

# Tradition and Modernity: Alevis' Ambiguous Terms and Turkey's Ambivalent Subjects

AYKAN ERDEMİR

The terms 'modernity' and 'tradition' have lately become omnipresent analytic categories in respect of the study of religion and society, not only in the Middle East but also elsewhere. Recently, the recognition of 'alternative',<sup>1</sup> 'multiple',<sup>2</sup> 'possible',<sup>3</sup> and 'other'<sup>4</sup> modernities, as well as various attempts at 'pluralizing modernities'<sup>5</sup> have contributed to a more critical appraisal of the social phenomena under scrutiny. Although recent reconceptualizations have provided scholars with upgraded versions of the inherited dualistic classificatory system, it is still hard to ignore the not-so-uncommon occurrence of 'implicit evolutionism'<sup>6</sup> best exemplified in Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar's programmatic statement that '[t]o think in terms of "alternative modernities" is to admit that modernity is inescapable and to desist from speculations about the end of modernity'.<sup>7</sup> Rather than attempting to provide yet another scholarly definition of modernity (singular or plural) exorcised of evolutionary demons (linear or multi-linear), I would like to draw attention to emic terms at the expense of the analytic concepts.<sup>8</sup>

As Michael Herzfeld warns, tradition and modernity are not only 'part of our own received rhetoric' as scholars 'but they have also become increasingly important to many of the peoples we study'.<sup>9</sup> Debates around modernity (*muasırlık*, *asrılık*, *modernlik*, *çağdaşlık*, *çağcılık*) have also been significant in Ottoman and Turkish political culture since the late 19th century.<sup>10</sup> There are various Ottoman references to the concept of *asrileşme* (modernization) ranging from the Young Turk revolutionaries to Kurdish nationalists.<sup>11</sup> One of the early Western recognitions of 'modernity' in the Ottoman Empire was J. Lewis Farley's book *Modern Turkey*, published in 1872.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, Le Corbusier 'dated' 'the advent of modern times' in Turkey to the appearance of the Young Turks on the scene, just before his own first visit to Istanbul in 1911'.<sup>13</sup>

The idea of '*muasır medeniyet*' (modern civilization) was also central to the republican project, as can be seen in Mustafa Kemal's renowned address to the nation at the tenth anniversary of the republic in 1933: 'We will elevate our land to the level of the most developed (*mamur*) and civilized (*medenî*) countries of the world. . . We will elevate our national culture beyond the level of modern civilization (*muasır medeniyet*)'. The publication of *Modern Türkiye Mecmuası* [Journal of Modern Turkey] during the 1930s also attests to the self-consciously modernist nature of the republican project. Most republicans, however, rather than

seeing modernity as being diametrically opposite to *gelenek* (tradition), would contrast it to *irtica* (going back), or *gericilik* (backwardism),<sup>14</sup> loosely defined by the Prime Minister, Bülent Ecevit, in 2000 as a desire to reinstate the Ottoman sultanate and Sunni caliphate.<sup>15</sup> Thus, the term *gelenek* (tradition), rather than being an analytic pair of *çağdaşlık* (modernity), continued to exist in the Turkish context as a fuzzy but potent term, ready to be deployed in support of, against, or in total disregard of the republican transformation.<sup>16</sup> Such a caveat is necessary, before attempting to find emic counterparts in Turkey to the global scholarly debates on tradition and modernity.

In an effort to complicate further these two analytic categories, I will focus on an Alevi commemoration of the Tenth of Muharram (*Aşure*) in Istanbul, in April 2001, as a 'diagnostic event'.<sup>17</sup> Through my ethnographic presentation I intend to highlight the ambiguity of *çağdaşlık* (modernity) and *gelenek* (tradition) as emic concepts, and the ambivalence of the Alevi subjects concerning these terms. In an effort to explore *çağdaşlık* (modernity) and *gelenek* (tradition) in the Turkish context, I will pay close attention to Alevi definitions, embodiments, and performances, while also discussing the various ways in which these concepts were used in public discourses on Alevi groups, beliefs, and practices.

In this work the term Alevi is used as an umbrella term to refer to various religious groups alternatively called Bektaşî, Kızılbaş, Nusayri, Abdal, Ocakzade, Çelebi, Tahtacı, or Çepni among others. Alevi is a heterogeneous group of Turkish, Kurmanji, Zaza, Arabic, and Albanian speaking non-Sunni Muslims, believed to comprise 15 to 25 per cent of Turkey's population.<sup>18</sup> Refusing to recognize the Sunni caliphs, the Alevi pledge allegiance to the line of twelve Imams beginning with 'Ali ibn Abu Talib, and also to the Bektaşî patron saint Hacı Bektaş-ı Veli. Most Alevi do not observe the Sunni fast, prayer, and pilgrimage, and there is little or no gender segregation in Alevi communities and congregational ceremonies (*cem*) that include music and religious dance (*semah*). In part owing to the long history of persecution under the Ottoman rule, Alevi remained marginal and peripheral for centuries, while increasingly turning to the secrecy of gnostic forms and esoteric teachings. Although the Sunni persecution of the Alevi did not cease in the republican era, most Alevi continued to support the secular Turkish republic with expectations of becoming equal citizens. However, by the 1970s the Alevi were listed as one of the three major threats to the Turkish state alongside communism and Kurdish nationalism.<sup>19</sup> Following the end of the Cold War, the ruling elite started to perceive Kurdish nationalism and Islamic radicalism as the emerging threats to security, and Alevi were now seen as potential allies in countering the Islamic and Kurdish threat. Ahmet Yaşar Ocak argues that 'a sizeable group of bureaucrats, intellectuals, and journalists' who feel threatened by Sunni Islamic movements in Turkey see the Alevi as a 'life jacket' against the Islamists who 'damage the secular, Kemalist, and democratic' image of Turkey on its way to becoming a member of the European Union.<sup>20</sup> What leads to the imagination of the Alevi as a strategic ally is the belief that Alevism is the indigenous form of Turkish Islam that is in part a survival of the pre-Islamic Turkic beliefs, and in part the Turkish adaptation of Islam to the conditions of Anatolia. The 'authenticity' of the Alevi was, therefore, seen as a way to construct Sunni radicals as followers of a foreign tradition; the so-called Arab, Wahabi, or 'desert' Islam. In the 1990s the Alevi were often portrayed as

the 'noble savage', a community that was by nature secular, democratic, egalitarian, progressive, Kemalist, tolerant, republican, and anti-shariah.<sup>21</sup> Some of the secular elite could now argue that the *Türk modernleşmesi* (Turkish modernization) was in fact a return to roots, a turning back from the Arab ways of the Islamists. It would not be right, however, to assume that this strategy is a novel move specific to the 1990s.<sup>22</sup> During the early years of the republic, similar attempts were employed to point out the parallels between the republican ideal and the Bektashi belief. John Kingsley Birge reports the early republican sentiments in the following manner:

