

Inclusive Victimhood: Social Identity and the Politicization of Collective Trauma Among Turkey's Alevi in Western Europe

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Using the social identity perspective, this study examines how a collective trauma is used in creating a coherent and unifying Alevi identity and a sense of shared victimhood. The focus is on the Sivas Massacre in 1993 in which the hotel Madimak in the Turkish city of Sivas was set on fire and 37 Alevi intellectuals died in the flames. This article focuses on the Confederation of European Alevi Unions because it is not so much Alevi in Turkey but, rather, those in Europe that try to establish a common Alevi identity and to address the oppression and discrimination of Alevi in Turkey. However, Alevi organizations face a serious challenge when it comes to unification and unity because the diversity among the Alevi is substantial and there is a lack of consensus about what it means to be an Alevi. This article shows how narratives of the massacre function as political capital in drawing group boundaries, defining intergroup relationships, and creating a sense of inclusive victimhood with other aggrieved and oppressed groups. The analysis indicates that the consequences of shared victimhood do not have to be violent and destructive, but might also lead to increased solidarity.

This article examines how a collective trauma is construed and used in creating a coherent and unifying group identity and a sense of inclusive victimhood. The focus is on the Sivas Massacre (hereafter *Madimak*) in

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1993 in which the Madımak hotel in the Turkish city of Sivas was set on fire and 37 Alevi intellectuals died in the flames. We examine how the narrative of the massacre functions as political capital in creating a shared moral identity—an identity based on moral values and innocent victimhood (Hardy & Carlo, 2005). Ethnic and national narratives provide accounts of the group's origin, its nature, and its relationship to others. These narratives are analyzed as the changing result of continuous “group-making projects” by activists and organizations (e.g., Brubaker, 2004). Specifically, the social identity perspective developed in social psychology (Turner & Reynolds, 2001) argues that a shared identity forms the psychological basis for mobilization and collective action (Reicher & Hopkins, 2001).

We adopt the social identity perspective for examining how the largest Alevi organization in Europe, the Confederation of European Alevi Unions (Avrupa Alevi Birlikleri Konfederasyonu [AABK]), construes and uses the collective trauma of Madımak to define Alevi identity and an inclusive victimhood. Focusing on the group understandings of Alevi activists in Europe is interesting for two reasons. First, it is not so much Alevis in Turkey but, rather, those in Europe that try to establish a common Alevi identity and to increase the public visibility of Alevism (S. Şahin, 2005). The AABK predominantly focuses on the oppression and discrimination of Alevis in Turkey. They are transnational and active, for example, by establishing religious Cem Houses and their satellite TV station, YOL TV. Second, Alevi organizations face a serious challenge when it comes to unification and unity. The diversity among the Alevis is substantial and there is a clear lack of consensus about what it means to be an Alevi (Sökefeld, 2008). The internal diversity has led to various movements, which make the establishment of a common Alevi identity and a sense of commitment among the different subgroups a continuous challenge for Alevi leaders and organizations that seek to improve the situation of Alevis in Turkey. Furthermore, even when Alevis succeed in developing a shared identity, they remain, numerically, a minority group that is politically relatively powerless. In Turkey, however, they are not the only minority group that faces oppression. A sense of shared victimhood can form a basis for mobilizing these other groups.

SOCIOPOLITICAL HISTORY

Alevism, historically *Kızılbaşlık* (literally, Redhead), refers to a heterodox, syncretic faith with a mix of mystical Sufi Islam, polytheist beliefs of Mesopotamia and Central Asia, and Shi'ite Islam (Moosa, 1988). Most Alevi live in Anatolia, Turkey, but Alevism is spread across Asia Minor

and the Balkans, and there are small communities with a similar faith in Iraq and Iran (Kehl-Bodrogi, 1988). Alevi are believed to be descendants of rebellious tribal groups religiously affiliated to the Safavids (Van Bruinessen, 1996). There is no agreement on the number of Alevi, but it is estimated that they form around 15% of Turkey's population (Dressler, 2008). Alevi include Turkish, Kurdish, Zazaki, and Arabic speakers. They have an overwhelming love for Ali—Mohammed's cousin and son-in-law—and believe that he embodies mystical knowledge. The Alevi religious ceremony *Cem* is led by a *Dede*, who is a member of a hereditary priestly caste. During the ceremony, religious poems are sung, and men and women perform ritual dances (*Semah*).

