Alevi-Bektashi

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Summary
The term Alevi-Bektaşi is today a common term not only in scholarly, political, and media contexts, but also among Alevi and Bektashi communities and organisations themselves. Although Kizilbash-Alevism and Bektashism share deep religio-cultural ties, they remained distinct institutions – both in self-perception and external classification – with separate structures and authorities until the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It was during this period that intensified socio-cultural interaction, political instrumentalisation, and discursive shifts led to their conceptual amalgamation under the label Alevi-Bektaşi, shaped by processes of nationalism and confessionalisation, as well as by reciprocal dynamics of internal and external attribution.

Keywords: Alevi History, Alevi-Bektaşi, Bektashi, Bektashism, Kizilbash, Kizilbash-Alevi, Kizilbash-Alevism, Kızılbaş, Nationalism, Ottoman Empire

Socio-Cultural Entanglements: Encounters and Exchanges

Relations between Bektashis and Kizilbash-Alevis date back to the early modern period and were shaped by shared roots in antinomian Sufi and dervish traditions, resulting in early overlaps in religious beliefs and practices (e.g. Karamustafa 1993; Karakaya-Stump 2020, 145-187). Earlier theories that portrayed the Bektashi order as a tool of the Ottoman state to incorporate the subversive Kizilbash-Alevis have increasingly been challenged by recent scholarship (Mélikoff 1998, 240-243; Faroqhi 1981, 77, 92; Weineck 2020,

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117-126). What can be established, however, is that from the 17th century onward, overlapping settlement patterns suggest growing interaction between the two groups – though the nature and extent of these contacts remain largely insufficiently explored (Faroqhi 1981, 41; Weineck 2020, 121 f.). One notable site of exchange took place outside of Anatolia, in Kerbela and Najaf, where Bektashi institutions granted religious authorisations and genealogies to Kizilbash religious leaders, thereby conferring spiritual legitimacy (Karakaya-Stump 2020, 188-219). Despite these interactions, the two groups maintained distinct institutional structures and were never discursively unified. A clear indicator of this separation is the abolition of the Bektashi order in 1826: while the ban harshly targeted Bektashi institutions and followers, it was not extended to the Kizilbash-Alevis, suggesting that the Ottoman state treated them as separate religious formations (Kara 2019, 194).

A closer rapprochement between Kizilbash-Alevism and Bektashism became apparent from the second half of the 19th century, as the Bektashi order began to regenerate and reorganise following its ban in 1826. During this period, socio-religious boundaries between the two groups began to blur, driven especially by the efforts of the Çelebi leadership, most notably under Cemaleddin Efendi (1862-1921). He actively sought to integrate Kizilbash communities by issuing religious authorisations, sending dervishes to their villages, and cultivating networks of pilgrimage and donation. Particularly in provinces near the Bektashi headquarters in central Anatolia, such as Çorum, Amasya, and Tokat, Kizilbash groups became closely affiliated with the Çelebi (Kara 2019, 184-187, Yıldırım 2010, 43-48)

A well-documented episode illustrating this influence occurred during World War I and the Turkish War of Independence, when, on the initiative of the Ottoman and later Turkish state, Cemaleddin Efendi succeeded in mobilising thousands of Kizilbash-Alevis for military service (Küçük 2002, 131-134). Yet these efforts also exposed the limits of his authority, especially in Kurdish- and Zaza-

speaking regions like Dersim, where mobilisation attempts failed due to local resistance.

One major source of tension was the Çelebi's attempt to 're-educate' Kizilbash communities by replacing their rituals with Bektashi practices. This was especially evident in the dispute over the Kizilbash initiation rite, in which the spiritual guide symbolically taps the initiate with a stick (*tarik*), associated with local saintly cults. Cemaleddin Efendi condemned the practice as superstitious and sought to replace it with a Bektashi alternative, where the initiate is tapped with the hand (*pençe*). Though seemingly minor, this interference provoked significant backlash and led to a deep division within Kizilbash communities, splitting them into pro- and anti-Bektashi factions (Dersimi 1992, 96; Yıldırım 2012; Kara 2019, 187-190).

This tension was also expressed in mutual stereotyping. Some Kizilbash derisively referred to the Bektashis as "garlic heads" because of their distinctive white dervish caps (Baha Said 1926, 330). Conversely, urban and intellectual Bektashis, especially from Istanbul, often viewed rural Kizilbash as religiously unsophisticated. Their portrayals ranged from orientalist romanticisation of the "pure but uneducated" Kizilbash to open disdain (Ahmed Rıfkı 1909, 148; Rıza Tevfik 1982, 248; Kara 2019, 190-194).

