



The Ocak System in Alevism: Diverse Interpretations of Sacred Lineage

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Published Date:

Downloaded Date:

18.10.2026

Suggested Citation: Ünal, Aynur (2026). The Ocak System in Alevism: Diverse Interpretations of Sacred Lineage. Alevi Encyclopedia — ISIL: DE-4607. <https://doi.org/10.68413/alevian-siklopedisi.xx3rf> (Access Date: 18.10.2026)

The Alevi Encyclopedia is registered under the code **ISIL: DE-4607** within the scope of the **International Standard Identifier for Libraries and Related Organizations**.

ISSN 3055-9928

ISIL URI /isil/DE-4607

LOBID

lobid.org/organisations/DE-4607

Permalink

id.zdb-services.de/resource/organisations/DE-4607

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Summary

This entry examines the ocak as both a sacred genealogy and a socio-religious network, focusing on seyyidlik, hereditary authority and the ocak-talip relationship. It argues against treating Alevism as institutionally homogeneous by bringing Turkish-speaking Anatolian traditions into conversation with Kurdish Alevism and Raa Haqi (Dersim Alevism), and Arab Alawism. The ocak (literally, 'hearth') is a central institution through which Alevi religious authority, ritual knowledge, social regulation and communal belonging have historically been organised. The entry also revisits competing narratives of the ocak's historical formation, highlighting the relative marginalisation of Kurdish Alevi and Dersim-centred histories in some general accounts. Particular attention is given to Dersim's sacred geography, Kızılbaş and Safavid connections, ritual variation, and the role of ocaks in preserving collective memory. Finally, the entry considers how legal restriction, migration, urbanisation and cemevis have reconfigured hereditary authority. The durability of the ocak, it argues, lies less in institutional uniformity than in its capacity to connect genealogy, moral authority, ritual transmission and community across changing historical settings.

Keywords: Alevism, Arab Alevisim, Dede, Dersim Alevism, Ehl-i Beyt, Kurdish Alevism, Ocak, Pir, Sacred Liniages, Seyyidlik

Introduction

In Alevism, the ocak-literally 'hearth', with connotations of household and family-is a foundational structure through which religious authority and knowledge are transmitted across generations (Kük 2025; Ersal 2022; Kara 2024). Linguistically, the term is associated with the place where fire is maintained and with the Old Turkish root od ('fire') (Deniz 2012; Kara 2024). In Alevi religious thought, this domestic image acquires a spiritual dimension: the hearth

becomes a site of moral and spiritual maturation under religious guidance (Yaman 2011; Kara 2024). Institutionally, ocaks are hereditary lineages linking religious leaders, usually described as dedes or pirs, with talip communities through relations of guidance and reciprocal obligation (Akin 2017; Ersal 2022; Kara 2024). Historically, these networks have organised cem rituals, transmitted religious knowledge, mediated disputes and sustained communal norms. The ocak is therefore more than a clerical office or a family pedigree. It combines genealogy, charisma, ritual competence, moral responsibility and forms of community governance.

Yet the institution is not identical across Alevi communities. Central, Western Anatolian Balkan formations and Kurdish Alevi traditions, particularly Raa Haqi (Dersim Alevism), share important principles but differ in terminology, sacred geography, ritual practice, and historical centres of authority (Erdem 2013; Kara 2024). Comparison with Arab Alawism further demonstrates that hereditary religious authority does not necessarily produce an ocak-talip system. This entry therefore treats the ocak as a shared but internally diverse institutional principle. It first examines sacred lineage and competing histories of origin, then turns to hierarchy and social functions, regional variation and, finally, modern transformation. Its central argument is that the history of the ocak is best understood as plural and relational rather than through a single Anatolian, ethnic or institutional centre.

