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The Cami - Cemevi Project

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Summary

The Mosque-Cemevi Project (CCP) was initiated in Turkey under the banner of interfaith tolerance and social unity, yet it sparked strong opposition within the Alevi community as a controversial case of spatial and political engineering. The project sought to merge a Sunni mosque and an Alevi cemevi—the central space of Alevi worship—into a single physical structure. It came to public attention, particularly during the 2013 protests in Tuzluçayır, Ankara, where heavy-handed state intervention deepened the controversy. Viewed by many Alevis as a tool of assimilation and symbolic domination and as an attempt to suppress long-standing demands for recognition, the project was widely interpreted as a spatial reproduction of the structural inequality between Alevism and Sunnism.

Historical Background

The Mosque-Cemevi Project was framed during the rule of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) with ideological terms such as “brotherhood,” “unity,” and “togetherness.” It was officially promoted as an initiative to ease tensions between Alevis and Sunnis. However, critics argued that rather than fostering genuine equality, the project functioned as a symbolic integration—or “harmonisation”—strategy designed to dissolve the symbolic presence of Alevism into dominant Sunni norms without actually recognising Alevi identity (Ecevitoğlu and Yalçınkaya 2013).

The first implementation attempt took place in 2013 in the Tuzluçayır neighbourhood of Mamak district, Ankara, with the support of the Cem Foundation and the Hacı Bektaş Veli Anatolian Culture Foundation. From the very beginning, Alevi residents of the area responded with mass protests, which were met with disproportionate police force. The use of water cannons (TOMAs), armoured vehicles, and heavy tear gas resulted in numerous injuries and led to the spread of resistance from the neighbourhood to other cities. Media outlets covered the events with ironic headlines such as “Brotherhood Beating in Mamak” and “Tolerance with Tear Gas.”

Political Interpretation and Criticisms

Alevi communities have interpreted mainly the project as a form of “enforced representation without recognition.” In a context where *cemevis* are still not officially recognised as houses of worship, while mosques are state-funded institutions under the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet), the claim that the two spaces can coexist on equal footing is fundamentally flawed. Consequently, the project has been viewed not as a gesture of equality but as an attempt to create “unity within inequality.” Most Alevi organisations rejected the initiative, and the participation of a few institutions in the project triggered heated debates around legitimacy within the Alevi public sphere.

From a sociological perspective, such initiatives can be understood as attempts to reshape non-Sunni belief systems like Alevism into a “tolerated minority” model within a Sunni-centric conception of the public sphere (Massicard 2012). While presenting a model of spatial integration, the project disregarded the historical, theological, and ritual differences between the faiths. More significantly, it produced a discursive framework that suppressed Alevism’s demand for autonomous recognition (Sökefeld 2008; Yıldız and Verkuyten 2011). In this regard, the project stands as an example of symbolic domination disguised as public tolerance.

The Tuzluçayır Resistance: Asserting Alevi Presence in Public Space

The protests in Tuzluçayır should not be viewed solely as a reaction to an architectural project but rather as a broader rejection of the attempt to define Alevism according to Sunni norms. Emerging in the immediate aftermath of the Gezi Park protests, the resistance was supported by many activists and leftist circles (İHD 2013). Residents erected barricades throughout the night in defiance of police intervention, and in the process, symbolic narratives surrounding the project began to take shape (Toker 2013). References to the “Mamak Türküsü,” a song associated with the neighbourhood’s past as a military prison, underscored the continuity of state violence (BirGün 2013).

This resistance must be understood as an expression of Alevis’ struggle for visibility in public space and for the right to have *cemevis* recognised as independent, legitimate places of worship. One of the protestors’ central motivations was precisely this demand for spatial and religious autonomy. The project, in its existing form, conveyed a message that the Alevi faith could only have a place in the public sphere if it was subordinated to Sunni norms—rather than being grounded in the principle of equal citizenship.

Conclusion

The Mosque-Cemevi Project stands as a revealing case of the structural inequalities

underlying interfaith relations in Turkey. While the idea of spatial coexistence may appear symbolically meaningful, the project has been overwhelmingly rejected by Alevi communities due to issues of unequal status, lack of proper representation, and the continued denial of their demands for formal recognition. The Tuzluçayır resistance, in this sense, represents a collective assertion of Alevi agency against interventions targeting their faith, spaces, and historical memory.

The criticisms levelled against the project offer a stark warning against instrumentalising Alevism under the guise of “brotherhood” without genuine political recognition or internalisation of its values. In this context, the Mosque-Cemevi initiative has been widely regarded as a spatial manifestation of symbolic domination—carried out under the guise of “tolerance architecture.”

References & Additional Readings

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