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Transnational Alevism

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Summary

Transnational Alevism refers to the evolving religious, cultural, and institutional formations of Alevism that have emerged in response to migration, displacement, and diasporic conditions. Rooted in the collective experiences of exclusion and discrimination in Turkey, and shaped by the legal and cultural environments of Western countries, transnational Alevism describes a dynamic field in which Alevi identity, community, ritual and spatial belonging are reconfigured across borders.

Definition and Scope

Transnational Alevism denotes a reconfiguration of Alevism shaped by migration and diaspora conditions and sustained through cross-border networks, practices, and institutions. It encompasses the rearticulation of Alevi identity, the growth of diasporic religious spaces such as cemevis, and the emergence of new organisational logics responding to the legal, political, and cultural environments of Western countries. It reflects a move from an ocak-based, charisma-driven religious structure to a cemevi-centred, bureaucratised and institutionalised Alevism (Hanoglu 2023a).

The term transnational Alevism also implies an ongoing interplay between diaspora communities and the homeland, with transnational networks facilitating the flow of people, remittances, religious materials, and symbolic capital. These connections not only shape diasporic life but also influence the socio-religious landscapes of Turkey, for example through the building of *rural cemevis* and the return of ritual practices reconfigured in diaspora contexts (Hanoglu 2024b).

Transnational Alevism cannot be understood merely as the extension of homeland religion into the diaspora. Rather, it is a creative space of negotiations where Alevis actively remake their religious culture, often balancing between change and continuity, visibility and authenticity, institutionalisation and pluralism, secular integration and religious heritage (Hanoglu 2021). It engages with broader debates on diaspora, religion, and identity politics. It reflects what Johnson (2007) terms a *“diasporic religion”*, whereby religious traditions are not only preserved but actively

reimagined in new spatial, political, and social contexts. It also intersects with debates on secularism, and religious pluralism in Western contexts, where the legal recognition of Alevism has necessitated institutional reorganisation and standardisation of rituals (Hanoglu 2023a).

Transnational Alevism is both a product of displacement and a field of agency. It encapsulates the transformation of a historically persecuted and oral tradition into a globally networked, spatially materialised, and politically engaged community. While it offers new forms of visibility and empowerment, it also raises critical questions about continuity and the negotiation of identity and tradition under modern conditions (Hanoglu 2023a; 2023b; 2024a; 2024b; 2025).

Diasporic politics of identity, visibility and recognition

Unlike Sunni settlements, which are often concentrated in low-lying regions, towns, and cities, Alevi settlements in Turkey are more commonly located in remote and mountainous areas — a pattern of social and geographical isolation resulting from centuries of oppression and marginalisation. The accompanying economic and social disadvantages prompted many Alevis to migrate from their villages to major cities in Turkey in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Some of them later left these cities and moved abroad, while a large portion of those who remained in the villages migrated directly to Western countries[1].

The historical context of social, political and economic insecurity was the principal factor that ‘pushed’ Alevis to move abroad. Hence, the Alevi population in Turkey exhibits significantly higher rates of transnational migration than its Sunni counterparts (Faist 2000). Alevi migration to Europe began in the second half of the 20th century, driven primarily by labour migration to Germany. However, it continued as political migration to different European countries triggered by events such as the Maraş Massacre in 1978, oppressive Turkish state policies following the 1980 military coup, and the armed conflict between the Turkish state and the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which peaked in the 1990s and was accompanied by the evacuation and destruction of villages and forests. A considerable portion of the Alevi population consists of Alevi Kurds, who are strongly affected by this war and unsurprisingly, the majority of Alevis in Europe are Kurdish, due to overlapping ethnic and religious discrimination. There are no accurate statistics about the Alevi population in Europe, but a tentative estimate is over one million (Keles 2014), and as many as 1.5 million according to the European Alevi Confederation.

Alevis were initially not recognised as a distinct community in the diaspora and studies on labour migration considered these new immigrants to be part of the Turkish Muslim

community, except Cesari (2013) who identified Alevis with a unique category of ‘minority within the migrant minority’. However, with developments in the diaspora, they became acknowledged as a migrant faith group which increasingly distinguished them from Muslim communities. Sökefeld (2008) and Özyürek (2009) suggest that both the policy of the German government to recognise religious minorities as independent units and the legal and political conditions of the European Parliament encouraged Alevis to describe their belief as distinct from Sunni Islam and to claim recognition of this difference.

