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# Alevis and Alevism in Turkish Cinema

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**Summary**

This entry focuses on the representation of the Alevi-Bektashi faith and identity in Turkish cinema, examining the role of cinema in the construction of cultural identities from a historical and sociological perspective. Cinema is approached not merely as an aesthetic medium but as a discursive space where cultural, social, and ideological relations are produced. In particular, the cinematic portrayals of marginalized identities are shaped by dynamics of social power, practices of historical exclusion, and struggles for public visibility. Within this framework, the representation of Alevism in Turkish cinema is analyzed across two main periods. The first covers the pre-2000 era, characterized by implicit and indirect portrayals, while the second spans the post-2000 period, when Alevi representations became somewhat more visible, though still limited. These representations serve not only cultural but also ideological functions. The entry adopts a holistic approach to the representation of Alevi-Bektashi identity in Turkish cinema, considering cinematic narrative strategies, identity visibility, and the broader cultural-political context across different periods. In doing so, it analyzes both the meanings and social functions of Alevi representations within historical, social, and political frameworks. Finally, it explores how Alevism is encoded in cinema through symbols, rituals, and characters, and how these representations have evolved over time.

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## Introduction

In modern societies, cinema emerges as a powerful medium in the construction and expression of cultural identities. Beyond being an art form, cinema functions as an audiovisual communication platform that not only offers aesthetic experiences but also bears witness to historical, social, cultural, and political transformations. In this context, cinema is considered a public space that renders visible the positions, perceptions, and struggles of various religious, ethnic, and cultural groups within society. Cinematic representations are closely linked to social hierarchies, power dynamics, and practices of cultural hegemony.

The representation of different identities and belief systems in cinema is shaped by

the political pressures, discrimination, and struggles for public visibility these groups have historically faced. Groups marginalized or othered by dominant cultures are often subjected to stereotypical and reductive portrayals in film; yet, they have also developed practices of resistance and self-representation in attempts to subvert and transform these portrayals. These dynamics underscore the multilayered and contradictory nature of cinematic representations.

Turkish cinema, with its high capacity to reflect the country's complex social structure, cultural diversity, and historical transitions, is a significant audiovisual narrative domain. Therefore, the representation of different ethnic, religious, and cultural identities in Turkish cinema is not merely an aesthetic issue—it is also a historical, social, cultural, and political matter intertwined with collective memory and identity politics. Alevism, which holds a significant place in Turkey's cultural and religious diversity and constitutes a distinct belief system outside the dominant Sunni-Islamic paradigm, has historically been marginalized, othered, and subjected to continuous definitions and limitations imposed by the official state discourse. This marginalization has deeply influenced how Alevism is represented in cinema—typically through implicit, symbolic, or reductive portrayals.

Representations of Alevis and Alevism in Turkish cinema can be broadly examined in two periods. The first is the pre-2000 era, characterized by mostly implicit portrayals, and the second is the post-2000 period, marked by a relative increase in visibility. To understand the visibility of Alevism on screen, one must consider a combination of historical, social, political, cultural, and economic factors. It is well established that representations are inherently ideological and shape public perception—especially in the case of identities defined as "the Other" by mainstream society (Hall 2017). In this framework, cinematic representations of the Alevi-Bektashi faith/identity have often been encoded through symbols, hagiographies, rituals, and mythological elements, while direct and explicit portrayals remain rare. Consequently, Alevism has been rendered "visible" within boundaries set by dominant discourses, and this visibility has frequently been limited to a set of cultural symbols. This study analyzes the representation of the Alevi-Bektashi faith/identity in Turkish cinema through a historical, social, and political lens, focusing on cinematic narrative strategies, identity visibility, and the broader cultural-political contexts of different periods.

## Early Representations: From the Era of Theater Artists to the Era of Filmmakers (1922–1952)Alevis and Alevism in Turkish Cinema

In the early period of Turkish cinema, representations of the Alevi-Bektashi faith and identity were limited to only a few films. For nearly three decades, aside from these

few examples, no visual or narrative elements related to the Alevi-Bektashi belief system or identity appeared on screen. This reflects a broader issue of underrepresentation or complete invisibility in cinematic discourse. Even in the few existing portrayals, the extent to which they realistically reflect the Alevi-Bektashi tradition remains debatable.

The first known cinematic depiction of Alevi-Bektashi identity emerged during the so-called “Theater Artists Era” (1922–1939) with the film *Nur Baba – The Mystery of the Bosphorus* (1922), directed by Muhsin Ertuğrul and based on Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoğlu’s novel of the same name. The fact that the film’s main character is a Bektashi and that the Bektashi order is portrayed in problematic ways makes this an important—though controversial—example. Despite its dramatic narrative structure, the film’s overt focus on religious elements and its framing of these elements in a way that targets a particular community intensifies the representational issues. In particular, the way the film aligns with the long-standing societal myth of the “mum söndü” (a pejorative trope about Alevi morality) served to reinforce negative stereotypes against the Alevi-Bektashi community.

Following *Nur Baba*, there are no other notable films from the “Theater Artists Era” that openly or implicitly address the Alevi-Bektashi identity. In the subsequent “Transitional Period,” one noteworthy production is *Kızılırmak Karakoyun* (1946), an adaptation of the folk tale of the same name. The script was written by Nâzım Hikmet (under the pseudonym Ercüment Er), and once again, Muhsin Ertuğrul served as director. According to the literature on Turkish cinema from this era, aside from *Nur Baba* and *Kızılırmak Karakoyun*, no other films are directly or indirectly associated with Alevism. However, due to the lack of sufficient sources, it remains uncertain whether *Kızılırmak Karakoyun* contains any explicit representations of the Alevi-Bektashi faith. As such, whether this film can be considered a meaningful example of religious representation remains an open question.

**Implicit Representations: From the Era of Filmmakers to the 1990s Alevis and Alevism in Turkish Cinema**

The 1950s marked a transformative era in Turkish cinema. During this period, the number of filmmakers increased, state support for cinema became more visible, and Turkish cinema began producing more developed works both in cinematic language and thematic depth. This phase, known as the “Filmmakers’ Era,” began with Lütfi Akad’s *In the Name of the Law* (*Kanun Namına*, 1952). Within this context, director Metin Erksan—a filmmaker of Alevi-Bektashi background—adapted the life story of the renowned Alevi folk poet Âşık Veysel to the screen in *The Life of Âşık Veysel (Dark*

*World)* (*Âşık Veysel'in Hayatı – Karanlık Dünya*, 1952). Written by Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu, the screenplay drew attention for blending documentary aesthetics with narrative cinema. However, the film faced significant censorship, triggered by elements such as the phrase "Dark World" in the title and its realistic portrayal of rural life. Depictions of short, sparse crops in the fields and young women performing the *Turna Dance* (*Turnalar Semahı*) barefoot were cited as reasons by the censorship board, leading to their removal from the film.

Although Âşık Veysel's Alevi identity was publicly known, the film contained no direct references to this faith tradition. Any implicit visual references to Alevism were rendered invisible due to the censorship interventions. Nevertheless, later interviews with the director revealed that certain symbolic elements linked to Alevism had been consciously included in the film. Among these, the "Turna Dance," or *Turnalar Semahı*, stands out as one of the film's strongest cultural and ritual representations of the Alevi-Bektashi belief system (Odabaş 2004, 547–548).

Throughout the Yeşilçam period, various elements of Alevism—including rituals, sacred utterances, venerated spiritual figures, and miracles attributed to these figures—occasionally appeared in cinematic narratives. However, with few exceptions, these representations remained superficial and lacked depth or realism. In many films from this period and afterward, portrayals of Alevi-Bektashi belief tended to revolve around the biographical narratives of religious authorities, saints, or poets revered within the tradition. While these works addressed the lives of such sacred figures, the narrative frameworks often reflected a Sunni perspective. Aesthetically, these films were also problematic. As film historian Burçak Evren notes, these religious-themed productions were far removed from cinematic realism and even failed to accurately convey fundamental aspects of Islam (Evren 2003, 12). Rather than exploring the spiritual or theological dimensions of religious figures, the films highlighted heroic deeds and extraordinary acts through hagiographic storytelling, resulting in exaggerated and disconnected narratives. These narrative formulas formed the basis of a genre aimed especially at rural audiences and relied heavily on popular religious tropes.

