Cem Ceremony as a Conflict Resolution Method

Dr. Aynur Ünal
dr_aynurunal@outlook.com

Published Date:
2 July 2025

Downloaded Date:
05.11.2026

Suggested Citation: Ünal, Aynur (2025). Cem Ceremony as a Conflict Resolution Method. Alevi Encyclopedia — ISIL: DE-4607. https://doi.org/10.68413/alevian siklopedisi.74gsn (Access Date: 05.11.2026)

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

Address: Alevi Ansiklopedisi Körnebachstr. 49-51, 44143 Dortmund

info@aleviansiklopedisi.com

Summary
This entry explores the significance of the Cem ceremony, which holds profound significance in Alevism, embodying a unique fusion of spirituality, communal values, and cultural heritage. Performed under the guidance of a spiritual leader known as a Dede or Ana, the ritual integrates music, prayer, sacred dance (semah), and conflict resolution. More than a religious event, the Cem reflects evolving traditions shaped by historical shifts and urban transformation. This ceremony not only serves as a spiritual gathering but also as a mechanism for social cohesion, echoing indigenous practices of mediation and communal harmony. Examining the Cem reveals deeper insights into Alevism's role in preserving identity and resolving conflict.

Keywords: Alevis, çatışma çözümü, Cem, Cem ayini, Cem Ceremony, Conflict Resolution, Indigenous Peoples, Mediation

Indigenous Aspects of the Cem Ceremony

The Cem ceremony in Alevism serves as a vital communal ritual that reflects the spiritual and cultural traditions of the Alevi people. This form of ritual blends prayer, music, and dance, drawing from Alevism's rich historical and spiritual foundations. Typically officiated by a spiritual leader known as a Dede (Pir), the ceremony emphasises community unity and spiritual introspection. More than a religious event, the Cem is a cultural manifestation that has evolved over time, particularly through its transition from rural to urban

Copyright © 2026 Alevi Encyclopedia and the author(s). All rights reserved. Unless otherwise indicated, this work is published under the Creative Commons Attribution–NonCommercial–NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0). Proper attribution must be provided for all uses. Any commercial use, adaptation, translation, or republication requires prior written permission from the Alevi Encyclopedia and/or the author(s).

contexts. Another significant aspect of the ceremony is the role of mediation and conflict resolution in any issues that arise among community members. This element of the Cem ceremonies resembles indigenous practices of conflict resolution, which are also guided by community elders or leaders.

The history and practice of the Cem Ceremony of Alevis have been among the most contested scholarly topics. Some studies suggest that historically, Alevis conducted rituals in private homes or spiritual centres such as dargah/dergah and tekkes, which remained closed during the Republic era. This closure led to the adoption of new spaces for these ceremonies (Rençber, 2012). Furthermore, since the 1980s, the Cem has become more publicly accessible, resulting in changes to its performance dynamics and liturgical structure, particularly in urban centres like Istanbul (Kreinath & Sariönder, 2018). Multiple interpretations also arise concerning the Cem ceremony's spiritual significance in its origin. One prominent perspective highlights the link between Cem and the Miʿrāj event[1]; the Prophet Muhammad's ascension and participation in the gathering with the Kırklar (Forties) are central themes partially reenacted during the Cem (Coşkun, 2022). The Assembly of the Forty (in Turkish: Kırklar Meclisi)[2], the sacred gathering of forty people, is known to have occurred when the Prophet descended to the earth, and he encountered a doomed building that represents the sacred gathering, which is pivotal in Alevi spiritual narratives (Schubel, 2010). As interpretations of the Cem ceremony vary, the discussions above initially imply a connection between Alevism and Islam. However, another distinctive aspect of the Cem ceremony is the inclusion of conflict resolution practices alongside the semah, a sacred dance performed as part of the twelve services, emphasising its spiritual rather than performative nature.

Moreover, given the vital role of the Cem ceremony in mediation and conflict resolution practices, it is essential to resolve interpersonal disputes among participants, as

harmony is a prerequisite for the ceremony to proceed (Coşkun, 2022). That aspect of the Ceremony resembles Indigenous community practices globally. Lee (1996) identifies key features of First Nations conflict management in Canada, including the role of elders in resolving disputes. Despite variations in spiritual beliefs among First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities, common themes such as spirituality as a "way of life" rooted in relationships with the Creator, the land, and all beings-including inanimate objects-are often present (Ontario Human Rights Commission 2024). Across Indigenous communities globally, traditional mediation practices show remarkable similarities. For example, a study by Tibebu Kefale Muluken (2020) on Ethiopian pastoralist communities highlights the crucial role of elders, religious leaders, and clan chiefs in conflict resolution. Their decisions, supported by community-based social sanctions, are integral to the success of these traditional mechanisms.

