



Author: Samuel Vock-Verley

Can

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Summary

The Alevi concept of *can* stems from its Persian Sufi heritage. In the poetic and mystical literature, it is associated with the ideas of life and soul, love and the divine. The term is now mainly used during the *cem* rituals. It also conveys some of the contemporary identity and political claims of the Alevi associations.

Etymology and Sufi Origins

According to Nişanyan's etymological dictionary, the word comes from the Persian *jān*, translated as "life" (*yaşam*), itself derived from the Sanskrit *vyāna*, translated as "soul" (*ruh*). In Turkish and Persian Sufi literature, the concept of *can* was used in addition to the Qur'anic Arabic concepts of *ruh* to name "the element that provides vitality to the body" (Uzun 1993). In *Divan* literature, the *can* is considered as an invisible and immaterial component that gives life to the material body made of flesh and skin. In these works of poetry, this component also nourishes the feeling of love, as shown in the addresses from the lover to their beloved as "*Ey can*". It was also used in the Sufi terminology, for instance in Mevlana Rumi's *Mesnevi*, to name the eternal soul of the human being that emerges at birth and that finds its divine origins in the prophetic light. In Sufi work, the word *can* is sometimes used to refer to Allah, Prophet Muhammad, the Sufi sheikh or the angels. As such, the term *can* was sometimes used by the dervishes of the Mevlevi and Bektashi brotherhoods to refer to one another. In the everyday life, the Turkish word *can* is also very widespread: it is used for anything that is *canlı*, meaning "live, living", or as an affectionate nickname, *canım*, "my life".

The Use of Can in Alevi Literature and Rituals

The concept of *can* has been used in the Alevi sources, especially in the hymns known as *nefes* among the Bektashis, and as *deyiş* among the Alevis (Gül 2021). Today, the term is mainly used during *cem* rituals: the *dede* or the *ana* often addresses the assembly as *canlar*. It was in the Alevi associations, now in charge of this ritual held every Thursday evening, that the ritual use of *can* made a comeback in the 1990s with the construction of the modern, urban *cemevi*. In this contemporary Alevism, the term



canlar is now used to express a more horizontal relationship, in contrast to the hierarchical relationship between masters and disciples that traditionally prevailed. In the identity debate, the ritual use of the concept of *can* has become an argument for Alevi associations seeking to differentiate themselves from the majority Sunni Islam in Turkey. It has become the symbol of “Alevi egalitarianism”, particularly between men and women, a widespread discourse that nonetheless invisibilises the existing gender inequalities in these communities (Nimet 2016).

Nature, Can, and Contemporary Animist Interpretations

Since the early 2000s, the reinvented Alevi concept of *can* has also given rise to new uses in the context of environmental struggles, in resistance to extractive and destructive industrial projects, especially in Dersim. Some Alevis now claim a form of “animism”, understood as a sensitivity to the existence of every “life-soul”, *can*, in the world. From this reinvented perspective, human beings are composed of a “life-soul”, an immaterial principle that they share with non-human beings, be them animals, plants or even minerals. In a politicized reinterpretation of the theory of the Oneness of Being (*Vahdet-i Vücut*) of the Sufi master Ibn Arabi, living beings in nature are considered by these activists as sacred and must be protected from all forms of exploitation.

Conclusion

The concept of *can* is part of the Alevi mystical poetic tradition, both written and oral. It is also flexible, open to change and reinterpretation, and has become a political tool for self-representation in the hand Alevi associations. For a long time, the term was mostly used to refer to the human soul of divine origin, but it has now been extended to non-human living beings as part of environmental struggles.

References & Further Readings

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