Between the early 1960s and 1973, dozens of such films were produced (Işık 2018, 807; Lüleci 2009). These works were later labeled as "Saintly Films" (*Hazretli Filmler*) and proliferated across Turkish cinema like a cultural epidemic. Film historian Agah Özgüç notes a sharp increase in the number of these films after 1965 (Özgüç 2005, 188). Early films from the Yeşilçam period focusing on Alevi-Bektashi spiritual authorities or saints must be evaluated within this framework. One of the earliest examples is *The Martyrs of Paradise* (*Cennet Fedaileri*), directed by Mehmet Dinler in

1965. The film follows a classical melodramatic aesthetic and tells the love story of two young people struggling to unite during the early years of Islam. It attempts to depict the emergence and spread of Islam through common folk narratives and well-known Islamic figures, yet it fails to present a coherent or artistically significant work. The film was later re-released under the title *Imam Ali and the Martyrs of Paradise* (*Hz. Ali ve Cennet Fedaileri*), a strategic move aimed at drawing the attention of Alevi audiences (Odabaş 2004, 551).

Two notable films from the mid-1960s, categorized as part of the “Saintly Films” (*Hazretli Filmler*) trend, depict the life story of Abu Muslim al-Khurasani, a historical figure revered within the Alevi-Bektashi tradition. *The Hero from Khorasan* (*Horasan’dan Gelen Bahadır*, 1965), written by Recep Ekicigil and directed by Natuk Baytan, along with its sequel *The Three Horsemen of Khorasan* (*Horasan’ın Üç Atlısı*), narrate Abu Muslim’s rebellion against the Umayyads, highlighting the regime’s hostility toward the Ahl al-Bayt and Abu Muslim’s role in the downfall of the Umayyad dynasty. Another film, directed by Yılmaz Atadeniz in 1969, reinforces a symbolic connection between Abu Muslim and Imam Ali by having the protagonist wield Zülfikar, the legendary sword associated with Ali. This film emphasizes Abu Muslim’s loyalty to the Ahl al-Bayt and his deep devotion to Imam Ali. While all three films have been criticized for exploiting religious sentiment and distorting historical reality, they hold particular significance for the Alevi community as rare instances of cinematic representation of their historical and spiritual figures.

A major example from this period is *Hacı Bektaş Veli (Those Who Turkified Anatolia)* (*Anadolu’yu Türkleştirenler*, 1967), directed by T. Fikret Uçak. This film dramatizes the life of Hacı Bektaş-ı Veli—a central figure in the Alevi-Bektashi tradition—drawing from *Vilayetname*, the hagiographic account of his deeds. The narrative follows Hacı Bektaş’s spiritual empowerment by Ahmed Yesevi and his journey to Anatolia (specifically Sulucakarahöyük), chronicling the miracles attributed to him. The film attempts to visualize the mythical and legendary elements associated with Hacı Bektaş, yet it includes several historical inaccuracies. Despite incorporating many widely known Alevi legends, the film falls short in presenting a coherent and faithful portrayal of the Alevi-Bektashi belief system. From a historical and theological standpoint, the film is deeply flawed. It ultimately presents Hacı Bektaş not as a spiritual leader within Alevism, but from an orthodox Sunni perspective. Nevertheless, *Hacı Bektaş Veli* remains significant as one of the first films to directly take the Alevi-Bektashi belief system as its central subject. For this reason, the film was embraced by Alevi audiences and garnered widespread attention (Koluaçık & Cantaş 2023).

Another rare and remarkable work from the Yeşilçam era is *Kızılırmak Karakoyun*,

directed by Lütfi Ömer Akad in 1967. The film incorporates both symbolic and dialogical elements of the Alevi-Bektashi belief system with a level of realism not commonly seen in the period. While the film centers on the melodramatic tale of an impossible love between a shepherd named Ali Haydar and Hatice, the daughter of a tribal leader, it also reveals underlying historical and social conflicts. The narrative transcends a mere romantic plot and offers a cinematic representation of the broader social transformations occurring in Anatolia. *Kızılırmak Karakoyun* is considered one of the first Turkish films to portray Alevism in a direct and visible way. A particularly notable sequence is the gathering of the *erenler* (saints), featuring a ritual trial of a "fallen" member (*düşkünler meydanı*)—depicting key elements of Alevi justice such as *dar* (ritual standing), *sorgu* (interrogation), and internal ethical accountability. These scenes dramatize the authority structure and moral values of Alevism through figures such as *pir*, *dede*, or *mürşid*. The film visualizes the internal workings of Alevi-Bektashi social and spiritual life, offering rare insights into its historical discursive framework. In contrast to other Yeşilçam productions that reduced Alevism to folkloric motifs or ignored it entirely, this film presents a more layered, ritualistic, and historically grounded portrayal.

Lastly, *The Lion of God: Imam Ali* (*Allah'ın Arslanı Hazreti Ali*), directed by Tunç Başaran in 1969, is a representative product of the "Saintly Films" trend. The film begins in pre-Islamic Mecca and narrates the spread of Islam through the lens of the relationship between Prophet Muhammad and Imam Ali. Throughout the film, Ali is portrayed as an ideal Islamic figure—brave, just, loyal, and a defender of the oppressed. His role in the propagation of Islam is constructed around themes of courage, loyalty, and jihad, aligning with the dominant hero narrative of religious-popular cinema of the time. However, a closer examination of the film reveals that it entirely omits the mystical, esoteric, and heterodox dimensions of Imam Ali that are central to the Alevi-Bektashi tradition. Instead, it adheres to a Sunni-Orthodox depiction that emphasizes formal ritual observance and Sharia compliance. As such, the representation of Imam Ali in this film aligns not with the spiritual and symbolic figure revered in Alevi-Bektashi cultural memory, but rather with a Sunni-Orthodox historiographical framework. This portrayal fails to establish any meaningful connection with the Alevi-Bektashi interpretation of Imam Ali and must therefore be seen as a product of mainstream Islamic narrative conventions.

Lütfi Ömer Akad's 1972 film *Gökçe Çiçek* serves as a thematic and aesthetic continuation of his earlier work *Kızılırmak Karakoyun* (1967). Once again, Akad places the socio-cultural life of nomadic Turkmen tribes at the center of the narrative, framing the story within the broader transition of semi-nomadic communities to a sedentary lifestyle in the Ottoman Empire of the 18th and 19th centuries. The film

revolves around the melodramatic love story between Gökçe Çiçek and Selman Ali, but uses this personal conflict as a metaphor for larger societal transformations. The tension between nomadism and sedentarism is portrayed not merely as a spatial shift, but as a transformation of identity and belief.

Although *Gökçe Çiçek* does not make explicit reference to the Alevi-Bektashi belief system, it is often interpreted as an implicit representation of it, incorporating symbolic and ritualistic elements associated with Alevism. Notably, the film aestheticizes these elements through traces of Shamanistic motifs and conveys them to the audience via embedded cultural codes. As Âlim Şerif Onaran observes, the film frequently integrates Shamanistic elements believed to have been carried from Central Asia to Anatolia by nomadic peoples (Onaran 1994, 109). In this sense, the film can be seen as an attempt to create a visual narrative of the cultural roots of Anatolian Alevism. *Gökçe Çiçek* stands out as a compelling example of “implicit representation,” a form through which Alevism could assert its presence in cinema during a period when explicit depictions were not feasible.

