Space in Alevism (Arab Alevism)

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Published Date:
5 October 2025

Downloaded Date:
07.11.2026

Suggested Citation: Alvanoğlu Yolcu, Sonmez (2025). Space in Alevism (Arab Alevism). Alevi Encyclopedia — ISIL: DE-4607. https://doi.org/10.68413/alevian siklopedisi.5xudc (Access Date: 07.11.2026)

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

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Summary
Alawites, also known as Nusayris, are an ethno-religious community living mostly in Hatay, Adana and Mersin in Türkiye as well as Latakia and Tartus in Syria and Jabal Mohsen in Lebanon. They have lived as a closed and suppressed society for centuries due to political and historical reasons. In general, research on Alawites is quite limited. This study examines the concept of space in Alawism and structures within Alawite culture such as “ziyaret,” “the tradition of unclehood,” and “sheikhdom” through Lefebvre’s theory of space. Based on Cemal Salman’s studies on Alevism and space, the study adapts Lefebvre’s triadic dialectic of space to Alawism, emphasizing that space is not merely a concrete plane, but rather an intertwined dimension of the physical, social, and intellectual.

Keywords: Alawite, Conceived Space, Perceived Space, Social Space, space

Introduction

The subject of space in Alevism has only begun to be addressed in a relatively recent period, namely in the last quarter of the century (Salman 2025, 1). Considering that Alawism itself has not yet been extensively studied as a distinct field of research and that existing studies in this area have proceeded within a much narrower framework, it is not surprising that the subject of space has remained unexamined. A review of the literature on Alawism reveals that studies conducted on this area are limited. Friedman notes that until the 1970s studies on Alawites were a

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marginal field within Middle Eastern Studies. The sect was perceived by the West as a community that had broken away from Shiism, isolated, impoverished, and small (Friedman 2010, 1). Existing literature has been written primarily in the field of theology. Furthermore, the fact that existing studies cover only a limited period of time is another source of difficulty (Mertcan 2013, 8-9).

Over the last half century, interest in space and in the spatiality of social relations has increased. Henri Lefebvre, with his seminal work The Production of Space, first published in 1974, elevated the discussion of space to an entirely new level. Lefebvre considers space in conjunction with social relations and the production process. According to Lefebvre, society and space are intertwined concepts, and understanding society fundamentally requires understanding space. Therefore, spatial theory also forms the basis for understanding society and social relations. Until the 1970s, space had been perceived as a mathematical plane or at best considered a subcategory. However, Lefebvre demonstrated that space is a multidimensional concept (Lefebvre 1991, 21). He approaches space not merely as a mathematical plane but as a phenomenon that is social, physical, and lived. Space is not merely a passive surface; it is not independent of factors such as social structure, social relations, and politics (Lefebvre 1991, 60). Social relations are reproduced in space. Accordingly, Lefebvre's approach to space comprises a triadic structure consisting of perceived space (physical space), conceived space (mental space), and lived space (social space), each with its own unique characteristics yet all intertwined.

Perceived (Physical) Space

According to Salman (2021, 62), the first conception of Alevi physical space is the geography of Alevism itself. Salman states that the fundamental values, religious rituals, and structures of contemporary Alevism are a result of the position of Alevis in the Ottoman Empire from the 16th century to the 2000s and their relationship with the

dominant Sunni hegemony. This shows similar characteristics for Alawites. Like other Alevi communities, Alawites have survived for centuries in remote regions and under extremely difficult conditions to escape the oppression of rulers. Indeed, due to massacres committed against them, Alawites repeatedly faced the danger of annihilation. Although urbanization and migration have brought mobility toward cities and the diaspora, a significant portion of the community still lives in rural, remote areas and makes a living from farming.

