Musahiplik: The Institution of Spritual Brotherhood in Alevism

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Published Date:
2 July 2025

Downloaded Date:
07.11.2026

Suggested Citation: Yönden, Elif (2025). Musahiplik: The Institution of Spritual Brotherhood in Alevism. Alevi Encyclopedia — ISIL: DE-4607. https://doi.org/10.68413/alevian siklopedisi.br8fm (Access Date: 07.11.2026)

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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
Musahiplik is an institutional form of brotherhood in the Alevi belief system that symbolises an individual's spiritual, moral, and social bond with the community, and is established through the rite of ikrar (confession of faith). As much a theological necessity as a form of social belonging, musahiplik is based on principles of interpersonal responsibility, mutual commitment, and surety, serving also as an internal mechanism of communal regulation. Closely linked to other foundational elements of the Alevi faith such as düşkünlük (excommunication) and ikrar, this institution has historically functioned as a bearer of social cohesion and moral order within traditional Alevi society. Today, however, it is reinterpreted and practised in symbolic, individualised, or transformed forms—particularly under conditions of urbanisation.

Keywords: brotherhood, Dersim, Dersim Aleviliği, Düşkün, İkrar, Musahip, yol

Definition and Historical Origins

Musahip is defined as "the companion chosen by the man and woman (husband and wife) who are to give *ikrar* and receive *nasip*, meaning guarantor, fellow traveller on the path, spiritual sibling" (Korkmaz 1994, 253). Rendered in Turkish as "brotherhood of the hereafter," "companionship on the path," "fellowship of nasip," or "soul sibling" (Yalçınkaya 2024, 82), the Arabic equivalent of *musahip* is "one who befriends, one whose conversation is pleasing"

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(Korkmaz 1994, 253). There are various perspectives regarding the historical origins of musahiplik. Irene Melikoff argues that the institution may derive from the “Anda” custom observed among Turkic-Mongol societies, the *Biste* tradition of the Avesta belief system-which emerged in Khwarezm and signifies “brotherhood, partnership”-and the *Ahi* tradition, which she sees as closely tied to Sufism (Melikoff 2021, 85). Another view associates the musahiplik tradition with the Prophet Muhammad’s *hijra*, suggesting that it emerged as a means to forge unity between the people of Mecca and Medina (cited in Öztoprak, in Yalçınkaya 2024, 83).

Musahiplik is also mentioned in a key written source of the Alevi faith, known as the *Buyruk*, specifically the *Buyruk of Imam Ja’far al-Sadiq*, where it is listed as one of the seven obligations (*farz*) required for the fulfilment of belief (Melikoff 2021, 87). In this regard, musahiplik can be understood as both a theological imperative and a social obligation. The historical and cultural origins of *musahiplik* become evident in the narratives found in the *Buyruk* that recount the relationship between the Prophet Muhammad and Imam Ali. According to the account, when heaven and earth were created, Adam and Gabriel tied belts around their waists and became brothers. To celebrate this brotherhood, the other angels brought them halva and fresh bread. Adam saved a portion of the offering for Eve. Based on this event, Gabriel conveyed God’s command to the Prophet Muhammad and instructed him to establish a similar bond of brotherhood among humans. In response, the Prophet Muhammad chose Imam Ali as his brother. They entered the same robe, appearing as one body with two heads. The Prophet then addressed Ali: “Your blood is my blood, your flesh is my flesh, your body is my body, your soul is my soul, your life is my life.” Upon hearing these words, the believers present turned to the Prophet and said, “O Messenger of God, remove your sacred robe so we may witness this.” When the Prophet removed the robe, the believers saw him and Ali as a single body (Bozkurt 2018,

28; Korkmaz 2013, 29; Melikoff 2021, 88).

Sociological and Social Dimension

To understand the meaning of *musahiplik* in the Alevi belief system, one must first examine the foundational concept of giving *ikrar* (confession of faith). There are certain conditions for a person to be accepted by the community as an Alevi (to become a *talip*) (Yalçınkaya 2024; DABF 2008). The first and foremost of these is giving *ikrar* in a *cem* ceremony before the community and the *pir*, which signifies a vow to enter the path and fulfil all its requirements (Yalçınkaya 2024; Korkmaz 2008; Engin 2020).

