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Alevi Kurds: History, politics, identity, migration and identity: An interview with Martin van Bruinessen¹

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Abstract

This interview with Martin van Bruinessen records his personal and intellectual engagement with Alevis in Turkey and the Netherlands for over fifty years. Initially, his interest was in Anatolian Alevi culture and he began exploring the religious dimension of Alevism in the 1970s at a time when Alevis were more preoccupied with left-wing politics. He charts the emergence of Alevism studies since the 1980s and links it to the religious resurgence and reinvention of diverse ethno-religious Alevi identities associated with urbanised and diasporic communities. He further examines the relationship between Kurdish and Alevi movements and Alevism and Islam.

Keywords: Alevis; Alevism; Alevi movements; Alevi politics and identity; Alevism studies

Introduction

Q. When and why did you become interested in Alevism?

Forgive me if this becomes a long answer. For almost as long as I have been interested in Turkey and the Kurds, and that's about fifty years, Alevis and Alevism have been present in my mind as background music even while I was focusing on other subjects. I began travelling in Turkey in my summer holidays when I was a student, in the second half of the 1960s. The 1971 military coup and the trials against leftist students and Kurdish activists that followed made a deep impression on me, and I joined a solidarity committee, through which I met the first Turkish political refugees who took asylum in the Netherlands. There were only three of them, quite unlike the thousands who came in later years, and they returned to Turkey after the

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amnesty of 1974. We have remained friends through the years, however. They were the first people who helped me to make sense of the news coming out of Turkey, and it is partly through them that I initially bought into the romantic view of Alevi communities as more open, tolerant, democratic and inclined to gender equality. One of these friends, though not an Alevi herself, had been hiding from the police in an Alevi village in Malatya. I also gathered from her that among the student left, Alevi were probably over-represented.

My growing interest in Turkish and Middle Eastern politics was probably one of the reasons why I decided to do a PhD thesis in anthropology of the Kurds. I carried out some two years of fieldwork in Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey (1974-76). My main interest was in tribes and the beginnings of nationalism, and I mainly stayed among Sunni Kurds, but I couldn't help hearing and reading about Alevi, because they were often the significant other of Kurdish Islamists and nationalists. Studying the backgrounds of the Sheikh Said uprising, I found that the mutual mistrust between Alevi and Sunni tribes appeared to be a major factor. This played again a part in the events in Dersim in 1937-38, about which I wrote later. No Sunni Kurds came out in support of the Dersimis, and the Dersimis did not even attempt to flee to nearby Sunni districts (van Bruinessen 1992; 1994).

I left the Kurdish region from time to time for Ankara, where I was in contact with students deeply involved in what they called people's culture: village literature (*köy edebiyatı*), folklore, the songs of popular *aşık*, such as Aşık Mahzuni and Ali Ekber Çiçek. The annual Hacı Bektaş festival was a celebration of people's culture, and I went there two or three times in the 1970s. It was a manifestation of counter-culture then, a joyful gathering of progressive people, not all of them Alevi, I believe. (After 1980, of course, it was brought under control by the state and its character changed.) In those years, Alevism was for me primarily associated with authentic Anatolian culture and progressive politics, and that was how many young Alevi also saw it. The Alevi pogroms of Malatya and Kahramanmaraş in 1978, where Sunni mobs attacked Alevi neighbourhoods, strengthened that association of Alevism with the political left and Sunni Islam with the political right.

Very few of my Alevi friends and acquaintances then were interested in Alevism as a system of beliefs and rituals. I spent some time in an Alevi village in Erzincan and later visited relatives of Alevi friends whom I knew from Holland, but even the older men I interviewed appeared to know rather little of the belief system, or were reluctant to speak about it. The communal ritual, the *ayin-i cem*, had not been celebrated in those villages for many years, they said. The German anthropologist Peter Bumke, who carried out research in Dersim around the same time, had the same

experience and observed, with some exaggeration, that Alevism was “a religion that is not practised” (Bumke, 1979).

