



Why Is It Important to Preserve the Memory of Alevism?

Author: Zana Kibar

zanakibar@gmail.com

This article was published on the Alevi Encyclopedia Blog.

Publication Date: 16.07.2024

Downloaded: 19.10.2026

Original Language: Turkish

ISSN: 3055-9928

ISIL URI: /isil/DE-4607

Alevi Encyclopedia is registered under ISIL: DE-4607 within the International Standard Identifier for Libraries and Related Organisations.

Summary

Alevism preserves its identity, faith, and culture through collective memory and memory sites, resisting historical oppression and displacement, while ensuring intergenerational transmission via physical, cultural, and digital means.

Tags: Alevi Hafızası, Dijital Epistemoloji

Preserving the Memory of Alevism: Sites of Resistance, Collective Identity, and Cultural Continuity

Alevism is a faith and cultural heritage with deep roots, carrying a rich history and collective memory that prioritizes universal values such as peace, justice, and love for humanity. However, throughout history, Alevis have experienced various forms of oppression, massacres, and discrimination. These events have left deep marks on the collective memory of the Alevi community, shaping its identity, beliefs, and cultural structure. Despite genocides, massacres, forced displacements, and attempts at assimilation, the collective memory and oral tradition of Alevism have survived to this day, thanks to its deeply rooted and powerful oral tradition.

Alevis have created significant repositories of memory that have preserved, stored, and transmitted Alevi identity from past to present, resisting centuries of policies imposed by ruling powers to eradicate their faith, culture, and traditions. Even though political dominance in Alevi regions often lay in the hands of colonial powers, Alevis engraved their lived experiences and faith into the land itself, inscribing traditions into every stone and soil, thereby establishing a form of cultural sovereignty. Despite the use of



all coercive mechanisms by colonial rulers, this cultural dominance could not be destroyed, and outside powers failed to establish their presence beyond military control in Alevi lands.

Collective culture, social life, faith, and oral traditions transform a mere geographical location into a *lieu de mémoire*—a place of memory. For occupiers, one of the greatest obstacles to establishing hegemony is the existence of such sites of memory. Because they preserve belief and tradition, memory spaces act as self-sustaining mechanisms of resistance: they remind communities of their existence despite massacres, genocides, and exile, while preventing the institutionalization of foreign domination. French thinker Pierre Nora, in his work on *Les Lieux de Mémoire*, described memory sites as representing absence. According to him, in the absence of living environments of memory, such sites embody the representation of those who are gone. They are living fragments of the past, strengthening a society's connection with its history (1).

The memory spaces of Alevism reference the community's shared past, faith, and cultural heritage. They keep collective memory alive and function as a part of communal identity. For example, the Dersim region plays a crucial role as an Alevi memory site. It symbolizes both the hardships and the resistance Alevis have experienced throughout their history. Dersim, in this sense, contains the painful memories of the past as well as the symbols of resistance. Such places play an essential cultural and social role. Attachment to these spaces reinforces one's sense of belonging to their culture and community. Therefore, communities are often targeted not only through their lives and beliefs but also through their memory spaces.

Many factors contribute to our attachment to a place, but at its core lies the human desire to find meaning, to feel belonging, and to keep memories alive. By being attached to specific places, people recall, share, and reinterpret the experiences and memories tied to them.

The connection between Pierre Nora's concept of memory spaces and Alevi memory sites is vital for understanding the relationship of the Alevi community with history and for conducting studies on collective memory. These memory spaces preserve the past, culture, and beliefs of the community, ensuring their transmission to future generations. They strengthen collective identity and support social solidarity. According to Maurice Halbwachs, who emphasized that social spaces and monuments shape collective memory and influence individual recollection processes, individual memory is always formed within social and cultural frameworks that guide what is remembered.



From Halbwachs' perspective in *The Social Frameworks of Memory*, individuals' memories are shaped within the identity and belonging of the society they are part of. Alevism, as a social framework, shapes the identity and sense of belonging of Alevis. The Alevi community is united around shared beliefs, traditions, and cultural practices. This common framework affects individual processes of remembering and constructs collective memory (2).

In his work on cultural memory, Jan Assmann describes societies as functioning with a dual memory system: personal memory (individual experiences and recollections) and cultural memory (shared experiences and collective history of a society) (3). Alevi culture and memory can be understood within this dual framework, where individual experiences interact with the collective experiences of the community.

The persecution and genocides faced by Alevis throughout history have shaped not only personal experiences but also the collective memory of the community. Francesca Cappelletto, in her study *Long-Term Memory of Extreme Events: From Autobiography to History*, examines how such traumatic events transform personal recollections and autobiographies into elements of collective memory. Looking at the Alevi experience through this lens shows how forced displacement, assimilation, war, and genocide have played a crucial role in the formation and transmission of collective memory. These experiences allow the community to recall, interpret, and pass on its past to future generations. Cappelletto's work highlights how memory is constantly constructed and reconstructed (4). In this sense, the autobiographies and testimonies of Alevis who have lived through war and genocide are not only part of collective remembrance but also critical elements in its ongoing reconstruction and strengthening.

Sites of Resistance and Remembrance

Sites of memory store the collective suffering of a community, remind future generations of these experiences, and ensure their transmission. For Alevis, such sites are not only spaces of remembrance but also symbols of resistance against past atrocities. For instance, even though the Madimak Hotel is not a museum, its intrinsic character as a memory site keeps alive the Alevi community's tradition of resistance. For Alevis, places are not merely physical structures but also symbolic expressions of their faith and cultural heritage, monumentalized in memory.

Physical Separation and Remembrance

Physical separation arises when a community leaves—or is forced to leave—a place. In such cases, people may strengthen their attachment to that place even more. Physical



separation often leads to investing greater meaning in the place and in the experiences lived there, making remembrance increasingly significant. Moreover, once access to a place becomes impossible, individuals may feel an even stronger desire to recall and reimagine it, as direct return is no longer possible.

In conclusion, the reasons for attachment to a place include belonging, memories, faith, identity, and cultural ties. Such bonds are essential for individuals to make sense of themselves, to feel a sense of belonging, and to keep memories alive. Physical separation does not sever these ties; rather, it strengthens them and increases the significance of remembering the place. Preserving the spatial bonds of Alevi memory is crucial for safeguarding this heritage and passing it on to future generations. This requires a combination of traditional and modern tools. Especially for Alevis who have been displaced or exiled—and for their younger generations—maintaining the spatial links of memory is vital. Through both physical and digital means, traditional and modern methods can preserve this memory and ensure its transmission to new generations. Active community participation and the effective use of technology play an important role in keeping memory alive and transmitting it successfully to the future.

The Alevi Encyclopedia has taken on precisely this historical mission: to preserve the memory sources of Alevism, to safeguard the community's identity, history, faith, and cultural values, and to contribute to their transmission to future generations by employing digital tools.

References

- Assmann, J. (2018). *Cultural Memory*. Istanbul: Ayrıntı Yayınları.
- Cappelletto, F. "Long-Term Memory of Extreme Events: From Autobiography to History."
- Halbwachs, M. (2016). *The Social Frameworks of Memory*. Ankara: Heretik Yayınları.
- Nora, P. (2006). *Les Lieux de Mémoire*. Ankara: Dost Kitabevi.