Within the borders of Turkey itself the energetic measures of the government have ensured the complete cessation of any visible sign of activity on the part of the dervishes of all sorts. Many Bektashis, as has been already pointed out, claim that they are content with the situation as it is, feeling that government action now ensured for all social life which formerly was to be found only in the secret ritual of the Bektashi Order. Ziya Bey, writing in *Yeni Gün* in 1931, ends his series of studies about the Bektashi Way with the statement that the Bektashi ritual with the presence of men and women mingling on a social equality was really a continuation of the old Turkish national rites, made possible, through the period when orthodox Sunni religious leaders controlled affairs, only by secret gatherings in tekkes built apart from other habitations. Now under the Republic this freer social life is made possible for all. 'What difference,' says Ziya Bey, 'is there between the Aynicem of the Bektashis and the family gatherings which constitute society in all the world and which are accepted as the right and necessity for every civilized man?'<sup>23</sup>

It is important to note that, back in the early 1930s, the similarity between Bektashism and republican ideals was invoked to eliminate the Bektashi order. In the 1990s, the similarity between *çağdaş düşünce* (modern thought) and Alevism was used to promote an Alevi revival, to demonstrate that the authentic values of the Turks were no different from Western values. This rhetoric was then utilized by some to construct the Sunni radicals as foreign elements, who could not have any authentic or legitimate claim to government.

The rapid social change that the Alevi religious groups have experienced in Turkey since the 1990s has drawn increasing scholarly, journalistic, and lay attention to the topic.<sup>24</sup> This phenomenon of Alevi transformation has been labelled in different ways: 'process of rediscovery',<sup>25</sup> 'revitalization',<sup>26</sup> 'enlightenment',<sup>27</sup> 'innovation',<sup>28</sup> 'coming out',<sup>29</sup> 'revival',<sup>30</sup> 'remaking',<sup>31</sup> 're-politicization',<sup>32</sup> or even 'the explosion of Alevism' (*Alevilik patlaması*).<sup>33</sup> Although there is some divergence on the issue of labelling, most scholars would agree as to the material details of the transformation:

1. Hundreds of books and journals have been published on Alevism, by scholars, journalists, as well as by Sunni and Alevi laypeople;<sup>34</sup>
2. Dozens of Alevi foundations and associations have been established, especially in urban centres like Istanbul and Ankara;<sup>35</sup>
3. Tens of local and national radio stations have been established, serving a predominantly Alevi audience;<sup>36</sup>

4. The Alevi have been increasingly visible in Turkish print, visual, and cyber media. Countless news articles, TV programmes, and websites have appeared;<sup>37</sup>
5. Increasing numbers of Alevi have been participating in the activities of Alevi organizations in cities;
6. There has been an increasing willingness and desire to present oneself as Alevi.

The overall effect of these developments is the increased presence and visibility of Alevi subjects in the Turkish public sphere, and the Alevi subjects' growing conviction that Alevism should be the main site of political, social, and cultural mobilization. Although most scholars and intellectuals agree on the above details of the transformation, it is much harder for them to agree on the nature and meaning of the overall process. I believe that a crucial factor which distinguishes between various interpretations is the way in which the relation of Alevi subjects to modernity and tradition is conceptualized. It is, therefore, possible to classify the existing approaches into five different, but not necessarily mutually exclusive, categories based on whether they see Alevi transformation as

1. Modernization;
2. Move away from modernization;
3. Return to tradition;
4. Destruction of tradition;
5. End of modernity, and the transition to post-modernity.

### *Modernization*

Taha Akyol, a neo-conservative Sunni journalist, argues that the Alevi revival in Turkey, just like the Sunni Islamic revival, results from the process of modernization, i.e. 'the intensification of social dynamics'.<sup>38</sup> He believes that, 'the [Turkish] society as a whole is living through the most advanced stage of modernization in our history'.<sup>39</sup> Akyol also argues that the Alevi are 'coming from the "periphery" to the centre as part of the modernization process' and this is 'modernization from bottom up'.<sup>40</sup> According to Akyol the Turkish state's inability to 'dominate social dynamics' is the major cause of this transformation.<sup>41</sup>

### *Move away from modernization*

Ali Haydar Cilasun, who is a Marxist-Leninist and Kurdish nationalist Alevi *dede* (religious guide),<sup>42</sup> takes a diametrically opposite view from Akyol about the social transformation in Turkey.<sup>43</sup> Cilasun believes that by turning Alevi into Kemalists, the Turkish state is dominating, domesticating, and taming the Alevi belief.<sup>44</sup> Cilasun advises current Alevi organizations to embrace modernity by moving away from metaphysics and superstition.<sup>45</sup>

### *Return to tradition*

For others, the Alevi revival could be seen as a return to tradition, or going back to roots. When Şahkulu Sultan Dergahı, a deserted Bektāşi lodge in Istanbul, was

renovated as an Alevi foundation in the early 1990s, the governing board publicized the current efforts in the *Nefes* journal by the title 'Tradition Coming to Life' [*Gelenek Canlanıyor*].<sup>46</sup> During my interviews with the Alevi youth at this foundation, I repeatedly came across statements about how they were learning, claiming, protecting, and thereby preserving their traditions (*gelenekler*) and path ( *yol*).

