis of Bayburt stated that they definitely observe the fast of Hızır.

“We observe the fast of Muharrem for 12 days. We also have the fast of Hızır; some observe the fast of Hızır for 3 days, and some for 5 days. Who is Hızır? Hızır’s father was a cruel person during the time of Nimrod. Nimrod had a dream in which it was said that a child would rise up and overthrow his throne. Nimrod issued an order that all children born that year should be killed. To save her child, Hızır’s mother wrapped him in a piece of cloth and left him in a cave. While a shepherd was grazing his animals, a sheep would separate from

the flock at noon and go to the cave to nurse Hızır. The shepherd's owner said to him, 'Why are you milking my sheep?' The shepherd said, 'I am not milking your sheep at all.' Months passed, and one day at noon, they saw the sheep separate from the flock and go to a cave. There, it was nursing a child. According to our sources, Hızır (peace be upon him) is immortal because he drank the water of life (ab-ı hayat). Whoever drinks the water of life is immortal. Hızır (peace be upon him) lives on land, at sea, and in the air. He comes to the aid of those in distress." (K1, Personal Interview, August 15, 2023).

"In the month of Muharrem, we fast for 12 days, and on the 13th day, sacrifices are made. If there is a Dede, the cem worship is performed. Ashura is cooked, and we walk to the cemetery together. The month of Muharrem is obligatory. It is one of the four sacred months. We observe the month of Muharrem for 12 days in respect of the Twelve Imams. The fast of Hızır is observed on February 13th, 14th, and 15th; some also observe it for 5 days." (K13, Personal Interview, August 20, 2023).

"There is the month of Muharrem; we fast for 12 days, and on the 12th day, we cook ashura soup. Those who have a sacrifice make a sacrifice." (K25, Personal Interview, August 24, 2023).

"We observe 12 days in the month of Muharrem and 3 days for the fast of Hızır." (K18, Personal Interview, August 16, 2023).

In the Alevi community, the ritual of sacrifice (kurban) also holds a distinct importance. (Yıldız, 2021, 194) It seems particularly unlikely for cem ceremonies to take place without sacrifice. (Üzüm, 2007, 154) The following expressions have been stated regarding the sacrifice ritual:

"We also perform the erkân during Eid al-Adha. We play the saz (a stringed instrument), and we perform our two rak'ahs of Eid prayer. After that, those who have a sacrifice make their sacrifice. We recite our takbir and slaughter our sacrifice; there is no difference from Sunnism. Generally, after we slaughter the sacrifice, we distribute it and don't bring any home. The Turkish meaning of kurban is closeness to Allah." (K13, Personal Interview, August 20, 2023).

"For example, on the night connecting Thursday to Friday, we hold a cem. On that night, there is a watchman who informs all the people. After that, lokmas (sacrificial food) are cooked, and those who have a sacrifice slaughter and distribute it." (K1, Personal Interview, August 15, 2023; K16, Personal Interview, August 23, 2023).

It is known that the sacrifice ritual also has a close relationship with ziyaretgâhs (holy sites/shrines). This is because ziyaretgâhs have a significant privilege in Alevi belief. In the interviews we conducted with the Alevis of Bayburt, the information that sacrifices are made in places considered ziyaretgâhs was expressed by the participants with the following words:

"...The ziyaretgâh is called Kanlı Tepe (Bloody Hill). During Eid al-Adha and the month of Muharrem, sacrifices are brought and slaughtered at this location, and cem is performed." (K15, Personal Interview, August 22, 2023).