Under the Ottoman rule, Alevi were defined as heretics, and they were persecuted and faced official *fatwas* ordering their murder and that of other heretic groups. Thousands of Alevi were massacred in the 16th century, and Alevi found refuge in the isolated highland to escape further atrocities (Van Bruinessen, 2007). In the 19th century, the Ottomans adopted an assimilation policy. Closing Alevi lodges and building mosques and appointing Imams in Alevi villages were some of the elements of this policy. The secularism of the republican period in the 20th century provided Alevi with equal citizenship rights. Except for the Dersim massacre in 1937 through 1938, Alevi could live relatively peacefully in the first 50 years of the republican period. Alevi welcomed Ataturk's secularist policies in the hope that it would end their persecution and marginalization. However, the discrimination of Alevi has continued in the republican period and takes different forms and relates to different spheres of life.

First, increased migration to urban settings during the 1960s and 1970s brought Alevi into direct contact with the Sunni Muslim majority. These contacts were not always without conflicts, and sometimes led to violent confrontations. Examples are the attacks of the extreme right National Action Party and Islamic fundamentalists on Alevi in the cities of Maraş (in 1978), Çorum (in 1980; Jongerden, 2003), and Sivas (in 1993); and attacks by the police in the Gazi district of Istanbul in 1995 (Van Bruinessen, 1996).

The massacre of 37 artists, writers, and musicians gathered in the hotel Madımak in the central Anatolian city of Sivas is the turning point in contemporary Alevi politics. These people were gathered for a festival commemorating Pir Sultan Abdal, a 16th-century Alevi poet and rebel. The attack took place on July 2, 1993 when, after the Friday's prayer, a mob of some 20,000 Sunni fundamentalists surrounded the hotel. They shouted "Death to the infidel!" They chanted anti-Alevi and pro-sharia slogans and threatened to lynch the hotel guests. Eventually, the hotel was set on fire. The assembled police did nothing to intervene, and the mayor of the

city took the side of the crowd (Van Bruinessen, 2007). The massacre had a great impact on Alevis. They organized large demonstrations in major Turkish cities, and it led to an increase in the number of associations and the foundation of new movements, such as the Cem Foundation.

Second, Alevis continue to face legal discrimination and a policy of assimilation. On the one hand, because of their secular tendencies, the Turkish state, as the “guarantor of secularism,” tends to see the Alevis as its strategic ally in the selective oppression of other groups. On the other hand, the status of Alevi worship places and their religious leaders are not officially recognized by the states Directorate of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*) that provides support and services only to Sunni Islam, which is the largest and more orthodox version of the religion. In addition, historical Alevi lodges are taken over by the state; infrastructure improvements in Alevi villages are made conditional on acceptance of the construction of mosques; and, in primary and secondary schools, Alevi children must take religious courses that teach Sunni Islam (Jongerden, 2003). Alevis face this assimilation policy due to the adoption of the Sunni-orthodox and nationalist unity ideology of *Turkish-Islamic synthesis*. As a consequence of this synthesis, and as argued by Zeidan (1999), “anti-Alevi Sunni Sufi orders, such as the Naqshbandi, Süleymanci, and Nurcu became more visible, and government propaganda stated that Alevis were actually Sunnis with some divergent customs, negating the uniqueness of Alevism and embarking on a plan of ‘Sunnification’” (p. 77).

Third, Alevis face diverse forms of discrimination and prejudice in everyday life. In a recent research report, it was concluded that Alevis have to hide their identity, experience harassment and insult on a regular basis, and are discriminated on the labor and housing markets (Toprak, 2009). In another recent report, supported by the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights, three out of four Alevis indicated that, in the last year, they had faced discrimination at least once in, for example, housing, on the streets, and in finding a job (Türker, 2010).

INTERNAL DIVERSITY

In the last 20 years, Alevis have become increasingly visible in Turkish public life. They have established associations, foundations, and prayer houses; held conferences; and published magazines and books (Vorhoff, 2003). However, they have not succeeded in creating a unified Alevi movement to address and challenge the different forms of oppression that they face. One reason is the political situation in Turkey, which makes it difficult to be politically active and which increases the importance of the Alevi

diaspora in Europe. Another reason is the wide variety of beliefs and practices among those who call themselves Alevi. Alevi identity is defined in linguistic, cultural, political, and religious terms (Shindeldecker, 2001). Some people argue that Alevi identity is a cultural lifestyle that has its roots in pre-Islamic Anatolia and Mesopotamia. Others claim that Alevi identity is more of a political orientation in which secularism and democracy are central, as well as a history of rebellion and opposition toward the Turkish state. Still others argue that Alevi is the Turkish—or Kurdish—interpretation of Islam and thereby different from the Sunni belief that would represent the Arabic interpretation of Islam. Thus, in Turkey as well as within Alevi communities in Western Europe, there is a continuing and intense debate on the most appropriate way to define Alevi identity (Van Bruinessen, 1996). Some of these interpretations of Alevi identity gain prominence in relation to the Turkish state, others in relation to the Sunni majority, and still others in relation to Western audiences and their discourses of human rights.

