The Making of a Transnational Religion:

Alevi Movement in Germany and the World Alevi Union

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Abstract

The literature on migrants' religious movements generally sees them as backward and conservative movements that are resistant to change. On the contrary, this paper shows that transnational religious movements are shaped by interactions between origin and destination places' political, legal, and social structures, and may take different pathways across time and place. Analysing the development of the Alevi diaspora movement in Germany and the recent efforts to establish the World Alevi Union, the article argues that both the (old and new) states and the (old and new) societies they live in, as well as broader paradigm changes and their agency have a direct influence on the ways migrants' daily life practices alter in time.

Keywords: transnationalism, diaspora, religion, Alevi, Turkey, Germany, institutionalisation

Introduction

History shows that migration is a catalyser for change both in destination and origin places: migrants bring new ways of thinking and doing things to the places they arrive, are transformed by the existing structures of their new societies and also bring about changes in their origin countries—either by their absence or by bringing these transformations. Such transnational interactions do not only bring about political, economic and social change, they also significantly impact spiritual lives. As Peggy Levitt (2003, 2013) observe, migrants bring their faith and practices with them when they migrate and change the religious landscape in their new countries. While they change their new societies, their own practices might also change in time according to their newly emerging needs, as well as unavoidable broader paradigm changes.

This article seeks to explore the changes in spiritual practices during the process of migration and settlement in new places. The motivating research questions are: how do migrants—in this case Alevi migrants from Turkey—experience and practice their faith away

from their hometowns, how do they express it for outsiders, and how do their faiths change along with their changing surroundings including new political, legal and social structures? Put more abruptly, how does a faith system change through migration abroad and through continuing transnational interactions between migrants and those in the homeland? By looking at the case of Alevi migrants abroad, this article particularly aims to examine the processes that led to the emergence of a transnationally institutionalised Alevism through the recent initiatives to establish the World Alevi Union.

This examination raises various theoretical questions over the relationship between migration and religion, such as who gets to define the boundaries of a religion and under which legislative and political structures they can do that, which will be explored further. Even though there is extensive literature on global religious pluralism (Banchoff 2008, Boase 2010), and on new religious movements (Lewis and Tollefsen 2016), there is very little examination of the processes of institutionalisation of transnational religions. Exploring the case of a transnational Alevi movement, the article argues that the changes in practices can only be studied by looking at the structures of the new place of residence and those of the origin place where migrants resided, acculturated and where they still have close family members and friends, as well as broader paradigm changes and migrants' agency.

A Multi-Scalar Approach to Transformation of Diasporas

This article employs a social constructionist approach towards Alevi migrants considering them as a diaspora group who mobilised against injustices in Turkey and in their new countries. A social constructionist approach regards diasporas as mobilised and fabricated social entities, as suggested by Sökefeld (2006) and Adamson (2008). Contrary to primordialist definitions of ethnic identity, Sökefeld (2006, 280) proposes that the formation of a diaspora, as an imagined transnational community (Anderson 1991), is not a natural and inevitable consequence of migration but an outcome of specific mobilisation processes in response to particular events. Adamson (2008, 2) suggests that diasporas can best be analysed as 'the products or outcomes of transnational mobilization activities by political entrepreneurs engaged in strategic social identity construction'. In this approach, '"diaspora" is not simply a descriptive term, but also a prescriptive term, which can be adapted as a means of creating a de-territorialised social, cultural or political community' (Adamson 2008, 7).

The existing literature often posits diasporas as an extension of the homeland population, but in reality, diasporas are different actors than their counterparts in the homeland; they are nourished from different sources and they go through different conceptualisation processes. Hence a diasporic individual or community may acquire different ideas, see the merits or shortcomings of their home countries from a different lens, and attach importance to and work for diverse issues (Kaya 2007). As much as they are affected by the developments in their homeland, they are also shaped by the conditions of their new societies (Esman 2009, 181), as well as how these conditions change over time. Consequently, they may initiate a completely divergent movement than their fellow compatriots in ways that may be unfeasible or unimaginable in the homeland. There are various factors one needs to explore to understand the emergence and transformation of a diaspora.

Firstly, host countries' state practices—policies and discourses—towards their migrants provide opportunities (or obstacles) and have an important role in mobilising them. Migrants may want to make use of these opportunities to the extent they are integrated (or in order to be integrated) into the economic, political and social structures of their new societies. Host societies shape the collective organization of migrants by providing (or not) certain resources for and models of organizing. Some host polities afford explicit channels for the participation and organization of migrant populations, thereby affecting their self-organization. Certain host-society institutions and policies encourage collective identity and organization, by means of categorization and the provision of resources to ethnic groups. Migrant organizations, in turn, define their goals, strategies, functions, and level of operation in relation to the existing policies and resources of the host state. They advance demands and set agendas vis-à-vis state policy and discourses in order to seize institutional opportunities and further their claims. Hence, it is imperative to analyse the structural conditions of the country of residence.