İkrar verdim bu ikrarı güderim

İkrarımdan dönmem yolun ucundan

Eksikliğim bilip yoldan kalmadım

Dönen dönsün ben dönmezem yolumdan

I have given my *ikrar*, and I shall uphold itI shall not turn from my *ikrar*, not even at the path's endKnowing my faults, I have not strayed from the wayLet those who will turn, turn – I shall not turn from my path
(Pir Sultan Abdal, cited in Engin 2020, 24)

These verses by Pir Sultan Abdal reveal that giving *ikrar* is regarded as both a religious and social obligation within the Alevi-Bektashi tradition. An Alevi who gives *ikrar* is expected to remain faithful to it throughout their life, and thereby loyal to the Alevi path and its spiritual essence (Engin 2020, 25). One who gives *ikrar* is considered to have "abandoned the ego" (Yalçınkaya 2024, 76). This decision must be made freely, for there are serious consequences to renouncing one's *ikrar*. Hence, those about to give *ikrar* are warned: "Do not come if you will return, do not return if you have come" (Engin 2020, 25), and are made aware of the responsibilities entailed in entering the path. This signifies the person's acceptance of a way of life summarised by Hacı Bektaş Veli's

saying “control your hands, tongue, and loins,” and being asked whether they can take on the responsibility of living in accordance with this principle. The failure to uphold one’s *ikrar* results in being declared *düşkün* (excommunicated) in Alevism. A person who violates the requirements after giving *ikrar* is inevitably declared *düşkün* within the Alevi belief system-entailing exclusion both spiritually and socially. Therefore, the person who is to give *ikrar* is warned with the following words: “Give *ikrar* only if you are fully aware of all these responsibilities; if you cannot remain true to your *ikrar* and fulfil the requirements of the path, do not come.” – “Die rather than give *ikrar*, die rather than turn from it!” Those who give *ikrar* but fail to uphold its requirements are inevitably declared *düşkün* (Engin 2020, 25).

The term *düşkün* denotes someone who has committed a transgression, and *düşkünlük* refers to this state; “One who violates the prohibitions of the path is *düşkün*” (Noyan, cited in Ersal 2007, 4). It can thus be said that the worldview shaping Alevi belief and guiding its path is grounded in a set of rules that regulate social life and prescribes the exclusion of those who fail to comply. This reflects the principle mentioned above: “Control your hands, tongue, and loins.”

Ali Yaman (1999) argues that focus should be placed not on the formal rituals of Alevism but on their essential meanings, emphasising that Alevism exists through this essence. Accordingly, merely performing religious practices such as fasting or attending *cem* rituals in a formal sense is not sufficient; unless individuals remain faithful to their *ikrar*-which integrates their lives with the community-and lead a life embedded in that community, they face the risk of being pushed to the margins of society (Yaman 1999). In the Alevi belief system, *musahiplik* goes beyond personal piety to encompass a moral code that regulates interpersonal relations and strengthens group identity. As an organisational structure that enforces values such as loyalty, honesty, and mutual responsibility, it functions as a moral control mechanism. In this context, the role of *musahip institution* as a means of internal communal regulation gains

significance. This form of kinship, not based on blood ties but established through a vow made by individuals during a ceremony in the presence of a *dede* and the *cem* community, entails lifelong mutual rights and responsibilities (Onarlı, cited in Akın 2018, 301). This bond, formed in front of the community, is not merely a kinship by descent, but a multidimensional structure embedding individuals in a web of social, moral, and religious relations (Akın 2018, 301). Within this structure, a person is held accountable not only for their own actions but also for those of their *musahip*. Thus, the significance of *musahiplik*-as one of the most fundamental institutions of the Alevi belief system-becomes clearer through its direct relation to the notion of *düşkünlük*. In this sense, *musahiplik* is not merely a religious union formed through *ikrar*, but a mechanism for surveillance, discipline, and integration that reproduces the moral and social order of the Alevi community.

