Development and Reformulation of a Returnee Identity as Alevi

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The presented study is actually the product of a research that was conducted in 1988 investigating a returnee community inside a Turkish small town. The main focus of this study was, among others, the analysis of the formation of a "migrant identity". Even though several years passed, contact with this returnee community continued. Finally, in May 1996 the field was revisited in a more formal manner.

The returnee community under investigation can be characterized by two criteria: first all its members are migrants, who migrated, lived, worked and returned from Germany and second, the majority belongs to the Alevi branch of Islam (70 percent or 131 of the 186 interviewed returnees).

In total 184 persons above 14 years of age were included into the analysis (87 men and 97 women). Parallel to this formal questionnaire, 14 in-depths interviews were conducted during a 4 months stay in the town. Also frequent visits and a large number of talks to officials, politicians and inhabitants and a multitude of observations collected at social events like weddings, funerals, circumcisions, religious meetings, periodical meetings of women *(kabul günleri)* etc., provided further important insights into the situation of the returnees in the studied small town. The small town itself is actually located in the Black Sea Region bordering Central Anatolia, constituting an area of high out migration. This region is at the same time characterized by the intermixture of Alevi and Sunni population. It can be assumed that the Alevi population, because of their greater economic deprivation, participated much more in migration processes (on the rural—urban, as well as international level).[1]

At the time of the original research the small town had a population of about 29 thousand inhabitants. In the 90s it reached about 35 thousand. It mainly serves as the administrative and educational centre of the sub-province population (incorporating 102 villages). Agriculture and stock breeding provide the main sources of subsistence.

Identity Formation Upon Return

International migration and the life of Turkish workers and their families in

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1 See K.Kehl-Bodrogi, *Die Kizilbaş-Alevi. Untersuchung über eine esoterische Glaubensgemeinschaft,* Berlin, 1988; R.Zelyut, *Aleviler Ne Yapmalı? Şehirlerdeki Alevilerin Sorunlari-Çözümleri,* Istanbul, 1993, p. 225; D.Shankland, "Alevi and Sunni in Rural Turkey, Diverse Paths of Change", PhD dissertation, Darvin College, Cambridge (1993), pp. 14–19.

Germany resulted in the formation of a "migrant identity".[2] This identity stands on the one hand for the Turks in Germany, as well as for those labeled as the Germanlike *Almancı, Alamancı* or *Almanyalı* returned to Turkey. The interesting aspect of this returnee community is that besides being *Almancı,* the majority of the returnees are Alevi. The study pointed out that the *Almancı* identity comprises aspects of "otherness" which to a large part include aspects of "cultural pollution". The fact of being seen as "culturally polluted Turks" is substituted in time by the returnees by an Alevi identity.

Before turning to this formulation of an Alevi identity, it seems to be necessary to give at least a short summary of the situation of the returnees in the studied small town and their *Almancı* identity. Only by pointing out these aspects and by settling them in the recent historical context in Turkey might the reformulation of an *Almancı* identity into an Alevi identity be understood.

The study of returnees in Turkey is usually connected with an analysis of the situation of migrants in Germany, or the emphasis is put on the analysis of migration mechanisms in general. Most of the studies on returnees are dealing with economic aspects. Without doubt, the migration to Germany can be described as labor migration and return migration can be considered as a part of these migration movements. The economic gap between the two countries, the need for cheap labor in Germany and unemployment in Turkey can be seen as the main forces behind this more than 30-year lasting migration history.

With the establishment of the Turkish population in Germany and a growing social network, supported by certain policies directed at the foreign population in Germany (such as recruitment stop and family reunions) the migration process went into a phase of consolidation. The social and communication network that meanwhile was established between the migrants and those who stayed in Turkey resulted in an independent variable reinforcing migration as well as remigration processes. These networks provided knowledge as well as psychological and material support, thus reducing risks and costs in the decision making processes.