Additionally, Dedes, as elders and spiritual leaders of the community in the Alevism context, are central to the Cem ceremony, showcasing important similarities between Cem and Indigenous methods in mediation, conflict resolution, and knowledge-sharing. For example, to commence the ceremony, the Dede (or Ana, in some cases) seeks the "consent" of the participants and encourages mutual agreement within the community. The Dede then assures the participants of the ceremony that if there is a problem or resentment between them, and if they are aware of or have witnessed something that contributes to the community's purification. This moment underscores the importance of transparency and conflict resolution within the community, forming a foundational part of the Cem's spiritual and social function. Consequently, this aspect of the Cem, viewed through the lens of indigenous mediation practices, necessitates a more thorough examination of the role of community elders and conflict-resolution strategies. It emphasises the importance of community members, harmonious interactions, and fostering mutual respect and

understanding, ultimately strengthening the community's connections.

Conclusion

The Cem ceremony exemplifies the intersection of faith, culture, and community governance within Alevism. Its emphasis on unity, spiritual introspection, and conflict resolution reveals strong parallels with indigenous traditions worldwide, where elders and ritual practices serve to sustain harmony and collective well-being. As Alevis adapt their practices in modern contexts, the continued role of the Dede and the ceremonial framework remains vital to community cohesion. Understanding the Cem through this broader comparative lens highlights its enduring relevance as both a spiritual rite and a social system rooted in mutual respect, transparency, and the preservation of cultural identity.

Endnotes

[1] The spiritual journey and spiritual ascension of the Prophet Mohammed known as the Miʿrāj see more at Eliza Tasbihi (2014).

[2] The assembly of the Forty and the Prophet's descent to Earth leads him to a condemned building where the Forty hold their sacred gathering, known as assembly (in Turkish: meclis). The Forty whom Mohammed encounters there are engaged in sohbet. He recognises this gathering as a meeting of the erenler, or "those who have attained". The Alevi community consistently emphasises the esoteric link between Ali, Mohammed, and the erenler through their participation in the ayin-I cem, which occurs in the presence of a dede and concludes with the semah ceremony , performed to the singing of mystical poetry accompanied by the baglama. The ritual recreates the cem of the Forty see more at Vernon Schubel (2010).

References & Further Reading

Adebayo, Akanmu, Jesse Benjamin, and Brandon D. Lundy.

2014. *Indigenous Conflict Management Strategies: Global Perspectives*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

Coşkun, Gamze. 2022. “Alevilikte Cem ve Semah’ın Kaynağı Olarak Görülen Miraç Hadisesi ve Kırklar Cemi.” *Türk Kültürü ve Hacı Bektaş Veli Araştırma Dergisi* 103: 187-203.

Kreinath, Jens, and Refika Sariönder. 2018. “Dynamics of Ritual Reflexivity in the Alevi Cem of Istanbul.” *Religion and Society* 9 (1): 145-159.

Lee, Gloria. 1996. “Defining Traditional Healing.” *Justice as Healing: A Newsletter on Aboriginal Concepts of Justice* 1 (4): 1-5.

Ontario Human Rights Commission. 2024. “Indigenous Spiritual Practices.” Last updated 2024.https://www3.ohrc.on.ca/en/policy-preventing-discrimination-based-creed/11-indigenous-spiritual-practices

Muluken, Tibebu Kefale. 2020. “The Role of Indigenous Conflict Resolution Mechanisms in the Pastoral Community: An Implication for Social Solidarity in Somali Region, Shineli Woreda.” *Open Access Library Journal* 7 (2): 1-16.

Rençber, Fevzi. 2012. “Alevi Geleneğinde ‘Cem Evinin’ Tarihsel Kökeni.” *Dinbilimleri Akademik Araştırma Dergisi* 12 (1): 73-86.

Schubel, Vernon. 2010. “When the Prophet Went on the Miraç He Saw a Lion on the Road: The Miraç in the Alevi-Bektaşi Tradition.” In *The Prophet’s Ascension: Cross-Cultural Encounters with the Islamic Miʿrāj Tales*, 330-343. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Tasbihi, Eliza. 2014. “The Prophet’s Ascension: Cross-Cultural Encounters with the Islamic Miʿrāj Tales.” *Al-Masāq* 26 (2): 234-236.

Publisher’s Note: The views, interpretations, findings, and data contained in this publication are solely the responsibility of the respective author(s). They do not necessarily reflect the views of the Alevi Encyclopedia, its editors, the editorial board, or supporting institutions. The Alevi Encyclopedia and its editors cannot be held responsible for any consequences arising from the use of the published content.