At the same time, there are also Bektashi poems from this period in which the term Kizilbash is used with pride as a self-designation (e.g. Harabi 2012, 272). This simultaneity of fraternisation and distancing often played out within the very same actors, revealing the complex and layered dynamics of this entangled relationship.

Discursive Entanglement: Confessionalisation and Nationalisation

Around 1900, non-Bektashi agents gave new momentum to the amalgamation of Kizilbash-Alevism and Bektashism, particularly on a discursive level. In state documents and

polemical writings by Sunni scholars prior to 1900, Bektashis and Kizilbash-Alevis were typically described as related yet clearly distinct religious groups. This perception began to shift at the turn of the century, when a new narrative emerged that portrayed Kizilbash-Alevism as a variant and sub-branch of the Bektashi order (Kara 2019, 194-198). This shift was likely linked to the increasing proximity between the Çelebi leadership and Kizilbash communities. Also Western missionaries, diplomats, and travellers had already reported on the relations between Bektashis and Kizilbash-Alevis in the mid-19th century. However, it was only in the late 19th and early 20th centuries that they began to conceptualise the two as a unified religious formation. Drawing on state, Sunni, and Western sources, one can trace the emergence of a narrative around 1900 that located Bektashis and Kizilbash-Alevis within a shared institutional framework. Initially, this narrative cast Kizilbash-Alevism as a sub-group of Bektashism (Ibid. 198 f.).

By the late 1910s and early 1920s, this interpretation had become discursively dominant, reinforced by political actors with concrete pragmatic interests, including military mobilisation. As previously noted, the Çelebi family recruited several thousand Kizilbash-Alevis for World War I and the Turkish War of Independence – efforts that were actively supported by state officials, who visited the Bektashi headquarters in Hacıbektaş for this purpose (Küçük 2022, 131-134, 156 f.). At the same time, the Young Turk government acknowledged its limited understanding of Anatolia's religious landscape. Concerned about political loyalty of the various religious groups, it launched comprehensive investigations into peripheral communities. In this context, Baha Said (1882-1939) was commissioned to explore the Kizilbash-Alevis and Bektashis (Şapolyo 1964, 2 f.; Dressler 2015, 127). Through fieldwork conducted across Anatolia, he became a key figure in the discursive merging of the two groups. In 1919, he referred for the first time to the "Bektashi-Kizilbash group" (*Bektâşî Kızılbâş zümresi*) in the singular – one of the earliest formulations uniting them

under a single expression (Baha Said 1919, 2).

The term “Bektashi-Kizilbash” gained further currency in the 1930s, when it was adopted by prominent intellectuals such as Fuad Köprülü (1888-1966, Köprülü 1939, 19). While Köprülü distinguished between the organisational structures of the two traditions, he regarded them as essentially similar. This framing was embedded in the Turkish nationalist project, which cast both Bektashis and Kizilbash-Alevis as religious heirs of pre-Islamic Turkic traditions. Their historical development was interpreted through the lens of cultural and civilisational continuity that had survived Islamisation. Consequently, religious and institutional differences were displaced by essentialist origin narratives and the homogenising ambitions of nationalism (Dressler 2015, 153-271).

Rather than a straightforward equation, nationalist discourse constructed a hierarchical relationship: Kizilbash-Alevism as a sub-branch of Bektashism – or vice versa. This categorisation unfolded on multiple levels. Besim Atalay (1882-1965), another early proponent of the Turkish nation building, proposed a broad definition of Bektashism that included Kizilbash-Alevis and other local groups such as the Çepni and Tahtacı. He referred to them as “village Bektashis,” defined by their rural way of life, in contrast to the “urban Bektashis,” who were associated with tekkes in towns and cities (Atalay 1924, 15-24). This distinction between rural and urban Bektashis became a discursively salient theme, especially after Köprülü adopted it (Köprülü 1935, 36). Interestingly, Bektashi authors themselves began to reproduce this differentiation in their writings from the 1930s onward (Kara 2019, 201-204).

Despite such internal differentiation, the broader narrative followed a logic of standardisation and unification. Ultimately, Atalay and Köprülü postulated an essential similarity between Bektashism and Kizilbash-Alevism, arguing that despite their differences in social setting, they were congruent in essence and origin. The distinction

between village and urban Bektashis served less to emphasise enduring differences than to frame diversity within a broader nationalist vision, in which both groups were reimagined as carriers of Turkish civilisation and culture (Dressler 2015, 259 f.).