*Pir Sultan Abdal* (1973), directed by Remzi Jöntürk, is one of the earliest films in Turkish cinema to openly and directly represent the Alevi-Bektashi belief system and its historical identity. In line with the political atmosphere of the 1970s, the film reconstructs the life of Pir Sultan Abdal—one of the most significant figures in Alevi-Bektashi literature—by blending historical narratives, myths, and legends into a cinematic form. It marks a turning point in Turkish cinema, where representations of Alevi identity transitioned from implicit to explicit discourse. Following *Kızılırmak Karakoyun*, it became one of the most visible portrayals of Alevism on screen and was embraced by Alevi communities as well as by leftist and socialist circles, resonating with the political sensitivities of the time.

Director Remzi Jöntürk centers the film’s narrative on Pir Sultan’s historical conflict with Hızır Pasha, portraying it not merely as a personal struggle but as a metaphor for the broader suppression and assimilation of heterodox identities by the Ottoman state. One notable feature of the film is its use of the term *Kızılbaşlık* (Qizilbash) instead of “Alevism” or “Bektashism,” despite openly engaging with Alevi-Bektashi beliefs and rituals.

*Ali’ye Gönül Verdim* (1973), directed by Asaf Tengiz, is another example of a film that incorporates symbolic representations of Alevi-Bektashi culture. Set in the Arabian Peninsula, the film tells the melodramatic love story of two young protagonists, Ali and Gül. From the very beginning, visual and auditory cues associated with Alevi-Bektashi culture appear throughout the narrative. In one notable scene, Ali performs the

*Turnalar Semahı* (Dance of the Cranes) while playing the *bağlama*, a moment that not only showcases musical tradition but also invokes collective memory. Ali also recounts the “Legend of the Forty,” one of the core narratives of Alevi-Bektashi mythology, embedding cultural transmission into the melodramatic structure.

This scene marks one of the first visual depictions of a *semah* ritual in Turkish cinema, though it introduces a contradiction: in Alevi-Bektashi practice, *semah* is an inseparable part of the *cem* ritual and gains its meaning only within that sacred context. In the film, however, the *semah* is performed by two men and a woman as a detached spectacle, divorced from its ritualistic framework.

Although *The Saint of Hearts: Yunus Emre* (*Gönüller Fatihi Yunus Emre*, 1973) by Özdemir Birsel does not contain explicit references to the Alevi-Bektashi faith, it is notable for including implicit religious and cultural markers. The film follows the transformation of Yunus Emre, one of the most prominent figures in Anatolian Sufism, into a dervish under the guidance of Hacı Bektaş-ı Veli and Tapduk Emre. While it draws from the well-known narrative of Yunus’s spiritual journey and his training in Tapduk Emre’s *dergâh*, the portrayal of Hacı Bektaş-ı Veli positions him not only as a Sufi authority but as a *mürşid* (spiritual guide) at the heart of the mystical chain of knowledge.

Although Yunus is depicted in some parts as a heterodox dervish—known for his poetic critiques of orthodox Islam—the film ultimately neutralizes his persona, presenting him as a figure promoting the Turkish-Islamic synthesis across Anatolia. Thus, even without directly invoking Alevi-Bektashi terminology, the film uses the historical and literary character of Yunus Emre to convey certain discursive traces of the tradition (Koluaçık & Battal 2021).

Kemal Kan’s *Avşar Beyi* (1974) is an example of the implicit representation of the Alevi-Bektashi belief system in Turkish cinema. The film centers on themes commonly explored during the Yeşilçam era—such as the tension between nomadism and sedentarism, tribal versus urban life, and the cultural transformation of migratory communities. Within this framework, it subtly incorporates symbolic and cultural elements associated with the Alevi-Bektashi tradition into its cinematic narrative. While *Avşar Beyi* does not offer an explicit portrayal of Alevi-Bektashi identity, certain symbolic markers in the film suggest a cultural backdrop rooted in this belief system.

Throughout the film, invocations, folk songs, and especially the emphasis on the *Tujik Baba* pilgrimage site evoke associations with the Alevi-Bektashi sacred geography and visitation culture in Anatolia. Although the main characters—Avşar Beyi and Elif—are not explicitly defined as Alevi-Bektashi, their religious practices, oral cultural

expressions, and ritual behaviors reflect the implicit presence of this identity within the narrative.

Between 1974 and 1986, there were no significant representations—either implicit or explicit—of the Alevi-Bektashi faith or identity in Turkish cinema. This absence must be understood in relation to the political climate of the time, particularly the series of massacres targeting Alevi communities prior to 1980. Following the 1980 military coup, significant shifts occurred in Turkey's sociopolitical landscape, including major ruptures in identity dynamics. The increasing ideological pressure and social unrest of this era influenced how different identities were represented in cinema.

A turning point came in 1986 with Engin Temizer's *Yunus Emre*, marking a reintroduction of cultural and mystical elements associated with the Alevi-Bektashi tradition into the cinematic discourse—albeit in a subdued and implicit manner. While the film avoided directly naming the Alevi-Bektashi identity, it depicted Yunus Emre as a heterodox Turkish dervish. His portrayal as a praying, observant figure, however, aligned him more closely with Sunni religiosity. Despite this, the film foregrounds themes central to Yunus's teachings, such as love, tolerance, and the spirituality of the heart.

Notably, certain scenes contain direct references to Alevi-Bektashi belief. The classic exchange between Hacı Bektaş-ı Veli and Yunus Emre is recreated, and a ritual scene features Tapduk Emre reciting an Alevi *gülbank* (sacred invocation) while *canlar* (spiritual companions) perform the *semah*. The film merges Alevi rituals with Mevlevi practices, creating a hybrid representation that blurs the lines between *semah* and *sema*. This synthesis produces a visual and symbolic portrayal that, while indirect, reflects the Alevi-Bektashi spiritual tradition within a broader mystical framework.

**The Cinematic Discovery of Faith and Identity: Representations of Alevis and Alevism in Turkish Cinema from the 1990s to the Present**

By the 1990s, Turkish cinema entered a significant period of crisis, marked by a sharp decline in film production. This era, often referred to as the "Hollywood Coup," began in the late 1980s, when cinema halls were inundated with American films, pushing Turkish productions out of distribution. By the early 1990s, the number of Turkish films produced annually had dwindled to barely a handful. At the same time, the rapid expansion of television dramatically reduced cinema's mass influence.

Beginning in the mid-1990s, a new phase in Turkish cinema emerged. As Asuman Suner suggests, "New Turkish Cinema" became a platform for marginalized identities—including Alevi, Kurdish, Armenian, and Islamist voices—to gain visibility

and express themselves in the public sphere with more realism and directness (Suner 2006). Consequently, Turkish cinema, once dominated by narratives shaped by Turkishness and Sunni Islam, entered a new stage marked by the increased visibility of diverse ethnic and religious identities.

During this period, debates around identity politics and cultural pluralism gained momentum in Turkey, and cinema began to reflect a growing interest in “othered” identities. Despite this broader shift, Alevism did not take center stage in these new cinematic explorations; instead, Kurdish identity and especially representations of non-Muslim minorities became more prominent. Nevertheless, the 1990s saw the emergence of some early examples of implicit Alevi representation.

One such example is the 1990 film *Küçük Bir Bulut* (*A Little Cloud*), directed by Faruk Turgut and written by Cemal Şan. The film follows the struggles of Saycan and his family, who have migrated from their village to a shantytown in the city. While Alevism is never explicitly named, symbolic and cultural elements linked to Alevi belief and identity appear implicitly through the characters’ way of life and social positioning. Though indirect, these narrative clues suggest an underlying Alevi cultural and religious background.

Another significant film from 1990 is *Hasan Boğuldu*, directed by Orhan Aksoy. Adapted from the short story by Sabahattin Ali, the film is not only a melodramatic love tragedy but also a notable cinematic portrayal of Anatolia’s layered cultural and religious landscape. Focusing particularly on the Tahtacı Turkmens, the film conveys rituals, values, and communal structures associated with the Alevi-Bektashi tradition. While the romantic plot remains central, the surrounding community, its ritual practices, and spatial settings serve to make Alevi identity visibly present.