### *Destruction of tradition*

For some Alevi elders, however, the current process of revival led to the corruption and destruction of Alevi traditions. Although, these elders were happy that Alevism was flourishing once again, they were not fully content with the ways in which the youngsters transformed Alevi belief and practices. During an Alevi youth festival at the Şahkulu Sultan Foundation, I witnessed an Alevi elder, who on watching the youth group's re-enactment commemorating the Sivas pogrom of 1993 started complaining: 'What kind of a programme is this? These youths should talk about the twelve Imams and the *Ehli Beyt* (the household of the prophet) not all this other stuff'. At that moment, the Alevi elder was voicing his discontent about the failure of the Alevi youth to stick to the conventional ways of expressing religious sentiments.<sup>47</sup>

### *End of modernity, and the transition to post-modernity*

Finally, there are various scholars, intellectuals, and politicians who see Alevi revival as a manifestation of the transition from the modernist era to a post-modern one. For some, like Erkal Zenger, one of the defining features of post-modernity is the critique of science and reason, and a return to religion.<sup>48</sup> Zenger, in his book *Postmodern Şamanizm, Alevilik ve Halkozanları* [Postmodern Shamanism, Alevism, and Minstrels], addresses Zöhre Ana, a famous Alevi healer from Ankara, as 'a post-modern shaman' (*postmodern bir şaman*).<sup>49</sup> Similarly Necdet Subaşı talks about 'the search for post-modern "gurus" among the Alevis' (*postmodern guru" arayışları*).<sup>50</sup> For others, the replacement of class politics with identity politics is the main indicator of post-modernity in Turkey. During my field study, accounts of socialists abandoning Marxist politics in favour of Alevi activism were frequently provided as evidence of the post-modern transformation.

These different viewpoints demonstrate that the Alevi revival in Turkey can be interpreted in at least five different ways in reference to the question of modernity. Alevi revival can be seen as modernization, or as a move away from modernization. It can also be perceived as a return to tradition, or as the destruction or erosion of tradition. Finally, it can be portrayed as the end of modernity, and the transition to post-modernity. The fact that these five positions are not necessarily mutually exclusive makes it possible for an individual to formulate an eclectic reconfiguration of this simplistic scheme. For example, Ali Haydar Cilasun, the above mentioned Marxist-Leninist Kurdish nationalist, sees Alevi revival as a move away from both modernity and tradition. According to him the Alevi tradition dictates that one embraces modernist and universalistic values, so rejecting modernization is a betrayal of the tradition.<sup>51</sup> Similarly, Şahkulu Sultan Foundation's announcement

entitled 'Tradition Coming to Life', also states that 'Alevi, who have identified with the modern values. . . expect services that are in accordance with the values of modernity and enlightenment'.<sup>52</sup> Apparently, for the board members, bringing tradition back to life entails being modern (*çağdaş*).

What makes matters even more complicated is the fact that the connotations of the various expressions used to signify modernity (*modern, moderen, modernite, çağdaş, çağcıl, asrî, muasır*), or tradition (*gelenek, görenek, töre, anane*) in the Turkish language are so ambiguous that one could use them pejoratively or affirmatively in different contexts. Moreover, it is not uncommon for a person to take different positions vis-à-vis modernity and tradition depending on the circumstances. It is striking that in the field of Alevi studies, where the emic terms are so unfixed and elusive, and where most scholarly works include lengthy sections on issues of modernity and tradition, only a handful of scholars have so far investigated how Alevi subjects define, interpret, perform, and embody these concepts. The omission of the emic perspective not only fails to appreciate the vast range of native points of view but also prevents a fuller understanding of the level to which Alevi practices, policies, claims, and narratives have been increasingly shaped in dialogue with local, national, and world-level repertoires of public discourses on modernity and tradition.

A work which provides insight into both the Alevi and the scholarly perceptions of modernity in Turkey is Yılmaz Soyzer's sociological study of the Alevi village of Kısas in south-east Turkey.<sup>53</sup> Several of Soyzer's survey questions were aimed at discovering the Alevi subjects' attitudes towards and perceptions of the concept of modernization (*çağdaşlaşma*). When Soyzer asked Kısas villagers to choose up to three appropriate definitions of being a modern person (*çağdaş insan*) from a list of six potential definitions, the subjects preferred 'being educated' (91%), 'being hard-working' (63%), and 'being open to innovations' (59%) over 'being rich' (17%), 'being religious' (10%), and 'being cunning' (3%).<sup>54</sup> Unsurprisingly, upon being asked whether they see themselves as a modern person (*çağdaş bir insan*), a concept which they associate with positive social values, the majority of the subjects (92%) replied affirmatively. These responses, however, fail to convince Soyzer that the research subjects have the 'consciousness' (*bilinç*) of being modern.<sup>55</sup> On the contrary, for him the survey results reflect the fact that modernity is a 'belief imposed by the mass media'.<sup>56</sup> According to Soyzer, although the villagers have both 'the concept and the desire of being modern', he does not see Kısas as 'a modern community' (*çağdaş bir topluluk*) but rather as a 'traditional agricultural community' (*geleneksel bir tarım toplumu*) since it fails to meet the criterion of being urbanized.<sup>57</sup> In the last instance, modernity appears to be an objective condition that can be assessed with a scientific yardstick, urbanization being the decisive one here. Within this framework, one can then only assume that the Alevi subjects' self-perception of being modern is a state of false-consciousness, in part imposed by the mass media. Although Soyzer is insightful in pointing to the moralizing framework within which Alevi subjects relate to modernity, he fails to acknowledge that his own sociological conclusions could equally be stemming from a similar moralizing position. Nevertheless, Soyzer's study hints that modernity is a potent concept in Turkish academic and lay discourses frequently employed to moralize the self and the other, as well as the present and the past.

