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Village Cemevis and Transnational Alevi Placemaking

Date Published: **July 2, 2025**

Summary

This entry traces the emergence and significance of rural cemevis built by migrants, situating them within broader debates on migration, religious change, and spatial politics. It explores how they emerged from collective remittances, their role in reconfiguring the visibility of Alevism in marginalised rural geographies in Turkey, and their function as sites of diasporic identity and communal continuity.

Conceptual Background: Migration, Remittances and Religious Space

The emergence of rural cemevis must be situated within the broader diasporic transformation of Alevism—marked by new forms of visibility, subjectivity, and institutional development in Europe—which has, in turn, shaped religious and spatial engagements in the homeland (Hanoğlu 2023; 2025). The construction of cemevis in rural Alevi villages through the collective efforts of diaspora communities represents a striking and underexplored development in the contemporary transformation of Alevism. These village-based worship and gathering spaces—referred as *remittance cemevis*—have proliferated in recent decades, reshaping the religious, spatial, and symbolic life of high-emigration Alevi villages in Turkey.

Although both diaspora cemevis and rural cemevis funded by migrant remittances are connected to struggles for recognition and visibility, the latter also represent a symbolic and material reconnection with the homeland. Their financing comes not from state institutions or local authorities, but from transnational networks of Alevi village associations and kin-based solidarity within the diaspora. In this way, they constitute a translocal infrastructure that links diaspora and village through ritual, memory, and physical space.

This analysis draws on ethnographic research conducted among Alevis in London and in their villages in the Afşin–Elbistan region of Maraş, where cemevis have increasingly been built with funds raised by migrants. The emergence of village cemevis reflects a growing tendency towards collective remittances. As Alevi migration to the UK was

largely shaped by chain migration—often involving the relocation of entire extended families—many migrants no longer had immediate relatives in the village to send individual remittances to. Instead, collective remittances were organised to fund public and communal projects, foremost among them the construction of cemevis.

Collective Remittances and the Making of Cemevi in the Village

In the high-emigration Alevi villages of Maraş, the building of cemevis has been made possible through collective remittances—funds raised collaboratively by migrants, typically via hometown associations based in diaspora. These associations, formed along kinship and village lines, play a central role in organising campaigns, collecting donations, and coordinating construction processes. Unlike individual remittances directed to family members, collective remittances serve communal ends, reinforcing social bonds both within the diaspora and between migrants and their villages of origin.

For British Alevis, contributing to the construction of their village cemevi is a deeply valued act. Many participants in the study proudly recalled their donations and viewed their contribution as a moral and spiritual duty. The funerary dimension plays a significant role here: most migrant Alevis have a strong desire to be buried in their village, and the cemevi is essential for enabling funerals in accordance with Alevi religious customs. These practices create a lasting transnational infrastructure that connects diaspora and homeland through the rituals of death and remembrance.

The building of a cemevi is often one of the first collective projects undertaken by a migrant village community. In many cases, this investment is followed by the rebuilding of family houses, and symbolises the return not only of individuals but of the community as a religious and cultural collective. These initiatives have generally not involved collaboration with state institutions. For Kurdish Alevis in particular, who constitute the majority of the British Alevi population, a conflicted relationship with governmental authorities—shaped by historical experiences of exclusion and violence—has meant that such projects are carried out independently of state support.

These collective remittances are best understood not merely as financial transactions, but as acts of communal and spiritual investment. They represent flows of religious capital from the diaspora that materialise in built space while carrying emotional, moral, and political meaning. As such, *remittance cemevis* are not only architectural structures but social projects that consolidate Alevi identity, memory and belonging in place.

Visibility, Recognition and Spatial Politics

The construction of rural cemevis through collective remittances reflects not only the material transformation of Alevi villages but also a broader politics of visibility and recognition. For generations, Alevis in Turkey were forced to practise their faith in secrecy. Public identification as Alevi carried the risk of marginalisation or violence, and Alevi communities lacked any formal religious infrastructure. In this context, the emergence of cemevis as purpose-built communal and worship spaces in villages marks a visible assertion of Alevi presence where it was once concealed.

In these spaces where Alevi identity was once invisible, cemevis become active declarations of identity. This transformation represents both an identity revival and a shift in spatial politics, in which Alevi villagers, empowered by diaspora remittances, reshape the built environment to reflect their communal and spiritual values.

Despite their de facto legitimacy and proliferation, cemevis are not officially recognised as places of worship. To navigate this legal and political landscape, many rural cemevis are registered under secular designations such as *köy konağı* (village mansion), *halk evi* (people's house), or *dernek* (association). This strategy enables communities to avoid bureaucratic obstruction while continuing to use the buildings as fully functioning cemevis (Salman 2015).

This tension between visibility and recognition underscores the contested status of Alevism in Turkey. While diaspora Alevis have achieved varying degrees of recognition in European contexts, the Turkish state's refusal to recognise their places of worship forces Alevi communities to seek alternative strategies (Hanoğlu 2025). The *remittance cemevis*, although materially prominent, must therefore continue to navigate a space of official denial. In this way, they represent not only acts of faith and memory but also quiet forms of resistance to religious exclusion and spatial marginalisation.

