Alevism and Social Trauma

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Summary
This entry examines how Alevi identity has been shaped through the framework of historical trauma and collective memory, and how it is narrated especially in the diaspora. From a psychosocial perspective, it focuses on the determining impact of massacres beginning with Karbala and continuing through events such as Dersim, Maraş, and Sivas on the formation of Alevi identity. Alevism is often defined in comparison to Islam, which leads to its distinctive, syncretic, and esoteric character being overlooked. While drawing attention to the internal diversity and non-homogeneous nature of Alevi society, the article addresses the psychological, social, and cultural effects of the intergenerational transmission of trauma. Alevism is approached as a mode of existence developed against historical oppression, beyond being a belief system. In conclusion, it emphasises that for social healing and justice, not only cultural awareness but also state-level recognition and reparation are necessary.

Keywords: Alevi Identity, Dersim, Travma

When I Say I Am Alevi

In recent decades, Alevism has begun to be examined in many respects; in this process, while Alevism has been redefined as a faith, the social sciences and humanities have also produced an extensive literature on how Alevism is lived. Studies on how Alevism is lived both in Turkey and abroad (Sökefeld 2004; Bilecen 2016), how institutionalisation relating to Alevism has formed (Şahin 2012; White and Jongerden 2021), how migration mobilities have affected Alevism in its main geography (Çelik 2017; Özkul 2019), and defining Alevi identity (Aslan 2017; Jenkins

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and Çetin 2018) continue to increase. The definition of Alevi identity is a common point where studies on Alevism have concentrated, and it is an important issue both for Alevi communities and for those who look at Alevism from the outside. In this study, I will look at the role of the massacres that have shaped its history in Alevism's self-definition. Studies on Alevi identity have, to date, been treated as a subject of sociology. In this study, I will address the issue from a psychosocial perspective, as a relatively new discipline.

As someone who has lived in the diaspora for many years and conducted studies on Alevism, I have both made an effort to explain Alevism and listened to definitions of Alevism conveyed to me. When Alevism is defined locally, some of the comments I have heard most often are as follows: "we are from the lineage of the Ahl al-Bayt", "we are the side of Islam that stands against injustice", "we are those who do not forget the injustice done to Ali and his lineage", "our faith and philosophy are directly on the side of truth; beyond that, what it is is not very important", and "Alevism is a faith that has common ties with Islam but is different".

In the diaspora, the effort to explain Alevism is even more intricate. The first reason for this is that Alevism is a syncretic and esoteric faith (Kehl-Bodrogi, Heinkele, and Beaujean 1997). Syncretic faiths contain elements from earlier and contemporaneous beliefs in the geographies where they are lived. In this context, Alevism contains elements from Shamanism, Christianity, and mainstream Islam. Alongside this, however, this faith of Anatolia is lived differently by the Tahtacıs in the Mediterranean and Aegean, the Hubyars living in Central Anatolia, or Zaza- and Kurdish-origin Alevis in Dersim. The most common assumption made about identity groups is that each identity group is homogeneous. The misunderstanding created by the nation-state current is still being overcome in an epistemological context. Because Alevis are demographically a minority, they are more often seen as a homogeneous group, yet they show many differences within themselves. In this context, to

understand Alevism, it is necessary to proceed with an esoteric understanding. Esoteric knowledge can be defined as powerful knowledge understood by a small group who understand the subject (Beck 2013).

In the diaspora, in defining Alevism in a way that is more intelligible, one starts with what is most widely known. For example, as Jenkins and Çetin (2018) note in their studies on Alevis in Britain, most definitions begin as "a kind of Muslim". Unfortunately, the further one moves away from its geography, Alevism is defined not by what it is, but by what it is not. Many definitions begin like this: "Alevism is like Islam, but unlike other Muslims, Alevis do not go to the mosque, do not perform namaz, and do not fast in Ramadan." After this come explanations of what Alevism is: mourning/fasting (*yas-ı matem*) in the month of Muharrem for the Twelve Imams rather than in Ramadan, gathering and worshipping not in a mosque but in a *cemevi*, or the content of the form of worship. Academics and Alevi organisations in the diaspora are making efforts to move away from this negative mode of definition. This effort is part of the revival process of Alevism that began especially in the 1990s. With modernisation, urbanisation, and migration movements, one of the reasons that triggered this reshaping process was that Alevi youth who were born and raised away from the geographies that are the home of Alevism came to recognise and embrace their identities.