My curiosity about the religious dimension of Alevism was first aroused when I spent two brief periods among the Guran Ahl-i Haqq in South Kurdistan, in 1975 and 1976. By some stroke of good luck, I was welcomed by the community, and their spiritual leader, Seyd Nasreddin, gave Ka Kerim, one of the oldest *kelamkhan*, the experts who know the religious poetry and legends, permission to answer my questions. Ahl-i Haqq theology and cosmology is more developed and more systematised than anything I later found among Alevis, but there are some striking similarities. Ka Kerim was in fact the first person who pointed this out to me. He told me a myth that connected Hacı Bektaş with the divine spirits of the Ahl-i Haqq pantheon, and he claimed that Alevism was just another version of the Ahl-i Haqq religion. That made me curious about Alevi myths and legends that I could compare with the complex Ahl-i Haqq mythology. The young Alevi activists whom I met had little interest in those things, and even the few older men with whom I spoke in Alevi villages remembered only vaguely bits and pieces of such legends. But I discovered that there was much of interest to be found in the older literature that I read to complement my field research – folklorists, anthropologists and missionaries of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. That was my first encounter with folk narratives and myths recorded in rural Central or East Anatolia. And yet later I discovered the hagiographies of Alevi saints (*menakibname* and *velayetname*) as an important genre that was rich in myths and legends reminiscent of those of the Ahl-i Haqq.

The political repression that followed the military coup of 1980, and the efforts to impose a conservative version of Sunni Islam on Alevi communities had an unintended consequence: many former leftists became interested in Alevism as a cultural and religious formation. This was especially noticeable in the diaspora – Germany and Sweden – where the first Alevi associations were established. By the mid-1990s, quite a few people whom I had first come to know as leftist political activists, Kurds as well as Turks, were playing roles in Alevi associations, organising *ayin-i cem* rather than political demonstrations, and discussing how to define Alevi identity. The 1990s were also a period of hectic publishing activity: hundreds of books about Alevis and Alevism came from the press in Turkey and found an eager readership.

One of the first, best-informed, and most influential books was *Alevism: The Hidden Culture of Anatolia (Anadolu'nun Gizli Kültürü Alevilik)* by Nejat Birdoğan, which was published by the Alevi Cultural Centre of Hamburg in 1990. Birdoğan was an interesting figure – I met him in 1994 or so, and I think I should mention him among the people who stimulated my interest in

Alevism. He was from Iğdır and originally a Twelver Shi'i but had decided to become an Alevi (although conversion to Alevism is very uncommon) and a strong advocate for Alevism as the true religion of Anatolia, different from Islam. He had spent many years studying the traditions of the various Alevi communities of Turkey and was perhaps the most knowledgeable person in Turkey, as well as one of the most opinionated. After the 1980 military coup he had been prosecuted and sentenced to one and a half year in prison under the notorious article 163 of the Penal Code, which dealt with attempts to establish a state based on religious principles – the only Alevi ever to be prosecuted under this article.

Q. What importance has been given to the study of Alevism in Turkish and Kurdish studies? Has it in any sense been neglected?

Irène Mélikoff, who was professor of Turkish studies in Strasbourg, was a leading expert on Alevism, and it is largely thanks to her that the study of Alevism became an important aspect of academic Turkish studies. Her doctoral student, Ahmet Yaşar Ocak, who was originally a theologian, played a similar role in Turkey: he published editions of many important manuscripts of the *menakıbnâme* type and trained many younger scholars. Mélikoff herself was in turn influenced by an earlier generation of Turkish nationalist Turcologists, and like them she took for granted that Alevi beliefs and rituals were rooted in pre-Islamic Turkish religion. She allowed herself to be persuaded to overlook or even hide the Kurdish/Iranian elements in Alevism; only towards the end of her life, in her last great book, did she hesitatingly acknowledge the Kurdish aspect (Mélikoff, 1998, 2001).

Since the 1980s there has been an enormous production of academic studies of Alevis and Alevism, in Western Europe as well as Turkey. A large conference on Bektashis and Alevis, in Strasbourg in 1986, gave a strong push to Alevi studies (Popovic and Gilles, 1995). In Germany, the anthropologist Krisztina Kehl-Bodrogi was a pioneer, who wrote on many different aspects of Alevi communities, institutions, and identity struggles (Kehl-Bodrogi, 1988; 1993). Presently there are several research groups in German universities that focus on Alevism and similar heterodox communities. In Turkey several universities have in the 2000s opened departments of Alevi or Bektashi studies, which tend to be dominated by Turkish nationalist views, but many young academics in other departments have written more critical studies. Some of this output was published by the quality publisher İletişim.