As one of the key conditions for entry into the Alevi community, *musahiplik* is a bond of brotherhood established through the mutual consent of two married men. However, for this ritual bond to be valid, the consent of their (female) spouses is also required. This indicates that while women are not recognised as direct agents within the belief system, they occupy a secondary, approving role. In other words, the institution of *musahiplik* is based on a male bond of brotherhood. As Nimet Okan (2016) emphasises, although the discourse of everyone being seen as a *can* (soul) in Alevism suggests an egalitarian structure, in practice it constructs a male-centred model of participation. The fact that women take part in *musahiplik* as accompanying rather than essential figures is a striking example of this gendered structure. While *musahiplik* represents a foundational social structure within the Alevi belief system, it exhibits asymmetry in terms of gender roles. Although it is required that men entering *musahiplik* be married and obtain the consent of their wives, the right to choose lies with men, and women are not obliged to form *musahip* ties-indicating an asymmetrical power relation. Furthermore, even though

women are expected to give their "consent" to the *musahiplik* bond, refusal may lead to being declared *düşkün*, which suggests that this is not voluntary approval but "compulsory consent" shaped by social pressure (Okan 2016, 62). This male bond of brotherhood renders women secondary to the *musahiplik* relationship and restricts their agency within the belief system. Thus, while *musahiplik* provides ritual belonging and communal solidarity, it simultaneously reproduces women's position within the hierarchy of gender relations (Okan 2016).

According to Alevi belief, one of the core requirements for being accepted into the faith and becoming a *talip* is to have a *musahip* (Kaygusuz 1991, 15). The foundations of this key institution are laid with maturity. Başgöz notes that *musahiplik* signifies admission into the adult community in Alevism (cited in Bozkurt 2010, 116). A person must reach a certain level of maturity in order to choose a *musahip*. "Accordingly, in Alevism, two men who have reached adolescence choose one another and enter the path together. They become *musahip* to each other" (Özkırımlı, cited in Yalçınkaya 2024, 82). Being married is a requirement for *musahiplik*. This is due both to the significance of the institution of marriage in Alevism-where those who are unmarried are not regarded as complete-and to the requirement that the wives of men who decide to become *musahip* must give their consent for the bond to be valid; "it is not appropriate for two people to become *musahip* before marriage, because future disagreements between spouses may lead to the breaking of this vow" (Özkırımlı 1993, 249). Furthermore, in the *Buyruk*, a key textual source for Alevis, solitary individuals are not regarded with esteem (Yalçınkaya 2024, 76). It is stated in the *Buyruk* that those without a *musahip* have no place in the Alevi community, are considered faithless and ignorant of the path, are seen as aligned with Mervan, and cannot participate in rituals. They are said to lack access to the gates of *shari'a*, *tariqa*, *ma'rifa*, and *haqiqa*, and to be without *nasip* from the forty stations and seventeen principles. The essence of *musahiplik* is

voluntary submission and unity. If this union does not occur at the gate of consent, and if the parties are not genuinely bonded, the *musahiplik* is deemed invalid; such persons are declared *düşkün*, and their *ikrar* is not recognised (cited in Korkmaz 2008, 336).

To elaborate further on the framework outlined above, it is useful to consider the example of Dersim Alevism-a significant regional interpretation of Alevism-in order to grasp the meaning and function of *musahiplik* in more concrete terms.

The Meaning and Forms of Practice of Musahiplik in Dersim Alevism

The *Rêya Heq/Raa Haq*, or the Path of Truth, which the people of Dersim define as their unique belief system, is not merely a religious tradition, but a holistic system encompassing social organisation, morality, and justice (Deniz 2011, 37). One of the foundational pillars of this system is the institution of *musahiplik*, which is based on mutual responsibility, consent (*rıza*), and communal oversight between individuals. Dilşa Deniz (2011) notes that, in the Dersim region, *kirvelik* and *musahiplik* form a kind of contractual or fictive kinship relation; since the belief system obliges every man to enter into one of these institutions, it also sustains its continuity (Deniz 2011, 61). Like Okan (2016), Deniz (2011) also points out that this bond of *musahip* brotherhood is a right exclusively granted to men, and that from childhood, boys are conditioned by their social environment to choose a *musahip* when the time comes. Only in this way can a man fulfil the requirements of the *Rê/Yol* (the Path) and earn the privilege of participating in the *görgü cem* (ritual of reconciliation) (Deniz 2011, 61). What begins as a personal decision gradually transforms into a social institution and creates a form of communal law. The institution most centrally regulated by this law is the family. Accordingly, members of the families formed by two *musahip* men are also considered siblings; just like biological siblings, marriage among members of these families is strictly prohibited. Today, the prohibition on marriage or sexual

relations between those joined by the bond of *musahiplik* remains one of the most strictly upheld taboos in the Dersim region (Deniz 2011, 62). Anyone who violates this rule is considered to have abandoned the *Rê/Yol* and faces the consequence of being declared *düşkün*, meaning exclusion from the faith and community (Deniz 2011).

