Kurdish Alevis (Postscript to a TAVO Article [1989] - Revisited)

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Published Date:
5 October 2025

Downloaded Date:
07.11.2026

Suggested Citation: Bumke, Peter J. (2025). Kurdish Alevis (Postscript to a TAVO Article [1989] - Revisited) . Alevi Encyclopedia — ISIL: DE-4607. https://doi.org/10.68413/alevian siklopedisi.r574s (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
This entry revisits some of the observations made during anthropological fieldwork in the 1970s in Mazgirt/Dersim and published in TAVO (Tübinger Atlas des Vorderen Orients) in 1989. These observations focused on the outside perceptions of Kurdish Alevis, on their forms of social incorporation, on religious symbols, practices, and tenets, and on the organisation of sociopolitical space within and outside Kurdish Alevi society. These observations are reconsidered here in light of the dramatic and traumatic changes in Dersim society. They have led, among the migrants from the region and in the diaspora in Europe, to a revival or reconstitution of Alevi religious practices and a reassertion of Kurdish Alevi and Dersim identity.

Keywords: Alevi Kurds

From Fieldwork in the 1970s Dersim to Revisiting a Changing Identity [1]

The original 1989 article, was an outcome of my anthropological fieldwork carried out over altogether 18 months between 1974-78 in several Kurmanci-speaking villages around Moxundi/Mazgirt/Tunceli-Dersim. (Some earlier articles from the same fieldwork period have recently been translated into Turkish and are listed in the endnote [2])

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The emphasis in my fieldwork shifted over time from economic conditions and the reasons for labour migration to themes like social structure and relations, religion, politics and oral history. In this contribution for a comprehensive and ambitious volume on ethnic groups in Turkey edited by Peter Andrews the special ethno-religious identity of the Kurdish Alevi took centre stage. This identity I had then perceived and described as a “vessel” in Frederick Barth’s felicitous term, whose boundaries were externally imposed while its valuable and time-honoured cago had started shifting and had been partly thrown overboard and its proud personnel were fluctuating or some had already sprung ship. In retrospective the limitations of my perspective becomes apparent: I had never gone into the Zazaki-speaking villages which form the most of Dersim and therefore highly localised diversity of Kurdish-Alevi rites and practices was hidden from my view. What did emerge, though, already in my article were early indications as to how migration might impact on this identity. My theoretical approach drew on British social anthropology, which encouraged examining communities not as isolated entities but as parts of wider social networks.

In the 2010s, I returned several times to the region and recorded 20 video interviews with former inhabitants of the village of Mankerek -10 men, 10 women-in their new surroundings in Western Anatolia and Germany. While they talked about their often difficult life experiences, reasserting their Alevi identity became a recurrent theme. My observations from the 1970ies are now a historic snapshot of communities whose members and their descendants have moved on into multiple geographic and cultural directions. The “vessel” now looks more like a small fleet, whose components are still held together by outside threats and repression, but have actively undertaken a large variety of transformations, reinventions and adaptations and continue to do so. Against the background of my more recent impressionistic observations and conversations of the last decade and with only a cursory glance at the rapidly growing

body of literature on Alevi religion, I revisit my 1989 article, following its chapters and structure.

European perceptions (1) (2)

The trickle of extremely scarce, reliable information on Alevi religion that was available in the 1970s has become a wide riverbed with a wealth of locally retrieved data on oral history, academic and civil society publications in Turkey and a very lively public and academic presence of Alevis in the diaspora.

Contrary to the earlier prevalent attitude of Alevis to hide in a subdued seclusion, a common thread in all these currents is now a firm reassertion of Kurdish Alevi identity. This is based both on a renewed knowledge of their locally quite diverse traditions but also on efforts at unifying and codifying religious rites and practices. Other than the Alevis in Turkey the diaspora in Europe has been more determined to establish Alevi religion as a religious community outside Islam and has been, as a consequence, been more active in establishing theological faculties side by side with – and not always clearly set apart from – social science oriented academic research which requires a more analytical and impartial stance.

This latter observation might also be due to a welcome major characteristic of this new wave of publications and public discourses: They articulate the authentic voices of academics, journalists, writers, musicians and artists from Dersim, many of them women. They are actively shaping and expressing the identity of their own community, both with festivals and events in Dersim and the cities of Anatolia or in the growing diaspora in Europe.

While in the 1970s and 1980s hardly anyone in Germany, the Netherlands or in France was aware of the fact that a good number of the “Muslim Turkish labour migrants” were in fact Alevi, or Kurdish or both, this situation has by now thoroughly changed. Contributing to this change of

perception was at the time one of my intentions in writing up what later inadvertently turned out to be pioneering articles.

The problem

The defensive quality of the boundary between Kurdish Alevis and their Sunni neighbours and rulers has been maintained, if anything it has been reconfirmed by the political climate in Turkey, the continued discrimination of job seekers and professionals from Dersim, events such as the July 2, 1993 massacre in Sivas or the persecutions and the embargo on Dersim in the early 1990ies. The revived memory of the 1938 Tertele, once only whispered about in the 1970ies, was brought into public awareness and focus, shaping today's sense of a continuity of the community as victims of state violence and bigotry.