Secondly, home states also play an important role in activating diasporas. For instance, since the 1990s, a growing number of governments has sought to reach their migrants abroad and mobilise diasporas in order to attract remittances or establish transnational business networks (Gamlen et al. 2013, Mullings 2011). Home states may also mobilise diasporas to obtain political support for government policies, especially in the case of a conflict between ethnic and/or religious groups (Brand 2006, 2014). Indeed, some

diasporas may be activated to join armed forces, as in the case of ISIS and the Syrian Armed Forces, while others play a role as peace-makers (Başer and Swain 2008, PILPG 2009). Even if there is no conflict, home states might try to exclude some ethnic groups from accessing resources while supporting others, which may in turn mobilise migrants from that ethnic group living abroad to react against their home states. Home states may attempt not only to monitor the activities of migrants abroad but also to transform them in line with the dominant state ideology in order to keep their population under control (Şenay 2012). *Diyanet İşleri Türk İslam Birliği* (DİTİB) [Turkish Islamic Union for Religious Affairs] is a good example of an origin country's involvement in its diaspora (Bruce 2013). Hence, as Bauböck (2008, 3) also suggests, diasporas have to be analysed through encounters occurring in the homeland.

Thirdly, it is impossible to analyse the role of host and home states by themselves without considering the broader paradigm shifts. The emerging discourse around national types of Islam, for instance German Islam, is 'shaped as much as by forces outside the nation as within it, because people and groups belong to transnational religious networks that exert their influence from far away' (Levitt 2012, 495). It has been well-documented in the literature that since the 9/11 attacks in the USA, hatred towards migrants and in particular Islamophobia have increased in western countries (Kaya 2012) with a growing perception of 'Western' and 'Islamic' countries as two opposite worlds, often ignoring the various differences among 'a billion Muslims, divided into over fifty states and into myriad ethnicities and social groups' (Halliday 2002, 14).[1] Nonetheless, this paradigm shift has had an important impact for all migrants from Turkey, because since 9/11 they have increasingly been identified as Muslims (Tezcan 2012).

Finally fourthly, migrants themselves can be influenced by changes in their origin countries regardless of states' involvement in them (Lyon and Uçarer 2001, Sökefeld 2008). Both origin and new countries influence migrants' broader perceptions and interpretations of life (Brinkerhoff 2009, 7). Having witnessed new forms of social organisation—diversity policies, such as multiculturalism, or different models of secularism—migrants might change their previous opinions or perceptions of their homeland. Alevi migrants, having learned

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[1] Moreover, the way communities perform their beliefs is often different in the diaspora context based on the level of their structural integration as well as whether they are first or second generation migrants (Kaya 2009, 2010).

about different approaches to governance of distinct cultural and religious groups, might come to frame their claims differently then their counterparts in Turkey.

From this multi-scalar perspective, this article is based on two theoretical assumptions: first, it assumes that all cultures and faith systems are permeable to transform according to the changing structures in host and home countries, as well as paradigmatic changes and migrants' altering needs and demands. Second, cultures and faith systems may evolve into a 'religion' following some political divisions. The social movement literature shows us that often political divisions first emerge among members of a social group (see della Porta 2009): once a group among the dissidents becomes successful in leading the group, the institutionalisation stage starts—new rules, routines and directories are established. Using a social movement approach, Massicard (2003, 2012) and Sökefeld (2008) theorise the Alevi movement based on the political opportunity structures that activists—in Massicard's terminology Alevists—operate in. Extending their work, this article shows that it is crucial to understand the initial political divisions, who become leaders, how they direct the movement and how they establish new routines and directories in order to understand the emergence of a transnational religious institution, such as that of the World Alevi Union. The following sections will show how the role of host and home countries, paradigm changes as well as Alevi migrants' emerging needs and framing contests have transformed the way they institutionalise.

Changing Political Landscape in Turkey and Abroad

The period since the 9/11 attacks in a number of Western countries witnessed the emergence of a discourse around the 'crisis of multiculturalism' (Lentin and Titley 2011) and the previous problematisation of immigrants' ethnic identities slowly gave way to the problematisation of their religion. Violent killings by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), carried out in the name of Islam, and continuing denigration of Muslim immigrants in mainstream media further tarnished the image of immigrants from Middle Eastern countries. A growing number of xenophobic groups, such as the newly established Patriotic Europeans against the Islamisation of the West (Pegida), have caused a great deal of distress among Muslim communities (De Genova 2015). In this socio-political environment in Western countries migration became immediately associated with threats to borders and national security.

Germany—where most Alevi migrants reside—witnessed similar changes, where religious (rather than ethnic) distinctions became crucial in identifying migrants' backgrounds (Tezcan 2012), paving the way for growing hatred of Muslims, whose internal heterogeneity was not widely understood. The attacks of 9/11, Madrid (2004) and London (2005) had a transnational effect (Cesari 2009), and issues associated with Islam (such as the wearing of headscarves, introduction of Islamic courses at schools, forced marriages and honour killings) became hot topics. The media quickly began describing Muslim men as oppressive, physically abusive in defence of their honour, traditional, undemocratic and 'un-German' and Muslim women as victims of oppression within their families (Bielefeldt 2008, Foroutan 2013, 5-7). These simplistic stereotypes became widespread, influencing public discourse, immigration policies and the imagination of nationhood (Bauder and Semmelroggen 2009, Ewing 2008). The new Immigration Act, for instance, facilitated deportation of so-called 'hate preachers', reflecting the assumption that immigrants were violent and threatened the German national imaginary. The growth of an anti-Islamic movement was also reflected in the emergence of aggressively anti-Muslim websites such as *Politically Incorrect121*, derogatory books by well-known figures such as Thilo Sarrazin (2010) and far-right political parties such as Pro Deutschland. Arson attacks on Muslims and nation-wide protests against the 'Islamisation of Europe' increased to such an extent that Chancellor Merkel of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) was compelled to declare that anti-Muslim hatred was not acceptable in Germany.[2]