The resurgence of Alevi identity and institutionalisation in the 1990s was a consequence of the diaspora efforts, particularly in Germany, to which the largest population of Alevis migrated (Köse 2012; Massicard 2012; Özyürek 2009; Şahin 2005; Sökefeld 2008). This period was crucial in the historical trajectory of Alevism because public identification was a recent development encouraged by Alevi organisations. Alevis became visible through their increasing political action in the West (Cesari 2013; Sökefeld 2008), especially with the establishment of Alevi organisations and associations dealing with the political issues of the Alevi communities and the continuity of religious culture. These Alevi organisations and networks have played a significant role in the social and political configuration of the Alevi communities by accumulating knowledge and coordinating collective action.

The Sivas Massacre had a significant effect on the Alevi population, as it highlighted the need to establish the Alevi movement as a defence against potential attacks from radical Muslims. It was followed by strengthened Alevi mobilisation both in Turkey and particularly in the diaspora (Sökefeld 2008). Commemorations of the massacre became one of the most important elements of the Alevi mobilisation, in addition to their contribution to the recognition process for Alevis in Germany. The representation of the massacre, according to Sökefeld (2008), furthered claims for recognition by presenting the ‘Alevi-Sunni master difference’ to the German public. Narratives of the massacre were used as political capital in drawing group boundaries, which was closely linked to the efforts of the European Alevi federations to establish a common Alevi identity by addressing the oppression and discrimination of the Alevis in Turkey (Yildiz and Verkuyten 2011). By politicising and mobilising Alevis, the Sivas Massacre forced and provoked a resurgence of Alevi identity and movement all over the world, which is widely known as ‘Alevi revivalism’ (Bruinessen 1996; Sökefeld 2008). It had a strong effect on the social formation of Alevis globally and is, therefore, widely regarded as a catalyst for the emergence of Alevi identity politics and institutionalisation (Bruinessen 1996; Köse 2012; Sökefeld 2008; Yildiz and Verkuyten 2011).

Rise of an Institutionalised Alevism

Migrant groups like Alevis, who have faced discrimination and exclusion in their homelands, enjoy democratic rights, including the freedom of religion, in the diaspora where they have various organisations and networks flowing across borders. However, to ensure continuity in the Western and global context, Alevis have needed to rearticulate their social structures and ritualised religious culture within new settings. Consequently, Alevi communities, as well as Alevism itself, transformed within the social, political and spatial spheres of the diaspora, where modern, secular, and global discourses dominate everyday life.

Several factors have contributed to this transformation in the diaspora. First, the socio-political context of Turkey that forced Alevis to be invisible in public life made them concentrate on politics of identity and recognition, imposing visibility and material existence in the diaspora. Secondly, the immobility of traditional religious institutions, *ocak*s, which are rooted in tribal settings, could not be transferred to the diaspora, leading to organisational and operational challenges. Thirdly, the spiritual essence of Alevism, valuing diverse interpretations and practices, contrasted with the need for collectivisation in the quest for reconstruction of identity and community in the diaspora. Likewise, Alevi mysticism, which emphasises morality, wisdom and inner quality rather than formalist worship, confronted the need to focus on the representation of Alevism in the quest for visibility and recognition. Finally, governmental regulations of religious pluralism require new organisational and operational structures to allow for official recognition.

As Alevis migrated first to urban Turkey and then abroad, their ties with ocaks weakened, leading to the disappearance of ocak-based religious, social, and organisational functions in the diaspora (Hanoglu 2023a). The need for communal spaces to gather, practise religion, and conduct funerals gave rise to cemevis, which became central to rebuilding collective cohesion and religious culture. This shift marked a significant institutional and spatial transformation from the pre-migration period. A Weberian reading of this process highlights how cemevi-centred Alevism replaced the spiritual charisma of the ocaks with bureaucratic power. While traditional authority rested on religious-charismatic foundations, the new institutional frameworks—cemevis and associations—were led by secular figures operating under bureaucratic rules. This process reshaped the position of the Alevi clergy, namely *pirs/dedes*, whose influence increasingly depended on their role within institutional structures and became rationalised as part of the cemevi/association bureaucracy.

This transition to cemevi-centred Alevism allowed diasporic Alevis to focus more on

rational actions aimed at their collective interests, namely the politics of identity, visibility and recognition. This encouraged Alevism to be a more ‘organised’ and institutionalised religion that was endorsed by the Western regulations of religious pluralism. Brubaker (2013) points out that the legal frameworks of Western states, which protect freedom of religion and religious pluralism, inspire migrant faith groups to become organised with an authority structure that stimulates institutionalisation. Religious education in public schools is also viewed as a means of institutional support for religious pluralism.