But the earlier affinity between traditional Alevi beliefs and concepts and those of modernity, notably the radical worldliness and the conviction of a universal unity of mankind has been broadened and opened up towards new frontiers or shores of modernity. The common ethical grounding or foundations of Alevi religion, which for many observers is there one distinctive trait, has thus been the basis not only for a revival and elaboration of religious practices and rituals in cem houses and revitalised ziyarets (jiares). It has led other members of the community from the young and well-educated diasporic generation to join a global rainbow alliance of postcolonial discourses, ecofeminism and environmental concerns, thus renewing their opposition to autocratic threats to freedom and social justice.

Social incorporation

The intricate network between localised lineages and the dedes, described in my 1989 account, was quite likely an already idealised reconstruction from a Baba Mansur perspective, and could not possibly withstand the break-up of social relations through migration and repression. Grafted

upon a tribal structure it was in a state of dissolution and its legitimacy questioned by a generation of young leftists.

To what extent new localised community cem houses in Turkey and abroad and continuing kinship-based dede-talip relations with seyit families or newly appointed Alevi religious leaders have replaced the earlier structures is an entirely new field for enquiry. Whether powers of keramet and capacities of mediators would still be required or available under these new circumstances is another open question.

Symbols -Alevi Practices and Tenets-, Orthodox Views

The earlier strictly anti-ritualistic character of Kurdish Alevi religious practices has for some sections of Kurdish Alevi society, given way to an extensive revival of half-forgotten or neglected practices around Muharram and Gaxend, recipes for *aşure* soup shared on social media, pilgrimages to a local ziyaret during the summer holidays, frequent invocations of Hızır, detailed prescriptions for the execution of a semah and a rich catechetical buyruk literature. While this might be viewed as a mimicry of Sunni or even Christian church practices, these reinterpretations of local tradition also function as markers of alternative identifications with a Shia, Zoroastrian, Mesopotamian, Chorasanian, Armenian, Gnostic or whatever other non-Sunni or non-Turkish past.

Other parts of Kurdish Alevi society, both in Anatolia and abroad, continue to hold on to their religious identity without any of these outward signs of adherence, just firmly retaining their ethical and universalist foundations. Quite often their sense of belonging is expressed in their distinctive and highly innovative musical styles.

Sociopolitical Space

In many ways the boundaries and perceptions of the Kurdish Alevi have been supplemented and partly superseded by the sociopolitical space of “Dersim”. Emerging from the trauma of 1938 and still an absolute taboo in the 1970ies it now

includes for those who consider themselves Dersimis and of whom more than 90 % do not live in Dersim, a wide and quite diverse spectrum of ethno-linguistic , religious and aesthetic markers.

This, of course, is partly due to the impact of the conflict, after 1978. between the Turkish state and the PKK. Villages in Dersim squeezed in between the two sides were pressed hard to show proof of allegiance to either side. While trying to hold on to dear life and survival and the impending need to move elsewhere, at the end of the day many of them also held on to the peculiar cultural atmosphere of their region, carried with them and kept in mind its traumatic history, were ready to discuss the ambiguities of ethno-linguistic affiliation of Zazaki and their relevance for Kurdish liberation struggles, were engaged in efforts to preserve Dersims historically charged landscape of sacred mountains and rivers. Some of them built new houses in their evacuated villages.

While migrants from Dersim were subjected to double discriminations as Alevis and as Kurds within Turkey, they made resolute and circumspect use of whatever open space for expression seemed available in Turkish cities. This expression was even more articulate and varied in the diaspora, where their reassertion is also fed by new opportunities, but also by a nostalgia of the older generation for the land and atmosphere of their childhood and a contemporary commitment by the next generation. to identity politics and diverse lifestyles.

Dersim continues to provide those who describe themselves as Dersimis with a rich and unique cultural vocabulary, with a revived and reinterpreted Alevi religion supplying many of its key concepts and symbols.

Conclusion

In this entry, Bumke revisits his 1989 study based on anthropological fieldwork in Mazgirt/Dersim during the

1970s, examining how the distinctive ethno-religious identity of Kurdish Alevis has been shaped by migration, political repression, and cultural transformation. He reflects on earlier methodological limits, such as the exclusion of Zazaki-speaking communities, and contrasts past observations with more recent impressions gathered through return visits and diaspora interviews. The analysis traces a shift from a defensive, secluded identity to a more assertive public presence, especially in the European diaspora, marked by revived religious practices, efforts to codify tradition, and engagement with global movements. While older communal structures-such as dede-talip networks-have weakened, new forms of organisation, ritual life, and cultural expression have emerged, reinforcing a shared sense of belonging tied to the memory and symbolism of “Dersim” as both a place and an idea.

Endnotes

[1] The Kurdish Alevis - Boundaries and Perceptions

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[2] Other publications from that period have recently been published in Turkish:

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