Sacred Lineage and the Basis of Authority

The legitimacy of the ocak is closely tied to sacred lineage, commonly articulated through seyyidlik. Many Alevi ocaks narrate their descent through a silsile connecting them to the Twelve Imams, the Ehl-i Beyt and ultimately the family of the Prophet Muhammad (Kara 2024). Dede and pir families may accordingly be represented as Evlâd-ı Resul ('children of the Messenger') or as seyyid lineages. Genealogy in this context is not simply a marker of ancestry; it authorises particular families to guide communities, conduct ritual and

sustain the path.

The cited literature also associates hereditary authority with *kut*, understood as divinely granted grace or sacred capacity transmitted through holy persons and lineages (Kük 2025). An *ocakzâde*-literally a descendant of the hearth-therefore inherits a recognised sacred status. Nevertheless, descent alone does not fulfil the normative requirements of leadership. *Dedes* and *pirs* are expected to possess religious knowledge, moral integrity, justice and the ability to reconcile conflicts and guide their communities (Yaman 2011; Kurt and Çal 2021; Kara 2024). The institution thus combines inherited legitimacy with ethical performance.

Some scholars argue that this distinction matters for regional comparison as Kurdish Alevi and Raa Haqi (Dersim Alevism) lineages also connect sacred authority to prophetic and *Ehl-i Beyt* descent, but they need not derive legitimacy from Turkish linguistic identity or institutional subordination to the Hacı Bektaş Veli centre (Kara 2024; Wakamatsu 2019). Sacred genealogy may therefore provide a common theological language while the institutions, places and historical narratives through which that genealogy is recognised remain diverse.

Historical Formation and Competing Narratives of Origin

The historical emergence of the *ocak* system cannot be reduced to a single uncontested origin. Akın (2017) notes the difficulty of tracing the concept in written history before the nineteenth century, a problem that has generated multiple hypotheses about its formation and conceptual boundaries. These accounts are better read as competing, and sometimes overlapping, explanations of how hereditary religious authority was produced and institutionalised than as a settled chronology.

Four hypotheses recur in the literature. Drawing on earlier classifications, first, an Alid or prophetic-lineage account in

which dede families descend from Muhammad through Fatima and Ali. Second, a Hacı Bektaş Veli-centred account either understands existing prophetic lineages as having been assigned responsibilities across Anatolia by Hacı Bektaş Veli or explains some ocaks through the spiritual service and keramet of figures associated with his tradition. Third, a Safavid hypothesis attributes an important organising role to Shah Ismail, including the recognition of genealogical documents and circulation of Buyruk texts. Fourth, a Turkmen religious-leadership hypothesis traces ocakzâde families to baba, abdal, ata or dede figures who exercised religious and political authority among migrating tribal communities (Akın 2017, 242; Kük 2025, 74).

These explanations may describe different processes rather than mutually exclusive beginnings: sacred genealogies could be produced or consolidated alongside local lineages, regional networks and later Safavid or Bektashi institutional connections. van Bruinessen (2017), moreover, draws attention to genealogies linking several Kızılbaş ocaks to Sayyid Abu'l-Wafâ, an eleventh-century Kurdish Sufi associated with the Wafâ'îyya order, which originated in southern Kurdistan and reached both Kurdish and Turcoman tribal populations in Anatolia. His account suggests a longer process in which sayyids and Sufi shaikhs became centres of relatively stable religious communities before Safavid networks contributed to greater doctrinal and ritual coordination. Later Bektashi affiliation provided some ocaks with another institutional framework and official privileges (van Bruinessen 2017).

This longer history also exposes a historiographical problem. In the analyses considered here, Ersal's discussion does not substantively address Kurdish Alevi, Dersim or Tunceli, while Kük's four-hypothesis framework likewise gives no sustained attention to Kurdish Alevism or Dersim Alevi. The resulting narrative is weighted toward Hacı Bektaş Veli, Safavid/Kızılbaş history, sacred descent and Turkmen religious organisation. This does not invalidate those accounts, but it raises a question of representativeness: can

a general history of the ocak adequately explain formations whose sacred geography and historical memory are specifically rooted in Dersim?