This diversity in interpretations and audiences has implications for the unity of the Alevis and the political claims that they can make. For example, those who define Alevism as an Islamic faith demand religious support from the Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet), whereas those who define Alevism outside of Islam demand the abolishment of the Diyanet altogether. According to Massicard (2007), plurality and diversity of beliefs and ideologies is the distinguishing feature of Alevis. Their lack of unity is a hindrance for the social and political claims that Alevis can make. It is difficult to unite and mobilize people and to make political claims when there is no shared sense of *us* (Reicher & Hopkins, 2001). In addition, when Alevis manage to be united, they still are a numerical minority group in Turkey facing a nation state that, according to them, is insufficiently democratic and that is ruled by a party that has a Sunni Islamic agenda.

DIASPORA

Alevis arrived in Europe in the early 1960s as part of the “guest-worker” policy of European countries such as Germany, Austria, and the Netherlands. In addition, Alevis had to flee to Europe, first in the aftermath of 1980 military coup due to their overrepresentation in Turkish leftist movements, and then in the early 1990s as a result of forced migration policy of the Turkish state in Kurdish provinces. As a result, the proportion of Alevis among Turkish immigrants is larger than among the population in Turkey (Kaplan, 2001).

Alevi have been politically active in Europe since the late 1970s. At the beginning, they organized along lines of political ideologies (Massicard, 2007), and they did not use the name Alevi because of fears from Sunni Muslims (Sökefeld, 2008). In 1988, the Hamburg Alevi Cultural Group was established (Kaplan, 2001). In 1989, this group published the *Alevilik Bildirgesi* (Manifesto of Alevism), which was signed by a large number of Alevi and non-Alevi Turkish intellectuals, and was published in a daily newspaper in Turkey in 1990. This manifesto considerably increased the public visibility of Alevi (S. Şahin, 2005). In 1990, the Cultural Group transformed itself into an association under the name Alevi Culture Centre. This stimulated Alevi in other cities to establish similar associations. Within 3 years after the establishment of the first association, the number of associations increased to 44 (Kaplan, 2001).

The 1993 massacre at Madımak was a turning point for Alevi in Europe. They organized large demonstrations in major European cities such as Cologne, The Hague, and Brussels. More than 100 new Alevi associations were established throughout Europe in 1993 and 1994. Seventy-six of them were established in Germany, and the number of member associations of the German federation increased from 44 to 120 within 2 years after Madımak. In 2002, with the participation of other federations from different European countries, the AABK (Confederation of European Alevi Unions) was established. The AABK is based in Cologne and has organizations in all western and northern European countries. It controls 13 member federations and more than 250 associations throughout Europe. The AABK publishes a monthly magazine (*Alevilerin Sesi*), has a TV station, runs an Alevi Business Network, has a Council of Faith Affairs, has a youth and a female division, and has established a European Alevi Academy.

THE SOCIAL IDENTITY PERSPECTIVE

The social identity perspective includes social identity theory and self-categorization theory (Turner & Reynolds, 2001). The core argument of this perspective is that the subjective shift from a personal (“I”) to a social level of identification (“we”) underlies the behavioral shift from individual to group behavior. A social identity allows people to refer to themselves and other members of a group as *us*, making collective action possible. Social identities serve to unite and shape the actions of those who consider themselves members of a particular category or group. A shared sense of *us* transforms the relationship between people because they see each other as belonging to the same group, and they start to act on the basis of collective

understandings, as well as beliefs and norms that define who *we* are and what counts for *us*. Thus, a shared sense of *us* gives unity and direction and, therefore, is an important basis of social power. In contrast, disagreements or internal diversity about what a particular group identity means makes it more difficult to organize and mobilize people to act together for a particular cause. From the social identity perspective, it is critically important to understand how a shared sense of *us* is defined and the ways in which it directs collective action. There are three aspects involved here (see Reicher & Hopkins, 2001; Reicher, Hopkins, Levine, & Rath, 2005).

First, a strong distinction between one's own group and others can be made. Social identity research has shown that in a context of "us and them," the differences within one's own group become smaller. Thus, a comparison with another, clearly contrasting group is helpful in defining what characterizes *us* and in what ways *we* are different from *them* and thereby distinctive (Brewer, 1991). The basis on which this group distinction is made defines the nature of the group boundaries and who is included in the group. These group boundaries are important for who will act together. The wider the category boundaries are defined, the greater the size of the possible mobilization for making claims and changing the situation. This means that it is politically important to define a common denominator that is shared by as many Alevis as possible.

