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Space in Alevism

Date Published: **July 2, 2025**

Summary

This entry examines the phenomenon of space in Alevism through its intellectual, physical, and social dimensions. It argues that space is not merely a geographical ground but a constitutive component of belief, identity, and social organisation. In this context, structures such as cem spaces in rural Alevi settings, sacred visitation sites (ziyaret), and the ocak network are discussed in detail. The transformative impacts of urbanisation and migration on Alevi conceptions of space are also evaluated. Emphasising the heterotopic and cyclical nature of space, this analysis aims to render visible the multilayered temporal and spatial structure of Alevism.

In Alevism, as with many other concepts and issues, space has only recently become the subject of scholarly research and academic inquiry—specifically in the past quarter century. This, however, should not be taken to mean that space has never held a place in Alevi thought, literature, belief system, or everyday life. On the contrary, space constitutes a critical dimension—physical, intellectual, and social—through which all forms of social existence are imbued with meaning, and this is equally true in Alevism. Yet the conceptualisation of space, not only in Alevi studies but across the social sciences more broadly, has become possible only since the second half of the twentieth century—thanks in large part to scholars such as French thinker Henri Lefebvre, who developed influential theses on (social) space. Until the 1970s, space had predominantly been represented by disciplines such as geometry, philosophy, physics, and geography as an abstract, two-dimensional, absolute, passive, conceptual, and natural/geographical plane. Lefebvre exposed the multidimensional, multilayered, and social nature of space. For him, space does not reflect a singular appearance; rather, there is a constant dialectic between *conceived, perceived*, *and social spaces*. Spaces are socially produced and, in turn, reproduce social relations. As social products, spaces cannot be treated as mere geographical or geometric planes; space is not a passive surface or an empty canvas upon which being takes place. All social relations take shape in space; knowledge, memory, ideology, and power are represented upon it. Every social form produces—or is compelled to produce—its own space (Lefebvre 2014, 21–30, 56–70).

It is thus evident that the beliefs, culture, rituals, and social order that Alevis have carried and preserved for centuries rest upon a spatial logic and practice. The Alevi social space found its ideal form in the rural Alevi order, which functioned as the site where foundational structures, institutions, actors, values, rituals, and belief practices emerged and were transmitted. Under political, religious, and social pressures, Alevis lived in relative autonomy in rural Anatolia until the mid-twentieth century, maintaining minimal contact with the non-Alevi world and centres of authority. In this context, they constructed an “Alevi geography” (Zırh 2017) rooted in ocak networks, along with an Alevi map composed of the visible and invisible boundaries of this geography. Following internal and international migration beginning in the 1950s and intensifying on a mass scale after the 1980s, the map of this Alevi geography was almost entirely transformed. The Alevi social space, along with all the elements shaped upon it, entered a process of profound change. Accordingly, it is more instructive to examine the notion of space in Alevism under two main headings: within the ideal rural order and in the context of post-urbanisation and modernisation.

Space in Rural Alevism

The notion and practice of space in Alevism can be depicted—consistent with the spatial dialectic outlined above—as multidimensional, multilayered, cyclical, and spiral in structure. These layers are shaped through the interweaving of the intellectual, physical, and socially embodied spaces of Alevis.

Conceived Space

These are the spaces articulated in Alevi mythology, theology, philosophy, and literature. Some are “mythical spaces,” while others are real places endowed with sanctity through the meanings ascribed to them. Mythical spaces are those in which real locations are entwined with mythological events from a distant past, or with divine or spiritual beings; they are spaces where the sacred and the worldly, the real and the imagined, are interlaced—plural, multilayered, and simultaneously present and absent (Aguilar et al. 2005, 69; Cassirer 2005, 135–145). In Alevism, such spaces are gathered under the concept of *lamekân* —a “non-lieu” (non-place), a space of presence-absence (Lefebvre 2013, 40). It refers to a time and place before the world and worldly life came into existence. Concepts such as *ervah-ı ezel*, *elest bezmi*, and *kalûbelâ* are used in the same sense. These are extensively represented in the poetry of great Alevi bards: “I am the essence of the noon-place, I do not fit into time or space” (Nesimi); “I came to this world from the land of the non-place” (Virani); “I am a guest from the land of the non-place” (Hatayi, Pir Sultan) (Salman 2019, 51–53).