According to Deniz (2011), *musahiplik* is "beyond brotherhood" due to the functions it assumes. Essentially, *musahiplik* operates as a mechanism of control and surveillance (Deniz 2011, 64). *Musahips* are held accountable for each other's actions. They are expected to know all of each other's secrets and to act before any wrongdoing occurs. A person who does not know their *musahip*'s secrets is considered negligent, which is itself regarded as a transgression within the *Rê/Yol*. The bond of *musahiplik*, formed through *ikrar*, involves a moral commitment between individuals as well as between each individual and the *Rê/Yol*. In this framework, an offence against one's *musahip* is simultaneously a violation of both *ikrar* and loyalty to the *Rê/Yol*. Such actions are thus viewed as dual violations-both individual and collective-and carry serious consequences. If the transgression directly targets an individual, the moral burden is tripled and forgiveness becomes impossible (Deniz 2011, 63).

The intertwinement of *musahiplik* with the process of family formation-the key pillar of social control-is no coincidence. In the Dersim belief system, the obligation for men to form a *musahiplik* bond before marriage functions not only as a religious rite but also as an operative mechanism of social regulation (Deniz 2011, 70). The duty of the *musahip* and his wife to offer guidance to the bride and groom on private matters such as the wedding night not only legitimises the marriage within the sacred framework of the *Rê/Yol*, but also adds a dimension of moral supervision and intimate counsel to the relationship (Deniz 2011, 70). In a social structure where premarital sexual relations are strictly prohibited, this transfer of knowledge occurs primarily through *musahips* (Deniz 2011, 71). In this respect, *musahiplik* is a structure in

which individuals are entrusted to one another, privacy is institutionalised, and the entire process of marriage is embedded within a religious and social network of regulation. This system represents a multilayered normative framework that governs not only interpersonal but also communal relationships. This arrangement extends beyond the mere transmission of sexual knowledge; it shows how confidentiality, trust, and mutual oversight are institutionalised through gender, moral, and path-based norms. Within this system, entrusting someone with another's "secret" and taking on the responsibility to protect them from transgressions signals a relationship that is deeper and more binding than siblinghood (Deniz 2011, 72).

In summary, within the Dersim belief system, *musahiplik* is not only a theological practice but also a tool used to regulate the norms of social life. It serves as a bearer of a multilayered structure encompassing gender roles, moral integrity, and social belonging.

The Foundational Ritual of the Institution of Musahiplik: The Musahip Cem[1]

The institution of *musahiplik* is built upon various traditional principles and structural rules. For *musahiplik* to be established, those who accept entry into this institution-meaning those who give *ikrar* in order to become *talip* on this Path-must fulfil certain fundamental conditions. They must:"a) Be loyal to their *mürşid* and *rehber*, mature, obedient, and trustworthy;b) Refrain from lying and gossip;c) Uphold truthfulness and integrity;d) Fulfil the requirements of the Four Gates (*Dört Kapı*) and their conditions;e) Promote peace and unity within the community;f) Be liked by others;g) Love others;h) Possess a continuous desire to know and to learn" (Korkmaz 2008, 336).

In addition to adhering to the above-mentioned principles, a person must also meet three further criteria in order to choose a *musahip* and participate in the *ikrar cem*, the initiation ritual into the institution. These are: a shared

language, marital status, parity in age and standing, and cohabitation in the same locality (Özkırımlı 1993; Korkmaz 2008). Shared language refers to the requirement that *musahip* siblings must speak the same language. It is assumed that they cannot properly understand one another if they do not. Korkmaz (2008) argues that this criterion plays a role in preserving and transmitting the link between language and culture: "Although Turkish has gradually emerged as a common language among the oppressed, the 'speaking languages of cultures' have nonetheless retained their significance. In this context, *musahiplik* has softly bound together those who speak the same language, thereby enabling the transmission of the 'speaking languages of cultures' into the present" (Korkmaz 2008, 338). Marital status, as previously mentioned, requires that both individuals entering into the *musahip* brotherhood must be married, and their spouses must also consent to the bond. The criterion of parity in age and standing expects that both persons entering the Path be approximately the same age. Additionally, their education level, maturity, belief, and areas of interest should be similar. These conditions serve as precautions to ensure the stability of this lifelong bond of brotherhood. Lastly, cohabitation in the same place of residence means that *musahips* must live in the same city, village, or neighbourhood. Özkırımlı summarises this criterion with the following metaphor:"A townsman should not be *musahip* with a villager. The townsman is like a wolf, the villager like a lamb. There can be no harmony between the wolf and the lamb. And to use another analogy: place is the body, *musahip* is the soul" (Özkırımlı 1993, 248).