Indeed, the provision of religious education in public schools has been a fundamental factor that advanced Alevi institutionalisation. For example, the Alevi community in the United Kingdom experienced important public developments after Alevism began to be taught in schools in areas densely inhabited by Alevis in 2012, within the scope of the national religious education (RE) curriculum. Currently, Alevism is taught within the RE curricula of over 20 schools. This has enlarged the legitimacy of Alevism as a religion and paved the way for an institutional shift. Subsequently, in 2015, Alevism was accepted as an official religion when the British Alevi Federation (BAF) was granted religious foundation status as an umbrella organisation covering 12 cemevis (currently 18). This development brought more opportunities in the public sphere and recognition by more state institutions. The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Alevis, established in the same year, served as a bridge between the British Parliament and Alevis and increased the visibility of Alevis in domestic politics. Such accelerating developments strengthened Alevis’ engagement with local and national authorities and increased their participation in domestic politics. The election of more than 20 Alevi councillors in the London boroughs of Enfield, Hackney and Haringey in 2018 and the election of the first Alevi MP in the British Parliament in 2019 are some of the results of the increasing visibility of Alevis in the UK public sphere.

Diasporic Alevi politics is significantly influenced by Turkey’s political context, shaping Alevi moral and citizenship claims. The political activism and lobbying strategies of migrant Alevis in Europe and beyond are concentrated on protesting Turkey’s discriminatory policies and demanding recognition of cemevis as places of worship. Transnational linkages allowing Alevis to engage, communicate and constantly exchange information help their claims for recognition in Turkey as well as in settlement countries. Their intention to address and put pressure on Turkey’s policies connects worldwide Alevis and expands the community’s transnational political activism, producing cross-border solidarity. Thus, the Alevi claim for identity, visibility and recognition serves a collective triadic purpose, asserting their territorial rights simultaneously in Turkey and the countries of settlement.

More than 250 Alevi associations in European countries (particularly in Germany, the United Kingdom, France, the Netherlands, Austria, Belgium, Switzerland and Sweden) are connected through national federations under the umbrella of the European Alevi Confederation, which made Europe an organisational centre for worldwide Alevis. The organisational and financial power of these associations in providing space for various community activities and services, along with the Alevi media, have developed and maintained social and political cohesion in and between Alevi communities and pushed for the political mobilisation around an Alevi collective identity (Coşan-Eke 2016; Koşulu 2013; Sökefeld 2008; Yaman and Dönmez 2016; Yildiz and Verkuyten 2011). The transnational networks of European Alevis transferred ‘identity discourse and an identity-based association model’ to Turkey (Şahin 2005). Indeed, the European Alevi associations link worldwide Alevi communities through various collaborations, campaigns, events and forums for social and political issues affecting Alevi communities and thus contribute to advancing the Alevi movement in Turkey (Hanoglu 2025).

The national federations, representing Alevi populations in their countries of settlement, campaign for recognition in the international arena, particularly in the European Union (EU) and its parliament. The Alevi Friendship Group of the European Parliament, established in 2018 by the Socialist and Democrat MEPs, reflects such efforts. As a result of lobbying activities, Alevis have increasingly become one of the key players in talks about Turkey’s accession to the EU, with the claim for recognition and the disadvantaged situation of Alevis in Turkey becoming a noticeable element in the negotiations. Official recognition of cemevis as places of worship and compulsory Islamic religious education of Alevi children were the primary issues most frequently occurring in the European Commission’s progress reports.[2]

Conclusion

Transnational Alevism describes the ongoing transformation of Alevism in response to international migration and diasporic conditions. Alevis’ pursuit of visibility and recognition, rooted in their history of marginalisation in Turkey, has led to institutional, spatial, and ritual transformations. This transformation, while fostering cohesion and visibility, also introduces new tensions around standardisation and authenticity. Migration has made Alevism transnational, embedding it across borders in both material and symbolic ways.

Migration has not only reshaped the internal organisation of Alevism but also expanded its political scope. Through their associations and federations, diaspora Alevis have pursued recognition both in Europe and transnationally, forming a

collective politics of identity and visibility. These developments underscore the dynamic role of the diaspora in transforming Alevism into an increasingly institutionalised and globally interconnected religious community.

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Endnotes

[1]: This pattern is particularly evident in the Alevi migration to the UK (Hanoğlu, 2025).
[2]: See European Commission Turkey progress reports, https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/countries/detailed-country-information/turkey_en and European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) - Country monitoring in Turkey, https://www.coe.int/en/web/european-commission-against-racism-and-intolerance/turkey

References & Further Readings