Politicians and scientists of both sides promised not only jobs and money but also development, progress, modernity and, together with this, a democratization at all levels of society. The migrants were considered to be the carriers of this development. However, the migrants turned more and more into "immigrants" and return, although existing as a "myth" decreased in the number involved. While the 60s and mainly the 70s were dominated by a discussion of socio-cultural integration of foreigners in Germany, in the 80s and 90s the discussion concentrated on return promotion and multiculturalism.[3]

2 R.Mandel and C.Wilpert, "Migration zwischen der Türkei und Deutschland: Ethnizität und kulturelle Zwischenwelten", in R.Hettlage, *Annali di Sociologia. Soziologisches Jahrbuch. Migrationsprobleme in Deutschland und Italien. Zwischen offenen Räumen und neuen Grenzen,* 10/I–II, Italienisch/Deutsche Gesellschaft für Soziologie, 467–486.
3 M.Brumlik and C.Leggewie, "Konturen der Einwanderungsgesellschaft: Nationale Identität, Multikulturalismus und 'Civil Society'", in K.J.Bade (ed.), *Deutsche im Ausland—Fremde in Deutschland. Migration in Geschichte und Gegenwart,* C.H.Beck Verlag, München, 1992, pp. 430–442; A.Gutmann (ed.), *Multiculturalism. Examining the Politics of Recognition,* Princeton University Press, 1994; H.E. Kürşat-Ahlers (ed.), *Die multikulturelle Gesellschaft. Der Weg zur Gleichstellung?* Verlag für Interkulturelle Kommunikation, Frankfurt, 1992.

Representatives for an Alevi association in Germany selling books and other
publications

Discussions on multiculturalism always incorporate the theme "foreignness" or
"otherness" and the formulation of an identity (in a monovalent or polyvalent form).[4]

Collective social identities like e.g. ethnicity act in this context in very different ways.
People see themselves as ethnically homogeneous groups against the background of a
common historical fate and the tendency to define and/or to protect their identity emerges
specifically in 'bordersituations', where different ethnic groups meet each other.[5] The
formation of ethnic communities is based on a feeling of togetherness and self definition
as well as external definition as a member of an ethnic group.[6] Return migration can be
seen in this context as an interesting example, because it arises the question whether
returnee identities can be compared with identities of ethnic groups.

4 E.Dorfmüller-Karpusa, "Bikulturalität-Belastung oder Privileg?", in H.E.Kürşat-Ahlers (ed.), *Die
multikulturelle Gesellschaft. Der Weg zur Gleichstellung?,* Verlag für Interkulturelle
Kommunikation, Frankfurt. 1992; M.Hettlage-Varjas, "Bikulturalität-Privileg oder Belastung?", in
H.E.Kürşat-Ahlers (ed.), *Die multikulturelle Gesellschaft. Der Weg zur Gleichstellung?,* Verlag für
Interkulturelle Kommunikation, Frankfurt, 1992.
5 F.Barth, "Enduring and Emerging Issues in the Analysis of Ethnicity", in H.Vermeulen and C.
Govers (eds.), Het Spinhuis Publishers, *The Anthropology of Ethnicity,* Amsterdam, 1994.
6 F.Heckmann, *Ethnische Minderheiten, Volk und Nation,* Enke, Stuttgart, 1992.

International migration, as was stated before, resulted in migrant identities. These "cultural borderlines" sometimes result in self-conscious identities and solidarities.[7] Often however, they turn into problematic zones. The migrant turns into a commuter whose systems of reference and levels of identification are commuting between the world s/he is living in and the world s/he is not. Chain migration processes reinforced the formation of ethnic communities in Germany and as the study showed, similar processes could be found in relation with the settlement upon return. The stay abroad puts the returnees upon return into the status of "stranger", in a Simmelian sense.[8]

The small town context of this research provided a good basis for such an analysis because it was not too large to facilitate the flight (of the returnees) into anonymity, as in a metropolitan area, or the social homogeneity of a village. They experience a stigmatization as *Almancı*, which to a large part incorporates elements of "pollution" and/or "jealousy". This state most often is defined as negative, because the returnee is seen as "in between two cultures", without roots and alienated, in a constant search for an identity.

Almancı also incorporates criteria of distinction from the "real" or "true" Turk. In this connection not only the phenomenon of international migration but also Turkey-specific experiences with ethnicity are of importance. Theories of ethnicity have a tendency to point out primordial differences. Here, a common past or shared history and a feeling of belongingness are of importance. The *Almancı* have in this context much less pretension to ethnicity than Kurds, Turks or, Alevi.[9] Together with migration, processes of ascribing and categorizing, similar to ethnic relations, occurred. The migrants' membership is however, not exclusively accepted and unequivocally defined, but their cultural world is defined by a consciousness characterized by a dual orientation and floating/flexible borders.

