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Diasporic Homeland, Rise of Identity and New Traditionalism: the Case of the British Alevi Festival

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Abstract

Historically, amongst Alevis traditional festivals have not been widespread and deep-rooted but this has changed over the last fifty years as a result of migration, urbanisation and the reconstruction of identity. By taking the Ninth British Alevi Festival as an example, this study looks at the building and functioning of Alevi identity in the diaspora through such a public event using mainly participant observation data collected at the festival in 2019. The festival functions to reflect the historical roots of the community by projecting a conception of the homeland in the diaspora that mirrors the perceived traditions, values and desires of the homeland. It also provides a means for Alevis to gain a footing, recognition and public visibility in their new homeland while mobilising local relationship networks, strengthening political connections and consolidating bonds within the community. It can be seen as an "invented tradition" within the new diasporic homeland.

Keywords

diasporic identity – homeland – (invented) tradition – Alevism – festival

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Welatê ji diasporayê, peydabûna nasname û edetgeriyeke nû: Nimûneya Festîvala Elewî li Ilgiltereyê

Berê di nav elewiyan de festîvalên edetî/nerîtî gelek berbelav û cîgirtî nebûn lê di nav pêncî salên dawî de ev yek di encama koçberî, bajarîbûn û jinûve sazkirina nasnameyê de hatiye guhertin. Li ser nimûneya Nehemîn Festîvala Elewî li Ilgiltereyê, ev lêkolîn li avakirin û karkirina nasnameya elewî bi rêya çalakiyeke cemawerî ya wisa li diasporayê dinêre. Lêkolîn xwe dispêre daneyên ji çavdêriyan û yên li festîvala 2019an hatî berhevkirin. Festîval rehên dîrokî yên cemaetê dide nî$an bi rêya pê$xistina têgihi$tineke welatî li diasporayê ku beramberî edet, nirx û daxwazên welatî ne. Herwiha îmkanê dide elewiyan ku li welatê xwe yê nû bibin xwediyê bingehekê, venasînekê û berçaviyeke gi$tî li rex wê yekê ku torên têkiliyên deverî çalak dike, girêdanên siyasî saxlem dike û pabendiyên di nava cemaetê de cîgirtî dike. Mirov dikare vê yekê wek îcadkirina an dahênana nerîtê li welatê nû yê diasporayê bibîne.

Nîştmanî dayespora, hellkişanî nasname û tradîsyonî nwê: keysî vîstîvallî ‘Elewîy Berîtanî

Lerûy mêjûyyewe, lenaw ‘elewîyekanda vîstîvallî tradîsyon leser astêkî frawanda bllaw nebotewe û rîşey danekutawe bellam ewe le dwa penca sallda behoy koçberî û şarinşînî û bunyadnanewey nasname, gorranî beserdahatuwe. Be wergirtnî noyem vîstîvallî ‘elewîy berîtanî wek nmûne, em twêjîneweye sernic dedate bunyadnan û karkirdî şunasî ‘elewî le dayespora le rêgey rudawêkî giştî awa û be şêweyekî serekî bekarhênanî datay kokrawe leser sernicî çawdêran le vîstîvallî 2019 da. Fîsîvalleke le rêgay arastekirdnî çemkî nîştman le dayispora ke rengdanewey nerît, behakan û xwastî nîştîmane wek rengdanewey rîşe mêjûyye cvakîyekan kardekat. Herweha hoyekîş bo ‘elewîyekan desteber dekat ta cê pêyek, danpêdanan û derkewtinîyan le fezay giştî nîştmane tazekeyan bedest bênin û leheman katîşda mobalîzey torrî peywendîyekan û ptewkirdnî bondekan lenaw cvakda deken. Ewe dekrêt wek dahênanêkî tradîsyon lenaw nîştmanî tazey dayesporada bbînrêt.

Welatê dîyaspora, averşîyayîşê nasnameyî û tradîsyonalîzmo newe: Nimûneyê Festîvala Elewîyanê Brîtanya

Tarîxê urf û adetanê elewîyan de festîvalî vilabîyaye û kokxorînî nêbîyê, la nê pancas serranê peyênan de semedê koçkerdiş, şaristanijbîyayîş û neweraawankerdişê nasnameyî ra no vurîyayo. Pê nimûneyê Festîvala 9. ya Elewîyanê Brîtanya, no cigêrayîş bi rayîrê inasar fealîyetêkê rakerdeyî qayîtê awanî û fonksîyonanê nasnameyê elewîyanê dîyaspora keno û seba ney zafane dayeyanê observasyonê beşdaranê festîvala 2019î xebitneno. Fonskîyonê festîvale no yo ke ristimanê komelî yê tarîxîyan wina nîşan bido ke dîyaspora de fikrê welatî yo ke rîayetê urf û adet, qîymet û hêvîyanê welatî yê hîsbîyayeyan keno, pêşkêş bibo. Ney ra zî wet, festîvale seba elewîyan îmkan o ke hem welatê xo yo newe de bibê wayîrê statuyêk, xo bidê naskerdene û rayapêroyî de biasê, hem kî eynî dem de torranê têkilîyanê cayîyan mobîlîze bikerê, îrtîbatanê sîyasîyan xurt bikerê û komelî mîyan de bêrê werê. Merdim eşkeno welatê dîyaspora yo newe de festîvale sey viraştişê tradîsyonî bivîno.

