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Indigeneity and Alevism

Date Published: **July 2, 2025**

Summary

This entry examines Alevism as an indigenous identity within Turkey's ethnically and religiously diverse context. Historically one of the most contested concepts in the region, Alevism comprises a spectrum of heterodox communities with distinct ethnic, linguistic, and ritual practices. The entry highlights how variations among Turkish, Kurdish, Azerbaijani, and Arabic-speaking Alevi groups reflect a complex religious identity shaped by both regional affiliations and historical ties to movements such as Twelver Shi'ism and the Safavids. Drawing on the global discourse of indigeneity, the entry situates Alevism within broader frameworks of marginalisation, state-led assimilation, and internal colonialism. It explores the unique cultural attributes and pre-Islamic origins of Alevism, advocating for its acknowledgement as an indigenous identity. It also analyses the community's continuous fight for rights and recognition in Turkey from this perspective.

Conceptual Background

As an ethnoreligious identity, historically, Alevism has been one of the most contested concepts in Turkey and the region (Aydın, 2018). The term "Alevi" encompasses various heterodox communities with notable differences in their beliefs and rituals. In Kars, an eastern province, Azerbaijani Turkish-speaking communities exhibit a form of Alevism that closely aligns with the orthodox Twelver Shi'ism found in modern Iran. In southern Turkey, particularly in Hatay and Adana, Arabic-speaking Alevi communities are ethnically linked to Syria's 'Alawite (Nusayri) community and lack historical connections to other Alevi groups. Significant Alevi populations comprise Turkish and Kurdish speakers, both groups believed to be descendants of rebellious tribal groups with religious affiliations to the Islamic faith, i.e. Safavids (van Bruinessen, 1996). As a growing body of scholarly works discusses the various aspects of Alevi identity, the main distinction in approaches to Alevism is their proximity to Islam. That is, the pre-Islam history of Alevism and distinct ways of practising it indicate an ancient practice/ set of rituals (in Turkish: kadim). The concept of indigeneity will be utilised to explore the uniqueness of Alevi identity and the distinct, ancient aspects of Alevism.

Indigeneity is also a debated concept, particularly since the global indigenous rights movement became more visible in the late 1960s. Indigenous identities are shaped by local circumstances, global cultural trends and international entities like the United Nations. Since the rise of indigenous political movements in the 1970s, these identities have become increasingly complex and dynamic. The question of who qualifies as 'indigenous' is inherently political, as such classifications emerge from conflicts over social, cultural and economic issues at specific times. As María Elena García highlights, engaging with indigeneity means exploring 'how difference is produced culturally and politically', rather than merely depicting it 'as it really is' (García, 2008, 217, as cited in Postero, 2013). As the struggles of indigenous peoples worldwide continue, Alevis have also been challenging state practices and addressing the collective traumas they face in Turkey, including marginalisation, oppression, forced displacement and assimilation (Cetin and Jenkins, 2024). This entry examines the approaches to those challenges associated with Alevi identity and the pursuit of fundamental rights from an indigenous perspective. Furthermore, it will discuss Alevism as an indigenous identity within Turkey, analysing its cultural significance, historical oppression and the struggle against systemic assimilation from an internal colonialism perspective.

Alevism and Multiple Identifications

The identification and self-identification of Alevism involve multiple perspectives, sparking debate among those who identify themselves as Alevi. When identification is imposed by external sources, such as the state, other religious groups or dominant identity communities like Sunni Muslims, it often carries a negative label that can be quite damaging. Even within academia, there is a visible tendency to describe Alevism as a sect of Islam; Grigoriadis and Akdeniz (2021) define Alevis as a heterodox Islamic group that has existed in Anatolia and its adjacent regions since the late eleventh century, following the introduction of Islam. Although the authors identify Alevis as including Turkish, Zaza, Kurmanji, Pomak, Albanian and Arabic speakers, they suggest that those people honour Ali, the Prophet Muhammad's son-in-law, thus setting themselves apart from Sunnis, and derive their name from him. According to the research findings that come from a study of an organisation that supports Alevis and offers relevant services, in the absence of any unified structure or revered text to shape their beliefs, Alevi organisations, including Pir Sultan Abdal Culture Associations, Hacı Bektaş the Veli Anatolian Culture Foundation and Alevi Culture Associations, describe Alevism as "a path", "a philosophy" or something that embodies universal values. In contrast, both the Cem Foundation and the World Ahl al-Bayt Foundation view Alevism as part of Islam (ibid.).