We certainly cannot say that Alevism is still being neglected in academic studies; much work of high quality has been done in the past few decades. But studies of Alevism remain largely Turkish-centred, if only because the language of most sources, *menakıbnâme* and *deyiş* (religious poetry), is

Turkish. Kurdish or Zaza-speaking Alevi and their distinctive traditions have received relatively little attention from academics (with Peter Bumke, Krisztina Kehl-Bodrogi and myself as the main exceptions) (Bumke, 1989; Kehl-Bodrogi, 1999; van Bruinessen, 1997). I should also mention the journal *Berhem*, published in Swedish exile in 1988-93 by Mustafa Düzgün and friends, which had many interesting articles about Kurdish Alevi history and culture (besides other subjects).

Within the field of Kurdish studies, there have been many more publications on the Yezidis than the far more numerous Kurdish Alevi. But in the past two, three decades young intellectuals of Kurdish Alevi background have been doing very interesting research, interviewing old people and writing down the last remnants of oral tradition. The musicians Metin and Kemal Kahraman recorded almost forgotten songs and narratives. The journal *Munzur* has since 2000 published many fascinating essays on folklore, material culture and religion of Dersim. Some of the most interesting research was recently published in English in a book edited by Erdal Gezik and Ahmet Kerim Gültekin (Gezik and Gültekin, 2019). Most of this work has concerned Dersim; we do not yet have comparable studies of Kurdish/Zaza Alevi communities elsewhere (Varto, Malatya, Kahramanmaraş).

Q. In looking at the intersection of ethnicity (or national identity) and religion in Turkey, does the Alevi movement and/or Alevism produce a common identity between Turkish and Kurdish Alevi (or between Kurds and Alevi-Kurds) or does ethnicity cut across and weaken a sense of common identity?

In the 1970s it was possible to think of Alevi as one single ethno-religious community, squeezed in between Sunni Kurds to the East and Sunni Turks to the West, but there was not much of an Alevi movement yet. As soon as an Alevi movement got organised, in the 1990s, internal differentiation also immediately became visible. The Cem Vakfı, the Hacı Bektaş and Pir Sultan Abdal cultural associations appealed to different constituencies, had different relations with Turkish nationalism and different views on accommodation with the state.

Most of the intellectuals who led the Alevi resurgence of the 1990s and tried to define Alevism for the recently urbanised Alevi were committed Kemalists and believed in the essential Turkishness of Alevism. Many Kurdish or Zaza speakers had also been convinced, by more than a half century of indoctrination, of their Turkish origin and of the importance of seeking protection from Islamic fundamentalism under the banner of the Kemalist party. But there were undeniable differences between, say, the village Bektashis of the Kızılırmak region and the Kızılbaş of the Euphrates

basin; they had quite different traditions. That coincided only partially with the ethnic dividing line; among the Kızılbaş there were Turks as well as Kurds and Zazas.

In the beginning, the Alevi associations in the big cities and in the European diaspora succeeded in bringing people of various regional backgrounds together in the newly established *cemevi*, community centres where the *ayin-i cem* ritual can be performed. The fact that many people had very little knowledge of their religion made it possible to reinvent shared religious ideas and common rituals, but even so a single community did not emerge. Most of the *cemevi* came to serve more or less distinct sub-communities. In the mid-1990s, when many were hoping that all Alevis might unite in the struggle for recognition and equal rights, I visited the famous Alevi town of Narlıdere, near Izmir, and found, somewhat to my surprise, that the two main Alevi communities there (Turkmen Tahtacı and Kurdish or Turkish Alevis from Erzincan) lived in absolute isolation from one another even though they lived surrounded by a Sunni Muslim majority.

Q. How do you understand the relationship between Sunni Islam and Alevism. Why do you think that some Alevis can describe themselves as Muslim while others deny any connection?

To put it very simply, Sunni Islam, and the Hanefi *mezhep* (school of Islamic law), was the religion of the Ottoman state and remains that of the secular Turkish Republic. Where the state strengthened its control, it built mosques and sponsored Islamic education. Entire tribes and districts that used to adhere to Alevi-like traditions became Sunni. Among the Kurds this can perhaps be seen more clearly than among the Turks: Sunni Kurds usually belong to the Şafii *mezhep*, but there are, especially on the Western periphery of Kurdistan proper, various groups of Kurdish-speaking Hanefis. It is likely that these people's ancestors were Alevis, who were Islamised by the state.