On the other hand, the sacralization of everyday spaces also forms the basis of physical space in Alawism. Based on Lefebvre's conceptualization, the physical spaces of Alawites in the rural context are ziyarets and homes that, when necessary, are transformed into places of worship or used for funerals. In Alawite teaching and religious practices, the significance of the "house" cannot be denied. In traditional Alevism, once two souls become "one in a cem," worship can take place in any space. A dede's room or even a house can be transformed into a cem place (Salman 2025, 4-5). It is also similar in Alawite teaching. For Alawites, religious rituals can be performed wherever one may be-at home, in a garden, at a ziyaret-provided that one is clean. Homes are transformed into sacred spaces on bayram days. On special days such as bayram or adak, homes are cleaned and cushions and chairs are arranged for men to pray on. Buhur is burned, the nakfi is brought in, and the room of the house is transformed into a place of worship. Those entering the prayer room must be clean. This also applies to ziyarets. Prayers are said here. It is believed that people who visit this place find healing. Although there are no official statistics, ziyarets are very common in Hatay, Adana, and Mersin, where Alawites are densely populated. Prayers are recited there and visitors believe they receive healing.

Although ziyarets are rarely encountered in urban areas, cultural centers, associations, and condolence houses can be considered examples of physical space. As noted above, the closer one moves from the countryside toward the center,

the less prominent ziyarets become. Younger generations visit ziyarets less frequently. Indeed, this subject alone is worthy of research. For this reason, this area needs to be supported by more field studies.

Lived (Social) Space

Social space, which is formed through shared values, also encompasses both mental and physical space (Salman 2025, 4). Salman notes that in the rural context, the Alevi social space was shaped around the ocak system. It consists of families considered sacred-such as Hacı Bektaş, Pir Sultan, and Hubyar Sultan-and the talips attached to these ocaks. In Anatolian Alevism, every Alevi individual belongs to an ocak from the moment they give their ikrar (Salman 2025, 4). In Alawism, this corresponds to the institution of sheikhdom (in Arabic, "şih") and the tradition of unclehood. Sheikh families, whose lineage is traced back to the Ahl al-Bayt, are attributed sanctity and act as community leaders. Sheikhs who set an example for society spread and transmit the Alawite teachings and lead the community in prayer. In addition, the tradition of unclehood is also a fundamental component of the social space.

In Anatolian Alevism, every Alevi individual is affiliated with a particular ocak (Salman 2025, 62). However, unlike Anatolian Alevism, there is no such binding relationship between Alawite individuals and sheikh families. In this sense, it differs from the ocak system of Anatolian Alevism. Instead, social ties largely expand through the unclehood tradition. The tradition of unclehood is one of the foundations of Alawite teaching. According to this tradition, when a boy reaches adulthood, a person chosen by the family teaches him the principles of Alawism and provides him with religious education. This person is called the "uncle." The tradition of unclehood creates a strong bond between two families (Alvanoğlu Yolcu 2025, 4). It is vital for the continuity of the teaching. Ertit conceptualizes the unclehood tradition as "initiatory guidance" (Ertit 2025, 3). The unclehood tradition in Alawism is similar to the

musahiplik tradition in Anatolian Alevism and the tradition of godfathership in Christianity. Furthermore, the institution of sheikhdom is a hereditary system, passed from father to son, and is specific to certain families.

Conceived (Mental) Space

The esoteric nature of Alawism corresponds to the Alawite concept of mental space. Alawites divide Islamic commandments into zahir (outer, apparent) and batin (inner, hidden). According to Alawites, there are apparent (visible, obvious) and hidden meanings in the Quran (Et-Tavil 2012, 140-41). Zahir refers to what is seen, heard, and felt, while batin refers to what lies beyond the visible, that which cannot be perceived materially. The Alawite teaching offers a consciousness that transcends the outer dimension. Alawism is a doctrine primarily based on oral culture. Therefore, stories and narratives occupy a significant place among Alawites. Literature, myths, stories, narratives, the stories of ziyarets, the stories of Alawite leaders, and belief in the migration of souls form the basis of the intellectual space. Besides, the belief in reincarnation is strong among Alawites. In Alawite faith, the soul is considered immortal. Accordingly, the soul of a deceased being continues its existence in another body. This belief is also referred to as *tanasukh*.

Conclusion

As Salman points out, Alevism and space have generally been addressed in a limited way, mostly within rural-urban patterns (Salman 2015, 78). Alawism is a subject that has been addressed within a much narrower framework compared to Anatolian Alevism. For this reason, the teaching needs to be examined in spatial contexts within different conceptual frameworks. Ultimately, practices such as ziyarets, homes transformed into places of worship, the unclehood tradition, the institution of sheikhdom, and the belief in tanasukh in Alawism are intertwined practices produced within physical, social, and mental spaces.

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