Second, drawing group boundaries does not in itself determine any particular course of action. Group distinctions are made for all kinds of reasons and do not necessarily imply moral claims or transnational political support to address oppression in the country of origin. Oppression implies a distinction between *us* and *them*, but also a particular intergroup relationship. What counts is not only how *they* and *we* differ, but also what *their* impact is on *us*. For example, when *they* oppress *us*, then *they* are the perpetrators, and *we* are the innocent victims who have the right to defend ourselves. Responsibilities and moral identities are defined by construing particular group relationships.

Functionalist approaches to intergroup relationships such as social identity theory (Turner & Reynolds, 2001), social dominance theory (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), and image theory (M. G. Alexander, Brewer, & Herrmann, 1999; M. G. Alexander, Brewer, & Livingston, 2005) share the idea that group understandings are shaped by the nature of the intergroup situation in which they are formed. Social identities depend on the kind of functional interdependence between the ingroup and specific outgroups. Furthermore, research has shown that victim beliefs and collective victimhood play an important role in sustaining and fueling conflicts between groups (e.g., Bar-Tal, Chernyak-Hai, Schori, & Gundar, 2009; Eyerman, 2004b; Lazar & Litvak-Hirsch, 2009; Muro, 2009). Stories about traumatic events are

powerful symbols and effective instruments for creating a sense of victimhood. A sense of being a victim

reminds group members of past violent acts by the rival and indicates that they could recur. The implication is that society members should mobilize in view of the threat, and should maybe even take violent action to prevent possible harm and avenge the harm already done. (Bar-Tal et al., 2009, p. 245)

Third, those who seek to mobilize people do not only have to construe a shared Alevi identity or an inclusive representation of victimhood, but also need to define themselves in ways that make them appear to represent the group identity (Reicher & Hopkins, 2001; Reicher et al., 2005). Leaders and organizations are influential when they exemplify the shared social identity: when their ideas, experiences, and circumstances are seen as the embodiment of who *we* are and what *we* want to be. This means that these leaders and organization must invoke a self-image of being “true Alevis.” This puts them in the position to speak for *us* and to lead *us*. In addition, Alevi organizations can try to enlarge their appeal by recognizing similarities with other groups that are victimized in Turkey, leading to a shared, inclusive category of victimhood (cf. Vollhardt, 2009). Inclusive representations of victimhood broaden the group of people that can be mobilized and thereby enlarges the potential political power. For this, these organizations should present themselves as exemplifying the oppression and victimization of minorities in Turkey. Trauma stories can be useful for construing the AABK as representing Alevi identity and the Alevis as the prototypical oppressed group in Turkey.

COLLECTIVE TRAUMA

According to J. C. Alexander (2004), collective trauma “occurs when members of a collective feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks on their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways” (p. 1). Trauma stories are animated, powerful, and tend to evoke victim beliefs that sustain the perception of vulnerability and threat with the related fear about the continuity of one’s group (Pettigrew, 2003). Victims of traumatic events tend to distrust other groups and can also experience feelings of rage and anger (Eidelson & Eidelson, 2003). Narratives about collective trauma that emphasize the innocence of *us* as victims are particularly useful in unifying and mobilizing people.

Appraisal theories of emotion (e.g., Frijda, 1986; Smith & Ellsworth, 1985; Weiner, 1982) conceptualize emotions as reflecting the specific ways

in which people make sense of and interpret particular situations. Emotions are also suggestive of people's readiness toward various forms of action: Emotions typically include action tendencies. Hence, appraisals trigger specific emotional experiences; and these experiences, in turn, promote certain behaviors. Victim beliefs can stir intense emotions and instigate offensive and violent reactions (Coleman, 2003). However, collective action does not have to be destructive, but may also be instrumental in attempts to achieve equality and positive social change or to prevent possible future harm (Bar-Tal et al., 2009; Simon & Klandermans, 2001).

The facts of traumatic events are seldom in dispute, but there are always different ways in which events can be presented and understood (McAdams, 1993; Somers, 1994). It is not the event *per se* but, rather, the cultural representation of it that turns it into a collective trauma. Thus, calling an event or a series of events "traumatic" requires interpretation (Aşık & Erdemir, 2010). Most people do not experience the traumatic event personally, but develop a sense of collective trauma through oral history, education, and the media. For example, it is not the personal experience of slavery but rather the collective representation of it as a cultural trauma that defines African American identity and can unite African Americans politically (Eyerman, 2004b). Collective trauma always involves a "meaning struggle"—a grappling with an event that involves identifying the "nature of the pain, the nature of the victim and the attribution of responsibility" (Eyerman, 2004a, p. 62).