A pivotal moment in the film is the *dar* scene, which directly references Alevi-Bektashi ceremonial law. In this sequence, the dialogues, spatial organization, costumes, and body language collectively generate a powerful spiritual atmosphere. Here, cinematic language and ritual practice are intricately intertwined—not merely representing Alevism but organically integrating it into the dramatic structure. As such, the film presents Alevism not as mere folklore, but as a collective identity with deep sociocultural meaning. *Hasan Boğuldu* stands out as one of the few works of the 1990s Turkish cinema to incorporate the Alevi-Bektashi identity into its narrative, during a time when such visibility was only beginning to emerge.

In 1990, *Journey of Hope* (*Umuda Yolculuk*)—directed by Swiss filmmaker Xavier Koller and written by Feride Çiçekoğlu—won the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film. While the film centers on the story of a poor family from Maraş attempting to

migrate illegally to Europe, specifically Switzerland, it offers more than a migration narrative. It also presents critical images of Turkey's socio-cultural structure. Notably, the film contains what is perhaps the first explicit and realistic depiction of Alevi-Bektashi ritual and symbolism in cinema history. The film opens with a *cem* ceremony in an Alevi village, marking a turning point in the cinematic visibility of the Alevi faith. The *cem*, presented as a deeply spiritual ritual, is rendered with almost documentary-like aesthetics, maintaining authenticity and preserving its ceremonial context. This deliberate artistic choice signals the first time that the Alevi-Bektashi belief system was portrayed so directly and unambiguously on screen. By presenting the ritual without aestheticizing or decontextualizing it, the film represents a significant shift in the cinematic representation of Alevism.

*Cemal Şan's* first feature-length script, *Ali – Don't Look Back* (*Ali – Sakın Arkana Bakma*, 1996), is another key example of the implicit representation of Alevi-Bektashi belief in cinema. The film addresses issues of cultural identity, memory, and belonging through the daily struggles of individuals uprooted from their origins and trapped within the alienation of modern urban life. One central character, Mihriban Nine, is an elderly Kurdish-Alevi woman brought to Istanbul by her children after her husband's death. Though Alevism is never explicitly mentioned, the film's implicit but meaning-laden references place it as a noteworthy contribution to 1990s cinema in terms of identity representation.

In *Elephants and Grass* (*Filler ve Çimen*, 2000), directed by Derviş Zaim, Alevism appears through symbolic indicators embedded within a broader political critique of the state-mafia-politics nexus, particularly in the context of the 1990s Susurluk scandal. The character Ali Kansız, a hotel owner, features a portrait of Imam Ali in his room—an image that serves as a subtle yet powerful sign of Alevi identity. In Alevi-Bektashi culture, a portrait of Imam Ali symbolizes not only a religious figure but also values such as resistance, justice, wisdom, and fidelity to truth. The presence of such imagery in private or semi-public spaces like homes or workplaces is often an expression of faith-based identity. The film's visual emphasis on Ali Kansız looking at the portrait offers an implicit suggestion of his Alevi background. Though never directly verbalized, this cultural signification is conveyed through cinematic codes, hinting at the hidden or symbolic presence of Alevi-Bektashi identity in film.

*He Loves Me Too* (*O da Beni Seviyor*, 2000), directed by Barış Pirhasan, is considered the first Turkish film to make Alevism overtly visible. Set in rural Malatya in the 1970s, the film explores Alevi–Sunni relations through the lens of love and social prejudice. Unusually for Turkish cinema, the director explicitly uses the terms "Alevi" and "Kızılbaş," signaling a rare moment of direct representation. The film incorporates

several Alevi cultural practices—*cem* ceremonies, *semah* performances, pilgrimage culture, belief in the Twelve Imams, and the institution of the *dede* (spiritual guide). These elements aim to legitimize Alevi identity and practice within the cinematic space.

The film's narrative is framed through the perspective of a 14-year-old girl, Esma, whose initial use of the term *Kızılbaş* reflects widespread sectarian prejudice. However, her love for a young Alevi man, Hüseyin, forces her to reconsider these biases. Through the character Saliha—Hüseyin's former love interest—the film also highlights how sectarian divides constrain gender and romantic relationships. Saliha expresses the impossibility of both her own and Hüseyin's relationship with Esma due to social expectations. The film critiques how inter-sectarian marriages are viewed as taboo and rejected by both Alevi and Sunni communities, especially in rural areas. While urbanization has led to a rise in such unions, the film reveals how they remain socially restricted in traditional contexts.

*The Waterfall* (*Şellale*, 2001), directed by Semir Aslanyürek, offers another example of implicit Alevi-Bektashi representation. The film emphasizes the shrine tradition among Arab Alevis, who believe such places can heal illnesses such as paralysis, epilepsy, psychological distress, and rheumatism. The portrait of Imam Ali in the home of protagonists Semra and Yusuf signifies not only the centrality of Ali in Anatolian Alevism but also marks the family's religious identity. Although the word "Alevi" is never used, the film's symbols clearly gesture toward Arab Alevism. In addition to Alevi identity, the film also makes implicit or visible references to other religious traditions and beliefs found in the Antakya region.

*The Road Home 1914* (*Eve Giden Yol 1914*, 2006), directed by Semir Aslanyürek, stands out as one of the most significant examples of visible Alevi-Bektashi representation in Turkish cinema. As an Alevi himself, Aslanyürek has stated that he originally conceived the film as a direct "Alevi film," inspired by his grandfather's story. However, in interviews, he revealed that during the production process, he faced industry pressures that forced him to revise the script and treat the Alevism theme in a more implicit manner. This experience points to the structural censorship and internalized self-censorship mechanisms that continue to shape Alevi representation in Turkish cinema.

Despite these limitations, the film incorporates numerous elements of Alevism both explicitly and implicitly. One notable scene features soldiers spreading the traditional slander of "mum söndü" (a sexualized accusation historically used to stigmatize Alevis), exposing the long-standing societal mechanisms of moral othering. By placing

this accusation in a critical cinematic context, the film confronts and critiques dominant Sunni narratives that associate Alevism with sexual deviance and immorality.

In addition, the film includes scenes of *cem* and *semah* rituals, central practices in Alevi-Bektashi religious life. Even though the filmmaker's original vision was diluted, these layers of narrative still convey a veiled Alevi story to the viewer. As such, the film can be read as a cinematic attempt to "give voice" to a repressed and silenced faith tradition.

Another key example from the post-2000 era is *Children of a Different Neighborhood* (*Başka Semtin Çocukları*, 2008), directed by Aydın Bulut. The film is notable for its portrayal of Gazi Mahallesi, a neighborhood densely populated by Alevis, not just as a backdrop but as a symbolic character in its own right. Gazi Mahallesi is framed as a locus of identity and resistance, and this symbolic construction is woven into the cinematic narrative with considerable depth.

Centering on an impossible love between an Alevi man and a Sunni woman, the film explores sectarian divides within the framework of melodrama, while layering the background with powerful political imagery. The opening sequence shows a funeral vehicle from a *cemevi* (Alevi house of worship), marking the first time such a public symbol of Alevism appears so clearly and directly in Turkish film history. Since the 1990s, *cemevis* have emerged as not only religious spaces but also key sites of public visibility, collective memory, and communal solidarity for Alevis.

This opening scene thus sets both the spatial and thematic tone of the film, signaling Alevism's presence in the public sphere. The film also touches on the Kurdish issue, with these references forming part of the director's deliberate, layered portrayal of social conflict. In doing so, *Children of a Different Neighborhood* constructs a narrative universe where ethno-religious, class, and cultural fault lines intersect.

By addressing these multiple layers of rupture, the film highlights intersectional structures of identity representation that are often neglected in cinema. Its contribution to the cinematic struggle for Alevi visibility is not only content-based but also expressed through aesthetic and spatial choices, making it a multidimensional work of political and cultural significance.