In Alevism, which bears the traces of ancient Eastern thought, the understanding of

time is cyclical (*devr-i daim*) and spiral, and so too is the conception of space multilayered. In the philosophy of space, the concept of “heterotopia” (*hetero*: multiple; *topos/topia*: space) refers to “other spaces” that are simultaneously themselves and other, that divide or accumulate time within themselves, and that contain their own unique meanings and rituals (Foucault 2005). In this respect, Alevi spatial thought is also heterotopic; it brings together the historical and the transhistorical, the spatial and the non-spatial (Yalçınkaya 1996, 30). Almost all the spaces found in Alevi myths, hagiographies, and written and oral literature display these characteristics. For instance, foundational myths such as the Kırklar Cemi (*Cem of the Forty)*, the Miraç (*Mi‘rāj,* ascension), and the narrative of *Fatma Ana (Mother Fatma)* take place in sacred-mythical spaces. In the tales of Salman the Persian, the Lake of Erzen brings together events from three hundred years prior and after. In the legends of Ali, the Hacı Bektaş narratives, and stories about saintly figures, the settings are not concrete geographic places but mythical, intellectual, and transcendent spaces.

Physical Space

This refers to everyday spaces as they are concretely perceived. What first comes to mind here is the general spatial configuration of Alevi settlements. Following the massacres and persecutions they suffered during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries under the Ottoman Empire, Alevis took refuge in remote, mountainous, and difficult-to-access regions of Anatolia, far from central settlements. As a result, the physical location of Alevi villages tends to be close to geographical features such as mountains, hills, rocky terrain, and forests. The naturalistic character of Alevi belief is aligned with this feature.

Within the rural Alevi order, two key spaces in which the physical/everyday and the sacred are interwoven are *cem* spaces and sacred visitation sites (*ziyaret*). In Alevi villages, the essence of belief and worship is reflected across the entirety of daily life. Since worship is sought in essence rather than form, there is no obligatory ritual to be individually performed on a daily basis. Worship is understood as life itself; when every moment of life is lived according to the principles of the path (*yol*), there is no need for a separate formal ritual. The central act of worship, the *cem*, is collective and takes place during certain periods of the year. Due both to the meanings attributed to belief and worship, and to centuries of life under religious and political domination, Alevi villages did not develop dedicated structures that could be defined as “places of worship.” Although in various regions of Anatolia one may encounter *cemhane* or *meydan evi* structures dating back to earlier times (Polat 2023), at least in the recent past, the majority of Alevi villages did not possess fixed and separate spaces

designated for worship. *Cem* ceremonies were held in *dede* houses, large village rooms, courtyards, or, in some cases, in wide spaces such as sheepfolds or barns that were temporarily converted into places of worship during *cem* time. In other words, a space that served an ordinary, physical, and everyday function was transformed into a sacred-religious space during the *cem*. Considering that the *cem* itself is conceived as the projection of another time and space—namely, the Kırklar Cemi (*Cem of the Forty)—cem* spaces thus encompass three spatial layers simultaneously: the physical space (room, courtyard), the sacred-religious space (place of worship), and the mythical space (*Cem of the Forty*). In this sense, *cem* spaces in Alevi villages are examples of heterotopia.

The same can be said for Alevi visitation sites. Located within or near Alevi villages, these sites—unless they are the resting places of saintly figures—are typically natural spaces or elements such as a mountain, hill, grove, water spring, or rock formation that are endowed with sacred meaning. As a reflection of their naturalistic belief system, Alevis have "sanctified" various geographical features—meaningless to outsiders—through miracle narratives and myths. The collective memory woven around these myths has played a crucial role in sustaining and transmitting belief and culture within Alevi geography. As seen in visitation sites like the Munzur Springs, the Lone Pine (*Tek Çam*), the Horse Rock (*At Kaya*), or the Black Stone (*Kara Taş*), the transformation of everyday/physical/natural spaces into sacred ones is another example of the heterotopic conception of space in Alevism.

Social Space

Social space, formed through shared images, values, representations, and life practices, also encompasses intellectual and physical spaces. In the rural context, Alevi social space is primarily shaped by the *ocak* system. Using contemporary terminology, this system can be described as a kind of "*ocak* network map." Each *ocak* is named after a revered Alevi saint—such as Hacı Bektaş, Baba Mansur, Gözükızıl, Ağuiçen, Kureyşan, Güvenç Abdal, Üryan Hızır, Hubyar Sultan, or Pir Sultan—and is composed of families who trace their lineage (*şecere*) to the *ehlibeyt* (the Prophet's family), and thus are attributed sanctity by their adherents, along with the Alevis affiliated with them. Within this system, every Alevi individual (*talip*) becomes a member of an *ocak* from the moment they make their declaration of commitment (*ikrar*) to Alevism. The *talip* is bound to a *dede* or *pir*, who in turn is affiliated with a *mürşit* (guide) of the *ocak*. These ties also extend across different *ocaks*. Ultimately, this chain converges in the *yol* (the path). From *talip* to *mürşit*, every Alevi is bound to the *yol*. In this way, through the cyclical relationships between *talip*, *dede/pir*, *mürşit*, *ocak*, and *yol*, a networked *ocak* system is formed, encapsulated in the principle of

“hand in hand, hand with the Truth” (*el ele, el Hakk’a*) (Salman 2019, 61–70).