After providing information about the sacrifice ritual, it would be appropriate to mention visits, which are also related to this ritual. For Alevis, the understanding

of visiting is not limited to tombs or shrines. In Alevi belief culture, the cult of places and water, the cult of mountains, the cult of stones and rocks, and the cult of trees and forests have an important place. During visits to these places, there are certain purposes, such as the sick finding healing, those who cannot marry finding their destiny, and those who do not have children having children. (Turan - Üçer, 2005, 66) When visiting the Alevi villages of Bayburt, it has been observed that almost every village has its own ziyaret/ziyaretgâh. The stories of some of these visits have been narrated to us by the individuals interviewed. The fact that some of these stories are not found in Bayburt ethnography or folk belief studies is one of the prominent aspects of our research. The stories that do not appear in the literature are as follows:

“We have three ziyaretgâhs in the village. One is the shrine inside the cemevi (Alevi house of worship). We offer our lokmas in the cemevi. The second is the ziyaretgâh at the entrance of the village, its name is ‘Yol Bekçisi’ (Guardian of the Road). The reason for its existence is that they had come to raid our village. A piece of rock broke off from the cliff at the entrance of the village and fell onto the road. No one dared to pass, and since then, the place where that rock fell has been called ‘Yol Bekçisi’. This event happened a long time ago; we heard it from our fathers, and our fathers heard it from our grandfathers.” (K16, Personal Interview, August 23, 2023; K17, Personal Interview, August 23, 2023).

“The cemevi, built in the early 2000s, was actually initially constructed as a normal detached house. The people living in the house reported that the door of the house did not lock, that even if they locked it, it would open, and that they even heard someone calling from the chimney at night, telling them to open the door, and they donated their house as a cemevi. Since that day, this shrine in the cemevi has been respected.” (K16, Personal Interview, August 23, 2023).

“The location called Kanlı Kaya (Bloody Rock) consists of cliffs 300 meters high. According to legend, 40 horsemen were traveling at night, galloping at full speed. One of the horses was blind, and when they reached the edge of the cliff, 39 horsemen and their horses fell, while the blind horse did not move forward and survived with its owner. Afterwards, that hill was named ‘Kanlı Tepe’ (Bloody Hill). During Eid al-Adha and the month of Muharrem, cem is performed at this location, and then sacrifices are brought and slaughtered.” (K21, Personal Interview, August 21, 2023).

“The village initially used an old plane tree as a ziyaret. One day, a new shepherd who came to the village cut down the plane tree to burn it in winter. When he woke up in the morning, he saw that his whole body was wounded, and a swarm of snakes was descending from the mountain towards his house. When he told the villagers about this, they explained that the reason for this was that he had cut down the plane tree, and they told him to take the cut tree back to its place and offer lokma.” (K13, Personal Interview, August 20, 2023).

Apart from these, it was reported by the participants that the tombs of Alevi dedes who came to the village and passed away in these villages are also used for the purpose of visiting. The Armut Dibi ziyaretgâh, which was mentioned during the interview and is also found in the literature, was also visited by the researchers.

In our interviews, there were also statements by the participants regarding worship in Turkish:

“Since our village is within the Sunni community, we do the same things that the Sunnis do. But it is not the same in Istanbul. In Istanbul, prayers are recited in Turkish. But in Bayburt, the prayers recited at funerals are recited in Arabic; there is no Turkish at all. In big cities like Istanbul, they recite their prayers in Turkish, including the Sübhaneke. Previously, it was recited in Arabic in the cemevis, but we said, ‘We are Turks, we will recite in Turkish,’ and we switched to Turkish. But since Bayburt is intertwined with the Sunni community, they still continue to recite in Arabic.” (K3, Personal Interview, August 17, 2023).

“We find it more appropriate for the adhan (call to prayer) to be recited in Turkish. When asked, ‘Does Allah ask us in Arabic or Turkish on the other side?’ what do we answer? We say, ‘Allah knows all languages!’ Since Allah knows all languages, why do they pressure people?” (K21, Personal Interview, August 21, 2023).