*The Seven Courtyards* (*Yedi Avlu*, 2009), directed by Semir Aslanyürek, is another film that offers a visible portrayal of the Alevi-Bektashi belief system. The film tells the stories of individuals from different ethnic and religious backgrounds who coexist, presenting these narratives independently of each other. In the dialogues between

Yusuf and his wife Meryem, explicit references to Alevi beliefs, particularly those of Arab Alevis, are made. The film is notable for its dual approach to representation—both visually explicit and narratively plural—making it a significant contribution to the cinematic depiction of Alevism. Its focus on Arab Alevi communities opens a new dimension in representation, highlighting the local diversity within Alevi identity and expanding the conversation beyond Turkish and Kurdish Alevi contexts.

*Storm* (*Fırtına/Bahoz*, 2009), directed by Kazım Öz, is another film that contributes to the representation of Alevi-Bektashi identity in Turkish cinema. It presents a personal transformation story at the intersection of ethnic and religious identities. The central character, Cemal, comes from Dersim (Tunceli), a region closely associated with Kurdish Alevism. After passing the university entrance exam, Cemal moves to Istanbul, where he experiences the alienation typical of rural-to-urban migration. His identity crisis begins with his rejection of his Kurdish roots and an attempt to align himself with Turkishness via his Alevi background. This act reflects the influence of dominant nationalist ideology in Turkey and the double marginalization faced by Alevi Kurds.

In this film, Alevism is not represented through ritual but is conveyed through themes of belonging, cultural pressure, and ideological struggle. This indirect but critical portrayal marks *Bahoz* as a cinematic text that engages with Alevism in a subtle yet meaningful way. The film also highlights the layered structure of marginalization in Turkey by showing the complex relationship between the public visibility of Alevi identity and the political struggle of Kurdish identity.

*Hidden Lives* (*Saklı Hayatlar*, 2011), directed by A. Haluk Ünal, represents a pivotal moment in the cinematic representation of Alevism in Turkey. Set against the backdrop of the Çorum Massacre—a violent episode targeting Alevis in 1980 that remains largely suppressed in official history—the film focuses on the traumatic memory of an Alevi family and the intergenerational transmission of that trauma. In this regard, *Hidden Lives* is not just a personal narrative but also a call for societal reckoning.

The story follows a mother and daughter who survive the Çorum massacre and later migrate to Istanbul to join the family’s daughter, who is studying medicine. The film explores more than just migration; it delves into themes of trauma, silence, identity, and repression, shedding light on the stigmatized and suppressed status of Alevis in Turkish society. The family’s efforts to remain invisible and socially isolated echo the historical invisibility Alevis have experienced in urban public life after migration.

*Hidden Lives* is among the few Turkish films that confront state-sanctioned historical trauma through cinema. It was released during a period when the AKP government

frequently invoked the idea of “confronting the past,” especially during the so-called “Alevi Opening” initiated in 2007. Within this context, the film argues that such confrontations must not remain at the discursive level, but must be embedded in collective memory through cultural mediums like cinema. As such, it is one of the first films in Turkish cinema to deal directly with anti-Alevi violence and to make the trauma of sectarian massacres visible through cinematic narrative.

*Bir Ses Böler Geceyi* (*A Voice Divides the Night*, 2011), directed by Ersan Arsever and adapted from Ahmet Ümit’s novel of the same name, holds a significant place among films that visibly represent Alevism in Turkish cinema. Centering on the *cem* ceremony—one of the most essential rituals of Alevi belief—the film does not merely portray a religious practice but also uses this ritual as a narrative device to explore the theological, philosophical, and social dimensions of Alevism. Intergenerational tensions around religious identity take center stage, particularly through the relationships between the protagonist İsmail and two traditional Alevi figures: Hüseyin Dede and Bektaş Sofu. These interactions reflect the clash between evolving values and established norms within the Alevi tradition. Through these characters, the film lays bare the tensions between traditionalism and modern critical perspectives within Alevism. İsmail becomes a vehicle for critiquing dogmatic interpretations while also exposing the internal debates and transformative dynamics of Alevi belief.

*The Son* (*Oğul*, 2011), directed by Atilla Cengiz, is a powerful cinematic narrative that symbolically and discursively engages with Kurdish Alevism and the Kurdish issue, grounded in the historically and politically sensitive geography of Dersim (Tunceli). Although framed as a personal journey—following a young man from Giresun traveling to Dersim to see the girl he loves—the film uses this storyline to reconstruct a deeply charged landscape. In this narrative, Dersim is not just a setting but a character in its own right, symbolizing resistance, memory, and marginalization. Represented as a land marked by exclusion from “acceptable citizenship,” the film portrays Dersim as the capital of “the Other,” criminalized and cursed in the discourse of the nation-state. *Oğul* challenges dominant stereotypes by offering a layered, critical depiction of Kurdish-Alevi identity—long ignored or reduced to caricature in Turkish cinema.

*Voice of My Father* (*Babamın Sesi*, 2012), co-directed by Zeynel Doğan and Orhan Eskiköy, is a compelling example of memory cinema that confronts the 1978 Maraş Massacre—one of the most traumatic episodes of anti-Alevi violence in recent Turkish history. The film offers not just a retelling of historical events but a meditation on trauma, silence, rupture, and the intergenerational transmission of memory. Through its characters’ inability to speak about the past, the film symbolically represents the silenced position of Alevis within Turkish society. In doing so, it contributes to the

reconstruction of collective memory. Its use of silence, spatial isolation, and visual/aural emptiness provides a powerful aesthetic language for representing trauma. The filmmakers' documentary-style narrative structure creates a permeable space between fiction and reality, inviting the viewer into a position of ethical reflection. *Voice of My Father* thus serves not only as a narrative but also as a call for moral engagement and remembrance.

In *Lal* (2013), once again directed by Semir Aslanyürek in memory of Yılmaz Güney, we find visual and symbolic references to Arab Alevism. The film emphasizes the tradition of shrine veneration and the communal *ashure* (known as *hırisi*) meals held at these sacred sites. It also includes references to beliefs in reincarnation and transmigration of souls—tenets found within Arab Alevi spiritual thought.

*Let's Sin* (*İtirazım Var*, 2014), directed by Onur Ünlü, stands out in recent Turkish cinema for its both implicit and explicit representations of Alevi-Bektashi belief. While developing a critical lens on religious institutions and belief systems, the film positions Alevism as an alternative form of spirituality, in contrast to orthodox Sunni Islam. Here, Alevism is not framed primarily as an identity but as a belief system centered on core values such as love, tolerance, and art—concepts that hold a foundational place in Alevi-Bektashi philosophy.

*Yunus Emre: The Voice of Love* (*Yunus Emre: Aşkın Sesi*, 2014), directed by Kürşat Kızbaz, is the third cinematic adaptation of the life of Yunus Emre, a key figure in Anatolian Sufi tradition. The film recounts Yunus's spiritual transformation into "Âşık Yunus," employing classical narrative structures and aligning its representational strategy with the ideological and aesthetic tone of its time. Framed as a mystical journey, the story follows Yunus as he visits legendary religious figures like Mevlana, Sarı Saltuk, and Barak Baba. However, while it engages with the mystical, the film ultimately reduces Yunus to a devout Sunni dervish figure, emphasizing formal religious practices—such as ritual prayer—at the expense of his heterodox, esoteric, and Alevi-Bektashi-aligned dimensions.

The batini (inner) aspects of Yunus's thought—expressed in his poetry through concepts like *wahdat al-wujud* (unity of being), *insan-ı kamil* (perfect human), love, and truth—are largely ignored. Instead, the film reproduces Yunus as a figure harmonized with official religious discourse. In doing so, it erases the mystical and heterodox threads in his legacy that resonate with Alevi-Bektashi theology.

*Madımak: Carina's Diary* (*Madımak: Carina'nın Günlüğü*, 2015), directed by Ulaş Bahadır, is a significant cinematic attempt to represent the Sivas Massacre—one of the most traumatic events in the collective memory of Turkey's Alevi community.