Introduction[1]

The Ninth British Alevi Festival took place in London between 25 May and 2 June, 2019. This event served as a significant research environment in which I could make observations on the form of relationships that Alevis establish with the homeland, space, memory and politics when in the diaspora in a festival where the reconstructed Alevi identity manifests itself and becomes visible.

1 This article arose from my post-doctoral research project on "The Effect of External Migration on Social Memory, Belief and Cultural Identity" that was financially supported by the Scientific and Technological Research Council of Turkey (TÜBİTAK) and hosted by Prof. Ruth Mandel, Department of Anthropology, University College London. In this regard, I owe them all a huge debt of gratitude. Additionally, I would like to thank the members of the British Alevi society for their helpful cooperation and dear Seda Kurt for her significant contribution to the language of the text. Dr Umit Cetin, Department of Sociology, University of Westminster deserves special thanks as I would not have seen this article to fruition without his patient support and encouragement. Finally, I would like to thank the reviewers and *Kurdish Studies* editorial team for their constructive comments.

The Alevi collective memory often cites a long history of suffering and massacres. For this reason, in rural Alevism, days of mourning and commemoration are more prominent than periodical festivities commonly celebrated by the whole community. It is difficult to come across festivities or festivals peculiar to Anatolian Alevis, except for certain celebrations such as *Nevroz*, *Hızır*, *Gağand*, and *Gadir Hum* that are also celebrated in similar forms by other communities settled in Anatolia and its surroundings. While the *ziyaret* rituals (pilgrimages to sacred places or objects)[2] in rural Alevism might correspond somewhat to Foucault's (1984) mode of festivals as heterotopias, they are, however, more for prayers and rituals than a festival. What we might now describe as a festival culture, which historically has not been widespread or deeply rooted in Alevi tradition, can be seen as the product of the last fifty years, a period in Alevi history marked by migration, urbanisation/modernisation and the reconstruction of identity. In this sense these relatively recent festivals can be seen as part of an "invented tradition". As Hobsbawm (2000: 1) remarks, the term invented tradition "includes both 'traditions' actually invented, constructed and formally instituted and those emerging in a less easily traceable manner within a brief and dateable period – a matter of a few years perhaps – and establishing themselves with great rapidity". In this context, the festival corresponds to a new state in Alevi culture, which was previously dominated more by a "traumatic memory" (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2012), and stands as a new type of "invented tradition".

The two longest-running cultural activities in recent Alevi history in Turkey were initiated in 1964 and 1978 as "commemoration ceremonies" for Hacı Bektaş-ı Veli and Pir Sultan Abdal, two great and symbolic figures of Alevism. The first notable event for European Alevis was the Alevi Cultural Week held in Hamburg in 1989 while later in the United Kingdom the British Alevi Festival was founded in 2011. The British Alevi Festival stands as one of the most important cultural instruments for uniting the Alevi community in the UK after twenty-five years of struggle and adjustment. In this context, this study, by using the example of the Ninth British Alevi Festival, focuses on the notions of home, projection of homeland and rebuilding identity in the diaspora with reference to locality, sense of belonging, designing a heterotopia and relationships with the host society.

2 The *ziyaret* in Anatolian Alevism is not only a place or site, but is also reminiscent of Durkheim's (1995: 35) definition of the sacred, thus objects such as a stone, a water spring, a tree, a stick or a *saz* (*bağlama*) also may be regarded as *ziyaret*.

Methodology

This study is based on qualitative data gathered in two interwoven researches. For general information on the British Alevi community, I utilised data derived from my ethnographic observations and interviews with leaders and members of Alevi organisations, religious representatives, intellectuals and individuals not belonging to any organisation during my postdoctoral research project. This research on the Alevi diaspora in Britain was conducted between August 2018 and August 2019 with the financial support of the Scientific and Technological Research Council of Turkey (TÜBİTAK) and with the collaboration of the Department of Anthropology at University College London. However, the main data for this study has come from participant observation, field notes, conversations with agents, festival attendants and participants, news from local media, and social media pages of Alevi organisations during the Ninth British Alevi Festival in London.

Home, Homeland and Diasporic Identity

The term diaspora has been defined in various disciplines using different concepts and in many different ways (Vertovec, 1997). Instead of seeking to provide a fully exhaustive definition of diaspora, it would be useful for our discussion to focus on certain primary attributes that can be used to assess a community or group within the context of the diaspora. With this in mind, Cohen (2008), expanding on Safran's (1991) model, lists some features of diasporas which are relevant here, such as: a home or homeland symbolising a collective history; a forced, often traumatic, migration story from this homeland; a collective sense of unity with fellow migrants and with co-ethnic members in other countries or back in their homeland; a vision of co-existence and of a common future with the host country and society; and an idealisation of the homeland. Home or homeland, whether real or imagined, is then one of the key features of the diaspora. Home, in this context, would be far from having a singular meaning, especially for communities living in the diaspora for an extended period of time. On the one hand, home is conceptualised as the land of pre-migration, a land of origin, to which the diaspora community feels a sense of belonging or attachment. On the other hand, home is also the current locus of daily-life experiences, a specific location, an abode, that incorporates social relations. (Brah, 1996; Sales et al., 2011). As noted by Toivanen (2014) in her work on young Kurds in Finland, the attachment of community members to their land of origin or homeland varies from one member to another, and especially from one

generation to another, depending on different personal and life experiences. Thus, for the diaspora, home is an intricate, complex and versatile concept (Raj, 2014).