I believe that the awareness of the ambiguity of these two concepts and the ambivalence of the Alevi subjects can be more illuminating than a clear-cut, and therefore, a simplistic mapping of their experiences in a dichotomistic schema. During my field study, I have encountered numerous debates around and references to modernity and tradition. Rather than provide a thin sketch of the range of my encounters I prefer to present a 'thick description' of a single 'diagnostic event' à la Sally Falk Moore,<sup>58</sup> namely a theatrical re-enactment of Kerbela massacre as part of the Alevi commemoration of the Tenth of Muharram in April 2001. According to Moore an event 'is not necessarily best understood as the exemplification of an extant symbolic or social order'.<sup>59</sup> On the contrary, events: 'may equally be evidence of the ongoing dismantling of structures or of attempts to create new ones. Events may show a multiplicity of social contestations and the voicing of competing cultural claims. Events may reveal substantial areas of normative indeterminacy'.<sup>60</sup> A theatrical performance, especially the kind which involves sensitive issues, heightened emotions, and active audience participation, is opportune for observing contesting visions and practices concerning tradition and modernity. Back in April 2001, the ninth month of my field research in Istanbul, however, I had little hint that the month of Muharram would be such a catalyst to bring about all the challenges, conflicts, and contestations to the fore.

April 2001 was typical in the sense that I was constantly on the move back and forth among different Alevi organizations in Istanbul trying to keep up with the speed and energy of my informants. Now that it was the month of Muharram, various Alevi lodges, foundations, and associations were full of visitors commemorating the martyrdom of the prophet Muhammad's grandson Husayn and his entourage in Kerbela in 680. For the Alevis, there were different ways of mourning during Muharram: fasting for ten, twelve, or fourteen days, abstaining from activities such as shaving, working, trading, eating, drinking water, or taking a bath. However, since urban life and work environment in Istanbul did not practically allow many of these mourning practices, for many Alevis, Muharram activities consisted of the time people spent after work in various Alevi organizations around Istanbul. I kept on hearing apologetic remarks: 'How can one stop shaving, or washing oneself, or take a leave from work for two weeks in Istanbul's business world?' Those who could not pay a visit to Alevi lodges could always tune in to Alevi radio stations to listen to Muharram programmes, a mix of *mersiye* (laments) and talk shows.<sup>61</sup> Or one could simply grab a copy of the latest Alevi journals which always made sure to dedicate a special issue to Muharram commemorations.<sup>62</sup> The urban Muharrams were inevitably less strictly observed than the rural ones, but this did not seem to create much discomfort among the more observant crowd. One could, nevertheless, come across gentle complaints of old folks who would nostalgically recount the tales of Muharram observances back in their villages, but even they seemed to be content with the fact that more youngsters were now observing the Muharram fast in the cities. Meanwhile, tea would be brewing in Alevi lodges in case non-Alevi guests, journalists, or scholars who do not fast showed up. Muharram in the city was much different from Muharram in the villages, but even in its new urban form, Muharram commemoration was something *geleneksel* (traditional). Tradition did not mean following the rural religious practices, but it simply meant willingness, or a gesture to reclaim Alevi identity. That is why

a youngster fasting just for a couple of days would be labelled as 'someone upholding the tradition' even if he was shaving, showering, working, trading, or doing other things necessary to make a living in Istanbul.

What satisfies the urban Alevi as 'traditional' can hardly satisfy the anthropologist. I was always curious, like many other colleagues, about the Muharrams in villages, as if it were possible to locate a rural, and therefore authentic, Muharram. So, it was with immense pain that I heard that the night before, on April 4th, or the 10th of Muharram according to *Hicri-Kameri* calendar, Ocak villagers performed what my informants referred to as *Kerbela Tiyatrosu* (literally, Kerbela Theater)<sup>63</sup> at Karacaahmet Sultan Association's *cemevi* (congregation hall). This could have been my only chance of getting close to observing the 'survivals' of the rural Muharrams, and I had missed the opportunity. My personal mourning was cut short when an Alevi friend informed me that *Kerbela Tiyatrosu* was to be repeated the next day on April 6, at Cem Foundation's headquarters in Yenibosna. Early in the evening that day, armed with my tape recorder, camera, tapes, films, notebooks, and pens, I set out on my journey to the European side of Istanbul to capture 'the Alevi tradition', as embodied by the villagers of Ocak.

Cem Foundation is one of the leading Alevi organizations in the world, with numerous branches throughout Turkey and Europe. The administrative headquarters in Yenibosna, Istanbul, is a five-storey building housing the Cem Radio Station, *Cem* journal, as well as a big *cemevi*, the Alevi house of worship. This congregation hall, called Koca Ahmed Yesevi Cemevi, is a peculiar structure. The building was completed within the past decade, and this massive congregational hall was designed to serve up to hundreds of Alevis at a time. From the very start, however, this *cemevi* has not only been a project of architecture and civil engineering but also a project of social engineering. Although numerous measures were taken from the start to create a 'traditional setting', such as the addition of a dodecagon indentation at the ceiling with the names of the twelve Imams inscribed, the hall remained an odd site for many people. Historical *cemevis* such as Şahkulu, or the village houses used as *cemevis* by the Alevis, do not segregate men and women architecturally. Often what one has is a large room with men sitting on one side and women sitting on the other. At the centre of the room, the boundary between men and women is never clear cut, preventing the perception that the religious ceremony is gender-segregated. In fact blurring of gender boundaries in seating arrangements signifies the fact that Alevi worship is different from the Sunni forms of gender-segregated worship. For some reason, Koca Ahmed Yesevi Cemevi had these two crescent shaped wings facing each other, separated by the stage on one tip, and by the protocol seating on the other. The architecture not only separates the men from the women, but also creates a designated protocol seating area where the Alevi male and female elite can sit on their own separated from others. So this building, which is often described as *çok modern* (very modern) by the patrons, not only imposes gender segregation, but also class and status differences on its patrons. Despite the foreignness of the hall, on 6 April 2001, or 12th of Muharram, there were hundreds of people squeezing in to partake in the Muharram observances.