Structured in two main parts, the film serves as both a trauma narrative and a vehicle for social memory. The first part focuses on Carina, a Dutch researcher who travels to Turkey and spends time in Ankara. Her introduction to Alevism provides the audience with an external perspective on the subject. The second part follows her trip to Sivas to attend the Pir Sultan Abdal Festival, where the tragic massacre unfolds.

Carina's diary becomes a lens through which the film explores the psychological and social dimensions of trauma. The aftermath of the massacre brings forth themes of Alevi identity formation and the community's pursuit of public visibility. The film is not only a cinematic recollection of a violent event but also a reflection on the collective pain, silence, and memory embedded in Alevi experience.

*Aşık* (2016), directed by Bilal Babaoğlu, brings another cinematic portrayal of the legendary Alevi-Bektashi figure Âşık Veysel to the screen. The film contains both implicit and explicit indicators of Veysel's association with the Alevi-Bektashi faith. These elements are integrated into the narrative and reinforced through dialogue, contributing to the ongoing visibility of Alevism in Turkish cinema.

*Zer* (2016), directed by Kazım Öz, addresses one of the most violent state-led atrocities in modern Turkish history—the 1938 Dersim Massacre—while simultaneously opening space for the cultural representation of Alevi identity. Through the diasporic protagonist Jan, who embarks on a journey to fulfill his grandmother's dying wish, the film moves from individual memory to collective trauma. Dersim's sacred landscape—its shrines, tombs, and oral histories—is not treated as mere background but becomes central to the film's spatial and narrative construction.

By centering Alevi cultural markers and holy sites, Öz not only visualizes the suppressed elements of Alevi identity but also reclaims a historical narrative long denied by the Turkish nation-state. *Zer* reimagines Dersim both as a physical location and as a site of memory, confronting official ideology with a politically and aesthetically critical cinema. The film connects Alevi identity to historical trauma, transforming cultural representation into a tool for collective reckoning.

*So Far, So Close* (*Çok Uzak Fazla Yakın*, 2016), directed by Türkan Derya and adapted from Adalet Ağaoğlu's play of the same name, explores themes such as identity, belonging, and cultural difference through interpersonal relationships. The character Cem's Alevi identity is revealed primarily through his dialogues with Aslı. He explicitly states that he is Alevi and shares that, for many years, Alevis were compelled to conceal their identities. This statement points not only to a personal experience but also to the persistence of societal prejudice, exclusionary discourse, and discriminatory practices toward Alevis. Cem recounts a past relationship that ended

because of his girlfriend's discomfort with his Alevi identity, exposing the enduring perception of Alevis as "impure" or "dangerous others" in hegemonic cultural narratives. Notably, the film includes no rituals, symbols, or visual elements specific to Alevism. This absence reflects how, in urban contexts, Alevism is increasingly expressed as a cultural identity rather than a religious one.

*Halef* (2018), directed by Murat Düzgünoğlu, offers an implicit representation of the Alevi-Bektashi faith by incorporating elements specific to Arab Alevism. The film consciously avoids naming the identity it portrays, making it a clear example of symbolic rather than discursive representation. Its narrative is structured around the belief in reincarnation and includes motifs such as animal sacrifice, the significance of shrines and sacred sites, the veneration of Hızır, and reverence for spiritual leaders (sheikhs)—all hallmarks of Arab Alevi religious culture. However, none of these practices are explicitly associated with Alevism within the film. The result is a layered and encoded portrayal in which identity is constructed through cultural and symbolic indicators rather than overt statements.

*Murtaza* (2018), directed by Özgür Sevimli, is one of the most notable recent examples of the cinematic representation of the Alevi-Bektashi tradition. The film brings to the screen the story of Murtaza and his blind wife Sabure, who live in a remote mountain village near Malatya. The couple's geographic isolation reflects the historical marginalization of Alevi communities, who have often been pushed to the physical and symbolic periphery of Turkish society. Historically subjected to systematic exclusion and assimilation, many Alevi communities have been forced to live in rural, mountainous areas far from urban centers.

In this context, the mountain village is more than just a setting—it functions as a discursive space reflecting Alevism's historical position in Turkey. The scene where Sabure recites *gülbank* prayers facing the sun at dawn highlights both the everyday continuity of Alevi rituals and the sacred relationship with nature. These sequences symbolically express the esoteric and metaphysical dimensions of the Alevi-Bektashi worldview. Sabure's visit to a shrine to pray for her daughter's healing further illustrates the centrality of pilgrimage, healing, and spiritual intercession in Alevi religious life.

In *The Decision* (*Yol Ayrımı*, 2018), directed by Yavuz Turgul, there are subtle hints of Alevi-Bektashi identity, particularly through the character Emine—an employee who is fired by the protagonist Mazhar. When Mazhar visits Emine's home, a *bağlama* (long-necked lute) is seen hanging on the wall—a symbolic object widely revered in Alevi-Bektashi households. The presence of both a *bağlama* and a small *bağlama* figurine

subtly indicates Emine's cultural and possibly spiritual affiliation with the Alevi tradition. Though the film does not explicitly name Alevism, these visual markers provide a quiet but recognizable signal of identity.

*Inflame* (*Kaygı*, 2017), directed by Ceylan Özçelik, is a significant contribution to Turkish cinema's engagement with collective memory, official historiography, and the politics of representation. Framed as a psychological thriller, the film critically addresses how memory—particularly the memory of the Sivas Massacre—is erased or reconstructed by state apparatuses. Though the event is never named explicitly, the narrative strongly implies that the protagonist Hasret's parents died in the massacre. Her inability to access official records or evidence of the tragedy highlights the mechanisms of suppression and denial.

Hasret's role as an editor at a news channel adds a meta-layer to the film's narrative, offering a critique of media's role in the production—and manipulation—of truth. As she gradually transforms into a subject who questions reality, her journey becomes a metaphor for the transition from personal to collective memory. *Inflame* stands out as the second major film to deal with the Sivas Massacre, following *Carina's Diary* (*Madımak: Carina'nın Günlüğü*, 2015), but it diverges by refusing direct representation. Instead, it explores the unrepresentability of repressed trauma through allegorical and post-traumatic imagery, making it a haunting meditation on memory and denial.

*Locman* (2018), directed by Şükrü Alaçam, is another notable film contributing to the cinematic representation of Alevism. Based on the director's personal life story, the film follows Uğur, a state railworker who relocates with his family to Divriği, Sivas—a region known for its strong Alevi presence. Through their interactions with Alevi neighbors, the film explores how religious difference is experienced in everyday life. It engages with Alevism both discursively and symbolically. Divriği's historical role as an Alevi stronghold provides a socio-political backdrop that grounds the narrative.

A scene in which Handan, Uğur's wife, discusses Alevis with a former neighbor—using language that subtly implies impurity—exposes the persistence of social prejudices. Handan's initial reluctance to eat food prepared by her Alevi neighbors and her avoidance of contact illustrate how exclusionary discourses are internalized and enacted at the personal level. However, by the film's end, her prejudices begin to dissolve, signaling a narrative of transformation and social reconciliation. *Locman* not only represents personal change but also symbolically contributes to expanding the boundaries of social cohesion and enhancing Alevi visibility in public discourse.

*Ali's Nature* (*Ali'nin Tabiatı*, 2021), directed by Levent Çetin, is a film that integrates

elements of the Alevi-Bektashi faith into its narrative. Centered on the daily life of a couple—Ali and Meryem—struggling with infertility, the film includes key ritual and cultural features of Alevism, most notably a depiction of the *cem* ceremony. In addition, the film draws a symbolic parallel between Alevism and ecological ethics. For instance, a scene where the killing of fish is portrayed as forbidden emphasizes Alevism's sacred respect for nature. In this way, *Ali's Nature* presents Alevism not only as a belief system but also as a value system grounded in environmental consciousness, offering a compelling intersection of spirituality and ecology.