Transnational Practices and Ritual Connectivity

Rural cemevis built by migrants are not only constructed through transnational ties—they are also maintained, activated, and imbued with meaning through transnational ritual practices. A central function of these cemevis is to facilitate funeral services, particularly for deceased community members whose bodies are repatriated from the diaspora for burial in their ancestral villages. This has become a widespread practice among diaspora Alevis, whose emotional and symbolic connection to the village is often reaffirmed in death. In this context, village cemevis serve as the 'receiving end' of a transnational funerary infrastructure. The corresponding 'sending end' is often a diaspora cemevi, such as the London Cemevi, which plays a key role in organising the return of the deceased. These coordinated arrangements allow Alevi

communities to uphold their religious customs across borders and constitute a significant expression of continuity and belonging. As Zirh (2012) has argued, such rituals represent a form of transnational community-making that defies national boundaries.

The usage of rural cemevis is largely seasonal. Most Alevi villages in the Afşin–Elbistan region are almost entirely depopulated in winter, inhabited only by a small number of elderly residents. During the summer, however, villages come alive with returning migrants. It is during this time that cemevis host *cem* gatherings, *kırk* (forty) meals, commemorations, and other events. In some cases, they also accommodate weddings and other celebrations, marking them as multifunctional communal spaces. This multifunctionality distinguishes rural cemevis from their diaspora counterparts. For example, while weddings are sometimes held in village cemevis, they are generally not hosted at diaspora cemevis, such as the London Cemevi, where the symbolic and visual presentation of Alevism is more formalised and structured. This difference reflects the adaptive nature of village cemevis, which respond to the seasonal rhythms and practical needs of returning migrants, while still serving as key sites for the enactment of diasporic religious and social life.

Moreover, large-scale events such as the Köseyahya Village Festival—organised collaboratively by emigrant villagers and the Elbistan Cemevi—illustrate how village cemevis operate within a wider network of institutional support. Migrants finance the event, and services are provided by the central cemevi, including catering and logistics. These events reinforce translocal solidarities and sustain institutional links across generations and geographies.

Village Cemevis as Diasporic Place-Making

Remittance cemevis represent more than the religious institutionalisation of village life—they are central to how migrants imagine, return to, and reshape the ancestral homeland. Through their contributions to the construction and maintenance of these spaces, diasporic Alevis actively participate in the transformation of rural Alevi geographies in Turkey that were once marked by neglect, invisibility and marginalisation. These buildings are therefore key components of diasporic place-making, in which returning migrants re-inscribe the village as a site of identity, memory, and belonging.

Many of the cemevis in the villages remain locked and unused for much of the year, only opening in summer when migrants return. In this seasonal rhythm, cemevis function as ‘migrant spaces’—built, financed, and inhabited by those who remain emotionally, ritually, and symbolically tied to it. Their presence affirms that these

villages, though demographically thinned, remain active sites of social and spiritual life, albeit on a transnational and cyclical basis.

The temporal and spatial specificity of rural cemevis also marks them as distinct from diaspora cemevis, which operate year-round as centres for community services, political activity, and ritual performance. Whereas diaspora cemevis are often tasked with representing Alevism publicly, rural cemevis perform the role of restoring spiritual continuity and grounding return. This distinction reflects the different functions and meanings attached to place in contexts of migration and return.

In this regard, the building of rural cemevis can be interpreted as part of a broader process of symbolic repatriation. Migrants who invest in these buildings are not simply constructing a religious space; they are also reaffirming their place in a village community they may no longer inhabit full-time. For many, this investment allows them to maintain a sense of rootedness, claim moral authority, and establish continuity between generations. The cemevi thus becomes a central node in the production of diasporic belonging and intergenerational memory.

Conclusion

Rural cemevis built by migrants stand at the intersection of religious continuity, diasporic return, and spatial transformation. Emerging from the collective efforts of Alevi migrants, these structures are not only functional religious spaces but also symbols of belonging, resistance, and transnational solidarity. In a context where official recognition of Alevi places of worship remains denied, the appearance of cemevis in historically marginalised villages signifies a quiet but potent form of visibility and self-assertion.

These cemevis reflect a shift from private to public expressions of Alevism in the rural Turkey. Financed through collective remittances and shaped by the lived experiences of diaspora communities, they operate as seasonal yet enduring sites of ritual, memory, and return. Their dual character—as both religious institutions and diasporic projects—offers insight into how migrant communities shape the physical and symbolic landscapes of their places of origin.

Ultimately, *remittance cemevis* exemplify how migration does not sever ties with the homeland but instead enables new forms of religious agency and spatial articulation. In sustaining ritual practices, facilitating intergenerational continuity, and asserting communal presence, these buildings materialise the ways in which diaspora Alevis continue to remake the village as a space of identity, care, and return.

***This entry is adapted from the author's original research article: Hanoğlu, Hayal. 2024. "Migration, Collective Remittances and Religion: The Growth of Alevi Worship Places (Cemevi) in the Rural Homeland." *Ethnic and Racial Studies,* 47 (10): 2288–2309. https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2023.2268688.**

References & Further Readings

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