I managed to find a tiny spot in between a middle-aged man and a teenager, whom I will call Hasan Bey and Bekir respectively from this point on. The person to my right, Hasan Bey, was an Alevi who had migrated to Istanbul from one of the

Eastern Anatolian provinces. The teenager to my left, Bekir, I noticed, was a conservative Sunni, who was curious, in a heresiographic manner, to see for the first time how Alevis commemorated Muharram.<sup>64</sup> As we were waiting for the programme to start, an unattended briefcase was found in the *cemevi*. The administrators immediately moved the briefcase out of the *cemevi*, and announced that everyone should be watchful of other unattended briefcases. Bekir was surprised about what he believed to be an excessive concern on the administrators' part, and asked 'What could be wrong about unattended bags?' Hasan Bey replied without hesitation:

Anything can happen. There are those who don't like us. You are still young. Why did they burn 37 people in Sivas? [making a reference to the Alevis killed by Sunni extremists in 1993, A.E.]. There are factions based abroad. You can never know who is who in this place. I wonder how many undercover police agents are here, or inspectors from the Directorate of Religious Affairs? There might even be a bomb!

Not realizing that he was speaking to two non-Alevis, Hasan Bey was right on target about the nature of the crowd that night. In urban *cemevis*, it was no longer possible to recreate the exclusivity or the social intimacy one would find in village ceremonies. The anonymity of the crowd in cities transformed Alevi worship from an intimate gathering with family, relatives, and fellow villagers, into a crowded ceremony with suspicious strangers. Nevertheless, for many Alevis, the urban *cem* ceremonies were still an act of practising and embodying Alevism. Alevi revival, after all, was not simply the imitation of village practices in the city. On the contrary, urban *cem* ceremonies were occasions to establish new links and ties across villages, lineages, and regions. Once, however, an Alevi elder warned me not to confuse urban *cems* with rural *cems*, and added 'The contemporary *cems* are just folkloric (*folklorik*) ceremonies'. He meant that the urban *cems* were nothing more than a public performance that can never attain the authenticity of the rural practices. For him the ongoing Alevi revival could never restore the genuine Alevi *cems* since as a consequence of urbanization some 'traditions' (*gelenekler*) were irrecoverably lost. So, a *cem* ceremony could signify for some the upholding of tradition in the urban setting, and the loss of rural tradition for others. That is one of the reasons why I was particularly interested that night in observing *Kerbela Tiyatrosu*. I wanted to see how different Alevis embodied, performed, negotiated, or challenged 'tradition' at a Muharram event. After all, I knew that having hundreds of people with potentially divergent opinions about what is the right thing to do, was an invitation for trouble, at the very least.

The event was scheduled to begin at 8 p.m. After the administrators warned the audience to turn off their cell phones, a scholar took the stage to recite Qur'an in Turkish. This was a move on the part of the Cem Foundation administrators to get the message across that Alevism was the authentic form of Turkish Islam. In an effort to distinguish themselves from the Sunnis who are associated with worship in Arabic, the Alevi administrators were performing a recitation in Turkish. Moreover, it was a reply to the Sunni conservative critiques that Alevis have strayed off the path of the Qur'an. This strategic move on the part of the administrators, however,

backfired when the Alevi audience made it very clear that they did not particularly like this innovation. Not only were they unenthusiastic to follow the verses on the prophet Noah and the flood, but they also did not like this non-participatory activity. After a short while, the audience started to punctuate the recitation by shouting 'Allah Allah' the Alevi formula for 'Amin'. Not only was the audience now part of the recitation, but the increasing cries of 'Allah Allah' were a gesture to the administrators that it was time to end the recitation, and start the Kerbela reenactment. The recitation was ended abruptly, and the announcer appeared to introduce the Ocak village theatre company and the *Kerbela Tiyatrosu*, but he seemed to have trouble choosing the right vocabulary for the performance. He did not want to offend the audience by calling it *oyun* (theatre play) since it also means game, dance, trick, or ruse in Turkish, and connotes a certain sense of triviality and frivolity. The audience rushed to the announcer's help, and people started shouting out alternatives, such as *piyes* (theatre piece), *temsil* (representation), and *canlandırma* (reenactment). Finally there was an agreement that *temsil* (representation), or *canlandırma* (reenactment) were the two appropriate terms to refer to the performance. What I had expected to be a traditional event, started out with a discussion on the question of theatrical genres. Once this issue was settled the announcer introduced the reenactment and the actors. At that point, whatever misconceptions I had about the authenticity of the event disappeared.

*Kerbela Tiyatrosu* was just one of the acts of a contemporary theatre piece called *Hünkar Hacı Bektaş Veli Dört Kapı Kırk Makam* [Hacı Bektaş Veli Sultan: Four Doors, Forty Stations]. It was written in 1970 by a prominent theatre and movie director, Avni Dilligil, and was staged at Reşat Nuri municipal theatre in Istanbul and also in the town of Hacıbektaş. Ocak Village Association had long ago obtained the rights to the play, and has been staging it in different occasions ever since. Moreover, the actors were not villagers living in the distant Eastern Anatolian village of Ocak, but were mostly members of the theatre group established by the Ocak Village Culture and Solidarity Association in Istanbul. I later figured out that the association had even proudly posted an online notice on their website announcing their previous performance: 'Kerbela, the first act of the work *Hünkar Hacı Bektaş Veli Dört Kapı Kırk Makam*, will be staged on 4 April 2001'.<sup>65</sup> So, the reenactment I was about to observe was not going to be a 'survival' of the *taziyes* (passion plays) of an era long disappeared.