At the same time, however, some politicians began paying closer attention to Muslims' activities and demands in order to understand them. For instance, immediately after the new CDU-led government assumed power in 2005, the Minister of the Interior, Wolfgang Schäuble, initiated a series of Conferences on Islam. The first was organised in September 2006 and hosted representatives from diverse Muslim organisations (including Alevi Federation in Germany [AABF]) with the aims of creating an institutionalised contact point between the German state and Muslims, promoting gender equality as a common value, and preventing radicalism and social polarisation (AIK 2010). This and subsequent meetings sought to build a platform for communication between the German state and Muslim groups

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[2] See Reuters. 12 December 2014. 'Merkel condemns racism as Dresden anti-Islam marches grow'. Available at: http://goo.gl/zvK3ao [Latest date of access: 8 December 2017].

via the newly established Coordination Council of Muslims in Germany (KRM), the same model which already mediated relations between the state and the Protestant and Catholic churches. Given the diversity of Islamic groups, however, it became clear that the process of negotiation would not be easy, since not all of them recognised the others as true practitioners of Islam. The Alevi Federation (AABF) in particular attracted criticism from other Islamic groups on the basis that 'those who do not live Islam should not be part of the conference' (Toprak 2006, 18). Both these paradigm shifts in German politics and the conflicts that emerged between representatives of different Islamic groups led to greater effort in the struggle for recognition of Alevism.

Simultaneously, Turkey—where Alevis originate from—also underwent major changes since the start of the millennium. Following an economic crisis of 2001/2002, the AKP administration rose to power as a new party promising changes in the political scene. Indeed, securing the majority of votes, the AKP government has gradually and profoundly changed the political, legal, economic and social conditions for Alevis in Turkey. Following some democratic 'openings' in the road to the EU membership, the AKP government also promised to make changes for Alevis to be able to practice their cultural and faith-related practices freely, while also clearly leaving them in limbo in the face of growing physical and verbal threats. As any other social group, Alevis were not a homogeneous group—some benefitted from the AKP's search for collaboration, but most remained under risk (Özkul 2015). Verbal and physical attacks (and threats of attacks) have continuously not been investigated by state authorities in Turkey deepening Alevis' longstanding resentment and disenfranchisement (Karakaya-Stump 2018).

Struggles for Recognition from Nation-States

Looking particularly at the case of Germany where the biggest number of Alevi migrants reside, in this section I show that throughout the 2000s, a large part of Alevi organisations chaged the framing of Alevism merely as an element of Turkish folk and began re-defining themselves as unique faith organisations. Firstly, in search for recognition, Alevi activists[3] presented their movement to German authorities in opposition to Islamists as peaceful,

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[3] I borrow the word 'activist' from the social movement literature to define people working for a common cause—in this case for the recognition of Alevism in the diaspora. I use the term 'leading activists' as those having high levels of seniority in local, regional or national level organisations.

egalitarian and modern. For instance, when German President Johannes Rau met with NGOs in Berlin immediately after the 9/11 attacks, the then president of Berlin AAKM, emphasised that they were totally opposed to terrorism. On 9 January 2002, a leading activist of AABF, also met with Rau and presented him with a detailed file of AABF activities (Alevilerin Sesi 2002a, p. 11).

Secondly, some activists became deeply involved in newly established inter-faith groups, collaborating primarily with Christian groups—which are the dominant religious authorities in Germany—to fight against Islamist radicalisation. For example, AABF attended various initiatives organised by the Catholic Church for inter-faith dialogue.[4] Through this relationship, the Catholic Church allowed AABF to distribute *ashura*[5] in front of Cologne Cathedral in the centre of the city (Alevilerin Sesi 2002b, p. 35). Berlin AAKM started working with the Catholic Academy[6] right after 9/11; AABF later attended the symposium 'Interfaith Dialogue in Europe' organised by the Ministry of Interior at the University of Cologne (Alevilerin Sesi 2002c, p. 27). As well, local Alevi cultural centres (AKMs) often participated in inter-faith open days along with Jewish, Christian, Orthodox, Protestant and Buddhist communities (Alevilerin Sesi 2002c, p. 28; Alevilerin Sesi 2004, p. 64; Peucker & Akbarzadeh 2014, p. 108).[7] In all these activities, Alevism's peaceful approach was emphasised.