In this struggle over meanings and interpretations, interest groups, organizations, and leaders play a key role. They are involved in defining the nature of the traumatic event, and they can use their interpretation as political capital in trying to unify and mobilize others (Ramanathapillai, 2006). These others are members of the ingroup, but may also include other victimized groups (Vollhardt, 2009). The narrative of collective trauma can be inclusive by stressing the similarities with other groups that have experienced oppression and atrocities. An inclusive representation of victimhood can give rise to empathy and supportive behavior toward other groups, but also enlarges the group of people that can be mobilized. Representations of trauma, which imply a particular "us and them" distinction, have the power to unify and mobilize Alevis, define similarities with other victimized groups, and create a moral ground for political claims. We examine this politicization of collective trauma and Alevi identity by the Confederation of European Alevi Unions (AABK).

METHOD: RESEARCH MATERIAL

Because we are interested in the identity narratives of the AABK, we examined their monthly magazine and press releases. We collected all 113

issues of the *Alevilerin Sesi* (Voice of Alevis) that appeared between January 2000 and May 2009, as well as all press releases (January 2003–January 2008) of the AABK. *Alevilerin Sesi*, the official publication of the AABK, is published in Germany and is distributed throughout Europe by member federations. The first issue was published in February 1994. In the first 7 years, Turkish was the only language used but, in 2001, pages in German were included; in 2008, pages in French were added. The editor maintains that there are around 6,000 subscribers to the magazine (personal communication, Fuat Ateş, February 6, 2010).

The thematic scope in AABK publications is broad and covers international and national news, activities of the local branches of the movement in Europe, Alevi teaching, and cultural activities. However, the main focus is on the situation in Turkey and, in particular, on the politics and policies of the Turkish government toward Alevis, the central claims of Alevis on the Turkish state, and the Madımak massacre. We built a data file of all the articles related to these topics and, in this article, focus on the political use of the construct, Madımak. For this, we examined the publications in terms of the main claims and arguments of the AABK in relation to the ways in which Alevi identity is defined. We treated the different articles as a single dataset and focused our analysis on the identity constructions. We have included extracts to illustrate the ways in which AABK defines Alevi identity in relation to the collective trauma of Madımak and for organizing and mobilizing Alevis and other minority groups in Turkey.

We also collected 104 press releases of the AABK because these are important for understanding the position that the AABK takes on current affairs. We also interviewed two movement leaders in the Netherlands and two in Germany. Extracts from other interviews—such as with Serdar Doğan, a survivor of Madımak—are taken from the written publications of the AABK. Furthermore, we have attended various (semi-)public events and meetings.

In addition, we collected material from an “alternative” Alevi voice—namely, the Cem Foundation. The Cem Foundation was established in 1995 and is more religiously oriented than other Alevi organizations. İzzettin Doğan, a Dede and professor of international relations, is the founder and the president of the foundation. Although the foundation does not have much support among Alevis, it receives substantial media coverage in Turkey because of Doğan. In addition, the government sees the foundation as representing Alevis and the negotiating partner for Alevi issues. The foundation has close ties with the Turkish state and does not define Alevis in terms of oppression and discrimination (Massicard, 2007). Rather, because of the ties with the Turkish state, Alevis is seen as the Turkish interpretation of Islam in which the Islamic faith is combined with

pre-Islamic beliefs. This combination would make Alevism intrinsically Turkish (Firat, 2005). As we show, within this understanding of Alevism, the Madımak massacre is interpreted quite differently.

FINDINGS

In this section, we first discuss the construed nature of the “us and them” distinction by focusing on a master difference and the historical continuity of evil and good. Subsequently, we examine the role of Madımak in the formation of a shared Alevi identity and the ways in which Madımak serves as a political source for mobilizing and organizing Alevi. Then, we examine the construction of inclusive victimhood, or “unity in pain,” and how Alevi identity is presented as embodying the fight against oppression and liberal values. Finally, we discuss how the alternative Alevi voice of the Cem Foundation interprets Madımak.

Us and Them: A Master Difference

A clear distinction with “the other” is a first and important strategy in trying to establish unity and a common identity. The differences within one’s own group become smaller and less important when the differences with another group are emphasized, particularly when a clear contrast or opposition is construed. For this, the basis on which the distinction is made is important. For example, by deploying the notion of historical continuity, an enduring and seemingly natural distinction can be made in which current actions of *us* and of *them* are defined as being rooted in group-specific traditions and cultures.