The complex nature of the concept of home can usefully be explored through an analysis that draws on Foucault's (1984) idea of heterotopias. For Foucault, heterotopias are places that "are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality" (2–3). Two out of the six principles that Foucault lists to describe heterotopias are useful to clarify the ideas of home or homeland in the context mentioned above. One of them, the third principle, is that "the heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible" (6). The other one, the fourth principle, addresses heterotopias linked to the accumulation or slices of time. The latter, the "absolutely temporal [*chroniques*]" heterotopia is "linked to time in its most flowing, transitory, precarious aspect, to time in the mode of the festival" (7). For these heterotopias, he gives the example of fairgrounds that teem with people once or twice on the outskirts of cities. Modern "traditional" festivals of Alevis, in this sense, especially in the diaspora, can be considered as heterotopias that juxtapose the projection of homeland and the new home of community on to the festival ground during the transitory time of the festival days.

When the attachment to home or homeland is directed towards a concrete physical abode, it becomes linked to a specific place or location. This link may also be established through imparted life experiences, history, narratives, myths or similar stories. Here, it is possible to observe another feature of diasporas as listed by Cohen: possessing a collective memory or myth about the homeland. Hall (1990) states that cultural identity is not immutable, essential, universal, absolute or transcendent; on the contrary, it is a product of history, of everyone's own history. It is always built upon "memory, imagination, narratives and myths" (226). As a cultural identity, a diaspora is also built upon the same foundations. As we often find in studies on the topic, diasporic memory is not simply based on a lyrical, nostalgic, mythical narrative of a homeland. That is because, as underlined by both Safran and Cohen, dispersal or expansion from the homeland often occurs as a result of "traumatic" incidents or events. Numerous examples, such as the cases of African slaves, the Holocaust victims, Palestinians, Irish workers, Iranians following the Islamic revolution, Kurds from Iraq and Turkey, Turks from Bulgaria and more recently Syrian refugees, demonstrate that the diasporic memory is filled with trauma and memories of exile. In this sense, as discussed by Lacroix and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2013), we can suggest that the diaspora identity is, in some aspects, built upon the "exilic memory".

From Alevi Lands to Alevi Diaspora: the Appearance of Alevism in Britain

Although geographically and historically there are a number of communities that share similar basic belief systems, the community presently identified under the name of Alevi has its roots in Anatolia. Strong in the community's self-perception, and recognised in much of the literature, is a conception that because their beliefs, culture and social order were regarded as a threat to Sunni orthodoxy, Alevis were persecuted, oppressed and excluded during the Ottoman Empire and also the early period of the Turkish Republic (Cetin, 2016). After living in hard-to-reach mountainous and secluded regions of Anatolia for centuries, they began to migrate to the big cities for the first time in the 1950s as part of the wave of urbanisation experienced in Turkey. This had become a mass migration within the following twenty to thirty years. A significant section of this migration was to places abroad with people from Alevi villages also participating in the wave of labour migration from Turkey to Europe experienced as a result of the bilateral labour agreements signed with Western European countries such as Germany in the 1960s. The foundation of the Alevi diaspora in Europe was created by migrations triggered primarily by economic factors, although there were also socio-political reasons. Today, Alevis are settled and organised in many Western European countries. Leaving aside inflated numbers and combining the estimates of official institutions, academic research and Alevi organisations, it can be assumed that the Alevi population settled in Europe is currently around one million (Eke, 2014; Haug et al., 2009; AABF, n.d.).

After sporadic migrations as part of labour agreements in the 1960s and 1970s, Alevi migration to Britain increased dramatically in the 1980s and the 1990s (Geaves, 2003; Sirkeci et al. 2016; İ. Erbil,[3] personal interview, 10 January, 2019). Besides socio-economic factors and expectations, three major factors also triggered this mass migration to the UK: organised attacks and massacres by ultra-nationalist and Islamist groups on Alevi neighbourhoods in some provinces in Turkey such as Maraş, Malatya, Çorum, and Sivas; the 1980 military coup; and the increased security concerns resulting from the conflict between the Turkish Armed Forces and militants of the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party, *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*) in the south eastern provinces of Turkey (Massicard, 2010; Zırh, 2008). The vast majority of those who came to

3 Israfil Irbil is the Chair of the British Alevi Association.

Britain were classified as "asylum-seekers" based on the aforementioned reasons for migration.

