Cem Ritual and Psychological Well-Being: A Social Identity Perspective

Yüksek Lisans (MA) Ege Akpınar
egeakpinar6@gmail.com

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Address: Alevi Ansiklopedisi
Körnebachstr. 49-51, 44143 Dortmund

info@aleviansiklopedisi.com

Summary
This entry examines the historical and contemporary experiences of exclusion faced by Alevis through the framework of the Social Identity Approach in social psychology, with particular reference to the concepts of “social cure” and “social curse.” Drawing on findings from qualitative research, the cem ritual and the cemevi are conceptualised not merely as religious practices or spaces, but as collective arenas in which solidarity, meaning-making, and psychosocial well-being are actively produced and reconstituted. In this context, the cem is analysed as one of the central social practices through which Alevi identity is sustained and reproduced under conditions shaped by historical trauma and structural discrimination.

Keywords: Cem Ritüelleri, Cemevi, Psikolojik İyi Oluş, Sosyal Kimlik

Alevi Identity and Alevis

Alevis have been subjected to exclusion, discrimination, and persecution throughout a historical trajectory extending from the early modern period of the Ottoman Empire to the present, particularly in relation to prevailing structures of political authority and dominant religious interpretations. This exclusionary stance, institutionalised through fatwas and official documents, has restricted the public visibility of

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Alevis and compelled them to maintain their religious practices under conditions of secrecy for extended periods. These experiences have not been confined to legal and political domains alone; they have also shaped how Alevi identity has been constructed, transmitted, and sustained in everyday life (Aydın 2015; Ocak 2015). Under modern citizenship regimes, despite formal claims of equality, the persistent non-recognition of Alevi beliefs, places of worship, and identity-related demands has contributed to the formation of a durable perception of exclusion within collective memory.

Following the establishment of the Republic, the citizenship model adopted was formally grounded in principles of equality; however, in practice it produced a public order centred on Sunni Islam. The closure of tekkes and zawiyas, the institutionalisation of the Directorate of Religious Affairs as an authority representing exclusively Sunni interpretations of Islam, and the continued refusal to recognise cemevis as official places of worship all demonstrate the persistence of Alevi exclusion at the institutional level (Üstel 2004; van Bruinessen 2007).

Social Identity, Exclusion, and Psychosocial Consequences

The Social Identity Theory/Approach (SIT) posits that individuals construct their sense of self not solely through personal characteristics but also through their membership in social groups (Tajfel and Turner 1979). According to Tajfel and Turner (1986), the formation of social identity involves three interconnected socio-cognitive processes:

Social Categorisation: This process enables individuals to classify people into groups, distinguishing between in-groups (groups to which one feels a sense of belonging) and out-groups. Social categorisation constitutes the foundational mechanism of social identity processes.

Social Identification: This refers to the process through

which individuals perceive themselves as members of a particular group and internalise its norms, thereby strengthening their sense of attachment and belonging to that group.

Social Comparison: In order to maintain a positive social identity, individuals tend to compare their own group with other groups. This process may give rise to in-group favouritism and the negative evaluation of out-groups, forming a basis for conflict, discrimination, and prejudice.

Within this framework, Alevi identity-historically constituted as a marginalised group identity-exerts a significant influence on the social positioning and psychological experiences of its members (Göner 2007; Shankland 2003).

A Social Identity Approach to Health: Social Cure and Social Curse

The social cure approach, developed as an extension of the Social Identity Approach, argues that group memberships play a decisive role in individuals' psychological well-being. This effect emerges when individuals identify with a given group and experience group membership as a meaningful component of the self (Haslam et al. 2009; 2018). According to Haslam and colleagues (2018), group membership contributes to psychological well-being through four key psychological resources:

Perceived Social Connectedness: This refers to the sense of closeness and relational bonds experienced with fellow group members. A shared social identity facilitates the perception of other group members as part of the self, thereby strengthening interpersonal attachment (Turner 1985).

Sense of Meaning, Purpose, and Value: This resource is generated through social interaction. Acting collectively toward shared goals and receiving recognition from other group members fosters a sense of personal value and significance (Haslam et al. 2018).

Social Support: When defined through a shared identity, individuals are more inclined to act in ways that serve one another's interests (Haslam et al. 2018). Social support plays a critical role in buffering the negative effects of stress (Cohen and Wills 1985) and assumes particular importance for groups such as Alevis, who have historically been exposed to discrimination and marginalisation.

Sense of Control, Efficacy, and Empowerment (Agency Hypothesis): Individuals who act collectively in pursuit of meaningful shared goals tend to experience a heightened sense of control over their lives and social conditions. Social identity fosters a sense of agency by enabling individuals to perceive themselves as active participants in shaping their own histories (Haslam et al. 2018, 31).

From this perspective, group belonging enhances psychological well-being by providing social support, meaning, and a sense of control (Haslam et al. 2009; 2018). Conversely, belonging to stigmatised and excluded groups may generate a "social curse" effect, increasing experiences of stress, insecurity, and psychological vulnerability (Kellezi and Reicher 2012).