According to Sökefeld (2008), most statements of Alevi about their identity refer to the difference between Alevi and Sunni. He called this the “master difference” of Alevi identity, and cultural and religious traditions play an important role in this. This is also the case in the AABK publications. In these publications, the fact that Alevi, for example, do not visit mosques, but Cem House; do not fast in Ramadan but for 12 Imams; and do not *salaat*, but perform a ritual circular dance are all presented as evidence of the fundamental difference between Sunnis and Alevi.

In addition to these practices, a group difference in beliefs and moral character is consistently made in *Alevilerin Sesi*. The humanist and peace-loving nature of Alevism is presented in opposition to the violent character of Sunni Islam that would have shown its “true face” in Madımak. According to the publications, Madımak illustrates the fundamentalist dimension of Sunni Islam and thereby defines a clear “us and

them” distinction. The perpetrators of Madımak are variably labeled as “reactionary political Islamist mob” (“Unutmadık, Unutmayacağız,” 2007), “Shari‘atist fascists” (H. Aydın, 2007), and “representing a reactionary Middle Age mentality” (Demirtaş, 2007). In many articles in *Alevilerin Sesi*, the slogans shouted by the mob during the hotel burning are presented as evidence for the adequacy of these labels. References to these slogans work in the direction of presenting the massacre as intentional, rather than resulting from provocation or anger. It is repeatedly claimed that the perpetrators knew what they were doing: They had a purpose and a Sharia agenda when they deliberately set the hotel on fire. In this way, they are portrayed as the immoral perpetrators who are fully responsible for what happened. As a corollary, Alevi victims are defined as the innocent victims.

Historical Continuity of Evil and Good

In the publications, the religious motive of the mob is also construed by referring to writings of famous Islamic scholars and to old fatwas issued about Alevi and other heretic beliefs during the Ottoman rule. For example, in an article on the massacre, E. Aydın (2006) referred to the Qur’an; the writings of Ghazali, a 13th-century Muslim scholar; and the fatwa issued in 16th-century Ottoman as evidence of the essentially violent nature of the religious belief of the perpetrators. Islamic texts and writings of Muslim scholars would form the root cause of the massacre: Madımak would not be a coincidence, but would follow from the continuing beliefs of the Sunni Muslim attackers.

Furthermore, in the publications, it is repeatedly argued that burning is a typical form of Sharia violence. For example, in the same article, E. Aydın (2006) gave examples of verses from the Qur’an that contain many details about burning in hell. In another article, Mehmet Bayrak (2006) gave an historical account of *İhrak-ı Binnar* (throwing into the fire) as a method of punishment in the Ottoman period for those who were against Shari‘a law. By giving these historical examples and making historical comparisons, a sense of continuity between the past and the present is established. In this way, the massacre was construed as a rooted and enduring praxis, rather than an exceptional event caused by the circumstances or conducted by a small group of fanatics.

In the publications, there is not only an historical narrative about the Shari‘a Islamists perpetrators, but also an historical account of Alevi identity. For example, Turgut Öker, the president of AABK, said the following in a speech for the Alevi-Bektashi assembly: “Our ancestors have resisted to Shari‘a at the expense of their lives. Our history is the history of resistance against Shari‘a” (as cited in Kaçmaz, 2007, p. 15). It is repeatedly argued that

Alevi identity is grounded in an historical struggle and that resistance is a self-defining characteristic. In the publications, the continuous historical struggle of the Alevis against the suffering from Shari'a law is the most emphasized aspect of Alevi identity. Opposition to oppression and siding with the oppressed are presented as the central and permanent characteristic of Alevism. The narrative about Madımak is pivotal in establishing this temporal continuity, to connect the past to the present. For example, Serdar Doğan, who is the scriptwriter of a theater play on Madımak and one of the survivors of the massacre, stated the following in an interview in *Alevilerin Sesi*:

What happened in Madımak is not simply a massacre of Alevis. It is a crime against humanity, it is a shame. . . . As you mentioned, it has been the Alevi organizations that felt the pain inflicted by this event most deeply and that kept the memory of the massacre alive. This situation is intrinsic to the Alevi perspective. History of Alevism is full of massacres and this burden goes all the way back to Karbala. Alevis have always been "the other" and paid dearly for this. Yet, they have struggled to keep their identity alive with faith, consciousness, and resistance up until today. (as cited in Ateş, 2008, p. 11)

In this excerpt, Madımak is used to establish the historical continuity of the Alevi identity—an identity that is marked by oppression and resistance. Alevis have been the victims of crimes committed against humanity and, although they paid a heavy price, they have managed to maintain who they are. This narrative of oppression and historical resistance that is symbolized by Madımak is important because it supports the claim of being a separate group and helps to define what it means to be Alevi. The historical narrative provides a basis for a shared Alevi identity by emphasizing the common experiences and by clearly distinguishing the Alevi from the Sunni oppressors. The narrative of oppression and resistance is not only meaningful in relation to Sunnis but also for "internal" differences. It offers a shared understanding and the possibility of meaningful commonalities, despite the many internal differences. For uniting and mobilizing an internally diverse group, it is useful to emphasize a common history and shared essential bond (Kuroiwa & Verkuyten, 2008). In that way, a common Alevi identity is defined that includes all Alevi subgroups.