Although there are historical accounts of the elaborate mourning practices in Kızılbaş-Alevi villages dating back to the Ottoman times,<sup>66</sup> there are no records on *taziyes*. G.E. White, who has an early twentieth century study of an Alevi village in Anatolia, reports that there was no *taziye* tradition there:

When the Tenth of Mouharrem comes there are sad scenes in the Persian part of the Shia world. White-shirted men form in processions that march through the streets, beating themselves over the head and shoulders with whips, until their persons and garments are clotted with blood, while they wail 'Hassan, Husseyn, Hassan, Husseyn,' in their annual lament for the untimely death of their favourites. In Turkey such Passion Plays are not seen; on the contrary your good Alevi, having denied the flesh to a perceptible degree and mourned with

real regret for the heroes of his faith, feels in a satisfied mood with himself and with things generally.<sup>67</sup>

The surviving historical accounts of *taziye* in Turkey are about the twelver Shi'ite Persian colony in Istanbul, and the twelver Shi'ite Turks from the city of Kars near the Iranian border.<sup>68</sup> Only recently have the Caferis in Istanbul, a twelver Shi'ite community who has migrated to Istanbul mainly from the Kars region, begun to stage elaborate public ceremonies to commemorate *Aşure* and stage *taziyes*. But the Caferi rituals, too, have gone through major transformation lately when their leader Selahattin Özgündüz banned self-flagellation, and encouraged his followers to donate blood to the Turkish Red Crescent instead.<sup>69</sup> Soon after, Özgündüz had his first live TV appearance at the *Basın Kulübü* [Press Club] programme of Haberturk TV. The TV host Hakan Aygün, praised Özgündüz's 'reform' by referring to it as a '*çağdaş uygulama*' (modern practice).<sup>70</sup> At a time when public religious ceremonies have become opportunities for various religious communities to demonstrate their embrace of modernity, and thereby, to prove their loyalty to the secular political system in exchange for public approval and praise, it would be problematic for Caferis to replicate the commemorations of the late 19th century in Istanbul where many would be left severely wounded or dead from self-inflicted wounds.<sup>71</sup>

I was beginning to realize that *Kerbela Tiyatrosu*, rather than providing me with a possibility of recovering 19th century 'survivals', was in fact giving me an opportunity to observe how the administrators, the cast, and the audience were negotiating what they see as tradition (*gelenek*) in complex ways. For me, the interaction of the audience and the cast, and the audience's participation in the performance were turning out to be more interesting than the actual script of the theatre piece. During what turned out to be a very short theatrical performance, I began to see that people had completely different ways of experiencing and interacting with the passion play. Behind the players, on the other side of the room, I could see and hear numerous women crying throughout the night. Right behind me was an old man, weeping and singing laments in a whispering tone throughout the event. At a climactic point, when Husayn drew his father's legendary sword *Zülfikar*, the impact on the audience was proportionate to the exaggerated size of the stage prop. An uproar of cries and applause accompanied the gesture. Especially for the younger end of the audience, this was a way to assert that resisting tyranny was a more appropriate theme for the month of Muharram than mourning victimhood. Some of the old folks and administrators were clearly disturbed by the applause, which they deemed inappropriate for the Muharram commemorations. As a potential conflict was about to erupt, the religious guide (*dede*) of the foundation shouted out a compromise: 'Let's just say Allah Allah'. So, during the rest of the reenactment, cries of 'Allah Allah' replaced applause and became an approved way of performing diverse sets of emotion or attitudes ranging from mourning to battle cries.

When the re-enactment ended, many people could not help but applaud the actors while also crying 'Allah Allah'. The awareness that this was a theatrical performance prompted most people to override their inhibitions about not applauding during Muharram. As I was on my return trip to the other side of the Bosphorus late at night, I was quite puzzled by that evening's events. I realized that there were so many

different ways of experiencing *Kerbela Tiyatrosu*, and each member of the audience had his or her own peculiar configuration of how to adapt predominantly rural religious beliefs and practices to urban conditions. For the old folks the youngsters' unruly rebellion was surely a sign of the old ways eroding in the urban setting. For the young ones, their attitudes were indeed an act of embracing the Alevi tradition (*Alevi gelenegi*) by demonstrating their commitment to resisting Sunni domination. At the end, for the majority of the people who applauded the actors, showing appreciation and respect for a work of art, was part of embodying modernity (*çağdaşlık*). On the actors' part, their two rounds of salutations at the end of the play was a slip from religious passion play into profane theatrical genre. Although their re-enactment of a seventh century tragedy was clearly an attempt to uphold the Alevi way (*Alevi yolu*) in the urban setting, they nevertheless could not repress the fact that they were performing a 20th century theatre piece.

Do these findings indicate something peculiar about the Alevis vis-à-vis the issues of modernity and tradition? Although the meaning and the impact of these two concepts are highly context-bound, it is still possible to observe that they can be equally fluid and elusive elsewhere. Jane Fishburne Collier, in her ethnographic study of Andalusia, shows that rather than being conceptual oppositions, tradition and modernity, in fact, accompany one another.<sup>72</sup> She observed that the ultimate sign of being modern in Andalusia was indeed having 'traditions'. David Sutton's study of the Greek island Kalymnos similarly provides examples of the ways in which the islanders strategically utilize the terms 'tradition' and 'modernity' not only to make value judgments but also to promote change.<sup>73</sup>

Comparative ethnographic data from Spain and Greece also indicate that the concepts of modernity and tradition are equally central to the way people embrace, accommodate, negotiate, or contest social change. For many people, uttering various local translations of the term modernity as part of a strategically deployed rhetoric seems to be a way of questioning the present and moralizing the past, while also trying to have a say in shaping the future. The instrumental power of the English terms 'modernity' and 'tradition', which is in part a result of their potency across cultures and borders, has led various individuals and communities to be much more flexible, entrepreneurial, and strategic about the ways in which they deploy and define their local equivalents. The scholars, on the other hand, are often less flexible in their approach and conceptualization than the people they study. As Marshall Sahlins argues: 'For the most part it is Western intellectuals who show themselves to be prisoners of traditional concepts holding to a rigid and exclusive distinction between the 'traditional' and the 'modern'. . . We are trapped in the logic of received dichotomies'.<sup>74</sup> Despite the different attitudes of scholars and research subjects, what brings them together is the central role played by the concepts of tradition and modernity in their narratives and practices. This could be clearly observed in Turkey within the last two decades as references to modernity (*çağdaşlık*) and backwardism (*gericilik*) became ubiquitous.

After all, can this be the defining feature of being modern in the Turkish case, and/or elsewhere? Has the strategic deployment of the tropes of modernity and tradition become the dominant way of constituting the self, making claims, attaining legitimate power, and exercising discursive violence through the denial of 'coevalness'<sup>75</sup> in certain cases, and authenticity in others? My reply to this question,

as an inescapably definitional exercise, and like every other ‘conception of modernity’ would be ‘an imbedded installation in the invention of the very thing to which it refers’.<sup>76</sup> Guilty I stand, both as an agent and as a subject of research on modernity.

