The Ghadir Khumm Festival (ʿId al-Ghadir) and Collective Memory

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Summary
This entry examines the Ghadir Khumm Festival, the most important religious festival of Alawites, within the framework of Maurice Halbwachs' theory of collective memory. It briefly addresses the historical and theological background of the festival and discusses how Ghadir Khumm is transmitted across generations through rituals, practices, and narratives and how it functions in the reproduction of collective identity.

Keywords: Arap Aleviler, Gadir Hum, Kolektif Hafıza

Etymological Context

Ghadir Khumm is described as a marshy and reedy area located between Mecca and Medina, close to Kufa (TDV Encyclopaedia of Islam 2025). The concept of Ghadir Khumm etymologically derives its name from this geographical location. This place has acquired a particular significance within historical and religious narratives and over time, has become a powerful symbol in collective memory.

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The Ghadir Khumm Festival is grounded in the belief of *velayet*, which constitutes the foundation of Alawite teaching and is regarded as the most important religious festival among Alawites. The festival is celebrated with reference to the event in which the Prophet Muhammad is believed to have bestowed *velayet* upon Ali during his return from the Farewell Pilgrimage(*Veda Haccı*). According to Alawite belief, after the Farewell Pilgrimage, while returning from Mecca to Medina, the Prophet appointed Ali as his successor at a place called Ghadir Khumm and declared this *velayet* with the statement, "Whoever I am *mevlâ* of, Ali is also his *mevlâ*" (Et-Tavil 2012, 35-36; Reyhani 2013, 47). This narrative constitutes the main reason why Ghadir Khumm occupies a central position within the Alawite belief system. The festival gains meaning not merely as a reference to a historical event but as the theological and symbolic expression of the understanding of *velayet*. In this context, the Ghadir Khumm Festival is regarded by Alawites as the greatest and most sacred festival of the year.

Rituals, Practices and Everyday Life

Within the Alawite community, festivals occupy an important place as rituals that ensure the continuity of belief and collective identity. In Alawite narratives, it is stated that various festivals are celebrated on approximately two hundred and fifty days of the year. Among these festivals, Ghadir Khumm holds a special symbolic significance as a ritual to which Alawites attach particular importance. The Ghadir Khumm Festival is celebrated on the eighteenth day of the month of Dhu al-Hijjah(*Zilhicce*) according to the Hijri calendar.

Preparations for the festival begin several days in advance. Within this process, the house in which worship will be performed is meticulously cleaned, and particular importance is attached to purifying every corner of the home. The ingredients for the food to be prepared for the festival, as well as the sacrificial animal to be slaughtered, are also procured several days beforehand. The time of

prayer for the festival day is determined in advance, contact is made with the religious leader who will lead the prayer and family members, neighbours, and the surrounding community are invited to attend. In accordance with the designated time, *hrise*[1], soup or bulgur is cooked in a large cauldron.

Families hosting the festival slaughter either large or small livestock, depending on their economic means. After the prayer, the prepared food is distributed. The content of the distribution varies according to family preferences; in some cases, soup and bread are offered, while in others, meat and bread are served. In addition, some families organise a communal meal for those attending the prayer, while others may choose not to provide any refreshments. The manner in which the festival is performed is closely linked to the economic condition of the families.

In Alawite narratives, the sanctity attributed to the day of Ghadir Khumm is extremely strong. It is believed that even trees prostrate themselves on this day and that the gates of hell are closed. This understanding of sacredness is also reflected in everyday economic activities. With the belief that money earned on this day is not blessed, workplaces and shops are kept closed. It is observed that this practice is not limited solely to Alawite tradespeople; in Antakya, some Sunni shopkeepers are also seen to close their shops on the day of Ghadir Khumm. On the festival day, everyday tasks such as washing clothes or cleaning the house are avoided unless absolutely necessary and it is believed that engaging in such activities is sinful. Worship continues throughout the day, visits are made to relatives and neighbours, cemeteries are visited where prayers are recited, and incense (*buhur*) is burned. These practices stand out as collective rituals that reinforce both the religious and social dimensions of the festival.