Psychological Trauma, Collective Wounding

The aim of this text is to contribute to the collective effort mentioned so far. In this context, it approaches Alevi identity formation from a psychosocial perspective by focusing on Alevi massacres that constitute Alevism's core discourses and the psychological traumas created by these massacres. Psychological trauma is in itself a major subject that has been examined extensively, and what is meant by the concept of trauma has changed over centuries. This word, of Latin origin, actually means "wound". In a physical sense it can be understood as wounding through the tearing of the

skin; in a psychological sense, as the fragmentation of the soul through a blow. In psychological terms, in the first version of the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-I), published in 1952, it is defined as the violence to which the individual is exposed and the emotional response given to that violence. This definition has changed in every version by redefining both the type of violence and the individual's distance to the violence. In the latest revision of the fifth version (DSM-V) (2022), trauma has been accepted across a broad spectrum, from being exposed to serious violence that would lead to injury or death, or feeling the threat of such violence, to being exposed to long-term stress. The updated definition of psychological trauma now also states that trauma may affect not only the victim but also people close to the victims-family and friends.

The DSM is a source that produces a definition related to psychological trauma and is more often referred to within a clinical framework. One of the clinicians and researchers who has produced the most work on psychological trauma, Bessel van der Kolk (1989), defines trauma as follows: "Trauma is the situation in which the individual, in the face of a threat to which they are exposed, does not have the resources to cope with this threat naturally." In fact, only a very small proportion of those exposed to traumatic events experience diagnosable disorders such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) through scales recommended by the DSM (Lukaschek et al. 2013). Judith Herman (2015), one of the clinicians and researchers who criticise a diagnosis-centred approach to psychological trauma, describes psychological trauma as follows:

At the moment it occurs, trauma leaves its victim helpless; it destroys the individual's sense of control normally maintained, the notion of perceiving oneself as an integrated whole with one's surroundings, and the meaningful bond established with one's surroundings… The destructive effect of trauma cannot be explained in a one-sided way through the symptoms it causes; turning the effect of trauma into

something measurable and weighable leads only to a meaningless comparison of the horrible things that have happened… The most striking aspect of trauma is the state of helplessness and fear evoked by what is traumatic.

Psychological trauma can be experienced both individually and socially. In an individual sense, we can give examples such as accidents, criminal acts that may lead to injury and death, and sexual violence. Social traumas are evaluated in two main groups as natural disasters and human-made disasters. Natural disasters are events such as earthquakes, floods, and drought; human-made disasters correspond to more complex violent events such as war, genocide, ethnic cleansing, and massacres. They are experienced by targeted societies and, even if at different scales, they affect the course of life of all individuals in the society and leave deep traces on them. It is accepted that the traumatic effects of human-made disasters are experienced more severely compared to natural disasters, and this cause-effect relationship is explained as follows: natural disasters affect everyone in a given geography without discrimination, and neither their cause nor the way they occur can be controlled (Ursana et al. 2017). Large-scale violence that one human society applies by targeting another human society is experienced collectively and leaves deep traces across the whole society.

The concepts of collective/cultural/historical trauma are too complex to be examined within a psychologically plain perspective. In this context, we need to approach trauma and its effects from a psychosocial perspective. A psychosocial perspective is an area where psychology and sociology intersect. Instead of approaching emotional problems and stress disorders by placing diagnosis and identification, it evaluates them within the context and looks at the individual’s conditions. Psychology became a separate field of science in the mid-nineteenth century by separating from medicine and philosophy. While continuing its own evolution, it has been criticised for approaching human experiences through a very narrow framework and for

focusing on reducing the causes of emotional problems people experience to the individual and making diagnoses that the individual has a mental problem. A psychosocial approach evaluates what people and societies experience by taking into account the family, school, work, social environment, socio-economic-political conditions within which individuals interact, and intergenerationally transmitted traumas. In this context, to look at social traumas and their intergenerational effects, a psychosocial approach provides a more comprehensive methodology.