## Notes

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1. D.P. Gaonkar, ‘On Alternative Modernities’, *Public Culture*, Vol.11, No.1 (1999), pp.1–11.
2. R.W. Hefner, ‘Multiple modernities: Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism in a globalizing age’, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol.27 (1998), pp.83–104.
3. J. Faubion, ‘Possible Modernities’, *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol.3, No.4 (1988), pp.365–8.
4. S. Bozdoğan, *Modernism and Nation Building: Turkish Architectural Culture in the Early Republic* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2001), p.9.
5. İ. Örs, ‘Coffeehouses, cosmopolitanism, and pluralizing modernities in Istanbul’, *Journal of Mediterranean Studies*, Vol.12, No.1 (2002), pp.119–45.
6. S.F. Moore, ‘Explaining the Present: Theoretical Dilemmas in Processual Ethnography’, *American Ethnologist*, Vol.14, No.4 (1987), p.727.
7. Gaonkar, ‘On Alternative Modernities’, p.1.
8. In this article, the term *emic* is used in the anthropological fashion and refers to native cultural meanings, concepts, and categories appropriate within the framework of the insiders’ point of view as opposed to the scholarly knowledge of outsiders.
9. M. Herzfeld, *Anthropology: Theoretical Practice in Culture and Society* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), p.81.
10. N. Berkes, *Türkiye’de Çağdaşlaşma* [Modernization in Turkey] (Ankara: Bilgi Yayınevi, 1973).
11. Memduh Selim Beki Bey of Van refers to ‘Kürd kadınlığının *asrî* zihniyetle inkişâfı’ [advancement of Kurdish womanhood with *modern* consciousness] (emphasis added) in a 1919 article in the *Jîn* journal while introducing the founding of the *Kürd Kadınları Teali Cemiyeti* [The Association to Elevate Kurdish Women], quoted in Y.S. Karakışla, ‘Kürd Kadınları Teali Cemiyeti (1919)’ [The Association to Elevate Kurdish Women (1919)], *Toplumsal Tarih*, Vol.119 (2003), pp.14–25.
12. J.L. Farley, *Modern Turkey* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1872). During the 17th and 18th centuries most Western references to ‘modern’ in the Ottoman territories denoted contemporariness, and they were usually attested in geographical works and travel writings. For an early 18th century example, see J.P. de Tournefort, *A voyage into the Levant . . . Containing the antient and modern state of the islands of the archipelago* (London: D. Browne, 1718).
13. Bozdoğan, *Modernism and Nation Building*, p.3.
14. Backwardness has been a compelling theme in the Islamic world. Shakib Arslan’s book is entitled *Li madha takhkhār al-muslimun wa li madha tagaddam ghayrahum?* [Why are Muslims Backward While Others Are Advanced?] (Cairo, 1939), quoted in E., Burke III, ‘Orientalism and World History: Representing Middle Eastern Nationalism and Islamism in the Twentieth Century’, *Theory and Society*, Vol.27 (1998), p.492, 505n.
15. M. Yardımcı, ‘Çağdaş Türkiye’nin hedefi ve irtica’ [Modern Turkey’s Aim and Reactionism], *Zaman*, 22 Sep. 2000.

16. Within this context, *Gelenek* Publishing House and *Gelenek* journal, both of which are closely affiliated with the Turkish Communist Party (TKP), do not find it problematic to name themselves *Gelenek* (tradition).
17. Moore, 'Explaining the Present'.
18. T. Erman and E. Göker, 'Alevi Politics in Contemporary Turkey', *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol.36, No.4 (2000), p.99.
19. The so-called 3K referred to *Kızılbaşlar* (Alevi), *Kürtler* (Kurds), and *Komünistler* (communists) as the main threats to national security.
20. A.Y. Ocak, *Türk Süfiliğine Bakışlar* [Views on Turkish Sufism] (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 1996), p.192.
21. Columnist Emin Çölaşan's remarks in the *Hürriyet* daily epitomize the way in which Alevi is perceived by many secular republicans: 'The millions of Alevi, who are secular, çağdaş (modern), civilized, deeply devoted to the republican regime, and opposed to bigotry, reactionarism, and backwardism, are the main sigorta (safety, insurance, or fuse) of the regime.' *Hürriyet*, 30 Dec. 2003. Yael Navaro-Yashin refers to this development as the middle-class secularists' 'discovery' of 'the people', or 'the society of Atatürkism'. Y. Navaro-Yashin, *Faces of the State: Secularism and Public Life in Turkey* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), pp.145-6. For an earlier assessment of the relations between the secular elite and the Alevi, see N. Yalman, 'Islamic reform and the mystic tradition in eastern Turkey', *Archives Européennes de Sociologie*, Vol.10, No.1 (1969), pp.41-60.
22. For a discussion of the Turkish elite's ambivalent attitudes towards Alevi belief and Alevi, see A. Erdemir, 'The "Eastern" Alevi and the "Western" Elite in Istanbul', paper presented at the Seventh Biennial Conference of the European Association of Social Anthropologists, Copenhagen, Denmark, 15 August 2002.
23. J.K. Birge, *The Bektashi Order of Dervishes* (London: Luzac Oriental, 1994[1937]), p.85.
24. See K. Vorhoff, 'Academic and Journalistic Publications on the Alevi and Bektashi of Turkey', in T. Olsson, E. Özdalga, and C. Raudvere (eds.), *Alevi Identity* (Istanbul: Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul, 1998), p.35.
25. R. Çamuroğlu, 'Alevi Revivalism in Turkey', in T. Olsson, E. Özdalga, and C. Raudvere (eds.), *Alevi Identity* (Istanbul: Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul, 1998), p.79.
26. *Ibid.*, p.81.
27. G. Demir, 'Alawis: A Faith and a Culture', *Turkish Daily News*, 8 April 2000.
28. K. Kehl-Bodrogi, 'Introduction', in K. Kehl-Bodrogi, B. Kellner-Heinkele and A. Otter-Beaujean (eds.), *Syncretistic Religious Communities in the Near East* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), p.xiv.
29. *Ibid.*, p.xiv.
30. Vorhoff, 'Academic and Journalistic', p.34.
31. *Ibid.*, p.34.
32. Erman and Göker, 'Alevi Politics', p.99.
33. Vorhoff, 'Academic and Journalistic', p.35.
34. *Ibid.*, p.35. See also A. Yaman, *Alevilik-Bektaşılık Bibliyografyası* [Alevism-Bektashism Bibliography] (Mannheim: Alevi-Bektaşılık Kültür Enstitüsü, 1998).
35. Erman and Göker, 'Alevi Politics', p.99.
36. M.H. Yavuz, 'Media Identities for Alevi and Kurds in Turkey', in D. Eickelman and J.W. Anderson (eds.), *New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), pp.180-199.
37. See Yavuz 'Media Identities'; M. Sökefeld, 'Alevism Online: Re-Imagining a Community in Virtual Space', *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, Vol.11, No.1 (2002), pp.85-123; A. Erdemir, 'Alevi Nettaşlar: İnternet'te Folklor ve Antropoloji'nin Sınırlarını Zorlamak' [Alevi Netizens: Pushing the Boundaries of Folklore and Anthropology on the Internet], *Halkbilimi*, Vol.14 (2001), pp.58-61.
38. T. Akyol, *Osmanlı'da ve İran'da Mezhep ve Devlet* [Sect and Religion in Ottomans and in Iran] (Istanbul: Milliyet Yayınları, 1999), p.234.
39. T. Akyol, 'İrtica, toplum, YÖK' [Reactionarism, Society, and the Council of Higher Education], *Milliyet*, 12 Sept. 2003.
40. T. Akyol, *Kitaplar Arasında* [Among Books] (Istanbul: Doğan Kitapçılık, 2002), p.21.
41. T. Akyol, *Osmanlı'da ve İran'da*, p.234.
42. See F. Baran, 'O tarih bilincinin ordinaryüs profesörüdür' [He is the Distinguished Professor of Historical Consciousness], *Özgür Politika*, 18 Jan. 2003.