Thirdly, leading activists of AABF and of some large local organisations began to present Alevism publicly as a distinct religion, separate from Islam. Recognition as a distinct religion would enable Alevis in Germany to obtain social support but also legal and financial assistance for their institutionalisation (Sökefeld 2008, p. 189). The German constitution guarantees the collective freedom of religion through self-management of religious organisations (see Art. 136-141). Article 137.3 notes that 'religious societies shall regulate and administer their affairs independently within the limits of the law'. Article 141 also states: 'to the extent that a need exists for religious services […] in the army, in hospitals, in

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[4] Islamic radicalisation is undoubtedly dangerous for Alevis, as its results can be seen in previous massacres committed by the then radical Islamists. Gazi (1995), Sivas (1993), Çorum (1980), Maraş (1978) and Dersim (1937) massacres targeting Alevis are only the ones committed in the history of Turkish Republic. Many others were committed in the Ottoman Empire.

[5] *Ashura* is a special dish cooked when the period of Muharram fasting terminates.

[6] In German: Katholische Akademie zu Berlin.

[7] A number of these events were attended by Hamburg AKM (Alevilerin Sesi 2002c, p. 28) and Aschaffenburg AKM (Alevilerin Sesi 2004, p. 64).

prisons, or in other public institutions, religious societies shall be permitted to provide them, but without compulsion of any kind.' In Germany, religious organisations can be established as a company under corporate law or as a registered voluntary organisation, *eingetragener Verein* (e.V.). The statute of *Körperschaft des öffentlichen Rechts* (corporate body under public law) allows organisations to collect contributions (often called a church tax) to provide religious education in state schools and to be represented in media consulting committees. This status can only be obtained if the organisation can give assurance of its permanency (through the size of its membership and the length of time it has been operating). To achieve this, Alevi leaders would need to sustain community development and represent Alevism as a unique religion.

To this end, Alevi activists framed Alevism in the 2000s by emphasising its divergence from Islam in policy circles in Germany (Gürcan 2015) and through their participation in the preparation of European Accession Reports for Turkey's membership in the European Union. The turning point came at a conference in Cologne on 23 October 2004, when activists from AABF and AABK met to evaluate the latest EU Accession report for Turkey. In that meeting, they opposed the definition of Alevis as 'non-Sunni Muslim minorities', arguing that the definition had been formulated under diplomatic pressure from the then Turkish Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül. Turgut Öker (who was then also president of AABF) and Ali Doğan (the then legal consultant for AABF) sent a letter to the European Parliament on 11 November 2004 stating that such a definition (Muslim minority) would not be acceptable to them. The Council of the EU agreed to their request and referred to them as Alevis (a distinct group) in their recommendations for Turkey (Alevilerin Sesi 2005, p. 24).

At the same time, activists around the country started applying for the right to conduct religious courses on Alevism at state schools. In 2000-01, AABF submitted an official request to the states of Baden-Württemberg (11 March 2000), Hessen (17 March 2000), Berlin (6 May 2000), Bayern (19 September 2000) and North Rhine-Westphalia, NRW (20 June 2001) (Kaplan 2009, p. 241). In late 2000, AABF organised a meeting with teachers and the AABF activist in charge of teaching, presented the draft curriculum that they planned to use (Alevilerin Sesi 2000, p. 33). In Berlin, religious classes on Alevism were accepted for the 2002-teaching year. In December 2001 state representatives from NRW, Hessen, Baden-Württemberg and Bayern requested two expert opinion reports on Alevism and AABF's capacity to supervise its teaching. Prof. Ursula Spulger-Stegemann from the University of

Marburg and Prof. Stefan Muckel from the University of Cologne prepared these reports and presented them in July 2004. They concluded that Alevism is a religion in its own right, that it can be taught in schools, and that AABF is a religious institution as per the German Constitution 7.3. clause (Kaplan 2009, p. 241; Spuler-Stegemann 2003).

Subsequently, courses on Alevism were initiated in Berlin (2002), Hamburg (2004), Baden-Württemberg (2006), NRW and Bavaria (2008). These are optional courses that have to be taught and graded in German. The curriculum was prepared from input from two conferences organised in November 2005 and March 2007 as well as consultation with local AKM board members, school teachers and *dede*s.[8] The final curriculum was approved on 29 September 2007 at the AABF General Council. In 2008, there were 530 students taking courses in state schools in Germany (Kaplan 2009, p. 249). With the help of widespread promotion by AABF and growing requests by parents, by 2014 this number had almost tripled to 1490 students, with 65 teachers in 120 schools in nine states.[9] In 2016, it was estimated that around 2000 students were enrolled in these courses.[10] A Department of Alevism was also established at Hamburg University's Academy of World Religions in 2015 to provide teachers with a stronger theological grounding.

In addition to introducing religious courses in schools, AABF worked on recognition of Alevism in the 2011 census, so that the Alevi population could be counted and their presence could be reflected in diversity policies.[11] AABF and Berlin AAKM also worked on acquiring separate areas in cemeteries for Alevis as adherents of a distinct religion. On 13 December 2001, Berlin AAKM board members successfully applied for such permission based on paragraph 3.2 of Berlin state cemetery legislation, which gives religious institutions the right to manage their own cemetery[12] (Alevilerin Sesi 2002f). In 2002, Cologne Alevi

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[8] Traditionally *dede*s are socio-religious / community leaders who lead *cem*s, which are community gatherings where problems are discussed and resolved and where the community comes together and transcends through various rituals such as music and *semah* (transcendental dance). *Dede*s are known to have wisdom and have designated *talip*s (students in Alevi path).