The process of Sunnicisation is continuing, partly as a result of deliberate policies of the state and partly because families want to get rid of the stigma of being Alevi and try to pass as Sunnis. An early Yılmaz Güney film, *Gelin* (*The Daughter-in-Law*), is set in an Alevi village where people perform prayers and go on the hajj. When I first saw it I thought that was a mistake on Güney's part, but I later understood that there are many such part-Sunnicised communities in Central Anatolia.

The interesting question is what this means for the future of Alevi identity. Will Alevi communities gradually be absorbed into, and assimilated to, mainstream Sunni Islam? Or will they constitute a stable and distinct different religious community, either as an alternative form of Islam or as a non-Muslim religion? It is interesting that Alevi theology is finding a place in a number of European universities, and Alevi religious education has

become an optional part of the school curriculum in several counties in Germany. If some comparable form of institutionalisation of Alevism will also take place in Turkey will depend on the outcome of a long process of negotiation between Alevi civil society and the state; it is unlikely to happen soon. And the lack of unity among Alevis is not helping either.

Those who claim that Alevism has nothing to do with Islam are a small minority, though they are strongly committed to their view. They can point to remnants of nature worship and other pre-Islamic practices, but they overlook the overwhelming evidence of a millennium of interaction with Islamic civilisation, which is very clear from the religious poetry. Alevism as a religion is not thinkable without the religious specialists, the *dede*. And the religious ideas of the *dede* are strongly informed by a Sufi version of Islam.

Q. How has the Alevi movement been influenced (positive and negatively) by the Kurdish movement (PKK and other Kurdish organisations)? To what extent has this influence shaped the direction of the Alevi movement in Turkey and the diaspora? More generally, how do you see the relationship between Alevism and leftists movements. Has it been an advantage or disadvantage?

Turkish Alevis, or those who opted for Turkish identity, were not influenced by the rise of Kurdish nationalism except negatively, as a threat to the Republican social order that protected them. Especially Cem Vakfı tended to associate itself with the Turkish nationalist response. When İzzettin Doğan, the leader of Cem Vakfı, visited Germany, he accepted invitations from *ülküci* associations (the “Grey Wolves”), which alienated many Kurdish Alevis from him. Kurdish and Zaza-speaking Alevis have been quite divided in their response to the Kurdish movement.

It is important to realise that the Kurdish movement, as a mass-based social movement, emerged some 25 years before the Alevi movement, and many young Alevis were deeply affected by it. In the late 1970s, I heard stories of young Alevis (whom I believed to be Turkish by origin) deciding to identify themselves as Kurds, as an act of protest against the Malatya and Kahramanmaraş pogroms. Kurdish identity then amounted to a denial of Turkish state ideology, and the entire Kurdish movement was, or pretended to be, socialist. Among the early leaders of the Kurdish movement there were in fact many Alevis; that was especially noticeable in the Özgürlük Yolu group and the PKK. Especially the PKK has been insisting on the primacy of Kurdish identity and the Kurdish struggle. But you did not have to give up your Alevi identity when becoming a Kurdish activist. They did claim, however, that Kurdish Alevism was different from Turkish Alevism, helped by intellectuals who attempted to demonstrate the Zoroastrian roots of Kurdish Alevism.

But the Alevis' deeply rooted distrust of Sunni Kurds did not disappear, and many have stayed aloof from the Kurdish movement or have been hostile to it. Identity struggles have perhaps been most intensive in Dersim, which is different from all other Alevi regions. Many Dersimis feel neither Turkish nor Kurdish and now also reject the label of Alevism in favour of the term *Raa Haqi*: of all subgroups of Alevis, they have perhaps the most strongly developed sense of distinct identity. Most of those who focus their activities on Dersim, incidentally, has a background in the radical left. Or to put it differently, some of the radical left movements – I am thinking especially of TIKKO and Halkın Kurtuluşu – have seen their following in most parts of the country dwindle since the 1980s, and many of their former members became Alevi activists and have competed with the PKK for the hearts and minds of Kurdish Alevis, most clearly so in Dersim.

Q. Looking back on your years of research on Kurds and Alevis, what has most intrigued and excited you?

Both Kurdish and Alevi identity have been stigmas in Turkey, and from my student days, I have been attracted by the struggle of subaltern groups for recognition and equal rights. My years of fieldwork in Kurdistan have, in a way, made me the person I am today, and friendships with individual Kurds and Alevis have remained important throughout my life. And yes, it has been fascinating to observe the shifting terms of the debates on identity, and the rediscovery of histories and religious traditions that had long remained hidden under the official modernist discourse of Kemalist Turkey.

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