It is crucial to address a key concern within this holistic approach: overgeneralisation

and the ongoing efforts to create only one Alevi identity and then homogenise it. The key issue is not whether Alevism predates Islam but rather the failure to recognise the diversity among those identified as Alevis, including Turkish Alevis, Kurdish Alevis, Nusayris and Shias. Whilst Turkish and Kurdish Alevis in Mesopotamia and Anatolia share some common practices, such as Ayin-i Cems and Dedes (religious and wise community leaders), the role of women within these communities and their rituals, some scholarly works suggest there are significant differences in their practices. Alevis are referred to by various names, such as Kizilbash, a title linked to followers of the Safavid Sufi order from the 15th and 16th centuries. They are also called Bektashi, which is associated with the Anatolian Bektashi Shi'a Sufi order established in the 13th century, to which many Alevis belong. Additionally, terms like
Tahtaci, Abdal, Cepni and Zaza represent specific tribal and linguistic identities. It is important to note that Alevis differ from the Arabic-speaking extreme-Shi'a Alawis found in Syria and Southwest Turkey (Zeidan,1999). Furthermore, the Alevis in Turkey primarily consist of Turks and Kurds, while the Alawites in Syria are mainly Arabs, who were historically referred to as Nusairis, a sect that originated in the ninth century. Additionally, there are Alawite citizens of Turkey who are of Arab descent; the 1939 redrawing of the Syrian-Turkish border split up many families, including both Sunni and Alawite groups. In southeast Turkey, particularly in Hatay, which borders Syria, there are also Alawites of Arab ethnicity, with their population estimated to be between 400,000 and 700,000 (Sandal, 2019).

Contemporary Alevis often feel distinct in religious and social contexts, necessitating self-protection from the Sunni majority. This sense of difference stems from experiences of violence in the republic's history, though recollections vary significantly based on ethnic backgrounds and differing historical experiences (Dressler, 2020). Although the transformation and redefinition of Alevi religious identity have attracted considerable interest within international academia since Alevism's revival in the 1990s, the situation of the Kurdish Alevis needs further exploration. The dynamics of cultural transformation within contemporary Kurdish Alevism offer distinct sociological insights into religion-making processes. In recent decades, Kurdish Alevis have undergone significant sociocultural shifts. Ahmet Kerim Gültekin (2024) discusses a significant aspect of the Kurdish Alevi belief system. He argues that despite being regarded as a component of Anatolian Alevi culture, the *Raa Haqi* religion of Kurdish Alevis should be recognised as a distinct belief system. It demonstrates intriguing similarities in cultural patterns and beliefs to various other self-contained ethno-religious communities in the Middle East, including the Ezidis (Yezidis) and the Yaresan (Ahl-e Haqq or Kaka'i).

Following the common practice of addressing Alevis as Turkish, Kurdish and Arab, a

growing body of scholarly sources indicates significant differences among these belief systems, despite efforts to group them under an exact identification of Alevis. Although Alevism is predominantly associated with Shia beliefs followed in the Islamic Republic of Iran, mainly due to its connections with Ali, the son-in-law of the Prophet Mohammed, the distinctions between other groups and Shias are more pronounced. Whilst Alevis in Turkey are exposed to systematic oppressive state practices, Shiism is a mainstream/ recognised religious practice in the Islamic Republic of Iran, especially since 1989 (Levy, 2009). The distinctions between Shias and other Alevi peoples are mainly seen in Turkey and Syria, not only in religious, spiritual or cultural practices but also in their experiences with host states.

Exploring Internal Colonialism: Indigeneity and the Systematic Assimilation of Alevis

Indigeneity discourse is recognised as a political and cultural identity, rather than a mere ethnic classification. Alfred and Corntassel (2005) assert that indigeneity is an ongoing experience shaped by colonial forces. In this context, the theoretical framework of internal colonialism highlights the oppression faced by the Alevi community. Understanding historical interpretations of colonialism is crucial for comprehending the past, present and future of oppressed and marginalised peoples within and across national boundaries. In a world where coercion perpetuates the superiority of certain nations, classes and genders over others, it is essential to identify the systemic roots of inequality that span from individuals to regions, countries and globally. Chávez (2011) suggests that this awareness aids in addressing these issues and charts a path towards a more equal and peaceful society. Therefore, historians and other scholars should at least explore the concept of internal colonialism in more depth.