Conceptual Amalgamation: Alevi and Alevi-Bektaşi

One crucial instrument in the process of amalgamating Kizilbash-Alevism and Bektashism was the conceptual and terminological reconfiguration of religious categories. Around 1900, a new label began to emerge as an umbrella term for various Alid-oriented religious communities in Anatolia: *Alevi*. The term, derived from Arabic and literally meaning "follower of Ali," underwent multiple semantic shifts over time. While it was primarily used until the 19th century to refer to the descendants of the Prophet Muhammad, it was increasingly applied to Sufi orders that traced their spiritual lineage to Imam Ali (Baha Said 1919, 2; Soyyer 2012, 298).

From the late 19th century onward, and especially around the turn of the century, Alevi gradually began to function as a collective label, though debates persist as to whether it originated as an emic or etic designation (Mélikoff 1998, p. 341; Çakmak 2019, 135 f.). In any case, a growing number of state documents from this period began to use Alevi as an umbrella term, often in conjunction with more established designations such as Kizilbash, or with pejorative labels like *rafizi*, *mülhid*, or *zındık*. By the 1910s and particularly the 1920s, Alevi was increasingly employed as a general and classificatory term in both administrative and academic contexts (Çakmak 2019, 134-141; Kara 2019, 201 f.).

This semantic evolution is paradigmatically reflected in the work of Fuad Köprülü, who employed Alevi with varying meanings over time: initially as a synonym for Shi'ites, later as a general term for so-called "heterodox" Anatolian Turks, and eventually as a specific label for Kizilbash-Alevis organized within the *ocak* system. Of these interpretations,

the latter two have proven most enduring (Dressler 2015, 240-247). Today, *Alevi* refers both to a specific religious category – namely, the *ocak*-centered Kizilbash groups – and to a broader umbrella that includes other traditions such as the Çepni and Tahtacı, as well as groups like the Nusayris, often referred to as "Arab Alevis."

Significantly, the term also began to include Bektashis. This shift is traceable in early 20th-century state documents as well as in literary sources from within the Bektashi milieu itself. Increasingly, Bektashi figures began to refer to themselves as Alevis, a trend visible in poems and proclamations from the era. Even the Çelebi leader adopted the term Alevi as a collective identifier that encompassed Bektashis. Similar evidence exists for Kizilbash-Alevis. Numerous accounts from the 1920s indicate that Alevi had become a widely accepted identifier among both groups (Kara 2019, 203-205).

This conceptual convergence culminated in the emergence of the neologism *Alevi-Bektaşi*. As far as can be determined, this compound term began to appear sporadically in the 1930s and 1940s, likely introduced by Abdülbaki Gölpınarlı (1900-1982). In his earlier writings, he had referred to the combined traditions as "Bektaşi-Kızılbaş", but in the 1940s he increasingly used the term *Alevi-Bektaşi* (Gölpınarlı & Boratav 1943, 9; Gölpınarlı 1963). It was not until the 1960s, however, that the concept gained broader traction and popularity. In the academic field, it was beside Gölpınarlı Irène Mélikoff (1917-2009) who played a pivotal role in consolidating the use of the term (Dressler 2015, 259 f.). But also the Çelebi Efendi Ali Celalettin Ulusoy employed Alevi-Bektaşi in 1980 to describe the teachings of Hacı Bektaş Veli (Ulusoy 1980). Since then, the term has gained broad acceptance across a wide range of actors, including Alevis, Bektashis, scholars and state institutions.

Because Alevi simultaneously serves as a specific designation for Kizilbash-Alevis and as a broader religious category, the compound term *Alevi-Bektaşi* often positions

Bektashism as a subgroup of the former. Based on the available sources, it remains difficult to determine whether *Alevi-Bektaşi* originated as an internal or external label. For now, it appears that while Alevi could plausibly have emerged from both contexts, *Alevi-Bektaşilik* was most likely introduced externally. However, it was adopted relatively early by Alevi and Bektashi agents, as seen in publications from the 1960s and, more prominently, the 1990s (Kara 2019, 204 f.).

Conclusion

The term *Alevi-Bektaşi* reflects a complex historical process of socio-cultural, discursive, and conceptual amalgamation shaped by religious, political, and scholarly agents. While Kizilbash-Alevism and Bektashism remained institutionally and discursively distinct well into the modern period, their entanglement intensified from the late 19th century onward. The emergence of *Alevi* as a classificatory term and its gradual adoption by both communities laid the foundation for the later synthesis into *Alevi-Bektaşi*, a label that became increasingly prominent from the second half of the 20th century. Although its origins lie largely in external ascription, the term has since been internalised by many actors across religious, academic, and institutional contexts.

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