Suarez-Orozca and Robben (2001, p. 1) say of large-scale violence that leads to social traumas: “large-scale violence occurs in a complex and highly overdetermined socio-cultural context that is intertwined with psychological, social, political, economic, and cultural dimensions.” Violence of this magnitude will affect both individuals in society and the collective identity of the society. Social trauma leaves deep traces on everyone who is directly exposed to that violence as well as those who are far from where the violence occurred but see themselves as members of that identity group. Because the destruction created by social traumas leads to destruction at every layer of society, the effects of this destruction affect those who are geographically distant from the traumatic events as well as the later generations who are the future of the society. Alexander et al. (2004), who define social trauma as “cultural trauma”, describe the effect such traumas leave on society as follows: “….it leaves indelible marks on the collective consciousness of the members of a community (society) and causes the future identities of those exposed to horrifying events that cover their shared memory to change in a very radical and irreversible way, just as it does for those exposed…”.

From Karbala to Today: Trauma and Identity

When we approach Alevism within this framework, Alevi history is woven with the massacres to which it has been subjected. I will continue my text by taking the point of

origin of Alevism as the Karbala Massacre, and I will approach the Karbala Massacre as the origin myth or mythological origin of Alevism. The reason for this is the chronological importance of the Karbala Massacre, namely that as a historical event it separated Alevi society from those who followed mainstream Islam, and that it is accepted as the point of departure for the historical visibility of Alevis. Historical events can be as powerful as a mythological origin because of the resonance they find within society. The Karbala Massacre (10 October 680) is the oppression and massacre carried out by the 5,000-strong army of the Umayyad ruler Yazid I against Imam Husayn's family and soldiers, a group of 70 people, because he did not pledge allegiance to him (Bal 2016). Despite its 1,400-year history, the Karbala Massacre continues to live in Alevi history and rituals and in collective memory, and it is at the heart of Alevi teaching and practices. This is followed by the Battle of Chaldiran in 1514. After tensions between the Safavids and the Ottomans, the battle fought on the Chaldiran Plain ended in favour of the Ottomans[1]. With the defeat of the Safavids, the Qızılbaş completely lost their hopes of security and were left entirely defenceless against Ottoman oppression. After this defeat, the Kızılbaş were subjected to various slanders produced about them; rather than punishing the authors of these slanders, they were isolated and othered through many fatwas issued about them by the ulema, and subsequently became the target of centuries-long discrimination, violence, pressure, and oppression (Kehl-Bodrogi, Heinkele, and Beaujean 1997).

Policies of othering, marginalisation, and annihilation directed at Alevis restricted Alevis' daily lives and pushed them into a strategically very weak position in terms of protecting themselves, and for this reason made them the target of countless massacres from Karbala to the present. Instead of following a different attitude from Ottoman rule, massacres of Alevis continued in the early Republican period, which placed modernisation and secularisation within its intellectual structure, and the system aimed not to

recognise Alevis as a faith group but to annihilate them; for example, the Dersim Massacre (1937-1938), the Ortaca Massacre (1966), the Maraş Massacre (1978), the Çorum Massacre (1980), the Sivas Massacre (1993), the Gazi District Events (1995). Thus, from Karbala onwards, practices and legal inadequacies that aimed to annihilate Alevis' physical and cultural existence through extermination policies have continued to be pursued up to the present. With each massacre, Alevis' legitimate conditions of living and existing have been attacked.

Each of these massacres is a highly traumatic event and has opened social psychological wounds for Alevis. In my study on the Dersim Massacre, I observed that the effects of the massacre do not fit into a time span. Members of the second and third generations, born decades after the massacre, spoke with horror about the effects of the massacre and the violence inflicted, as if they themselves had experienced it; they narrated the oppression experienced by their mothers, fathers, and other ancestors as if they had lived it themselves, internalising it (Çelik 2013; 2017). Nearly 85 years have passed since the Dersim Massacre, and the overwhelming majority of those who survived the massacre are no longer alive. In my studies on Dersim, the most prominent theme is this: Dersimlis have been living the oppression of the Dersim Massacre since 38, and the state has been denying the oppression it committed since 38. The Dersim Massacre is undoubtedly a traumatic event because of the violence and oppression it involved in 1937-38; however, the discourse created and sustained about the massacre after the years of the massacre is at least as traumatic as the massacre events themselves. We see a similar picture when we look at other Alevi massacres. For example, after the Maraş Massacre, proceedings were initiated against 800 people, but it was not possible to reach 68 people responsible for the events even to put them on trial; sentences given were overturned and annulled or reduced by the Court of Cassation. There was no change in the developing political conjuncture, and those responsible

for the Maraş Massacre were elected as MPs from the MHP (Poyraz 2013).