In our example the *Almancı* identity is overlapped by a clear cut ethnic unity as Alevi. In the original study the Alevi identity was not openly declared. Although the *Almancı* identity has a largely euphemistic connotation, most of the returnees themselves accepted this ascription and saw themselves as "in between two cultures". The shared migration experience, their common village origin (mainly two villages close to the studied small town) and their Alevi background supported the formation of spatially as well as socially segregated communities in the studied small town.

7 E.Pankoke, "Wanderer Zwischen Zwei Welten. Ausländerarbeit im Soziokulturellen Feld", *Archiv für Wissenschaft und Praxis* 2 (1988), 126–145. M.Weber, "Economy and Society", in G.Roth and C.Wittich (eds.), *Ethnic Groups,* University of California Press, Berkeley, 1978, pp. 385–398.
8 To be a stranger is, according to Simmel, nothing but a specific form of interaction. G.Simmel, "The Stranger", in K.H.Wolff (ed.), *The Sociology of Georg Simmel,* New York, 1950, p. 402: "The unity of nearness and remoteness involved in every human relation is organized, in the phenomenon of the stranger, in a way which may be most briefly formulated by saying that in the relationship to him, distance means that he, who is close by, is far, and strangeness means that he, who is far, is actually near."
9 Mandel and Wilpert, *op. cit.,* p. 481.

This spatial as well as social segregation has to be seen in the context of a growing ethnic polarization and the revival of Alevi consciousness in recent Turkey, and has to be seen as a potential for similar developments not only on the national but also on the local level. Thus, it is not surprising that the returnee community in this small town also shows a tendency towards a reorientation to Alevi values and to an Alevi identity.

However, it should be emphasized that identities are seen as socially constructed and not as naturally given.[10] Finally, each identity formation is seen as the result of different power structures. At the same time, identity is seen as flexible and not finite and as a constant claim for power. Smith, too, describes ethnic identities as the result of power structures:

> If ethnicity is constructed and reconstructed by articulatory practices growing out of contemporary conditions and power relations among social groups and the interpretative meanings people give to them, rather than out of some timeless or primordial dimension of human existence, then creative leadership by political and cultural elites and public intellectual, as well as the everyday interventions of ordinary people into the flow of racial and ethnic discourse do matter, perhaps more than we are now prepared to imagine.[11]

Socio-Economic Situation of Returnees

To understand the situation of the returnees/*Almancı,* some of the results of the original research will shortly be presented here:

1. The date or better to say the year of return falls parallel to the return promotion law which was installed at the end of 1983 by the German state.

10 P.Bourdieu (*Outline of a Theory of Practice,* Cambridge University Press, 1977, p. 72.), provides an interesting attempt to combine psychological, social, economic and physical aspects in an identity model under the concept habitus.
11 Cited in A.Elliot, *Social Theory and Psychoanalysis in Transition. Self and Society from Freud to Kristeva,* Oxford, 1992, p. 526.

Alevi associations in Germany organizing a demonstration.

2. The returnee's economic standing is much better than before migration, although the majority do not participate in the active labor force. Most of them are living as a kind of rentier class (rents, payments from Germany, savings).

3. The tendency to engage in small enterprises can be found among the youngsters, where it has mainly to be interpreted in the sense that they either had the alternative to be unemployed, to be supported by their families, to migrate again or to open an enterprise.

4. Most of them own a three to four floor apartment house and the electronic equipment and furnishing can be described as above average standards for the small town.

5. The decision to migrate as well as to return has to be seen in a chain migration process, where it turns out that the majority of the returnees returned as couples (first generation migrants) mostly leaving their children and grandchildren in Germany.

6. They live a spatially as well as socially segregated life. The contacts are clearly limited to the direct neighborhood which to a large part is constituted by returnees, and/or family members and/or villagemates. These family members also share to a large part a common experience in Germany (i.e., same town; neighborhood; same work place).