Festival practices are shaped by the economic means of individuals and families. The family hosting the festival is regarded as being obliged to maintain this ritual every year.

The responsibility of hosting is most often sustained through intergenerational transmission. For example, it is expected that the children of a family that hosts the Ghadir Khumm Festival will continue this responsibility after them. Naturally, there are exceptions to this transmission. In recent years, with the increasing difficulty of economic conditions, it has been observed that festival celebrations have begun to be carried out in more limited and modest forms.

Festivals are products of traditions constructed by collective memory in order to keep sacred days remembered and alive. Each family hosting a festival is of great importance in preventing the forgetting of individuals and historical events regarded as sacred in the collective memory of the community and in ensuring intergenerational transmission. The belief that if a festival is not observed, things will not go well and the household will lack prosperity clearly demonstrates the importance of the tradition of observing festivals among Alawites.

The celebration of the Ghadir Khumm Festival in Alawite belief goes beyond the commemoration of a historical event. As stated above, Ghadir Khumm appears as a memory practice that enables the reproduction of collective identity. At this point, it is necessary to refer to Maurice Halbwachs' theory of collective memory. According to Halbwachs, individual memory is not independent of society (Halbwachs 2017, 38). In addition to being the most important festival of Alawites, Ghadir Khumm is also a reference point that reinforces feelings of belonging and remembrance within the community. The repeated remembrance of the festival through rituals, narratives, and intergenerational transmission constitutes one of the fundamental mechanisms through which social memory constructs and sustains collective identity.

The Ghadir Khumm Festival forms a central historical reference point in Alawite collective memory through the annual ritual re-enactment of the narrative that Ali was

endowed with divine authority. As Halbwachs emphasises, collective memory does not preserve the past as it was; rather, it reorganises it in accordance with present social needs and identity construction (Halbwachs 2017, 43-59-80). In this context, Ghadir Khumm produces a symbolic memory narrative that distinguishes it from Sunni-Orthodox Islamic narratives, rather than merely commemorating a historical event. Through rituals, prayers, and collective celebrations, this narrative continues to exist not in individual memories but within the shared world of meanings of the community.

In recent years, it has been observed that state officials have also celebrated the Ghadir Khumm Festival by issuing congratulatory messages and exchanging greetings with Alawite citizens[2]. In addition, various parliamentary motions and legislative proposals have previously been submitted regarding the declaration of the Ghadir Khumm Festival as an official public holiday. HDP Adana MP Tülay Hatimoğulları Oruç submitted a parliamentary question to the Grand National Assembly of Turkey concerning the declaration of the Ghadir Khumm Festival as an official holiday. In the parliamentary questions dated 2019 and 2020, it was stated that on Ghadir Khumm, the largest festival of Alawites, shopkeepers close their workplaces and working life comes to a halt, yet official institutions remain open, causing difficulties in exchanging festival greetings and fulfilling religious obligations (TBMM 2020). In 2016, CHP Mersin MP Aytuğ Atıcı submitted a legislative proposal for the Ghadir Khumm Festival to be declared an official public holiday (TBMM 2016).

Conclusion

In conclusion, when evaluated within the framework of Halbwachs' theory of collective memory, the Ghadir Khumm Festival constitutes a social memory space in which identity and belonging are reconstructed among Arab Alevis. The Ghadir Khumm Festival provides a powerful example of how collective memory is constructed through ritual, time, and community. Moreover, through intergenerational transmission, the festival keeps alive the bond that the

community establishes with the past and reinforces the community's sense of belonging. The fact that the festival has become increasingly visible in the public sphere in recent years also demonstrates that collective memory possesses a political dimension.

Endnotes

[1] It is a special dish made of wheat and meat that is prepared during Arab Alevi festivals.

[2] See the statemnt of the governor of Hatay regarding Gadir-i Hum fest,val: https://www.hatay.gov.tr/valimiz-mustafa-masatlinin-gadir-i-hum-bayrami-mesaji

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