The *ocaks* are spread across Anatolia like a molecular network or mesh map. The sphere of influence of an *ocak* surpasses concrete administrative or geographical boundaries. The centre of an *ocak* may be located in a village of one province, while its *talips* may reside in villages of another. Multiple *ocaks* may have *talips* living in the same village. The bond between an *ocak* and its *talips* is often not sustained through direct physical proximity, but rather through symbols that construct and reproduce communal belonging—such as the visits of *dedes/pirs*, acts of worship, and rituals. All the core tenets of Alevi belief and worship, identity values, ethical and legal principles, and social order are embedded within the *ocak* system. Practices with strict regulations, such as *düşkünlük* (ritual exclusion) and endogamy, are concrete examples of how Alevi social space is not confined to a single settlement or administrative unit, but corresponds to a broader map encompassed by the *ocak* network. In this sense, the *ocak* network outlines an invisible map encircling the boundaries of the extended Alevi geography—a space in which communal images, representations, and life practices converge, and where shared values and rules apply.

Alevi Spaces in the Process of Urbanisation and Modernisation

From the 1950s onward, within a relatively short span of roughly half a century, Alevis who had formerly resided in rural settlements have dispersed to small and large urban centres, abroad, and across diverse countries and regions. As a result, their perceptions, understandings, practices, and sociospatial forms of organisation have undergone, and continue to undergo, profound transformation. This transformation merits detailed examination under a separate heading; however, a few key areas of change can be outlined here to offer a general framework:

First, with migration, the map of Alevi geography has been fundamentally altered. The relatively stable and geographically confined settlement network that persisted for centuries in rural Anatolia has expanded into a transnational network stretching from villages to urban neighbourhoods across Turkey and, notably, throughout Europe and beyond.

Second, the *ocak* system, which formed the backbone of Alevi social space, has been significantly fragmented by migration. The components of the system have been scattered across various geographies, and many of the institutions, values, and representations embedded in the *ocak* system have entered a process of transformation.

Third, the meaning, content, function, and form of *cem* spaces and sacred visitation

sites (*ziyaret*)—which, in the rural context, symbolised the intellectual and physical spaces of Alevism—are also changing. The *ziyaret* sites, which functioned as memory spaces (*lieux de mémoire*, Nora 1989) crucial to the transmission of community identity through myth and ritual in the rural Alevi social memory, are gradually being erased from the memory of younger Alevi generations distanced from their ancestral lands. Alternatively, rather than preserving the plural visitation culture shaped by locally grounded narratives, increasingly centralised, institutionalised, and standardised forms of *ziyaret* practice are taking root. As natural spaces that cannot be transplanted or reconstructed in urban settings, the fading of these sites from social memory also signals a transformation of the naturalist worldview that once imbued them with sacred meaning.

Conversely, the process concerning *cem* spaces has followed a different trajectory. In the rural context, no institutionalised, purpose-built structure existed as a place of worship. In urban settings, however, the need for such a space—capable of addressing both religious and broader social functions—has become an urgent demand for Alevis. As a result, since the 1990s, *cemevis* have become a symbolic site of struggle for the Alevi movement in both Turkey and Europe, emerging as new urban social spaces for Alevis. Alongside *cemevis*, institutions such as *dergâhs*, associations, foundations, centres, institutes, and federations have become new arenas for Alevi sociospatial organisation.

Finally, in parallel with developments in communication technologies, Alevis are increasingly establishing formations—both individually and through various virtual networks and communities—on the internet and social media, seeking channels of expression and representation. In a context where physical, intellectual, and social space is being transformed in its entirety, the Alevi conception and practice of space is likewise undergoing reconfiguration.

Conclusion

In Alevism, space constitutes a multilayered web of meanings in which the sacred and the worldly, the individual and the collective are intricately interwoven—going beyond mere physical structures. The *cem* spaces, visitation sites (*ziyaret*), and the *ocak* system shaped within the rural order demonstrate that both belief practices and social bonds are established and continually reproduced through space. Although the changing conditions brought about by urbanisation and migration have transformed the form of Alevi spaces, space continues to serve as a vital element in the mnemonic and ritual continuity of Alevi identity.

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