As clearly stated in the interview information provided above, there is an approach towards worship in Turkish. We must also say that this approach was expressed by participants in only one village during the interviews conducted. However, as a result of our observations in the villages, among the books in the cemevis, in the workplaces or homes of the participants, although there is the original Qur'an, no one who knew how to read Arabic was encountered among the participants, and the participants' relationship with the Qur'an was limited to Turkish translations and explanatory Yasin books. Again, as a result of our observations among the books found in the villages, works related to Alevi history generally consist of books written by Alevi dedes. It is possible to say that in the libraries of the villages, there are works written by Alevi dedes and authors related to Shiism. Examples of these include authors such as Muhammed et-Ticanî es-Semavî, Mehmet Dişkiran, Cafer Sübhânî, and Alevi Dede Mehmet Yaman; books related to the Ahl al-Bayt, Hz. Ali, Hz. Hasan and Hz. Hüseyin, and Hz. Fatima are abundant. However, as we mentioned above, the language of these works is Turkish.

Cemevleri and Dedelik Institution in Bayburt

In seven of the Alevi villages in Bayburt, there are cemevis (Alevi houses of worship), while in one, the village guesthouse is also used for holding cem ceremonies. The village headmen stated that some of the cemevis were built through the initiatives of the villagers themselves, while others were built with the support of the governor's office. The oldest cemevi in the city was built in 1996 in Yeniköy (formerly Mağara) village with the self-help of the people and the support of the village association. We were informed that the construction of other cemevis began in the 2000s. It was stated that in Demirşık (formerly Çepe) and Otlukbeli (formerly Doğanaslan) villages, the old primary school was converted into a cemevi with the permission of the governor's office and the help of businessmen.

In the Alevi villages of Bayburt, it was stated that despite having cemevis, they cannot regularly perform the cem ritual due to the absence of a Dede (spiritual leader), and they generally complete the year with the cem they hold in the month of Muharrem. They generally defined the cem ritual as follows:

“We hold cem on the night connecting Thursday to Friday. On that night, there is a watchman who informs all the people. After that, lokmas (sacrificial food) are cooked, and those who have a sacrifice slaughter it, take it to the cemevi, the Dede comes, recites his prayer, and consent (rısalık) is obtained. For example, if there are feuding parties, they are brought to the ‘dar’ (a place of reconciliation), meaning if there is hurt or financial hardship, these issues are resolved. Married couples who are separated cannot enter the cem, those who steal cannot enter, those who violate the rights of others cannot enter, those who lie cannot enter, and those who are divorced also cannot enter; these are considered ‘düşkün’ (fallen). If someone does not want to reconcile, they are expelled from the cem. After that, there is a discourse, Şah Hatâî’s nefes (poetic expressions) are recited, semah (ritual whirling dance) is performed, the çıra (lamp) is lit, and verses 34-35 of Surah An-Nur are recited. Then the Dede completes his service, lokmas are distributed, prostrations (secde) are performed, prostration prayers are recited, and the cem is completed.”

The participants stated the following regarding how young generations learn about the cem ritual and its rules through television and the internet:

“Since we cannot hold weekly cems, our children cannot learn our culture well. We open Cem TV on television and have our children watch the cem on Thursdays because that’s when it is held.” (K22, Personal Interview, August 19, 2023).

It was particularly stated that while cemevis are not actively used weekly, they are opened for funeral ceremonies, meals given for the distribution of cenaze lokması (funeral food), and also during election times in some villages.

When examining the history of Islamic thought, although there is a lineage tracing back to the Prophet in political and theological sects, there is no concept of authority/lineage that continues from father to son, within the lineage or Ocakzades (families traditionally providing spiritual leaders), or changes through election. However, when looking at the Alevi intellectual structure, Dedes have such authority. The institution of Dadelik (the position of Dede) is a structure that continues through lineage, changes through election, or is appointed by ijazet (authorization). (Kutlu, 2008, 34) The understanding of Dadelik among the Alevis living in Bayburt is accepted as it is in the doctrine. The importance of the institution of Dadelik was emphasized in the interviews conducted.

“Dadelik comes from the post, that is, from lineage. That’s why it is becoming difficult to find a Dede.” (K23, Personal Interview, August 19, 2023).

“Dede means coming from the lineage of the Ahl al-Bayt. Who is the lineage of the Ahl al-Bayt? It means coming from the lineage of our master Hz. Ali. It means coming from the lineage of our masters Hasan and Hüseyin.” (K24, Personal Interview, August 17, 2023).