In the Çorum Massacre (1980), during the month-and-a-half-long violence, Alevis were left defenceless, their homes and workplaces were attacked, and the security forces acted indifferently to these attacks and the losses incurred. In the Sivas Massacre (1993), 33 people-including writers, intellectuals, hotel workers, and some young people who were children-were killed when the hotel where they were staying was set on fire. After years of judicial proceedings, it concluded with only 33 defendants receiving aggravated life sentences, while the defendants' lawyers entered parliament after being elected as MPs from the Welfare Party. The discourse regarding these massacres carried out in the Republican period consists of slanders similar in nature to the fatwas issued by the ulema in the Ottoman period to other Alevis, claiming that Alevis were irreligious and did not attach importance to notions of honour and morality.

With every massacre, Alevis were exposed to violence and the threat of violence on a very large scale. Alevis were forced to live under conditions in which they had no security of life and property. This atmosphere in itself is highly traumatic. It is inevitable that it will cause anxiety, unease, fear, and sleep disorders in individuals. It may lead to physical pain and organ disorders, and psychologically to disorders such as anxiety, mood disorders, and depression, and even to more organic psychiatric disorders beginning with psychosis. Beyond this, individuals will develop different strategies in order to adapt to the conditions they live in; for example, hiding that they are Alevi in order to ensure security outside the home, teaching their children not to express that they are Alevi because they live in an unsafe world, and by building thickened psychological boundaries, maintaining a more distant stance in relations with non-Alevis. For Alevis, over time these strategies ceased to be variable, and hiding one's identity and maintaining distance became protection against a danger whose source and timing were unknown.

Events that will lead to social traumas such as genocide, ethnic cleansing, and political violence are, unfortunately, events experienced by many societies. For this reason, there is an extensive literature on how to heal the wounds opened by social traumas (Danieli 1998; Humprey 2000; Alexander et al. 2004). The first step to be taken for the healing of social trauma is to recognise and accept the injustice and oppression inflicted. In Turkish literature, this is referred to as "coming to terms with history" (*tarihle yüzleşme*). Coming to terms with history is accepting the injustice done to a society and a guarantee that this injustice will not be continued. After this stage, the repair process-that is, the process of establishing justice-can begin. By removing structural inequalities of opportunity, equal rights are provided to the society that has been traumatised. For example, in Canada, opportunities were provided through positive discrimination in education and employment for those of Indigenous origin; in America, it was done by enabling Indigenous peoples to make decisions concerning their own lands. Alongside this, in order to ensure the establishment of justice with the aim of restoring the society's dignity, courts and/or commissions are established, both an apology is offered to the traumatised society and assurances are given that they will live safely as an identity group. This is a process of social reconciliation and a starting point for societies to recognise one another and produce shared values. In an environment where there is no coming to terms with society, and where the violence and threat applied to Alevis has not been removed, Alevis will continue to be othered and the boundaries between them and those who follow Sunni Islam will continue to increase.

Unfortunately, Alevis still live under the shadow of the injustices done to them and the denial of these injustices. These massacres confirm that Alevis are both a numerical and cultural minority! As a minority, Alevis are defenceless and do not have the political and military power to defend themselves. Alevis' minority position has made their othering easier and, historically, they have been culturally rendered

homeless in the places where they lived. These massacres have also shaped Alevi collective consciousness and caused Alevis to live more isolated lives in order to protect themselves. Every child born into Alevi society has become a carrier of the traumas coming from Karbala to the present, because it is inevitable that, within understanding Alevi identity and expressing oneself as Alevi, one evaluates where one stands in life as an Alevi in relation to these massacres. As can be seen in this picture, Alevi massacres are wounds that do not fit into time, and because these wounds cannot close, they have a place in the lives of all Alevis, whether they have experienced them or not.

Intergenerational transitions of psychological trauma can take different forms. When we look at these transitions in the axis of Alevism, trauma transitions are intra-generational, intergenerational, and transgenerational. Those who directly experienced the massacres and the physical and psychological violence endured by Alevis, and those close to them, are affected, and it is transmitted within generations. Transmission from one generation to another, that is from parent to child, is intergenerational transmission. Intergenerational transmission includes many processes from speaking and narrating to total silence. Traumas that one generation cannot bring to an end within its own time span affect many subsequent generations and turn into transgenerational trauma. In the process of coping with social trauma, social identity is rebuilt. In this context, the most widely used theory is social identity theory (Tajfel et al. 1979; Tajfel and Turner 2004). According to social identity theory, people ascribe themselves to a group and see themselves as “we”; we call this the in-group. They see those outside their group as “they”; we call this the out-group. The person uses this to determine their bond with the in-group and their distance from the out-group.