[9] Ha-ber.com. 30 September 2014. '*Almanya'da Alevilik dersleri yayılıyor*' [In Germany, courses of Alevism are spreading out]. Available at: http://goo.gl/dNY4HW [Latest date of access: 8 December 2017].

[10] CNNTurk. 2 May 2016. '*Almanlar da Alevilik dersi alıyor*' [Germans are also taking Alevi courses]. Available at: goo.gl/eNNNu3 [Latest date of access 2 September 2018].

[11] See BDAJ. 2010. *Zensus 2011*, [cited 22 June 2017]. Available from http://www.bdaj.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=224:zensus- 2011&catid=61:aktuelles.

[12] In German: Beleihung mit dem hoheitlichen Bestattungsrecht.

Bektasi Cultural Centre was granted the same right to manage their own cemetery in Westfriedhof. All these developments paved the way for the Alevi diaspora in Germany to be recognised by the state as a religious institution.

Alevi activists signed an Equality of Rights Agreement with Hamburg (November 2012), a preliminary contract with the government of Lower Saxony (October 2013) and an agreement with the Bremen state government (October 2014). All of these recognise AABF as the official representative of Alevis in their state and Alevism as a distinct religion. Equality of Rights Agreements grant Alevis the right to celebrate religious holidays, to educate clerics, to open childcare centres and schools, to found Chairs in Alevism studies in universities, to participate in media consultation committees, and to have the same public recognition as Christians and Jews. The agreements were signed with state governments by the leaders of the Alevi movement in Germany identifying Alevism as a distinct religion in its own right.

Construction of the Alevi Diaspora as a Congregation

In line with the efforts of the leaders of the Alevi movement to gain official recognition, growing emphasis was given in local Alevi organisations in the 2000s in Germany. In this section, I argue that these efforts in Germany constituted *cemaatleşme* (congregation) that is a re-shaping of the Alevi movement as a religious/faith-based congregation in itself. I view *cemaatleşme* as activists' efforts to represent the Alevi diaspora as having a common identity, despite their acknowledgment of internal differences, under the leadership of organisational Alevi leaders.

Cemaatleşme was evident in the following developments. Firstly, increasing numbers of organisations changed their names from Alevi Cultural Centres (AKMs) to Alevi Communities (*Gemeinde* in German). Their activities included weekly *sohbet* (conversation about Alevi ethics) gatherings and their spaces were re-defined as *cemevi*s (places of worship) rather than *dernek* (organisation). For instance, in 2009, Berlin AAKM changed its name to Berlin Alevi Toplumu (BAT) [Berlin Alevi Community] in line with AABF's intention to apply for recognition as a religious institution (*Körperschaft des öffentlichen Rechts*). The following quote from *Alevilerin* Sesi—AABF's main publication—explains how important these name changes were for the movement:

'According to the [recent] decision, no organisation in Germany except AABF can use the two words *Alevitische* (Alevi) and *Gemeinde* (community) together. As such, it is established that AABF is the top establishment of the Alevi institutionalisation. The organisation founded by CEM Foundation former European coordinator Alişan Hızlı, *Vereinigung der Alevitischen Gemeinden in Deutschland e.V.* (Union of Alevi Communities in Germany) now has to change its name, according to Wuppertal state court's decision. AABF board member and legal consultant Eser Polat [said]: According to this decision, the name of *Alevitische Gemeinde*, in other words the Alevi community, is identified with AABF even by courts. This means that the Alevi community means AABF, and AABF means the Alevi community' (Alevilerin Sesi 2009b, p. 7).

This name change from 'cultural organisation' to 'community' is of crucial importance. When the federation was established in Germany in 1994, heated discussions prevailed about its name. The leading activists then had vehemently opposed the name *Almanya Alevi Cemaatleri Federasyonu* (Federation of Alevi Communities in Germany), which had been proposed by the traditionalist *dede*s, arguing that they were not a *cemaat* (congregation). This was because *cemaat* in Turkey referred to a religious organisation. One decade later, when they sought for recognition from the German state in the form of a religious organisation (*Körperschaft des öffentlichen Rechts*, which would confer important benefits), the same activists began to claim that they were the representatives of the Alevi *cemaat* in Germany.

Secondly, the way organisations were institutionalised was also changing. At the national level, AABF had a faith council composed of several *dede*s, one of whom was president. On 12 April 2003, the faith council changed its rules of association so that its membership would represent each local AKM. The importance of the role of the AABF Faith Council in the movement grew: a section of *Alevilerin Sesi* magazine was dedicated to explaining their activities and describing how 'correct' Alevi conduct should be. At the local level, the larger organisations established their own faith councils, constituted on the same model as that of AABF. In Cologne AKM, for instance, the rules governing the organisation were changed in 2006 to give the faith council an official role (Alevilerin Sesi 2006a, p. 56). Further, AABF suggested all local AKMs to appoint a *dede* and create a position for him in their faith council (*inanç kadrosu*). Accordingly, *dede*s working for particular AKMs should become members of that AKM and at least one *dede* should become a member of the

administrative board and should represent their AKMs on the AABF Faith Council.
Moreover, *dede*s should be appointed by AKMs through an agreement of service (*hizmet anlaşması*), should conduct annual religious services, should work in line with the decisions and suggestions of the AABF Faith Council, should participate in *dede-ana* training programs[13] organised by the AABF Faith Council, should give service in inter-religious matters, such as inter-religious marriages, inter-religious funerals, inter-religious ceremonies and prayers, and in presenting Alevi conduct on TV and radio, should not favour their own *ocak* (hearth/caste), but should consider all Alevis equally (Kaplan 2009, pp. 234-239).

