Author: Dicle Paşa

Arab Alevism and the Symbolic Construction of Gender within the Community

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Summary

This entry focuses on the religious structure, symbols, and ritual practices that shape the gender regime within the belief system of Arab Alevism (Nusayrism). Through elements such as the spiritual unclehood relationship, the institution of discipleship (tilmizlik), mythological narratives in the Kitab-ül Mecmu, the Nakhfi ritual, and the symbolic meaning of the "ceviz" (walnut), it analyses how masculinity is constructed on religious and cultural levels and how women are positioned outside this structure. Texts such as the Reyhan prayer, in which the woman is defined as the “source of the nafs” (carnal soul), demonstrate the religious legitimacy of patriarchy. The entry offers a critical perspective on the intersections between belief systems and gender regimes, using the case of Arab Alevism as a point of departure.

Definitions

Arab Alevism (Nusayrism) can be defined as an ethno-religious belief, a social identity, or a culture. This community, living in various regions of the Middle East such as Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Turkey, is referred to by different names including Arab Alevis, Nusayris, Nusayri-Alevis, or Fellahs. These names, however, have at times been used as tools of assimilation or forms of denigration by dominant discourses. Despite being subjected to oppressive and exclusionary narratives and practices, Arab Alevis have occasionally adopted these labels themselves and have been able to subvert their derogatory intentions.

In Turkey, Arab Alevis mainly reside in the provinces of Antakya, Adana, and Mersin. Since they have historically earned their livelihood primarily through agriculture, they have been referred to as “fellah,” an Arabic term meaning “farmer.” The use of the term “Nusayri” for Arab Alevis has several origins. The first is the association of their teachings with Muhammad Ibn Nusayr, one of the foremost disciples of the 11th Imam Hasan al-Askari, who continued and significantly contributed to the doctrine (Doğruel 2010, 35; Uluçay 2010, 77–78). Additionally, the retreat of Arab Alevis—subjected to assimilation, repression, and massacres—into the Nusayriyya Mountains is also seen

as a reason for this naming. Terms like *Ensar* and *Nasrani*, meaning “helper” and “Christian” respectively, also carry layered meanings within Arab Alevi narratives, influenced in part by the impact of Gnostic Christianity (Işık 2013, 32).

Doctrines & Some Rituals

Arab Alevism is the continuation of the “tradition of the secret” (*sır geleneği*), which corresponds to a patriarchal brotherhood of men, sustained through the “unclehood tradition” (*amcalık geleneği*) within the “path doctrine” (*yol öğretisi*). This path doctrine encompasses the stages of religious instruction given to Arab Alevi boys under the leadership of sheikhs—religious leaders recognized by the community—and accompanied by three religious feasts (vows). It includes the selection, during the boy’s adolescence, of a spiritual uncle (*seyyid*) chosen by the family to teach him religion, the selection of a “helper” or “substitute” uncle (*dekhıl*) who serves as a witness, and the process whereby the child, in the position of a student (*tilmiz*), is sent to the house of the chosen uncle with the participation of the congregation after the third religious feast, in order to learn the faith.

Religious instruction includes the transcription by hand of selected verses from the *Kitab-ul Mecmu*—a book considered sacred by Arab Alevis alongside the Qur’an—into the child’s own notebook, their memorization, and the process of reaching a level where the child can participate in communal prayer through these verses (Türk 2013, 100–117). The child, as a *tilmiz* sent to his uncle’s home, is considered the uncle’s spiritual son; any marriage between the uncle’s daughters and the *tilmiz* is strictly prohibited.

Women are not included in this tradition of the secret (*sır öğretisi*). Within the doctrine, the roles of women are shaped by patriarchal practices such as marrying someone from the Arab Alevi community, giving birth to and raising male children who will continue the teaching, preparing their sons for their own instructional process, and performing gender-based divisions of labour during religious feasts—such as cleaning the prayer spaces where men will conduct communal prayer and preparing the feast meal (excluding *Hrise*, which is considered a core dish) (Paşa 2019, 2023, 2024). It is forbidden for women to learn the “tradition of the secret” or to participate in the communal prayers performed by men.

Furthermore, it is forbidden for women to touch the notebook in which men write verses, the *Kitab-ul Mecmu*, or the grape juice called *Nakhfi*, which is consumed and shared among the male congregation during prayer and represents another symbolisation of male brotherhood. Arab Alevism, constructed as a male-dominated belief system, is able to reproduce this structure through various rituals and

symbolisations. For example, during prayer, the *Reyhan* prayer is recited for symbolic purification (the cleansing of souls and the environment through *raiha*), in which a male *reyhan* plant—one that does not bear fruit—is used, and it is stated that “not even the scent of a woman should be allowed into the space” (Özbek 2006, 36–64).

In addition, the walnut, referred to as *cövz el tıyb*, which is symbolised through both inner (batınî) and outer (zahîrî) meanings, has its outer shell associated with women—portraying them as “superficial” (Özbek 2006)—while the walnut’s inner kernel, representing a deeper meaning, is associated with men. The conveyance, authority, and depth of knowledge are maintained through a masculine hierarchy and perpetuated accordingly. Among Arab Alevis, it is forbidden and considered sinful to eat the meat of female animals.

Social Life

Although Arab Alevism is gendered in terms of forms of worship, social participation is realised through a more modern lifestyle. In Arab Alevism, social engagement—such as dress, division of labour, and public presence—takes place with the involvement of both women and men. Participation in funerals, weddings, social gatherings, and work life can be given as examples of this. Nevertheless, the continuation of caregiving labour within the home—such as caring for the elderly, disabled, or children—remains gendered. The same pattern is evident in matters of inheritance, property ownership, and the observance of religious festivals. Clothing styles are comfortable and modern.

Sacred Places

The sacred places for Arab Alevis are white-domed shrines known as *ziyaret*. These shrines may be visited for worship during special days of significance to Arab Alevis, such as *Ğadir Humm*, as well as during ordinary times, vow offerings (*adak*), weddings, funerals, and similar occasions. Prayers are recited within the *ziyaret*, and incense called *bakhkhur* is burned. Rituals include circumambulating (*tawaf*) the shrine and taking a piece of the “green cloth” found inside, which is then tied to individuals, household items, vehicles, or trees. These practices are believed to protect people from evil and the evil eye. Additionally, *bakhkhur* is brought home and burned to cleanse the house of malevolent spirits. *Bakhkhur* and green cloths acquired for a newly purchased item, house, or car carry meanings of protection and invoke historical memory.

Massacres & Genocides

Arab Alevis have been subjected to numerous “historical, political, and social”

devastations both during the Ottoman period and throughout the Turkish modernization process (Mertcan 2013). They continue to resist oppressive and assimilationist policies directed at them. The most immediate example of this in the Middle Eastern context can be observed in Syria, which shares a border with the region in Turkey where Arab Alevis predominantly live. The year 2025 has witnessed instances where jihadist groups, particularly Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), have threatened and committed acts of genocide against Arab Alevis and other minorities living in the region. Similar to the massacres in Dersim, Maraş, and Sivas-Madımak in Turkey, thousands of Arab Alevis have been killed, displaced, raped, or abducted. This ongoing threat has not received adequate global attention and support, and it has negatively affected the Arab Alevi community living in Turkey as well. The threat continues to persist.

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