The traumas experienced by Alevis and their othering have been determining in forming a strong shared consciousness and identity as an in-group, as “we”. By becoming conscious through the injustice done to them, they developed the

maxim of standing against injustice, regardless of who the target is. Both in order to continue acting with this awareness and to cope with their unresolved historical and social traumas, they restructure their collective and individual identities by keeping the massacres they experienced alive in shared memory. The traumas created by massacres are not ordinary experiences that will come to an end within a single generation. Unfortunately, the fact that those who carried out these massacres are not tried justly, not punished, and not condemned from a historical perspective leads to the traumas created by the massacres not being left behind. Members of the society continue to live these traumas by remembering/not forgetting the massacres.

Individuals and societies have a capacity to forget and do not remember everything they experience; they cannot remember. What we call functional memory loss-our capacity to be unable to remember everything-is essential for living a healthy life, but the traumatic events they experience can damage an individual's and society's capacity to forget. On this, Nietzsche says that societies that lose their capacity to forget will have a more difficult struggle for life (Ramadanovic 2001). Unfortunately, for societies exposed to severe traumas like Alevis, forgetting does not work in its natural course, because until the injustices and oppression are accepted, and until there is an effort from the out-group for reparation, societies are forced to live in an unjust and unsafe environment. This living environment causes both the wounds experienced not to heal and new wounds/wounds to be opened. Thus, remembering, or continuing to remember, becomes the strongest reference related to who you are-that is, identity. In this context, the direction of remembering is not from past to present, but from present to past (Bergson 2007): that is, it is not the events in the past that follow us, but our need to remember them and keep them alive in memory. On this, the cultural historian Dominic La Capra (2000), who works on the Jewish genocide, says that what we remember is functional for today rather than for the past,

because what we remember strengthens our group and individual identity. In this context, rather than the content of what is remembered, why it should be remembered, and why societies do not forget/cannot forget, is the field of psychological trauma.

Being forced to remember is a very heavy burden for a society. For centuries, Alevis have existed by not forgetting/not being able to forget. By making a very successful effort, they have preserved their distinctive collective identity. From the 1950s onwards, migration and modernisation pushed Alevis to carry their identities into urban space and the diaspora. Alevis took their identities to the places they went and, especially with the 1990s, carried the formations they established in the diaspora in accordance with the urban settlement fabric back to Turkey. The process of Alevis' identity formation has undoubtedly been affected by these new developments as well, and new Alevi institutions have become determinants of Alevi identity in the ever-increasing literature on Alevism. In this reshaping process they have experienced, Alevis are resorting to more positive and more distinctive interpretations in order to introduce themselves. Definitions reflecting this change have become more commonly heard in recent years, for example: "Alevism is a faith", "Alevis are a minority faith group in Anatolia".

Conclusion

The determining relationship Alevis have with trauma will continue as long as the political conditions, and the institutional recognition and reparation of the oppression and injustices inflicted on them, are not achieved. However, as we conduct these discussions, the most important point will be to think about what we understand by psychological trauma. I begin my classes on psychological trauma by saying: "trauma is normal reactions to abnormal events." As I end this text, I also want to underline this here. In many meetings and classes where I talk about trauma, unfortunately I have received a great deal of feedback that

trauma is perceived as an illness. This is a wrong approach! In every context where trauma is not discussed in a medical sense, it points to the violence to which the individual or society is exposed and the effects of that violence. We can make this effect a method for understanding the individual and society by examining it in its literary, political, social, and psychological dimensions, as in this text. Going beyond this-namely, evaluating it as diagnosis and identification-is unconsciously, ignorantly, and ethically unacceptable!

Endnotes

[1] The Safavids ruled Persia between 1501 and 1736 and are widely regarded as the founders of the modern Iranian state. Claiming descent from the Prophet, they were known as Sayyids and adhered to Twelver Shiʿism. Geographically, the regions of Anatolia where Alevis lived in large numbers were closer to the Safavid centers than to Istanbul. This geographical and religious proximity of non-Sunni Alevi communities to the Safavids caused significant concern and unease for the Ottoman dynasty, which was firmly committed to Sunni Islam.

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