Thirdly, it was argued that matters of Alevi conduct (in relation, for example, to funerals, *semah* and *cem* rituals) needed to be standardised so that religious services would be the same throughout the country. According to Cafer Kaplan, the president of the AABF Faith Council (2009-2015):

> 'To overcome the struggles that we are facing, we need to put forward more regular worship/praying (*ibadet*) forms in the following process. For instance, as the Faith Council, we need to prepare a *cem* and *erkan* (conduct) file, so that all *dede*s conduct their work in the organisations in the same system. […] We will call all of our organisations at the earliest possible time and ask 'do you have a *dede*?' After making our list, we will look at the number we have, and if we have enough numbers, we will introduce this criterion. I mean if [the *dede*] is from *dede* descent, but is not affiliated with any organisation, I believe it is not right for organisations to call on that *dede*. If we want to organise and grow our institution at this time, a *dede* needs to belong to an institution and needs to be led by an institution. Otherwise, if everyone does their work on their own, this disorder would continue. […] When all *dede*s are trained in the system, [for instance] if I were unable to attend to an organisation's *cem* and another *dede* goes in my place, it would be relieving for us to know that he will conduct the *cem* in the same system' (Alevilerin Sesi 2006b, pp. 54-56).

In contrast to the existing diversity of practices among *dede*s (Langer 2008, p. 96), standardisation aimed to order and re-shape the Alevi diaspora in Germany as a single religious community.

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[13] *Ana* is the female counterpart of *dede*.

The first step in standardising Alevi conduct was the introduction of *dede-ana* training programs. Such training, based on the 'project of turning to the essence [of Alevism]', began in 2002, when the AABF faith council organised a training seminar in Lauterbach for 40 participants on subjects such as 'what is Islam?' and 'what is the approach to Islam in the Alevi faith?' (Alevilerin Sesi 2002e, pp. 20-21). The aim was 'to reduce the differences between *dede*s because of their distinct geographical origins and to provide a regular and systematic service for all AKMs' (Alevilerin Sesi 2002d, p. 23). The AABF Faith Council, with growing support from the administrative board, organised a number of seminars thereafter (Alevilerin Sesi 2002d, p. 23). On 29 April 2006, a *dede-ana* training program was accepted by the Faith Council. All participants in the program would receive an agreement of service (*hizmet anlaşması*), which gave them an official affiliation with AABF. It was also suggested that 'if *dede*s and *ana*s could give their services according to a calendar for religious services (*inanç hizmetleri takvimi*), that would make Alevi cultural centres a real faith institution' (Alevilerin Sesi 2006c, p. 52). Moreover, *dede*s and *ana*s were advised 'to form an Alevi code of conduct and take an active role in interfaith dialogues' (Alevilerin Sesi 2006c, p. 52). From 2006, *dede-ana* training programs had the objective of 'training *dede*s and *ana*s who would combine the Alevi values with an institutional identity' (Alevilerin Sesi 2009c, pp. 8-9) for all AKMs in Germany within five years (Alevilerin Sesi 2006c, p. 52). Turgut Öker, the former president of AABF and current president of AABK, argued that these trainings were crucial for the institutional transformation of Alevism as a religious order like that of Christians or Muslims:

> 'I predict that the institutionalisation process will be on the agenda within the next ten years. Institutionalisation does not only mean all institutions coming and working together. Institutionalisation also means putting forward projects that will cover decades and even hundreds of years. In this respect, in the coming period, we will make important openings in terms of faith. In the coming period, we will work to create a serious faith institution that meets the faith needs of the Alevi community, organised within our federation. We will work on reducing the local differences in faith—on the condition of preserving its richness—to the minimum level. This work of ours will not be homogenisation; on the contrary, it will enable us to strengthen the impulse to act together. As the first step in this work, *dede-ana* training programs will continue in the coming period too. I believe that within the next ten years, we will have an order in

which *dedes* and *ana*s, like priests and *imam*s [Islamic religious leaders], will also be trained through an education system' (Alevilerin Sesi 2009a, p. 15).

As this quote makes. clear, one of the most crucial objectives of the Alevi movement in the late 2000s in Germany became standardisation of rituals and of religious leader training

In addition to AABF's training programs, secondly, various opinion pieces published in *Alevilerin Sesi* magazine advised readers on how Alevi conduct should be. Hasan Kılavuz, the former head of the AABF Faith Council, provided detailed explanations of this conduct in his frequent writings in *Alevilerin Sesi*. The following account of how *semah* should be performed exemplifies the attempts at standardisation and re-creation of the Alevi religious community:

'They wear their folk dance clothing as *semah* clothing and go dancing in public. And none of the clothing used in any organisation matches that of other organisations. Everybody uses whatever they can get based on their means. […] Then what should be done? a) The most important task belongs to Alevi organisations. The managers of organisations need to educate member parents and young people through seminars; b) The visual and written media of Alevis should explain these issues in open forums, panel discussions and interviews; c) *Alevilerin Sesi* should inform its readers in every issue in a serious and informative manner; d) the AABF Faith Council should definitely explain this issue and advise people; e) All the federations of AABK should take a common decision that the young people turning [performing] *semah* in our organisations should wear one type of clothing, which would have the same colour and symbols, and this should continue on a long-term basis. This clothing should be simple and should have Alevi faith figures on it; f) The clothing should be professionally designed' (Alevilerin Sesi 2007, pp. 44-45).