Essentially Good Alevis

As illustrated in the previous extract from *Alevilerin Sesi*, there are many references to positive characteristics that define Alevi identity, such as peacefulness, egalitarianism, and humanism. The name of the column on faith matters by Hasan Kılavuz is "Those Whose *Kiblah* Is Human Being,"

and this was reflected by him in several articles. For example, in a January 2008 issue of *Alevilerin Sesi*, he stated that “none of the beliefs, including divine religions, has reached to the extent of Alevism’s focus on the necessity of human love, peace and cooperation, and solidarity among people” (p. 45). This narrative of Alevi virtues has a long history and places the Alevis in a morally superior position. Such positive characteristics can always be questioned, however, as being subjective, biased, and self-favoring. Therefore, to justify these descriptions and to convince others, it is necessary to make them appear objective and factual. This can be done by drawing a contrast with the Sunni Turks and by presenting the positive traits as being intrinsic to the Alevi character. Drawing contrasting categorical distinctions is a useful means of making particular descriptions or interpretations a feature of reality, rather than a personal assessment that results from subjective concerns and preoccupations (Dickerson, 2000; Horowitz, 2000). There are many instances in the publications in which the character of Alevis is described in direct contrast to that of Sunnis.

In addition to making a contrast, the inherent positive character of Alevis is stressed in the publications. This character can even be presented as the reason for the Madımak massacre. The next extract is an example:

Actually, the reason for Alevis being massacred should be sought in Alevism itself. Alevism does not discriminate on the basis of religion, language and gender, sees the 72 nations with the same regard [an idiom representing Alevis’ egalitarian view of people in terms of their ethnic, national, or religious belongingness], is in favor of justice, is based on peace and brotherhood, and defends a free and egalitarian life. In essence, Alevism is the struggle to make the earth heaven and to make human beings God. (Mat, 2007, p. 18)

In this and many other extracts, Alevi identity is defined in terms of positive characteristics that would make Alevis vulnerable to oppression and atrocities. Peace, brotherhood, justice, and egalitarianism would define the essence of Alevi identity. These virtues are presented as original and timeless, going back to the earliest days, and they construe a moral character. However, the peace-loving nature of the Alevis does not only make them innocent victims, but also vulnerable. This vulnerability implies that unity and solidarity remains a political imperative in order to survive as a community.

Madımak as a Political Resource: “We Will Survive”

On March 21, 2010, the Alevi Culture Centre in the Dutch city of Zwolle organized a conference on Alevi politics in which the president of the AABK, Turgut Öker, participated. The conference was followed by a dinner

in the center. Disappointed by the modest turnout of Alevis, an old man asked Öker, “Do we need another Sivas to mobilize?” This question can be heard regularly among Alevis who are disappointed about the lack of political commitment. Öker’s answer was typical as well: “No uncle. We don’t need another Sivas. We are organizing to prevent it from happening again. Not the number of people but unity around our movement is important” (personal observation, March 21, 2010).

However, numbers are important, and narratives about traumatic events can mobilize people. Each year there is a commemoration before the Madımak hotel, and the ritual of this event plays a role in defining a collective trauma and developing a politicized Alevi identity. According to the *Alevilerin Sesi* (Ateş, Kaçmaz, & Fırat, 2008), the number of participants in the annual commemoration has increased from 150 in 2000 to 50,000 in 2008. The role of the massacre in the formation of a collective memory, and a mobilizing force has clearly increased over the years. The massacre in Sivas was not the first painful experience of Alevis, but it was the first one that was publicized and debated widely in the media.

In the articles in *Alevilerin Sesi* related to the massacre, the need for unity and political action is typically emphasized. Reference is often made to the traditional legend of the bird Simurgh that has seen the destruction of the world three times over but each time witnessed its rebirth. For example, the theater play by Serdar Doğan carries the name *Simurgh*. This play was staged all over Europe with the massive support of the AABK. The metaphor of Simurgh is used in almost all news articles, sometimes more than once. For example, in an article about the annual commemoration of the massacre by the regional representative of North-Rhine Westphalia of the AABK, it is implicitly referred to by stating, “But, from the ashes of our Cans [fellow Alevi, literally means *soul*], our movement is born which defends the rights of Alevis and leads them” (“Unutmadık, Unutmayacağız,” 2007, p. 5) Similarly, the former leader of the faith affairs division of the AABK and the columnist on faith matters in *Alevilerin Sesi*, Hasan Kılavuz (2006), stated that “We harvested the Alevi organization in the ashes in front of Sivas Madımak” (p. 30). The reference to a *rebirth* out of the *ashes* of destruction is a common theme in the publications with a clear message: We will survive, but we need to organize in order to prevent future harms.