7. In studying neighborhood contacts, emphasis was laid on the female returnees. The traditional Turkish small town context describes the action space of women much more in the private sphere (of neighborhood, family). Here also commonly held periodical women's meetings *(kabul günleri)* in the small town were studied. However, it turned out that returnee women were excluded from these functions. The reasons for rejecting their participation can be their being considered as unsuitable or not conforming to the expected status and prestige criteria, as well as their membership of the Alevi

community.

8. As for the women, it might be said that their stay abroad and specifically their working experiences resulted in an upgrading of their position inside the family and their self consciousness.

9. The social activities of the female returnees are limited to the direct neighbor-hood that arouse associations of village life (with open doors, women knitting, cooking and chatting in front of their houses).

10. Here it should be mentioned that the life styles and practices of men and women and of different generations showed quite important variations.

11. Very little information about religious practices was provided. They pointed out that religious meetings *(cem ayini)* were not conducted. However, their economic betterment upon return resulted in charity payments and sacrifices that were out of question before migration.

Many other results could be summed up here, but their *Almancı* status forms one of the foci of this paper. Asked about their identity, the returnees emphasized that they felt themselves degraded as *Almancı*. Cultural pollution formed the key concept for their "otherness" in Germany and again it is used as a legitimization for a social distancing upon return. To be an *Almancı* in itself already creates antipathy mixed with jealousy among the small town population. The fact that the majority of these returnees are also Alevi reinforces these negative feelings. The Sunni population describes the returnees as Alevi villagers, villagers who got money without having received any education. Thus, you could hear discriminative statements like: "They are golden chickens, but with empty heads".

The *Almancı* are seen as strangers, strangers who however, have a certain degree of power. Firstly, economic power but also the "power of knowledge". The years in Germany, in a Western European, highly industrialized country still forms the "unreachable" target for a large part of the small town population.

Although, the *Almancı* identity cannot necessarily be equated with an ethnic identity, it is nevertheless used to differentiate migrants/remigrants and non-migrants. Like all identities, it undergoes changes. Migration resulted in changes in behavior patterns and the use of symbols and values is typical for this cultural border situation. As opposed to purely ethnically defined solidarities, the status of *Almancı* is characterized by not being onesidedly oriented. This often results in the stigmatization as "polluted" Turks. These facts might lead the returnees to try to strip off their *Almancı* identity and adopt instead a collective solidarity that is ethnically defined. However, in the original study they emphasized their identity as returnees, as "urban" and a member of the small town community, rejecting the *Almancı* identity. However, they pointed out that the small town population ascribed this identity to them. They also often referred to their village roots (indirectly refering to their Alevi origin). Thus, they claim to be from the Çamiçi villages, which are known by everybody in the small town as Alevi villages.

Findings of the Revisit to the Returnee Community

In May 1996 the field was revisited. One of the reasons was the fact that throughout the

years major changes could have occurred among the returnees. Thus, while formerly the Almanci identity (although mainly externally defined) occupied their lives, after the 90s the *Almancı* identity was substituted by a mainly self-defined Alevi identity.

In the revisit no questionnaire was applied, but 9 in-depths interviews were conducted (6 formerly already interviewed and 3 newly). We can summarize the results as follows:

The younger generations pointed out that they have no hope for a professional and/or educational future in the small town (this hopelessness was often extended to the national level). They emphasized that most of the young people who returned to

Alevi celebrations in Hacibektaş.

the small town are now without work or living at the expense of their parents and are considering marriage with an *Almancı* as the only way to escape from this situation.

The older generations live the life of retirees, visiting their villages for weekend and holiday trips. However, a new development could be seen in the fact that most of the first generation *Almancis* had now a country house in the mountainous vicinity. Interestingly, again here, too, the *Almancis* join together in their own groups, which again resulted in spatial segregation. In this context, it should be mentioned that the younger people preferred a summer house on one of the Turkish coasts.

In these talks it also became clear that a large number of more specifically the older generation migrants practiced a kind of commuting life: house in the small town, weekend house, summerhouse, village house and in addition frequent visits to Germany. Visits to the country of migration were often combined with visiting the family and recourse to medical services. Thus, we are confronted with a state of temporariness which seems to be difficult to integrate in an identity.