Kara (2024, 49) offers a contrasting Dersim-centred account, identifying twelve principal or 'head' ocaks and arguing that all were historically situated within the geography of Dersim; three later moved away, two to Istanbul and one to Antalya. In this interpretation, Dersim is not a peripheral region into which a fully formed institution was imported but a foundational location in the history of ocak organisation. Kara (2024) further cites an inscription at the Ağuçan (Ağuichen) shrine in Bargini village, Hozat, bearing the date 930 CE, and interprets it as evidence of an earlier Alevi sacred lineage presence than conventional chronologies allow. Because this claim carries substantial historiographical weight, the date and its interpretation should be treated as Kara's source-based argument unless independently established by archaeological or epigraphic evidence. Even as a competing claim, however, it complicates narratives that locate the ocak primarily in the thirteenth-century Hacı Bektaş tradition or sixteenth-century Safavid organisation.

The issue, then, is not simply which origin is earliest. It is also whose histories become representative of Alevism. When Kurdish Alevi and Dersim traditions are absent from general histories, a Turkish/Turkmen-centred trajectory can inadvertently be universalised. A more plural approach allows the possibility that ocak formations emerged through geographically differentiated processes that were later connected through religious, political and genealogical networks. This historiographical asymmetry is methodologically important. Categories such as 'Alevi', 'Kızılbaş', 'Bektashi', 'Turkmen' and 'Kurdish' have not always carried the same meanings across periods, regions or sources. Retrospectively arranging diverse lineages beneath one institutional genealogy can therefore obscure the local terms communities used to understand authority. A comparative reading does not require choosing between a

Dersim-centred history and the better-known Hacı Bektaş or Safavid narratives. It instead asks how different genealogical claims became authoritative, how they were connected to sacred places, and how later scholarship selected some trajectories as more representative than others. This approach is especially useful for Raa Haqi (Dersim Alevism), where lineage, territory and oral memory are closely intertwined. It also prevents the absence of a community from a particular scholarly framework from being mistaken for evidence of its historical absence. The problem is thus simultaneously historical and epistemological: reconstructing the ocak requires attention to the sources through which its past has been made visible.

Institutional Relations and Social Functions

The ocak system is not a single centralised organisation. It consists of interconnected lineages and communities structured through relations of spiritual responsibility. The principle *El ele, el Hakk'a*-‘hand to hand, and the hand to God’-expresses chains of guidance and accountability linking believers, religious authorities and ultimately the divine (Kara 2024). Roles such as *mürşid*, *pir* and *rehber* establish layers of spiritual supervision, although terminology and practical arrangements vary by lineage and region (Yaman 2011; Kük 2025; Kara 2024). Authority is relational: a religious leader requires a recognised *talip* community, while *talips* enter a moral and ritual network through attachment to an ocak.

Historically, this relationship supported functions extending well beyond worship. *Dedes* and *pirs* could serve as ritual leaders, educators, mediators and moral authorities, particularly in rural communities (Yaman 2011; Kara 2024). *Düşkünlük* provided a means of sanctioning those judged to have violated communal norms, giving the ocak a role in internal social regulation and dispute resolution (Mutluer 2014; Erdem 2013; Kara 2024). *Müsahtiplik*, a lifelong spiritual bond between couples or families, created forms of fictive kinship and reciprocal responsibility beyond ordinary

friendship (Mutluer 2014; Wakamatsu 2019). Some lineages were also associated with healing practices and with the transmission of specialised knowledge through *el verme* ('giving the hand') (Deniz 2012; Yaman 2011; Kara 2024). These practices show how ritual, ethics, social solidarity and embodied knowledge were historically intertwined within *ocak* authority.