*Elif Ana* (2022), co-directed by Semir Aslanyürek and Kazım Öz, makes a substantial contribution to the cinematic representation of the Alevi-Bektashi tradition. The film centers on the life of Elif Ana, a revered Alevi spiritual figure from Pazarcık, Maraş, while simultaneously depicting major events in Republican Turkish history. Through community narratives of her compassion, justice, and moral integrity, the film constructs Elif Ana as a symbol of Alevi ethical and spiritual ideals.

Rituals and practices central to Alevism—such as *dede* authority, *dardan indirme cem*, *semah*, and *don değiştirme*—are explicitly portrayed. The film also incorporates legendary elements, such as her miraculous foresight, particularly in scenes related to the Maraş Massacre. These elements are imbued with both religious and cultural significance. By integrating traumatic historical events like the Dersim and Maraş massacres, *Elif Ana* highlights the political and historical dimensions of Alevi identity. It provides a narrative space where memory, trauma, and spirituality converge, transforming Elif Ana's story into a collective expression of Alevi resilience and remembrance.

Nuri Bilge Ceylan's *About Dry Grasses* (*Kuru Otlar Üstüne*, 2023) offers a rare, discourse-based cinematic approach to Alevism in Turkish cinema. Rather than exploring the faith through ritual or visual spectacle, the film examines Alevi identity through language and intersubjective dialogue. A key moment occurs when the protagonist, Samet, remarks to Nuray and Kenan, "you're both Alevi," while speculating on their potential relationship. This statement does more than note a shared identity—it positions Alevism through a lens of othering. Samet, a figure that embodies the "White Turk" archetype with Sunni-nationalist leanings, represents the dominant, state-favored citizen. His colonial and centralized perspective pervades the film, including in his perceptions of Alevi identity. By suggesting that Kenan and Nuray "suit each other" based on their shared Alevi background, Samet imposes a limiting, homogenizing view of Alevism as cultural sameness. Alevism is also represented visually in a symbolic register: the portrait of Imam Ali in Nuray's home serves as an overt emblem of her Alevi faith.

Another 2023 film, *The Festival of Troubadours* (*Aşıklar Bayramı*), directed by Özcan Alper and adapted from Kemal Varol's novel, explores Alevi-Bektashi themes through a road narrative. The story follows Heves Ali, a sickly *aşık* (minstrel), and his estranged son Yusuf as they journey to a festival in Kars. The film traces not just a physical voyage but also an emotional and cultural journey toward reconciliation. As Heves Ali faces mortality, the film highlights rituals and poetic traditions rooted in Alevi-Bektashi heritage. The conflict between generational estrangement and the continuity of cultural tradition forms the emotional backbone of the narrative. *The Festival of Troubadours* marks an important moment in making Alevi-Bektashi culture visible in the public sphere via cinema.

Orçun Ünsal's *Bars* (2023) is another standout contribution to the cinematic representation of Alevism, distinguished by its layered narrative and metaphorical richness. The film follows two young zoologists, Emre and Veysel, as they travel through Central Anatolia in search of the extinct Anatolian leopard. But their expedition becomes much more than a scientific mission—it unfolds as a journey into memory, identity, and belonging. Veysel's Alevi background brings a collective memory dimension into the film, adding depth to what might otherwise be a personal quest. For Veysel, tracking the elusive leopard becomes a metaphor for reclaiming a marginalized, nearly erased identity.

In this context, the Anatolian leopard stands not just for an endangered species but for repressed cultural legacies, erased spiritual practices, and forgotten belief systems—especially Alevism. Through this layered metaphor, the film poeticizes the processes of exclusion, assimilation, and invisibilization that have historically shaped the Alevi-Bektashi experience. *Bars* thus emerges as an original and evocative cinematic text that uses natural symbolism to meditate on cultural survival and historical silencing.

**Conclusion**

The representation of the Alevi-Bektashi faith in Turkish cinema has historically been marked by profound limitations, both quantitatively and qualitatively. From the pre-Yeşilçam period until the 1990s, Alevism was largely portrayed through implicit, veiled forms, often reduced to folkloric elements within rural melodramas. Films such as *Kızılırmak Karakoyun*, *Gökçe Çiçek*, and *Pir Sultan Abdal* exemplify this indirect representation, with only *Pir Sultan Abdal* standing out as an exception for its direct visibility of Alevi identity. The scarcity of such examples underscores how the cinematic visibility of Alevism has been systematically suppressed and restricted to symbolic or marginal representations.

After the 2000s, there has been a noticeable increase in the on-screen visibility of Alevi identity. The term “Alevi” began to be spoken more openly; rituals, symbols, and character portrayals became more direct and recognizable. Yet this increase has not translated into representations that are rich, pluralistic, or fully authentic. While more films now engage with Alevi themes, the majority rely on superficial narratives, simplified cultural codes, and marginal characterizations that often fail to capture the depth and complexity of the Alevi-Bektashi belief system.

The structural reasons for Alevism’s limited representation in cinema are multifaceted. The foundational identity of the Turkish Republic is built upon a Sunni-Hanafi and ethnically Turkish framework, which renders belief systems outside these norms largely invisible. Within this exclusionary ideological matrix, Alevis—much like in other public spheres—have been silenced and othered in cinema as well. Persistent societal prejudices, limited knowledge or interest from filmmakers, producer pressures, and commercial taboos all directly affect Alevi representation. Additionally, the absence of a well-established Alevi bourgeoisie capable of investing in cultural production has contributed to the lack of cinematic output. In a medium as capital-intensive as film, this economic vacuum has had a significant impact on the sustainability of representation. Furthermore, many politically oriented Turkish films suffer from aesthetic shortcomings, resulting in a didactic and overly simplified treatment of Alevism, a deeply layered spiritual tradition.

Taken together, these factors reveal that Alevism remains underrepresented in Turkish cinema. This is not solely an Alevi issue, but symptomatic of a broader structural problem that also affects other marginalized ethnic and religious identities, most notably the Kurds. As a faith system that official ideology has failed—and often refused—to define, Alevism has typically either been rendered invisible or represented within tightly controlled and hegemonic narrative frames.

In conclusion, the representation of Alevi-Bektashi identity in Turkish cinema has been constrained by a range of political, social, and economic obstacles since the founding of the Republic. Though the post-2000 period has brought a modest increase in visibility, this is not yet sufficient to suggest the emergence of a genuinely pluralistic or in-depth Alevi cinema. Alevis still face structural barriers to using cinema as a narrative platform capable of speaking from the local to the universal. Therefore, the question of Alevi representation in cinema should be understood not only as a cultural matter but as a complex, multilayered issue with political, economic, and ideological dimensions.

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**Appendix**

**Films Depicting Alevi-Bektashi Rituals**

*Aşık Veysel’in Hayatı – Karanlık Dünya* (*The Life of Âşık Veysel – Dark World*) – Semah

*Kızılırmak Karakoyun* (*Kızılırmak Karakoyun*) – Dar

*Ali ile Gül – Ali’ye Gönül Verdik* (*Ali and Gül – We Gave Our Hearts to Ali*) – Semah