This quote suggests that *semah*, which was traditionally a spontaneous and instinctive practice, should be replaced by a choreographed performance that would follow the same stylistic rules throughout Germany.

Thirdly, standardisation of Alevi conduct included the introduction of an Alevi religious calendar. AABF and some local organisations have recently started using this

calendar to systematise the timing of annual activities.[14] Foremost among these was the celebration of the birth of Imam Ali. Just as the birth of Prophet Mohammed is celebrated among Sunnis in *Kutlu Doğum Haftası* (Holy Birth Week) activities, the Alevi calendar throughout the 2000s identified the birthday of Imam Ali as 21 March, which coincides with the celebrations of Nowruz.[15] All these changes illustrate the Alevi movement's gradual transformation into a religious movement at the community level. Although there were widespread discussions and conflicts over the boundaries of Alevism and the rituals, some activists aimed to institutionalise Alevism on a transnational scale, as will be shown below.

Institutionalisation of the World Alevi Union

As framing contests around the definition of Alevism continued, the Alevi movement abroad in the 2010s began to evolve into a transnational movement with a clear aim of institutionalising Alevism and bringing all Alevis around the world under one umbrella. In this section, I describe the attempts by activists to develop and impose a centralised structure on Alevism under a system of transnational governance and a universally shared understanding of Alevism.

The idea of organising Alevis and managing Alevism at a supra-national level emerged in the early 2010s as a higher ambition of leading activists in Europe. The *dede*s of the AABF Faith Council first planned to establish a European Alevi Faith Council. On 23 April 2011, *dede*s and *ana*s from various European countries met in Cologne for the first time and decided to develop an integrated framework for Alevi conduct. To this end, they decided to 'centralise the decision making', to work on codes of conduct for *cem*, funerals, engagements and circumcision, to translate the prayers into the languages of the countries in which Alevi institutions are located.[16] In their second meeting in 2011, they worked to frame their statutes and agreed that the faith-related decisions of the Faith Council in Europe should

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[14] The calendar points out the following dates as specifically important days of the year. I take the example of 2014 religious calendar. 21 March: Imam Ali' Birth and Newroz; 11-13 February: Hızır Fast; 5-6 May: Hıdırellez; 15-16 August: Hacı Bektaş commemoration activities; 4 October: Festival of the Sacrifice; 10 October: Imam Hussain's Death; 25 October: First day of Muharrem Fasting; 6 November: Ashura Day. See for more details: http://www.Aabf-Inanc-Kurumu.com/.

[15] See *Alevitischer Kalender* for further information. Available at: http://alevi.com/de/alevitentum/alevitischer-kalender/ [Latest date of access: 8 December 2017].

[16] See Federation of Alevi Unions in Austria. 14 July 2011. '"Avrupa Alevi İnanç Kurulu" oluşturuluyor!' ['Alevi Faith Council in Europe' is being established!]. Available at: http://goo.gl/hRuALh [Latest date of access: 8 December 2017].

be binding for all AKMs in Europe (Alevilerin Sesi 2011, p. 58).

In fact, as early as 2006, Turgut Öker, the president of AABK (the Confederation of Alevi Unions in Europe), had stated that they were willing to establish a World Alevi Union (Alevilerin Sesi 2006d, p. 58). In early 2010, AABK established a commission specifically tasked to develop and promote institutionalisation (Koşulu 2013, p. 271). The former president of the Federation of Alevi Unions in France (FUAF), Durak Arslan, was elected as president of this new commission. After his appointment, Arslan carried out an inquiry into Alevi organisations throughout the world and started working to bring them together. He began by calling a meeting titled *Dergahta Birlik* (Union in the Lodge), which was held on 10-11 September 2011 in Hacıbektaş, Turkey, where he explained his plans for this new structure of Alevism to around 600 activists from all around the world. He called this process *Yeni Alevi Yapılanması* (YAY) [New Alevi Institutionalisation] and formulated a *Küresel Alevi Birliği* (KALB) [Global Alevi Union].

The proposed *Küresel Alevi Birliği* (KALB) had a clear structure with faith as its central element. KALB is comprised of seven *musahip kurum* (companion institutions), a term coined by Durak Arslan.[17] These would have members from all countries with a significant Alevi population, such as Turkey, the Balkans, the Middle East, Germany, France, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Belgium, Northern Cyprus, Austria, Switzerland, Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Italy, Australia, the USA and Canada. In Arslan's words, this structure would reflect 'a wide community on which the sun never sets'.[18] It was envisaged that the project would bring together at least 500 Alevi organisations and 'would make the Alevi movement an important lobbying power in the world [policy] arena' (Alevilerin Sesi 2009b, pp. 10-11).