Regional Variation: Anatolian Alevism, Raa Haqi (Dersim Alevism) and Arab Alevism

Any distinction between 'Turkish' and 'Kurdish' Alevism must be used cautiously. Neither category is homogeneous, and lineage, language, locality and ethnicity do not map neatly onto one another. Nevertheless, regional comparison reveals meaningful differences in titles, sacred centres, ritual repertoires and relations of authority. In many Turkish-speaking settings, *dede* is a common title for hereditary leaders, whereas *pir* is more widely used in Kurdish Alevi and Raa Haqi (Dersim Alevism) contexts (Mutluer 2014; Erdem 2013). Kara (2024) also identifies terms such as *Serçalan* or *Sereçavan* in relation to head *ocaks* in Dersim.

Dersim is especially important because its *ocak* landscape cannot easily be reduced to a Hacı Bektaş-centred hierarchy. van Bruinessen (2017) describes numerous lineages, often subdivided into semi-independent branches, whose authority relations are complex and not readily systematised. In his account, most Dersim *ocaks* remained independent of the central Bektashi lodge in Kırşehir and historically maintained stronger Safavid ties, placing them more clearly within a Kızılbaş orientation. Bamasur (Baba Mansur), Kureyşan and Ağuçan (Ağuichen), among others, are linked to distinctive sacred sites and local narrative traditions (van Bruinessen 2017). Kara (2024) similarly presents Ağuçan and Baba Mansur as major *mürşid ocaks* within a Dersim-centred sacred geography. Erdem (2013) also points to Shah Ismail Hatayî and the Erdebil Dergâhı as important reference points in some Eastern Alevi traditions. Together,

these accounts caution against treating Hacı Bektaş Veli as an equally central institutional authority for all Alevi communities.

In Dersim, ocaks have also functioned as repositories of collective memory. van Bruinessen (2017) notes that, following the disruption of the traditional social and religious order by the 1937-1938 massacres and deportations, elderly sayyids from prominent ocaks became important sources for younger artists and intellectuals seeking to recover local myths, legends and memories. This role extends the significance of lineage beyond ritual leadership. Sacred genealogy becomes a means through which knowledge of place and communal history survives political rupture. This memory function also helps explain why Dersim-centred histories cannot be treated simply as regional variants of a supposedly standard Anatolian model. Sacred sites, lineage narratives and memories of violence are mutually constitutive. The ocak is at once a religious institution and an archive embodied in persons, places and oral transmission. Its authority therefore concerns not only who may conduct ritual but also who can narrate continuity after displacement and destruction.

Ritual variation reinforces this point. Erdem (2013) distinguishes tarıklı and pençeli forms of service. Some Eastern Anatolian and Kurdish Alevi ocaks, including Ağuçan, employ the tarık, a sacred wooden staff associated with spiritual authority, while lineages more strongly shaped by Bektashi or Çelebi traditions may use the pençe, or hand. These are not fixed ethnic markers; rather, they register histories of lineage affiliation and institutional interaction. Economic relations may also differ. Erdem (2013) describes kesim in certain Ağuçan settings as a defined hakullah associated with spiritual service, whereas some Hacı Bektaş-related lineages emphasise voluntary offerings. Wakamatsu (2019) similarly shows that the normative expectation that müsahip couples should not be blood relatives could be adapted under conditions of insecurity and restricted social networks in Eastern Anatolia. Ritual norms, in other words,

are lived through local historical circumstances.

Ocak genealogy also crosses linguistic boundaries. Erdem (2013) discusses branches of the İmam Rıza Ocak whose members became Kurdish-speaking (Kurmancî) over generations while continuing to narrate sacred descent through İmam Musa-i Kazım and İmam Rıza. This is an important reminder that ethnic and linguistic labels should not be treated as self-contained religious classifications. Ocak identity can remain durable even as language changes.