Conclusion

The institution of *musahiplik* is not merely a religious ritual but a form of social organisation built upon multilayered socio-cultural conditions such as language, locality, social equality, and solidarity. The transformation of this institution in the face of social changes such as urbanisation and migration has raised important questions about how institutions like *musahiplik* can be reinterpreted under

contemporary conditions. Two distinct approaches offer responses to this question: one by Yıldırım (2018), who evaluates the issue through a traditional-modern dichotomy, and another by Gültekin (2025), who critiques this framework and proposes a perspective that moves beyond such binary oppositions.

In order for *musahiplik* to function, certain foundational conditions must be met: shared language, parity in age and status, marital status, and co-residence. However, these conditions have been altered by the processes of rural-to-urban migration and urbanisation that began in Turkey in the 1950s (Yıldırım 2018, 304). According to Yıldırım (2018), significant changes began to take place in Alevi society after the mid-20th century, rooted in the dynamics of migration and urbanisation. With these developments, the previously "insulated society" that characterised Alevism was no longer sustainable, and "rurality-long the dominant feature of the traditional socio-religious system's natural, economic, and cultural environment-gave way to urbanity" (Yıldırım 2018, 82). The two social institutions in which the transformation identified by Yıldırım as resulting from urbanisation can be most clearly observed are *düşkünlük* and *musahiplik*; the *Görgü* and *Musahiplik Cems*, through which the functioning of these institutions could once be traced, have been abandoned in this new modern society (Yıldırım 2018, 310). As the backbone of traditional Alevism, the institution of *musahiplik* has largely been relinquished in urban life due to its declining sustainability and increasing rigidity (Yıldırım 2018, 84).

Contrary to Yıldırım's (2018) view-which interprets Alevi belief through a traditional-modern binary and considers *musahiplik* a discarded institution-Gültekin (2025) critiques the tendency to frame Alevism through dichotomies such as traditional-modern, rural-urban, centre-periphery, and settled-nomadic (Gültekin 2025, 29). He argues that the frequent use of the traditional-modern binary in particular overlooks the individualised and everyday dimensions of belief when attempting to make sense of the transformations

Alevism has undergone (Gültekin 2025, 29). While reading the transformation of belief in this way may be useful for tracing the chronological shifts in ritual and discourse repertoires, this approach-whose meanings have shifted over time-can no longer adequately account for today's Alevi social dynamics (Gültekin 2025).

As clearly stated in Gültekin's study, Alevi social organisation has constructed a complex social network through "the articulation of social structures ranging from household, *ezbet*, and tribe to tribal confederations, with strong cultural formations based on real and fictive kinship patterns such as *kirvelik* and *musahiplik*" (2024, 519). This complex web can be viewed as a continuing social pattern whose relevance persists without being confined to a nostalgic ideal of the past. Although it has become difficult to sustain *musahiplik* in its traditional forms in the face of urbanisation and individualisation, it can be said that the institution holds the potential to be reinterpreted within contemporary Alevism as a moral point of reference and a marker of cultural belonging. The fact that the marriage/sexual taboo associated with *musahiplik* in Dersim continues to be strictly observed today (Deniz 2011, 62) also acquires significance in this context. Gültekin's (2024; 2025) approach offers a meaningful opportunity to move beyond the frequent academic distinction between "traditional" and "modern" Alevism: *musahiplik* need not be regarded as a dissolved ritual of the past, but rather as a form of social bond that is undergoing transformation and open to reinterpretation.

Endnotes

[1] Although musahiplik begins with the cem ritual known as the görgü cem, Dilşa Deniz (2011, 63) notes that she has not witnessed musahiplik being established through this cem in Dersim. She suggests that this may be due either to the fact that the ritual is not strictly required in Dersim, or to the historically prohibited status of the belief system, which may have led to a softening of this obligation.

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