Since the formation of the Republic of Turkey, Alevis have suffered systematic marginalisation, violence, forced displacement, assimilation efforts and exclusion from religious representation within Turkey’s Directorate of Religious Affairs. Another form of state-led discrimination involves attempts to assimilate Alevis through education and enforced Sunni religious teachings. These prolonged governmental practices have positioned Alevism not just as a faith but also as a political identity. Martin van Bruinessen (2023) includes Alevism within the categories of religious, ethnic and political minorities, while Omer Tekdemir (2018) emphasises that the rise of Alevi political identity is a response to this oppression.

Public discourse framing Sunni Islam as threatened has surfaced in various incidents. In 1978, in Maraş, Turkey, over 111 people (mostly Alevis) were killed, and their

properties damaged amid claims like “Communists are burning mosques” and “Our religion is at stake.” In July 1993, during the Alevi festival honouring Pir Sultan Abdal in Sivas, a mob killed 35 intellectuals, mainly Alevis. Two years later, a gunman targeted shops in an Alevi neighbourhood. Protests followed, resulting in over 20 Alevis being killed by Turkish security forces. Numerous acts of violence against Alevi homes have been recorded in recent decades, preceding the rule of the Justice and Development Party (AK Party). A 2013 police report claimed that 78 per cent of those detained during the Gezi Park protests were of Alevi origin, a statement contested by some opposition parties and the Alevi community (Sandal, 2019). In summary, systemic practices and state-supported or encouraged actions against Alevi identity, ranging from denial, oppression, marginalisation, massacre, and assimilation, can be analysed within the framework of internal colonialism.

Understanding Alevism as an Indigenous Practice

The experience of indigenous peoples in other regions of the world closely resembles that of the Alevis within recognised nation-states. Alevis have cultural and spiritual practices dating back to Islam or other religions. The overgeneralisation of Alevis, or identifying any group that distances itself from Sunni Islam, is also a way of denying diverse beliefs, religions or cultures. The use of Alevism as a general term has also become part of the effort to unify multiple and unique forms of beliefs and practices. Overgeneralisation of indigenousness has been pointed out by indigenous scholars as well; as Sium et al. (2012) succinctly note, often, only Western cultures are allowed to be diverse and contradictory, while Indigeneity is expected to be ‘pure’, of one mind and aesthetic, and easily identifiable. Indigenous peoples and Alevis face comparable experiences in their host states, including oppression, marginalisation, assimilation, forced displacement and the denial of their religious and ethnic identities.

Another notable similarity lies in their connection to nature and their perception of unity as a whole. Indigenous communities perceive themselves and nature as members of a broader ecological family with a shared ancestry and origins (Salmón, 2000). Studies of indigenous communities and their ecologies reveal the significance of “earth practices”, which are rooted in local cosmopolitics, ontologies and epistemologies − a theme that has been raised in particular by some indigenous thinkers (Hanoğlu et al., 2025). Gültekin (2024, 587) also states: “…land is not just an environment where non-human beings live; it is a living part of the *Raa Haqi* cosmology inhabited by non-human entities and humans”. He suggests that indigenous communities, along with various groups not formally recognised as indigenous, like the Kurdish Alevis of Dersim, regard their surroundings as inhabited by ‘persons’ – including mountains, lakes, trees, and spiritual objects – that they see

as living non-human entities or souls. In addition to discussing the negative experiences shared by Alevis and indigenous peoples, including simplification and historical denial or assimilation practices, Alevism warrants greater recognition as an ancient belief system. This is due to the intrinsic nature of the Alevi faith and worldview, which aligns closely with those of indigenous peoples.

Conclusion

This entry approaches Alevism from an indigeneity perspective to explore the parallels between the experiences of Alevis and indigenous peoples in their host states and practices, particularly regarding their relationship with nature. One of the key propositions that indigenous scholars criticise is who falls within the indigenous description, as well as the tendency to define and create a singular definition of indigenous people. The increasing studies on Alevism also draw attention to the overgeneralisation of Alevi identity and its implied connection to Islam. This umbrella definition of Alevis is used to address, ethically, linguistically and, more importantly, religiously, different practices, including those of Kurdish Alevis and Arabic-speaking Alevis (Nusayrism). As indigenous studies scholars suggest, colonisation never ends for indigenous peoples; therefore, indigenous peoples worldwide still face oppression, marginalisation and assimilation practices by host states. Alevis in Turkey also experience denial, oppression, marginalisation, forced displacement and assimilation practices by the state. As a form of assimilation practices, significant efforts have been made to connect these unique religious, spiritual or cultural practices to Islam through the Prophet Mohammed's son-in-law, Ali. However, increasingly, Alevism studies emphasise the ancient (*Kadim*) aspect of Alevism as opposed to the mainstream state discourse.

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References & Further Readings