The town quarters in which they mainly concentrated also underwent some changes. The number of shops, restaurants and coffeehouses increased, and they now have jewelry shops, attributed to the demand (investment in gold) of the visiting migrants in the summer months.

The in-depth interviews of the revisit made clear that an Alevi consciousness gained more and more importance for the returnees in the small town context. This found, among others, its manifestation in the foundation of a Hacı Bektaş foundation; an Alevi religious, cultural center.

Before discussing the reasons for such an institutionalization and the aims of this foundation, it seems to be necessary to give at least a rough chronological overview of certain events in the late 80s and 90s which resulted in an Alevi revival all over Turkey. The events on the national level also caused the revival of Alevi identity on the local level.

One index for this general revival is a dramatic increase in publications on Alevism, and discussions in the media in general. This revival is mainly oriented at a revival of religious traditions and practices, as well as at claims for equality con-cerning religious practices (i.e., religious ceremonies, funerals, etc.). Nevertheless, this revival can be differentiated into at least two main tendencies. On the one hand, there is a group which aims at the revival of a real Alevi consciousness by reestablishing religious institutions (e.g. religious leaders, *dedelik*), religious principles (some intending to bring about a standardization of Alevi practices, a separate Religious Directorate, etc.). On the other hand, there is a tendency to activate the political potential of the Alevi population, which is seen as "leftist" and "democratic". Obviously, a religiously defined Alevi identity is of minor importance in this version. While the reorientation towards religious values and principles also found recently growing support from officials, other voices emphasize the fact that there exists a danger that this kind of religiously oriented revivalism will lead to a form of Alevi fundamentalism.

These discussions, the killing of 37 intellectuals, mostly Alevi, in the Central Anatolian province of Sivas, by Sunnite Islamic fundamentalists and some spontaneous Alevi uprisings in the 90s in Istanbul were interpreted by some state officials as signs of the potential danger of further ethnic clashes.

Finally, in late 1995, an Alevi attempt to form a political party and the presentation of independent candidates under the name of the Democratic Peace Movement was another sign of rising Alevi consciousness. Although the candidates were withdrawn in the December 1995 elections, the leader of this movement, Ali Haydar Veziroğlu was determined to found a party. His determination became already clear when he bought the National Press Agency (UBA, *Ulusal Basin Ajansı*) in early 1996. At the end of September, the party was finally founded. The party, which was founded under the name of the Democratic Peace Movement, was closed by the Constitutional Court, because of its rejection of the Directorate of Religious Affairs in its program. Immediately a new one, with the name of the Peace Party, was founded to succeed it.

Without an examination of these developments on the national level, it might be difficult to understand the emerging Alevi revivalism in the studied small town. Thus, it is not surprising to see that the studied, elderly returnees/Alevi ask, among other things for the revival of the *dedelik* institution. However, not only the claim for a reinforcement

of *dedelik* was mentioned, but also the wish for Alevi religious officials conducting funeral ceremonies and, of course, the request of a *cemevi,* a meeting place in which to practice their religious rituals.

The most recent and important development in this connection is the foundation of a Haci Bektaş Foundation in the small town, which however is not interlinked with the nationwide Haci Bektaş Associations. It was officially founded on 29.4.1995. According to the information of one of the founders, the foundation had already 371 members officially registered in the first year. He, however, emphasized that they have a basis of about 3000 supporters.

Women play an important role and take an active part in the activities. The women's section meets regularly at the weekends, combining these meetings with religious talks. Another founding member stressed that their foundation followed the principles of a secular, democratic and Kemalist Turkish Republic.

The activities of this foundation include seminars and conferences on Alevi culture, education, and democracy, *sema* (Alevi folk dance) and *saz* (Anatolian string instrument often used by Alevis) courses. Future projects compose courses on funeral ceremonies and student scholarships, and they are also planning to form a pressure group that would demand the inclusion of classes on Alevi religious belief in the official school curricula. Another important function of their foundation is the protection of pupils specifically during the Ramadan, fasting month, when they fall victim to religious discriminations.

All these demands finally resulted in the need for a "cultural center" (the term *cemevi* was not used by the foundation members), obviously to escape from accuzations of religious fundamentalism. The Alevi population of the small town, however referred to it as *cemevi*.