In the early years of migration, the organisational focus for Alevis in Britain was through leftist political groups. The London based Halkevi (People's House) and Kurdish Community Centre were structures that both received support from, and provided wide-ranging support for, the first-generation migrants. Reflecting the Sivas-Madımak Massacre in 1993, the England Alevi Cultural Centre and Cemevi-EACC (Alevi place of worship) was established in north east London (Geaves, 2003; Sirkeci et al., 2016). Despite this step that now highlighted Alevi identity, political organisation remained the most prominent form within the community until the mid-2000s. The first-generation migrants' efforts to gain their footing and survive in this country meant that economic concerns ultimately overshadowed a sense of identity. But the next generation, experiencing low educational attainment and a problematic relationship with their families, schools and peer groups, faced a crisis of identity. As well as such problems as gang formation and substance abuse, there were fifty recorded cases of youth suicide within the Alevi-Kurdish community in London alone after 2003 (Cetin, 2016 and 2017). All these, combined with the recurrent problems in Turkey associated with the state's treatment and attitudes towards Alevis and issues of settlement in the diaspora, directed Alevis to enhance their self-organisation and promote the Alevi identity (İ. Erbil, personal interview, 10 January, 2019; Akdemir, 2016). The British Alevi Federation (BAF) was founded in 2009; Alevism lessons were started in a London school in 2011 under the Alevi Religion and Identity Project (Jenkins and Cetin, 2018) and have now expanded to include around twenty schools in London and thirty across the rest of the country; the BAF and Alevi Cultural Centres and Cemevis (ACCS) were recognised and registered as charities by the Charity Commission of England and Wales in 2015; the All-Party Parliamentary Groups for Alevis was established "to ensure that British Alevis are represented in Parliament" (UK Parliament, 2017); and as at the end of 2019, eighteen ACCS, an Alevi Education and Art Centre, an Alevi Sports Academy, a Funeral Fund, an Alevi Youth Federation and an Alevi Women's Union have come into existence under the umbrella of the BAF. In addition to the Federation, Alevis also participate in hometown associations, independent organisations and political groups mainly located in London. It is difficult to estimate the full size of the Alevi community in Britain as there are no statistical data on the topic, but figures from some research and estimates by community leaders puts the range from between 150,000 to 300,000 people (Turkish Consulate, 2008; UK Office of National Statistics, 2011; Sirkeci et al., 2016: and İ. Erbil, personal interview, 10 January, 2019). At least three-quarters of the Alevis in Britain are settled in

London, residing in the boroughs of Enfield, Hackney, Haringey, Islington, Waltham Forest and Croydon. The rest of the population is scattered in other parts of the UK such as Essex, Edinburgh, Manchester, Glasgow and Sheffield (CLG, 2009; Sirkeci et al., 2016; 13).

From Traditional Festivals to a Festival Tradition

Alevi collective memory positions the persecution of Alevis in Anatolia within a history of massacres and suffering beginning with the Battle of Kerbela (680 AD) and continuing through the Kızılbaş massacres of Selim I in the sixteenth century to the Dersim and Madımak massacres in the twentieth century (Massicard, 2013). Reminiscent of Foucault's mode of festival, Alevi communities have had temporary, transitory and nomadic festivities such as a gathering at a *ziyaret* for a sacrifice ritual, oblation or a prayer for abundance once or a few times a year. These rituals (known in Turkish as *ziyaret*, *birlik kurbanı*, *adak* and *bereket duası*) are experienced as both festivals and a form of worship by the rural community (Yıldırım, 2018). Mélikoff (2011) cites three festivals celebrated by Anatolian Alevis in January, February and March: Kagant, Hızır and Haftamol. According to the author, these festivals have similarities to Christian, Cehelten, Azeri, Yarsan and Kurdish celebrations in or around Anatolia. Other sources conceptualise these Alevi rituals by different names such as fasting, *cem* (the Alevi worship ritual), festival or celebration (Yaman, 2012; Bodrogi, 2012). All these events are either local or uncharacteristic and it is difficult to find periodic festivals peculiar to the entire Anatolian Alevis. Therefore, it would seem that the festival culture now developing among Alevis is a very recent phenomenon and is, I would argue, the product of the urbanisation process over the last fifty years (Soileau, 2005).

The oldest festival that has become an Alevi phenomenon in Turkey in recent history is the Hacı Bektaş Veli[4] Commemoration Ceremony, the first of which was held in August 1964. The ceremonies started on the occasion of the re-opening of the Hacı Bektaş Dervish Lodge as a museum, thirty-nine years after its closure in the early Republican era. The ceremonies were held for many years in the form of official public ceremonies and in line with a Hacı Bektaş profile, fitting the official historical narrative[5] (Massicard, 2003;

4 Hacı Bektaş Veli is recognised by many Alevis an Alevi philosopher and saint who lived during the thirteenth century.

5 The official ideology of the Turkish Republic establishes Hacı Bektaş as a Sufi figure of the Turkish-Islamic Synthesis. Most Alevis recognise Hacı Bektaş as the second most

Soileau, 2005; and Norton, 2013). Another important event of the recent period is the Pir Sultan Abdal[6] Commemoration Ceremony or the Banaz Festival. The festival started in 1979 in the Banaz Village of Sivas, the birthplace of Pir Sultan Abdal, one of the most significant figures of Anatolian Alevism. After an eight-year suspension following the 1980 military coup, the festival was resumed in 1988 and was relocated to the Sivas city-centre in 1993. However, in 1993, the Madımak hotel, where intellectuals, artists and guests participating in the festival were staying, was set on fire by Islamist/ultra-nationalist groups after Friday prayers and thirty-three intellectuals and two hotel staff were burned to death (Soileau, 2005). This incident which went down in history as the Madımak/Sivas Massacre and the Pir Sultan Abdal Festival became another mark of persecuted suffering in the Alevi collective memory.