Findings from a Qualitative Study: The Psychosocial Functions of the Cem and the Cemevi

The findings discussed in this section are based on a qualitative study conducted with Alevis living in Istanbul who participate regularly in the cem ritual. The data generated in this study were analysed using thematic analysis and organised under three main themes. These themes indicate the interrelations between the content of Alevi identity, perceptions of the cem ritual, experiences of ritual participation, and perceptions of the religious space (the cemevi). Detailed information on the methodological framework and analytical process is provided in the relevant study (Akpınar 2021).

(i) Perceptions of the Religious Ritual (Cem)

In accounts concerning the cem, the dominant themes are unity/collectivity and worship.

Unity / Collectivity: The cem is associated with notions of social peace, social solidarity, gender equality, collective gathering, and social interaction. One of the central components of the cem, *rızalık* (mutual consent or reconciliation), functions as a key mechanism for sustaining harmony and trust within the community. In this sense, the cem is framed as a practice grounded in social concord and collective unity. The institution of *musahiplik* is likewise understood as promoting equality among individuals. The mutual obligation of musahips to support one another under all circumstances contributes to the reproduction of social solidarity (see Shankland 2003; Yaman 2004).

Worship: The cem is predominantly understood as a form of worship. This understanding is closely linked to spiritual concepts such as "dying before death," which symbolically refers to the cultivation of moral integrity and ethical conduct in the presence of the community.

When perceptions of the roles of the *Dede* and *Ana* are considered, three main representations emerge: teacher (as figures who transmit belief, culture, and ethical values), leader (as persons who guide the community within a hierarchical framework), and representatives of sacred lineages (associated with the lineage of the Prophet Muhammad and the Twelve Imams). Dedes and Anas are thus recognised as guides on the path (*yol*) and are accorded respect on the basis of their knowledge and guidance.

(ii) Ritual Participation and Emotional Experience

Themes related to experiences and emotions during the cem include relaxation, happiness, spiritual calm, distancing from individual selfhood (depersonalisation), and experiences resembling altered or intensified states of consciousness. In this context, the cem is frequently characterised as having a "therapeutic" dimension.

Therapeutic Effect: Participation in the cem is associated with feelings of mental and emotional purification and with experiences of inner integration. Following the ritual, participants report a sense of relief and release from the burdens of everyday life.

The Presence of Others: Responses concerning the presence of other group members highlight themes such as collective intensity, shared emotional experience, harmony, and cooperation. The cem is described as more meaningful and spiritually intense when performed in a larger communal setting. Being together with others who share comparable historical experiences of suffering is understood as a source of collective strength and empowerment.

(iii) Perceptions of the Religious Space (Cemevi)

Although the cemevi is primarily defined as a place of worship, emphasis is placed on its function as a communal and social space.

Community Centre: The cemevi is conceptualised as a multifunctional space, described variously as a site of mediation and justice, a communal kitchen, a place of reconciliation, an educational space, and a setting for social interaction. In this respect, cemevis are regarded as platforms that facilitate the socialisation of the Alevi community.

Activities Beyond the Cem: Most participants indicate that their engagement with the cemevi extends beyond participation in the cem ritual itself. Cemevis host a wide range of communal activities, including courses (such as German, mathematics, English, arts and crafts, and *semah*), panel discussions (on topics such as earthquakes, health, and philosophy), as well as social excursions and cultural visits. In particular, cemevis provide educational support for children from economically disadvantaged families and organise courses that encourage women’s participation in social and communal life.

Conclusion

The findings presented here indicate that the cem ritual and the cemevi function, for the Alevi community, not only as religious domains but also as powerful social and psychological resources that counterbalance the effects of historical experiences of exclusion. In line with the social cure approach (Haslam et al. 2009), the cem provides participants with a sense of belonging, solidarity, and collective strength. In this respect, the cem enables Alevi identity to be constituted not solely through reference to past traumas, but also through contemporary practices of solidarity and meaning-making. The findings suggest that, within the context of the cem, Alevi identity is experienced less as a "vulnerable" or merely defensive identity than as a form of social belonging that is actively reproduced and reinforced.

This qualitative study contributes to discussions on how religious identity-and its two core components, ritual and religious space-affects the psychological well-being of individuals belonging to a socially disadvantaged group. The findings demonstrate that regular and active participation in the cem ritual, as well as engagement in other communal activities organised within the cemevi, has a positive and "therapeutic" impact on participants' psychological well-being. Themes such as relaxation, social harmony, unity, happiness, and depersonalisation suggest that these practices perform a social cure function for Alevis. Moreover, through elements such as *rızalık*, *musahiplik*, and the concept of *can*, the cem ritual provides key psychological resources including social connectedness, social support, and a sense of meaning in life. These resources contribute to Alevis' capacity to cope with the stresses of everyday life as well as with historically rooted and politically structured forms of oppression. In this sense, the cem ritual may be understood as a practice through which identity is continuously reproduced and sustained, functioning as a form of collective survival strategy.

At the same time, the findings also invite consideration of potential political implications. While cemevis facilitate processes of social healing, they may simultaneously enable Alevis to reproduce their communal life primarily within civil domains that do not directly challenge the state's official ideological framework, thereby functioning as a form of depoliticised social space. The possibility that social healing processes might, under certain conditions, contribute to reduced engagement in collective political action represents a critical question that warrants further investigation in future research.

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