The Arab Alawite Case: A Comparative Boundary

The Arab Alawite case makes the institutional specificity of the Anatolian Alevi ocak particularly clear. Salman (2025) states that in Anatolian Alevism every Alevi individual is affiliated with a particular ocak. This is not merely respect for a religious family: the ocak-talip relationship creates an enduring, intergenerational connection between sacred lineage and an affiliated community, organising ritual responsibility, spiritual guidance and belonging. Arab Alawite social and religious organisation differs from this model. Alvanoğlu Yolcu (2025) notes that there is no equivalent binding relationship between individual Alawites and particular sheikh families. Instead, social ties expand significantly through the unclehood tradition. Hereditary or family-based religious authority therefore should not, by itself, be taken as evidence of an ocak system equivalent to Anatolian Alevism. The comparison identifies a useful analytical boundary: what is distinctive about the Anatolian ocak is not hereditary leadership alone, but the binding and reciprocal relationship between a sacred lineage and its talip community (Salman 2025; Alvanoğlu Yolcu 2025). Shared reverence for Ali and the Ehl-i Beyt can thus coexist with substantially different institutional forms.

Modern Transformation: Law, Urbanisation and the Cemevi

The twentieth century altered the social conditions under

which hereditary authority operated. The 1925 legislation closing tekkes and zaviyes restricted the public institutional space available to dervish and hereditary religious formations and affected institutions associated with dedelik and ocak authority (Mutluer 2014). Ocak relations could continue informally, but their legal and public position changed substantially. Starting in the latter half of the century, urbanisation and migration led to another significant structural change. The traditional model depended on relatively stable relationships between spiritual leaders and geographically identifiable talip communities. Migration dispersed both, making periodic visitation, oral teaching, mediation and ritual obligations more difficult to sustain in their earlier spatial form (Yaman 2011). These changes intensified as Alevi populations became distributed across cities and national borders.

The growth of cemevis has partly responded to this new environment. Cemevis provide spaces for worship, cultural activity, education and community organisation, and in some contexts have assumed functions previously organised through family-based ocak networks (Mutluer 2014). This should not be read simply as the disappearance of the ocak. Rather, authority has become more plural: hereditary lineages, associations, foundations, cemevis and translocal networks coexist and may also compete over representation and religious legitimacy. Modernisation is therefore better understood as reconfiguration. The contemporary question is how hereditary authority is translated into urban, diasporic and organisational forms of Alevi life.

Conclusion

The ocak system is central to Alevism because it joins sacred genealogy to lived institutional relations. Through seyyidlik and narratives of descent from the Ehl-i Beyt and the Twelve Imams, hereditary lineages acquire sacred legitimacy; through the ocak-talip relationship, that legitimacy becomes a network of ritual guidance, moral accountability and communal belonging.

Yet lineage alone is insufficient: authority is also expected to be enacted through knowledge, ethical conduct, mediation and service.

The entry has argued that this institution should not be represented as historically or regionally uniform. Competing origin narratives point to Alid genealogy, Hacı Bektaş Veli, Safavid organisation, Turkmen religious leadership and older Kurdish-Sufi networks. Raa Haqi (Dersim Alevism), in particular, complicates narratives organised around a single Anatolian centre. Its complex lineages, Kızılbaş and Safavid connections, sacred geography and role in preserving memory after the violence of 1937-1938 require analysis on their own terms. At the same time, linguistic change within lineages warns against turning 'Turkish' and 'Kurdish' Alevism into rigid categories. Comparison with Arab Alawism sharpens the argument further. The absence of an equivalent binding relationship between individual Alawites and sheikh families shows that hereditary religious authority is not synonymous with the Anatolian ocak system. What distinguishes the latter is the institutionalised, intergenerational relation between sacred lineage and talip community.

Finally, legal restriction, migration, urbanisation and cemevis have transformed the spatial and organisational conditions of ocak authority without eliminating its symbolic and genealogical importance. The durability of the ocak lies precisely in this capacity for translation. It remains a language of ancestry, legitimacy, ritual responsibility and belonging, but one whose forms have always been shaped by region, historical encounter and political change. Recognising that plurality offers a more adequate account of Alevism than either a homogeneous institutional model or a simple Turkish-Kurdish binary.

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