In Germany, where the Alevi diaspora first emerged and mobilised, Sökefeld (2008) attributes a crucial role to the Alevi Cultural Week organised in Hamburg in 1989 as a constituent step that virtually determined the next direction of the Alevi movement. Citing prominent anthropologist Veena Das, Sökefeld states that this successful cultural event can be considered as a critical moment that re-defined traditional categories and paved the way for new models for future action. Some other large-scale cultural events, such as *Bin Yılın Türküsü* (The Saga of the Millennium) in Cologne (2000) and in Istanbul (2002), as well as concerts and festivals became widespread in Turkey and the diaspora throughout the 2000s (Massicard, 2013; Sökefeld, 2008). It is possible to say that festivals, as a reflection of the public visibility of Alevis, have increased in quantity and grown richer in content in the last twenty-five years.

Being organised by Alevi *derneks* (associations), the publicising and performance of Alevi culture, political messaging and developing political networks, strengthening the sense of identity, referencing holy figures or lodges, and emphasising their ties with tradition are some common features of recent Alevi festivals (Soileau, 2005). With all of these features and functions, Alevi festivals provide important opportunities and platforms for Alevis to find their own voice in their cities and countries of residence, to increase their public visibility, and to express the fundamental principles of Alevi thought along with Alevi identity as a whole. Even though the festival culture does not have

important holy figure after Imam Ali, and some even believe that he was the transfiguration of Ali. Contrary to the official narrative, Alevis do not place Hacı Bektaş in a nationalised or orthodox-Islamic context.

6 Pir Sultan Abdal was a popular Alevi poet during the sixteenth century. His rebellious stance led him into conflict with the Ottoman establishment and he was hanged on the orders of the Ottoman governor Hizir Pasha.

a common, clear and well-known place in "traditional Alevism", "modern" or recent Alevism has invented a new tradition through the festival culture.

A Case Study: the Ninth British Alevi Festival

Aside from the cultural activities of various communities, there are certain events in Britain that are organised by other Turkey-based groups and organisations other than Alevis, such as the DayMer Culture and Art Festival, the Newroz Festival and the Anatolian Cultural Fete. Some of these celebrations have been taking place for over thirty years (Demir, 2012; Sirkeci et al., 2016; Eskioğlu, 2019). It is possible to read the Alevi Festival within the context of an interaction with these similar events. But, along with this interaction, it is also possible to argue that the British Alevi Festival must be seen in association with those large-scale events that had an effect on the building of the Alevi diasporic identity in continental Europe, notably in Germany. Alevi migration to Britain became significant in the 1980s, as it was in the 1960s to Germany. Thus such issues as the problem of identity in the second generation (see Portes and Zhou, 1993) and the Alevi revival and organisation that occurred on the continent in the 1980s were not experienced by British Alevis until the late 2000s. During this time, as a means to overcoming the social problems within Alevi society, British Alevis adopted steps focussed on emphasising Alevi identity, such as expanding and strengthening Alevi organisations, introducing Alevism lessons in schools and associations, and promoting the recognition of Alevi belief and culture. The festival was born out of an intensification of these cultural steps. As it was in other areas, British Alevis followed the experience of Alevis in continental Europe in developing cultural events. In this regard, I can suggest that the major Alevi events that began in Hamburg in 1989 and spread across Germany and other European countries where Alevis lived were precursors to the British Alevi Festival.

In the declaration brochure of the First Alevi Festival UK, held in 2011, it was underlined that despite the first *cemevi* opening in Britain in 1993, it had taken a number of years to reach the point of organising a festival. One of the fundamental aims of the festival was not to be limited to the existing achievements concerned with institutionalisation, publication and education. The declaration states other aims under the Alevi motto of "*Bir olalım, iri olalım, diri olalım*" ["Let's be one, let's be huge, let's be lively"] such as unifying the community, inculcating a sense of belonging to young generations, publicising Alevism and encouraging Alevis to acquaint themselves and engage with British society and other cultures living in Britain. Based upon all these goals

"a mass gathering, open air Alevi Festival" was needed (EACC, 2011). Besides all the aforementioned functions, the festival was seen as a symbol of Alevis becoming a society that celebrates its achievements and not only one associated with massacres and their commemorations (Release of EACC Youth Branch, cited in Akdemir, 2016).

The Ninth British Alevi Festival was held between 25 May and 2 June, 2019. Despite smaller versions in Edinburg and Sheffield, the main event of the festival took place in London. Since the Alevi community in London represents a large section of the total Alevi population in Britain, London is the centre for Alevi activities in Britain and the festival in the capital is distinguished in terms of participation, content and impact. For this reason, it would not be incorrect to say that almost all observations on Alevis and the Alevi Festival in London may be generalised to apply to the Alevi community in Britain as a whole. The festival has several meanings for the Alevi community in Britain in terms of the expression of identity and increased visibility, the reproduction of local networks, the embodiment of a contemporary political discourse transferred from the land of origin, and a reflection of the longing for the homeland. In considering these we need to consider the process of organisation, the profile of the participants, the activity and programme schedule, the dominant discourse, the political context and the spatial organisation.