43. A.H. Cilasun, *Alevilik Bir Sır Değildir* [Alevism is not a Secret] (Istanbul: Ceylan Ofset, 1995).
44. Ibid., pp.37–9.
45. Ibid., pp.35–6.
46. Şahkulu Sultan Vakfı, 'Gelenek Canlanıyor' [Tradition Coming to Life], *Nefes*, Vol.3, No.34 (Aug. 1996), p.52.
47. For alternative readings of this event, see R. Geaves, 'Religion and Ethnicity: Community Formation in the British Alevi Community', *Numen*, Vol.50 (2003), pp.68–9, and A. Erdemir, 'Death of a Community: Alevi Predicament in 1990s Istanbul', paper presented at the Boas/Benedict Conference, Columbia University, 23 March 2000.
48. E. Zenger, *Postmodern Şamanizm, Alevilik ve Halkozanları* [Postmodern Shamanism, Alevism, and Minstrels] (Ankara: İtalik, 2000), pp.101–2.
49. Ibid., p.97.
50. N. Subaşı, 'Alevilik, Aleviler ve Modernleşme' [Alevism, Alevi, and Modernization], *Birikim*, No.159 (2002), pp.92.
51. Cilasun, *Alevilik Bir Sır Değildir*.
52. Şahkulu Sultan Vakfı, 'Gelenek Canlanıyor', p.52.
53. Y. Soyyer, *Sosyolojik Açıdan Alevî Bektaşî Gelenegi* [Alevî-Bektaşî Tradition from a Sociological Perspective] (Istanbul: Seyran, 1996).
54. Ibid., p.56.
55. Ibid., p.56.
56. Ibid., p.56.
57. Ibid., p.60.
58. Moore, 'Explaining the Present'.
59. Ibid., p.729.
60. Ibid., p.729.
61. *Cem Radyo*, one of the most popular Alevi radio stations in Istanbul, started to air *Muharrem Sohbetleri* (Muharram Conversations) in 2000. In these week-long programmes, the radio host Ayhan Aydın would interview prominent Alevi *dedes* (religious guides), intellectuals, minstrels, poets, and scholars.
62. *Pir Sultan Abdal* journal's April 2000 issue (Vol.37) was devoted to Muharram, and had a dramatic collage depicting Kerbela on its cover.
63. The word *tiyatrosu*, which conventionally means theatre hall, is used here in the colloquial sense to refer to a theatrical work.
64. For a discussion of Sunni heresiographic gaze on Alevi, see A. Erdemir, 'The Other's Sexuality as an *Idée Fixe*: Demarcating Religious Communities in Contemporary Turkish Culture', paper presented at Fixed Ideas Interdisciplinary Graduate Student Conference, Harvard University, 1 March 2002.
65. <http://www.ocakder.org.tr> [accessed 24 Jan. 2004].
66. M. And, 'The Muharram Observances in Anatolian Turkey', in P.J. Chelkowski (ed.), *Ta'ziyeh: Ritual and Drama in Iran* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 1979), pp.243–7.
67. G.E. White, 'The Shia Turks', *Journal of the Transactions of the Victoria Institute*, Vol.XL (1908), p.234.
68. And, 'The Muharram Observances', pp.23–43.
69. S. Arat, 'Kan akıtmadılar kan bağışladılar' [They did not Spill Blood, They Donated Blood], *Hürriyet*, 14 March 2003.
70. <http://www.haberturk.com> [accessed 16 March 2003].
71. And, 'The Muharram Observances', pp.239–243.
72. J.F. Collier, *From Duty to Desire: Remaking Families in a Spanish Village* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).
73. D.E. Sutton, 'Tradition and Modernity: Kalymanian Constructions of Identity and Otherness', *Journal of Modern Greek Studies*, Vol.12, No.2 (1994), pp.239–260.
74. M. Sahlins, 'The Economics of Develop-Man in the Pacific', *Res*, Vol.21 (1992), p.21.
75. J. Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1983), pp.37–69.
76. Faubion, 'Possible Modernities', p.368.