In the interviews conducted with the Alevis of Bayburt, a request was encountered for the appointment of Dedes to the cemevis. The citizens expressed that the Dede is indispensable for performing the cem ritual and that bringing Dedes from other cities with their own means puts them in economic difficulty, as follows:

“We don’t have a Dede in the village. We bring one from Erzincan by covering his expenses with our own means. The salary given to hodjas (Sunni religious

leaders) should be given to Dedes by the state. Because in this way, our cemevi will remain open continuously, and we can use it whenever we want to worship. Our Dede will give religious talks in this way.” (K1, Personal Interview, August 15, 2023).

In studies conducted on Alevism, it has been stated that it is not legally possible for cemevis to be opened within the framework of association or foundation activities, for the Presidency of Religious Affairs to provide financial assistance to these places, and for them to appoint Dedes as officials. (Kutlu, 2008, 86) However, it should be noted that the Alevis of Bayburt insist on the fulfillment of their demands, even if it is not legally possible.

One point that we need to touch upon here is a criticism directed at the Alevi Dedes. During our interview, criticism of the Dedes and their authority was voiced by only one of the participants:

“In the past, Dedes used to come from Erzincan. A Dede comes from the lineage of the Ahl al-Bayt. There are no Dedes left now. A Dede reconciles those who are feuding, takes from the rich and gives to the poor. He is on the side of right, law, and justice. A Dede does not drink rakı (an alcoholic beverage), and a Dede does not have his hand kissed and take money.” (K24, Personal Interview, August 17, 2023).

Our participant seriously criticized the Dedes, especially for collecting money and taking from the villagers' animals. By telling a story that happened to his own father, he insisted that the institution of Dadelik could not be like this:

“My father was a poor man. My mother died, and a Dede came to the village. In our Alevi tradition, the Dede goes in front of the hodja during the funeral prayer. Because the Dede is more knowledgeable and knows the Qur'an by heart. While the Dede was praying behind the hodja, they buried the deceased and came back; my father said, ‘Why did you do that?’ The Dede said, ‘Never mind!’ My father said, ‘It doesn’t matter. What you did is wrong, it’s against our culture.’ The Dede said, ‘Give me that white sheep.’ My father said, ‘Dede! I have seven sheep and six children. What will I do if I give it to you?’ The Dede said to my father, ‘You’ll see!’ Meaning he was going to curse him; Dadelik cannot be like that!” (K24, Personal Interview, August 17, 2023).

Compared to other participants, this participant's criticism of the point where the institution of Dadelik has arrived is important in terms of ensuring the development and transformation in Alevi culture.

The Cultural Teaching of the Alevis in Bayburt and Its Impact on Life

The concept of *musabiplik* (spiritual brotherhood/sisterhood) (Kaplan, 2019, 207, 208; Melikoff, 1993, 89-91; Üçer, 2011), which is an important part of Alevi culture, is also embraced by the Alevis of Bayburt. Generally, the same expressions regarding *musabiplik* are found in the villages:

“*Musabiplik* exists in our village. *Musabiplik* is very significant for us. It means more than a sibling. Marriage is forbidden between *musabips*; a *musabip* is considered family. *Kirvelik* (godparenthood) is the same way. When Prophet Muhammad migrated from Mecca to Medina, he made the Muhajirun (immigrants) and Ansar (helpers) brothers so that they could get along better. Hz. Ali also says, ‘O Messenger of Allah, with whom will you make me a brother?’ And the Prophet says, ‘O Ali! You are my brother in this world and the hereafter!’ Our bond of *musabiplik* comes from there.

We also have the *musabiplik cem*. *Musabips* appear before the Dede as a family, the Dede performs the erkân for them, and their *musabiplik* is bound with prayers, gülbanks (Alevi religious hymns), and sacrifices for generations. Giving and taking daughters/sons in marriage is absolutely forbidden.”