Space-Object-Performance: Projections of Homeland

One of the features of heterotopias is their ability to bring multiple spaces or locations that seem incompatible together in one single real place (Foucault, 1984). The places of worship (for example, *cem*), rituals (for example, *ziyaret*) and where daily and social life occurs (for example, the *ocak* network) in Anatolian Alevism have always been intertwined with something else that may have been transformed and have had particular meanings for the community (Yalçınkaya, 2005). This practice, serving as a sort of protective shield for the community in the rural setting, has been transferred to the cities, to metropolitan life and to the diaspora in different ways and forms (Salman, 2019).

The festival ground is an example of this. Although some events were held at the *cemevi* and the concerts on the last day of the festival took place several miles away in a park in Hackney, the main part of the festival took place at the Churchfield Recreation Ground, Enfield, North London, a 5,000 square metre field thousands of kilometres away from the homeland of Alevism. The buildings standing at the entrance to the field were used as a degassing and purging centre during the Second World War but currently are the headquarters of the Alevi Federation whose doors were open throughout the entire festival. The grounds and buildings served as one big "home" for the participants of the

festival, a home or homeland where they felt at ease, where they could express themselves, where they felt that they belonged and where they felt that it belonged to them. By the row of stands on the right of the field, there was a large *kılçadır*[7] decorated with authentic rugs, stools and sofas by the Göksunlular Association from Maraş (see Figure 1). Both in front of this tent and other stands, including those of particular hometown associations, throughout the festival grounds there were signboards and queues for indigenous dishes such as *gözleme*, kebab, *halka tatlısı*, *ayran*, Turkish coffee and *çay*. Children and the young put on performances of Turkish and Kurdish *halay* (folkdance) music and bilingual announcements invited people to join in with them. Throughout the festival, many *deyiş* (songs and poems specific to Alevism) were played on the stage and people performed the *semah* (ritual Alevi dance) in bare feet. All of these were parts of a heterotopia complete with objects, symbols, figures and performances organised in a space in a diaspora that existed in a different geographical environment far from their place of origin.

Many similar sights could be encountered during the festival. However, one of the most unequivocally impressive site was the *dem* or *muhabbet* that was set up on the stage after the activities ended on the evening of the sixth day of the festival.[8] The stage, which was covered in authentic Anatolian rugs and was reserved for various activities during the day, transformed into a *cem/dem* circle in the evening. A few *zakir*s (Alevi bards) came and sat down. A *ziyaret* (in this case, an old *saz* or *bağlama*[9]) was placed in front of the main *zakir*. Those who partook in the *dem* took off their shoes and sat in a circle after respectfully greeting the *ziyaret* and the *zakir*s. The *zakir*s continued to recite Kurdish-Turkish *deme*, *nefes*, *duaz* (types of Alevi poems and songs) into the late hours of the night. Sometimes, some participants were "carried away" (*aşka geldi* in Turkish, a "collective effervescence", a loss of individuality and unity with the group, in the Durkheimian sense) as they performed the *semah* on the stage with bare feet.

This scene as a whole indicates the fact that the Alevis at the festival could still organise a social space to invoke a memory in an appropriate and intimate

7 An Anatolian *oba* (nomad) tent made of goat's hair cloth.

8 *Dem* is literally used for moment, time, breath, alcoholic drink in Turkish. *Muhabbet* literally means conversation and metaphorically love, fondness. Combining all these literal and metaphorical meanings, *dem* or *muhabbet* is used for a type of small-scale, symbolic *cem* ritual accompanied by Alevi songs and *semah*.

9 In Anatolian Alevism, the musical instrument *saz* is referred to as the "stringed Quran" that gives a voice to holy poems or songs. Referring to it as *baglama*, and thus as *ziyaret*, is a manifestation of it sacredness.

FIGURE 1 Large Nomad Tent, Göksunlular Assosication
SOURCE: AUTHOR

way to reflect the experiences of their land of origin. The festival grounds and the organisation of the festival as a whole reflected the Alevis' efforts to make/establish/gain a place for themselves within an heterotopic space in the diaspora. Here, the effort to transform space into a place and to attribute a history and a sense of community to that space was also the projection of a desire to transform the diaspora into a homeland experienced by those who were exiled or driven away from their lands of origin for whatever reason.

Locality within Locality

The Alevis settled in London represent three intertwined forms of locality. The first one emerges out of the inner fractioning of the community tied to a person's place of origin. The majority of the community today is organised around a hometown association (*dernek*; abbreviated as *-der* in Turkish). These associations are founded on the basis of a locality (province, town or village in Turkey) or on the basis of a tribe (*Elbistan Community, Bozca-der*, *Paz-der, Dersim-der*, etc.). Secondly, the Alevis in London represent a community with their own local characteristics within the broader European Alevi diaspora and within the Alevi community as a whole. Very similar to workers associations (*landsmanshafts*) founded by the Ashkenazi Jewish migrants in the early twentieth century (Gidley, 2013), the Alevis in London, while being organised under different associations and institutions, have a feeling of solidarity among themselves and with Alevis in the European diaspora and in Turkey. Third and

lastly, with a network composed of hometown associations, *cemevi*, the BAF, other Alevi organisations, political groups, small and large-scale businesses, art centres, and so on, Alevis have created a local community of businesses, trade, education, arts and politics within the host society comparable to other migrant communities in the north east of London.