*Pir Sultan Abdal* (*Pir Sultan Abdal*) – Dar

*Avşar Beyi* (*The Bey of Avşar*) – Ziyaret

*Umuda Yolculuk* (*Journey of Hope*) – Cem, Semah, Kurban

*O da Beni Seviyor* (*She Loves Me Too*) – Cem, Gülbank, Semah, Tevhit

*Şellale* (*The Waterfall*) – Ziyaret

*Eve Giden Yol* (*The Road Home*) – Semah, Ziyaret

*Babamın Sesi* (*Voice of My Father*) – Ziyaret

*Bir Ses Böler Geceyi* (*A Sound Divides the Night*) – Cem, Dar

*Oğul* (*The Son*) – Cenaze

*Saklı Hayatlar* (*Hidden Lives*) – Çerağ, Cem, Semah, Gülbank

*Yunus Emre: Aşkın Sesi* (*Yunus Emre: The Voice of Love*) – Semah

*Madımak: Carina'nın Günlüğü* (*Madımak: Carina's Diary*) – Semah

*Zer* (*Zer*) – Ziyaret

*Murtaza* (*Murtaza*) – Ziyaret, Gülbank

*Ali'nin Tabiatı* (*Ali's Nature*) – Cem

*Elif Ana* (*Elif Ana*) – Cem, Semah

*Bars* (*Bars*) – Ziyaret, Cem, Semah, Gülbank, Çerağ

*Aşıklar Bayramı* (*The Festival of Troubadours*) – Cem, Gülbank, Semah

**Films Addressing Alevi–Sunni Relations Through Everyday Life Practices**

*Kızılırmak Karakoyun* (*Kızılırmak Karakoyun*)

*Hasan Boğuldu* (*Hasan Boğuldu*)

*O da Beni Seviyor* (*She Loves Me Too*)

*Başka Semtin Çocukları* (*Children of a Different Neighborhood*)

*Saklı Hayatlar* (*Hidden Lives*)

*Oğul* (*The Son*)

*Kuru Otlar Üstüne* (*About Dry Grasses*)

*İtirazım Var* (*Let's Sin*)

*Locman* (*Locman*)

*Bars* (*Bars*)

**Films Exploring the Relationship Between Alevism and Leftism/Socialism**

*Pir Sultan Abdal* (*Pir Sultan Abdal*)

*Filler ve Çimen* (*Elephants and Grass*)

*Başka Semtin Çocukları* (*Children of a Different Neighborhood*)

*Bir Ses Böler Geceyi* (*A Sound Divides the Night*)

*Saklı Hayatlar* (*Hidden Lives*)

*Babamın Sesi* (*Voice of My Father*)

*Oğul* (*The Son*)

**Films Addressing Alevi Massacres**

*Başka Semtin Çocukları* (*Children of a Different Neighborhood*) — (*Maraş, Sivas, Gazi*)

*Saklı Hayatlar* (*Hidden Lives*) — (*Çorum*)

*Babamın Sesi* (*Voice of My Father*) — (*Maraş*)

*Carina'nın Günlüğü: Madımak* (*Carina's Diary: Madımak*) — (*Sivas–Madımak*)

*Locman* (*Locman*) — (*Maraş*)

*Zer* (*Zer*) — (*Dersim*)

*Elif Ana* (*Elif Ana*) — (*Dersim, Maraş*)

**Films Referencing the Alevism–Nature–Shamanism Connection**

*Kızılırmak Karakoyun* (*Kızılırmak Karakoyun*)

*Gökçe Çiçek* (*Gökçe Çiçek*)

*Hasan Boğuldu* (*Hasan Boğuldu*)

*Bir Ses Böler Geceyi* (*A Sound Divides the Night*)

*Oğul* (*The Son*)

*Ali'nin Tabiatı* (*Ali's Nature*)

*Bars* (*Bars*)

**Films Containing Othering ("Impurity") Discourse About Alevis**

*Nur Baba – Boğaziçi Esrarı* (*Nur Baba – The Mystery of the Bosphorus*) — (*"Mum söndü" accusation*)

*Saklı Hayatlar* (*Hidden Lives*) — (*"Kızılbaş" / "Mum söndü" – Impurity discourse*)

*O da Beni Seviyor* (*She Loves Me Too*) — (*"Kızılbaş"*)

*Eve Giden Yol* (*The Road Home*) — (*"Kızılbaş" – "Mum söndü"*)

*Başka Semtin Çocukları* (*Children of a Different Neighborhood*) — (*"Kızılbaş"*)

*Locman* (*Locman*) — (*"Alevi", Impurity discourse*)

*Çok Uzak Fazla Yakın* (*Too Far Too Close*) — (*"Alevi", Impurity discourse*)

**Films Depicting the Lives of Alevi Saints and Poets**

*Aşık Veysel – Karanlık Dünya* (*Âşık Veysel – Dark World*)

*Horasan'dan Gelen Bahadır* (*The Brave from Khorasan*) — (*Ebu Müslim Horasani*)

*Allah'ın Arslanı Hz. Ali* (*Ali, the Lion of God*)

*Horasan'ın Üç Atlısı* (*The Three Horsemen of Khorasan*) — (*Ebu Müslim Horasani*)

*Hacı Bektaş-ı Veli* (*Haji Bektash Veli*)

*Ebu Müslim Horasani* (*Ebu Müslim Horasani*)

*Gönüller Fatihi Yunus Emre* (*Yunus Emre: The Conqueror of Hearts*)

*Pir Sultan Abdal* (*Pir Sultan Abdal*)

*Yunus Emre: Aşkın Sesi* (*Yunus Emre: The Voice of Love*)

*Aşık* (*The Bard*) — (*Aşık Veysel*)

*Müslüm* (*Müslüm*) — (*Müslüm Gürses*)

*Elif Ana* (*Elif Ana*)

**Films on Alevism and Ethnicity**

*Horasan'dan Gelen Bahadır* (*The Brave from Khorasan*) — (*Turkish*)

*Horasan'ın Üç Atlısı* (*The Three Horsemen of Khorasan*) — (*Turkish*)

*Hacı Bektaş-ı Veli* (*Haji Bektash Veli*) — (*Turkish*)

*Ebu Müslim Horasani* (*Ebu Müslim Horasani*) — (*Turkish*)

*Allah'ın Arslanı Hz. Ali* (*Ali, the Lion of God*) — (*Arab*)

*Gökçe Çiçek* (*Gökçe Çiçek*) — (*Turkish*)

*Avşar Beyi* (*The Bey of Avşar*) — (*Turkish*)

*Ali ile Gül* (*Ali and Gül*) — (*Arab*)

*Gönüller Fatihi Yunus Emre* (*Yunus Emre: The Conqueror of Hearts*) — (*Turkish*)

*Eve Giden Yol* (*The Road Home*) — (*Turkish*)

*Bahoz* (*The Storm*) — (*Kurdish*)

*7 Avlu* (*Seven Courtyards*) — (*Arab*)

*Babamın Sesi* (*Voice of My Father*) — (*Kurdish*)

*Bir Ses Böler Geceyi* (*A Sound Divides the Night*) — (*Turkish*)

*Zer* (*Zer*) — (*Kurdish*)

**Films Featuring Symbols of Alevism**

*Aşık Veysel – Karanlık Dünya* — (*Bağlama*)

*Hacı Bektaş-ı Veli* — (*Teslim taşı / Seal of surrender*)

*Ebu Müslim Horasani* — (*Zülfikar / Dhulfiqar sword*)

*Pir Sultan Abdal* — (*Teslim taşı, Bağlama, Zülfikar*)

*Ali ile Gül* — (*Teslim taşı, Bağlama*)

*Avşar Beyi* — (*Bağlama*)

*Filler ve Çimen* — (*Portrait of Hz. Ali*)

*O da Beni Seviyor* — (*Portrait of Hz. Ali, Bağlama*)

*Şellale* — (*Portrait of Hz. Ali*)

*Bahoz* — (*Portrait of Hz. Ali*)

*Başka Semtin Çocukları* — (*Portraits of Hz. Ali, Hacı Bektaş, Twelve Imams*)

*Saklı Hayatlar* — (*Portrait of Hz. Ali*)

*Bir Ses Böler Geceyi* — (*Portrait of Hz. Ali*)

*Yunus Emre: Aşkın Sesi* — (*Teslim taşı, Bağlama*)

*Madımak: Carina'nın Günlüğü* — (*Bağlama, Portraits of Hz. Ali, Hacı Bektaş, Twelve Imams*)

*Yol Ayrımı* — (*Bağlama*)

*Bars* — (*Bağlama, Portraits of Hz. Ali, Hacı Bektaş*)

**References & Further Readings**