While the understanding of *musabiplik* is accepted, it has also been stated that due to the heavy conditions of *musabiplik*, it is not preferred as much in the villages compared to the past.

“The villagers are not keen on *musabiplik* and *kirvelik*. If families become *musabip*, it becomes a level even beyond biological siblings. We do not give or take daughters/sons in marriage for seven generations; marriage is not performed. These are heavy conditions.” (K25, Personal Interview, August 24, 2023).

From these statements, it is evident that the problem of the slowly disappearing tradition of *musabiplik*, an important part of Alevi culture, due to its lack of preference by the new generation, is also coming to light.

Regarding the position of women in the Alevi culture of Bayburt, the participants made the following statements:

“Women are more free among us. There is no discrimination whatsoever. Women are at the forefront with us; women have the right to speak in our assembly. Paradise is under the feet of mothers.” (K17, Personal Interview, August 23, 2023).

“There is no gender distinction among us. In our belief, women are superior. We perform our worship together, women on one side and men on the other. In our normal lives, women are also valuable to us. Whichever door we go to, whether it’s a woman or a man, they are our mother, sister, or sibling. There is no evil in our belief, which views the seventy-two nations with one eye.” (K22, Personal Interview, August 19, 2023).

The expressions of a female participant are as follows:

“Women live a more comfortable life compared to Sunnis. We go to the market comfortably and do our shopping. Women in the center of Bayburt are not as comfortable as we are. The women of Bayburt are more reserved. But we can express ourselves more comfortably.” (K17, Personal Interview, August 23, 2023).

During the interviews conducted in the villages, we can say that women do not enter crowded places where there are men, unlike the women in Bayburt, and that they adopt a clothing style similar to the Sunni women in Bayburt (here, *çarşaf* and *ehram* are not meant).

It was conveyed by the participants that there is an attachment to the *sağ* (a long-necked lute) culture, which is accepted by the Alevis of Bayburt as the “stringed Qur’an,” but the number of people who play the *sağ* has decreased considerably, and people are not as enthusiastic about playing the *sağ* as they used to be. Among the villages we visited, only in one did a participant play the *sağ* and sing Alevi *deyişler* (religious folk songs/hymns).

Relations with the Sunni People of Bayburt

Apart from the eight Alevi villages we visited in Bayburt, which form the basis of our study, the remaining 162 villages are Sunni. The general public we encountered consists of strictly conservative individuals. One of the most significant indicators of

this conservatism is the *ehram* (a traditional outer garment) worn by women. (Elpe, 2015, 699) In Bayburt, people mostly make their living through animal husbandry, beekeeping, and agriculture.

In interviews with the Alevis of Bayburt, when asked about their relationships with the Sunni population, we encountered the following responses:

“Our relationship with the Sunni people of Bayburt is very good. We only don’t intermarry; otherwise, we don’t have any problems.” (K1, Personal Interview, August 15, 2023; K13, Personal Interview, August 20, 2023; K9, Personal Interview, August 18, 2023; K12, Personal Interview, August 20, 2023).

“Our relations with Sunni villages have been good throughout history. We attend each other’s weddings and funerals. There has been no exclusion, and there won’t be. When we go to the center of Bayburt, they respect our beliefs and cultures, and we respect their beliefs and worship. When we go down to the center of Bayburt during the month of Ramadan, we do not eat or drink anything.” (K24, Personal Interview, August 17, 2023).

“Our relationships are very good. As the literacy rate increases, respect for each other’s culture also increases. In Alevism, there is only no intermarriage with Sunnis. However, in the past, a boy loved a Sunni girl. They went to ask for her hand in marriage, but they didn’t give her, so the boy eloped with her. This incident happened in the village of Serenli in Bayburt. In the past, Alevis and Sunnis were mixed in that village; after this incident, the Alevis left that village, and there are no Alevis living in the village now.” (K18, Personal Interview, August 16, 2023).