The British Alevi Festival is one of the meeting points where all three forms of locality come together or become intertwined. Preparations for the festival start months in advance of the event. During these months of preparation, there are regular announcements on the BAF social media account about the businesses that sponsor the festival. Almost all the sponsors are businesses operating in districts of London which have a high population originating from Turkey and are either established or co-managed by people from Turkey. In this way, on the one hand, the firms are able to convey a message to their target group by supporting the festival and engaging in self-promotion both before and during the festival. On the other hand, the Federation receives financial support and expands its network of recognition. This is an example of an ethnic economy established at the local level, especially through small businesses (Bilecen, 2016; Eroğlu, 2018). Hometown associations constitute the other branch of this network. Although they are not within the institutional structure of the BAF, the target audience of the Federation are also members of these associations. Naturally a section of members or executives of these associations take part in the preparation and organisation of the festival and all the associations had a tent in the festival grounds. Moreover, one or more associations are included in the festival schedule with a specific event almost every day. These associations either draw their members to the festival or act as a meeting point for their members during the festival. They not only generate income for themselves through the sales of food, beverages and indigenous products, but they also contribute to the organisation of the Federation in terms of renting booths, providing publicity and attracting participants.

The layout of the festival grounds, with regional associations on the left, Alevi businesses on the right and with certain political groups sprinkled throughout, resembled a miniature re-creation of the local network of Alevis settled in London. This re-creation brought together, in one place but on different planes, all the actors that have played a significant role in the formation, development and rise of the Alevi identity in the diaspora, reflecting all of its progress from hometown associations to transnational actors.

Identity, Adaptation, Sense of Belonging

As featured on festival posters, the theme for the Ninth Festival, which had previously made references to saintly Alevi figures such as Seyyid Nesimi, Yunus

Emre and Pir Sultan Abdal, was the motto of Hallac-ı Mansur:[10] "truth lies in humanity, humanity is the truth (*insan hak'ta, hak insanda*)". Sufi Mansur is one of the most prominent figures in Alevi thought and literature. The theme "On the path to *En-el Hak*, everything is going to be great" brings together the millennia-old philosophy of Mansur with a recent popular political slogan and constitutes, as underlined by Soileau (2005), a perfect example of establishing links with tradition. It is also possible to observe this emphasis on tradition in the festival manifesto and speeches (Haber Newspaper, 2019), where general concepts such as unity and solidarity are often brought together with the beliefs of Alevism such as *cem olma* (being together), *çerağ uyandırma* (symbolic illumination), *yol bir sürek binbir* (the path is one, practices are a thousand and one), and *rıza şehri* (city of compliance).

As previously mentioned, the Alevi community in Britain had sought solutions to the disengagement and crisis of identity experienced in particular by their second-generation youth in the 2000s. In this period, Alevi identity served as a cement for the unifying and restorative formation that was being built. Steps, such as the increase in Alevi cultural centres, the establishment of the Federation and the introduction of classes on Alevism in schools, yielded results in a short period of time (İ. Erbil, personal interview, 10 January, 2019). It is possible to assess the role of the festival in preserving culture and in constructing identity within this context. For the generations born in the diaspora and raised in a different cultural world with a different language, this effort at preserving and transmitting Alevi culture to the next generations not only had importance but also contained tensions. To illustrate using a concrete example, the language spoken at home[11] for second- and third-generation Alevis (roughly under the age of thirty) is English but the languages of the festival were largely Turkish, Kurdish or Zaza. But most of the Alevi individuals under the age of twenty whom I met at the festival preferred to communicate primarily in English when possible. In this situation, it is not surprising that there is a difficultly in transferring the concepts of the Anatolian Alevi terminology to a generation born and raised in the capital city of the UK and then expecting them to be the bearers of Alevi culture.

10 Hallac-ı Mansur, also known as Mansur Al-Hallaj, was a Persian mystic born in 858 AD. He was brutally executed in 922 CE for his political views.

11 By "home" in this context is meant the closely defined neighbourhoods in which Alvis live in London.

From conversations in the festival grounds with younger generation Alevis, it is clear that they, in particular, are caught in the middle in terms of their diaspora identity, being integrated in the culture of the host society whilst simultaneously feeling a sense of belonging to the Alevi culture. During these conversations some young festival-goers said that they felt good in the atmosphere of the festival, that they loved being with their friends from Turkey, participating in folk dances and in the *semah* and that they wished that there would be more of these cultural activities. But, there were also those who questioned the cultural boundary on which the community stands, including the festival, referring to the desires of the middle-aged and older generations to preserve their culture and identity:

> Is this a cultural festival or a kebab festival? There are folksongs, folkdances, food and beverages … it's all very well but how long can this continue? How many British people are there here? How many people from other nations are there here? We all already live in the same places (in the city). We all see the same people. It is no difference here. (F. K./woman, 26 years old, personal conversation, 28 May, 2019).

On the other hand, this festival opened up opportunities for assessing the sense of belonging, citizenship and attachment to other migrant communities and minorities besides the issue of cultural integration into British society. The traumatic socio-political background of Alevi migration to the diaspora and seeking asylum status in the UK have shaped the conceptions of homeland, citizenship and the Alevi sense of belonging in this country. During my conversations on the festival grounds, I noted numerous statements similar to the following:

> Look, here we practise Alevism freely. Nobody asks us anything at school, at work, on the streets, nobody looks at us. The municipality allocated this space and in the middle of this square we are playing our folk songs and performing the *semah* in another country. I wish this was the case in our own homeland too. (Personal field notes).