According to the model, seven different institutions would work together but the central role would be played by *Alevi İnanç Merkezi* (ALIM) [Alevi Faith Centre], which is located in Serçeşme, Turkey. The other institutions were the Alevi Media Union (ALMED), Alevi Artists' Union (ALSAN), Alevi Institute (ALEN), Alevi Federations Union (ALFEB),

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[17] Note that the concept of *musahip* refers to companion families who decide to enter the Alevi path together and to look after each other throughout their life. These families ought to support each other morally and financially at all times.
[18] See Durak Arslan's presentation about YAY at http://goo.gl/55Ub8n [Latest date of access: 8 December 2017].

Alevi Employers Union (ALIŞ) and Alevi Jurists Union (ALHUK).[19] This structure would enable the members to enhance financial resources, produce knowledge in arts, academia and media circles and claim their communal rights in jurisdictions across the world.

Although the new institutionalisation has been well received, it has also attracted a number of criticisms. Firstly, reflecting the broken relationship between *talip*s (students in the Alevi path) and *dede*s (socio-religious leaders), some argued that in this model *dede*s would acquire too much power, since they would be at the centre of the new institutionalisation.[20] Secondly, some organisations, such as CEM Foundation in Turkey that is known to have right-wing nationalist tendencies, condemned the framing of Alevism in this model, arguing that Alevism should be positioned as the true form of Islam. As could be expected, bringing all organisations together under one umbrella proved to be a difficult task as they all had different views over the definition of Alevism. Thirdly, it was claimed that Serçeşme (the suggested centre for Alevi institutionalisation) was not the only place of faith, pointing out that there were a number of *ocak*s (hearth/caste) such as Dede Garkın, Baba Mansur, Avuçan, Sultan Sahak (located in Iran and Iraq), Haydari and Klezi (led by Arab Alevis). It was argued that locating Serçeşme as the main centre of a transnational religion would mitigate against the foundation of a truly global community. Finally, it was also suggested that this institutionalisation would exacerbate exclusion and make Alevis more isolated in their countries.

There have also been some reactions to the growing emphasis on religious and faith-related matters. The very recent workshop organised by the Alevi Bektasi Federation (ABF) on 9-11 March 2018 in Edremit, Turkey indicated that the objectives of the Alevi World Union was mostly to create a lobbying force in the world through transnational networks with Alevis around the world. The ABF President, Muhittin Yıldız, made a public speech at the end of the 3-day workshop stating that the idea of creating a World Alevi Union was originally conceived by AABK and that ABF later fully supported it. Yıldız said that following a number of debates conducted in the workshop, the participants thought of

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[19] Respectively, in Turkish, these are *Alevi Medya Birliği* (ALMED), Alevi Sanatçılar Birliği (ALSAN), *Alevi Enstitüsü* (ALEN), *Alevi Federasyonlar Birliği* (AKFEB), *Alevi İşverenler Birliği* (ALIŞ) and *Alevi Hukukçular Birliği* (ALHUK).

[20] Traditonally *dede*s (socio religious leaders) guide *talip*s (students), but this relationship is not a hierarchal one. *Dede*s and *talip*s are of equal status as they are dependent on each other.

creating unions among Alevi authors, artists, lawyers, businesspeople, *pir*s (spiritual guides), women and youth. These unions were thought to be organised under a delegation of Alevis who will constitute an assembly of around 120 members. The model that he described gave much less emphasis on the idea of a transnational faith centre but more on the governance mechanisms. He also insisted that the structure was open to discussion and that there was no binding decisions at this initial stage. Clearly, construction of a transnational religion needed time for reflection among its members.

Conclusion

The findings that are presented in this article suggest that the changing political landscape, social structures in the host and home countries and activists' own agency shaped the Alevi diaspora movement. The changes in Germany—where most of the diaspora members reside—had also important ramifications for Alevis in Turkey through continuing transnational interactions between the leading activists. While institutionalising Alevism at a transnational level, members sought to systematise Alevism through standardised and centralised procedures. It is difficult to assess how the Alevi communities will be affected by the changes depicted in this study (such as the transformation of the training system between *ana*s/*dede*s and *talip*s from one based on common lineage towards another that is based on common membership to Alevi organisations; transformation of *cem* gatherings and *semah* rituals around aesthetic concerns; transformation of participants in these rituals towards becoming spectators; standardisation of the Alevi conduct through the establishment of Faith Councils, education in schools, training programs for community leaders in organisations, etc.) in the long term. Similarly, it is unclear how the changes of the movement's characteristics will reconstruct Alevism itself. These changes may result in the reconfiguration of the Alevi community structure and may cause the diverse views and practices to disappear. Or, the ongoing framing contests over Alevism may lead to even more novel ways of defining it. What this study does show though is that the properties of Alevism will not stay within contained spaces (such as particular traditions or institutions), but will constantly evolve according to the circumstances in which it is situated as well as members' responses to them. As the World Alevi Union continues to be established, it would be fruitful to pursue further research on how the institutionalised definitions around Alevism at a transnational level will re-shape the everyday practices in particular localities.

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