This "cultural center" was planned to include a library, meeting halls (also for religious ceremonies), concert halls, a health station, kindergarten and a home for elderly people. As can be seen from these projects, there obviously exists a need for mutual support and solidarity and, in the words of one of the interviewees:

> The foundation has led to an increase in solidarity in the Alevi community. From now on, the Alevi in our small town will be not ashamed of their Alevi identity and will not try to hide it. We now openly appear as a pressure group, which also goes to the schools and asks for the equal treatment of Alevi pupils.

The Role of Returnees in the Local Alevi Revival

After these descriptions, we can point out the role of the Alevi returnees *Almancı* in the local revival. Obviously, the most important role they play is in providing a large part of the financial resources. However, they are important not only on the material side. It is also clearly pointed out that they are the actual initiators of this foundation, so to say the founding fathers and mothers. Another interviewee summarized this in the following words:

> The native Alevi population is very poor. That was also one of the main reasons

why they migrated to Germany. The returnees, as well as those still in Germany, are however now capable of providing financial support. They also have a better experience of organization. Years ago, they founded Alevi organizations in Germany and other countries of Europe and now they are carrying this experience into their countries of origin.

The power of initiative of the Alevi returnees/*Almancı* is shown in the fact that the experiences collected abroad now serve as basis for an ideological leadership. Here one should note that the ideological leadership came from migrants, who were still abroad, to be more specific, from members of village associations *(Çamiçi Köyleri Dernekleri* founded in Germany. These associations originally aimed at giving aid to those who stayed in Turkey, as well as uniting and supporting those abroad.

The same interviewee goes on to explain the difficulty of organizing the nonmigran Alevi people as follows:

> The native Alevi population has been under political pressure for years. This oppression comprises a long history of massacres in the 70s in Sivas, Maraş and Çorum and the military coup of the 12th of September 1980. The Alevi are afraid to organize in any form. The *Almancı,* however, are free of these fears.

In the case of the Hacı Bektaş Foundation the claims are limited to a comparatively non political level. This is also one of the reasons for the conflict between them and anothe group of mainly politically organized Alevi in the small town who unite around the socialdemocrat or extreme left parties. The founders of the newly founded leftis *Özgürlük ve Dayanişma Partisi* (ÖDP, Freedom and Solidarity Party) are also mostly Alevi in the small town in question. These are mainly from the younger generation. I wil cite here a discussion between a father and his son. The father supports the foundation o a non-political Hacı Bektaş Foundation but the son accuses him of Alevi fundamentalism The son:

> …the activities of the foundation entirely conform to the framework the state provides for the Alevi population. It cannot be considered as a way towards emancipation of the Alevi population.

Another representative of the anti-Hacı Bektaş Alevi group who founded the ÖDP declares:

> The foundation is a place where right oriented and relatively wealthy Alevi— *Almancıs* unite. They see this foundation as a source of income. Recently, they went to Germany and collected 50.000 DM in the name of the foundation. Even now these trips to Germany continue. The foundation is not tied to the nationally organized Alevi associations because in this way they do not have to share out what they collect in Germany and they are financially more free.

On the other hand, one of the founders answered the question why they were not tied to the national Alevi associations, by stating that "we did not want to become lost in the

multitude of Alevi sects and interpretations."

Conclusion

We may conclude by saying that parallel to the Alevi renaissance on the national level the small town also experiences such a revival. On the one hand, there is the tendency to revert to an Alevi culture, religious practices and the institutionalization of a network of mutual support, on the other, there is a more radical and politicized version of a revival of Alevi consciousness, emphasizing not the religious values but rather the minority status of the Alevi population.

It is also interesting to note that the returnee population, which of course continues its contacts with Germany, facilitated by the fact that close family members are still living abroad, initiated an Alevi revival. This may be, on the other hand, interpreted as a way to declare themselves in public and to appear as a pressure group. Their economic position provides among others the necessary basis for this. Thus, the *Almancı,* which formerly were perceived as "spoiled" or "polluted" Turks, now define themselves more and more as Alevis. Even though the Alevi were also discriminated against, they are now members of a bigger and "pure" community which, as an identity, is in a process of revival all over the country.