Here, it is possible to observe how the conceptions of belonging-otherness expressed through the words "our own" and "another" become intertwined and transformed into each other. The migrants, who had to migrate to the diaspora as a result of being marginalised in the country they think they belonged to, also have a sense of belonging to another country.

Political Sympathies, Critical Contacts

The need for, and the act of organising, an Alevi festival for whatever reason is in itself political due to the historical background of Alevism. Alevi festivals have always been political because of the Alevis' attitude towards the state (whether in Turkey or abroad), the ideology of the coordinating organisations and representatives, and the messages that are conveyed. The spirit of the British Alevi Festival is no exception. On the basis of voting preferences both in the UK and Turkey (London Council, 2019; YSK 2015–2019), and on my own data from general observations and interviews with Alevi organisations' leaders and individuals, it is clear that Alevis in Britain, as in Turkey, support social democratic, left-wing or socialist policies. The high number of votes for the Peoples' Democratic Party (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi*, HDP) and the Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP) in Turkish elections and the visible support for the Labour Party in certain boroughs of London where there is a high Alevi (Turkish-Kurdish) population is clear evidence of this. The scene at the festival confirmed this. Although there were local representatives of other political parties and groups present, the dominance of the Labour Party in this area of London was clearly reflected at the festival. This demonstrates their support for what they see as a political discourse in the UK that is sympathetic and in tune with their struggle for survival and recognition as a migrant community in British society (and more generally in Europe). The political bonds forged are also a means of improving Alevis' relationships with the host community and local political actors.

The festival also encompassed a second important political message, one concerning the impact of current Turkish politics on the diaspora. The most prominent political figure in the festival grounds was Ekrem İmamoğlu, the candidate for the Istanbul mayoral elections that were to be held on 23 June, 2019, accompanied by his campaign slogan "Everything is going to be great". Despite his initial win in March of that year, he had been forced to rerun the election as a result of political intervention and he had become highly popular during the process. From my observations at the festival, people rarely talked about the current affairs of the host society or about British politics; rather at tables, food queues, meetings, in the front of stands and during personal interactions, all conversations revolved around the Istanbul elections. Posters, banners, signboards, and balloons carrying İmamoğlu's slogan were everywhere, both on the stage and in the festival grounds.

Lastly, it was also possible to observe the political cleavages and factions within the Alevi community itself at the festival. For example, on the one side of the field, by the tents of hometown associations, there were associations

connected with certain leftist groups and with the Kurdish movement in Turkey. On the other side there was the CHP (Turkey's main opposition party) positioned between the *cemevi* and executive stands. This reflects the fact that for some time now diaspora Alevis have been in disagreement amongst themselves on a number of topics, such as the definition of Alevism, its place within Islam, and the representation and political position of Alevis. This has meant that certain Alevi organisations have come to advocate different positions in terms of such issues as Kurdish-Turkish nationalism, regionalism and so on and, as a result, certain sections of the Alevi community have sought to dissociate themselves from these organisations or at least not to become involved with them. However, for now, the Alevi community in Britain seems to have arrived at some sort of compromise on the superordinate identity of being Alevi in the diaspora. The overall scene at the festival demonstrates that Alevi identity is open to the creation of a common ground that goes beyond regional-ethnic-political cleavages and also meets the expectations of those Alevis in the diaspora who do not belong to any organisation. However, in the long-term, the political atmosphere in Turkey and the trajectory of the Alevi movement and of the diaspora will have a significant impact on this.

Conclusion

Alevis in Britain, whose migration background is based on violent and traumatic experiences in their homeland, faced not only economic and political problems but also issues of cultural integration and identity during the early years of migration. The search for a solution to the crisis of identity experienced, in particular, by the second generation resulted in a consolidation around Alevism. In addition to the steps that took place at the end of the 2000s towards formal institutionalisation, education, recognition, and intra-community organisation, the efforts to reinforce religious-cultural identity also gained momentum. The British Alevi Festival, organised for the first time in 2011 and with its ninth event constituting the main case study for this analysis, was one of the important means for increasing the visibility of Alevi culture and identity in Britain.

As in previous years, the main theme of the Ninth British Alevi Festival centred on fundamental aspects of Alevism. With its symbols, prayers, rituals, *deyiş*, *semah* and instructional activities, the programme offered opportunities not only for introducing and transferring Alevi cultural memory and identity to the younger generation but also bringing middle-aged and older generations together around common values. The organisation of the space, the food

and drink served during the festival, the objects on sale, the symbols used in decoration, the music, folk dances and the performances created a scene from Anatolia within the British Isles. It thus was an attempt to create projections of the homeland within the diaspora. In this way, the festival mirrored the traditions, values and desires transferred from the homeland and reflected the historical origins of the British Alevi community. However, despite its emphasis on tradition, the festival itself was not yet ten years old. But as an ongoing event it plays a significant role in the Alevis' efforts to gain their footing, recognition and public visibility in this new homeland. The festival contributes to the mobilisation of local relationship networks, the construction of multifaceted political connections and the consolidation of the bonds of belonging within the community. In this sense, it is possible to perceive the festival as an invention of tradition for building a future in the new homeland of the Alevi diaspora.

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