Although every participant stated during our interviews that intermarriage between Alevi and Sunni villages in Bayburt still does not occur, it was mentioned that this is not the case for those who have migrated to cities such as Istanbul and Ankara, and that intermarriage between Sunnis and Alevis does take place there.

In Kıratlı (formerly Herortu) village, which uses the village guesthouse for holding cem ceremonies due to the absence of a cemevi, there is also a mosque, unlike other villages. The Sunni mosque imam, who was appointed to the village years ago, married a daughter from an Alevi family in the village. This was the only instance of an exception to intermarriage we encountered during our interviews.

“We don’t intermarry; although we used to be a bit more distant in the past, that distance has now closed. Families who have migrated out of the village can marry Sunnis. One of the villagers gave his daughter to the Sunni imam in the village. Even though everyone asked why he gave her to this Sunni, the imam was loved and respected in the village. Our commercial and neighborly relations with Sunni villages are also good.” (K18, Personal Interview, August 16, 2023).

The following story told by the participants is also important in showing the course of the relationship between Alevis and Sunnis:

“Ten years ago, a father was going to the market with his daughter, who was between 5 and 6 years old. It was the month of Ramadan, and the child wanted water (according to another account, chocolate), and those in the market scolded that little girl for drinking water. We are experiencing problems because the mentality has not changed. But we are overcoming and will

overcome this in a better way, by experiencing good things thanks to the new generation.” (K14, Personal Interview, August 22, 2023).

Apart from the isolated incidents we heard from the participants (elopement and the little girl drinking water), we must state that no conflict has occurred. It was clearly expressed by the participants that there is no exclusion in neighborly relations among those who are tradespeople. Considering the population of Bayburt and the demographic structure of the villages, we can say that Alevi villages are in the minority, and the majority of people in these villages consist of those coming from abroad or other provinces during the summer months. One of the main goals of our research is to determine whether there is any othering in the relationship with the Sunni population of Bayburt. However, as our research concluded, it was observed that there was no conflict or othering.

Conclusion

In Bayburt, a predominantly Sunni city, the Alevi community, consisting of only eight villages and existing as a minority, was examined in our study within the context of belief, worship, culture, and relations with the Sunni population. The findings we obtained as a result of the interviews are as follows:

- Despite the presence of cemevis in all but one village, the Alevis of Bayburt are unable to bring a Dede for the cem ritual due to economic difficulties, which leads to the performance of cem only during the month of Muharrem. Facing the situation of performing cem only once a year, the community remains distant from their worship and congregation, and they experience difficulties in transmitting their beliefs to future generations.
- The inability to find a living Dede also makes it difficult to fulfill Alevi beliefs, erkâns, and rituals.
- In villages where oral culture is the means of transmitting beliefs, it must be stated that the religious dimension of Alevism faces the risk of disappearing.
- The presence of mostly secondary, and often modern research, rather than primary sources of Islamic thought among the books found in the villages gives the impression that Alevis only read biased works. Whether the narrated stories have scientific value is debatable. The demand for the Turkish adhan and worship also indicates the political dimension of Alevism.
- Despite seeing themselves as a community bağlı (connected) to Islam and the Prophet Muhammad, a distant and liberal approach continues in terms of worship.
- The fact that cultural understandings such as *musahiplik* are not adopted by the new generation because they are perceived as heavy/difficult, and the lack of interest in playing the *sağ* and reciting *deyişler* pose a problem in the transmission of Alevi culture.
- It is observed that relations with the Sunni population of Bayburt continue very positively at the social level, with the only separation persisting in the matter of intermarriage. No problems were observed in terms of eating and drinking together, doing business, and neighborly relations.

Considering these findings, we can say that Alevism in Bayburt is in a state where prayers are offered only in places like ziyaretgâhs, disconnected from worship and erkâns, and facing significant problems in its transmission to new generations. In our opinion, the possibility of the culture and belief disappearing will lead to the

emergence of different forms of Alevism or evolve into irreligion. In the face of the expressed risks, it is essential to conduct multi-dimensional studies on what can be done.

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