The Need to Organize

Madımak as a traumatic experience has left deep wounds among Alevis and raised the awareness of the need of self-organization. This is considered to be of vital importance if Alevis do not want these traumatic events to

happen again. Thus, political mobilization is presented to be essential for the very existence of Alevis. For example, Turgut Öker, in his speech in Sivas on the 15th commensuration of the massacre, stated:

Today, we are able to openly say that “we are Alevi.” We are able to say that we will be living in this land with our own identity, as Alevi. We have managed to counter attempts to eradicate our existence. We achieved all these thanks to those who set their bodies on fire, those who died as martyr at Madımak. (as cited in Kaçmaz, 2008, p. 12)

Madımak is presented as a symbol of the danger that Alevis face—namely, the disappearance of Alevi identity. The importance of political mobilization for preventing these traumatic events from happening again is expressed in the same speech in which a connection to previous massacres is made:

We lost hundreds, thousands of martyrs in massacres such as the one in Maraş. *Cans* are the same *cans*, humans are the same humans. They also had mothers, spouses, and children who feel the pain in their hearts. But in those days there was not an active Alevi movement that exposed the atrocities. Therefore, millions of Alevis only know the names of 37 people [who died in Madımak]. We the leaders [of the Alevi organizations] do not even know the names of our *cans* who died in Maraş, Çorum, Gazi and in other massacres. They are not less important than the ones who were killed in Madımak, but there was no Alevi organization that took up their cause. What I am trying to say is this: Alevis have a lot to contribute to this country. [What we need to do is] to stop mourning our lost ones, and fight the conditions that can lead to future massacres. We have to struggle and not only to commemorate. (as cited in Kaçmaz, 2008, p. 12)

According to Öker, it is not the loss or the pain itself that leads to people’s awareness that they should unite, but it is the political organization that creates this awareness. Although the loss is greater in the other cases, people only remember the names of those 37 people killed in Madımak. The only solution to prevent future massacres is to organize around Alevi identity. This line of argument is present in many articles and commentaries in *Alevilerin Sesi*. A striking example is the approach of the columnist of “Matters of Faith,” Hasan Kılavuz, who presents participation in Alevi organizations, especially the AABK, as a religious duty. He emphasizes that these organizations are crucial for remembering Madımak and preventing future massacres; and, therefore, that criticizing the organization is an attack on the religious faith (see Kılavuz, 2003).

Inclusive Victimhood: Unity in Pain

We have argued that the historical narrative of oppression and resistance is useful for defining a meaningful commonality for Alevis and a clear difference with Turkish Sunnites. In addition, this narrative of oppression and the original virtues of the Alevi character construe a moral position and the need for unity and resistance. This construction can be further strengthened by recognizing and emphasizing similarities with other groups that have experienced group-based oppression and violence. For the AABK, the unity can be a “unity in pain” because Alevis share a history of victimhood with groups from other parts of the world. One of the largest public events that the AABK has ever organized was entitled “Ağittan Umuda” (“From Requiem to Hope”). It took place on June 17, 2006 in the Cologne Arena, and was a theater performance about massacres throughout the world history. The call of the event was reprinted in the German pages of the June 2006 issue of *Alevilerin Sesi* (N. Şahin, 2006):

From Requiem to Hope is a commemoration of Alevis, Alevi holy personalities, and poets who were burned, massacred from Karbala to Sivas From requiem to hope is a noble day of commemoration in which humanity “unites in pain,” within the fraternity of religions, languages, cultures From Requiem to Hope emphasizes the central Alevi principle, which is to be on the side of the oppressed and against tyranny, so that Sivas, Solingen, Halabja, and Auschwitz do not take place again. (p. 33)

Here we see the elements of an inclusive representation of Alevis’ suffering. The history of Alevis is presented alongside the oppression and massacre of other groups. Alevis are not the only victims of tyranny and, similar to Auschwitz and the burning of Turkish-Germans in Solingen, Madımak is a symbol of victimhood. The concept of “unity in pain” defines a common moral ground, an inclusive victimhood.

Oppression and Opposition

The AABK does not only side with the oppressed, but also presents experienced oppression as a self-defining characteristic. Oppression and opposition would define the permanent and real Alevi character—a character that is expressed in their commitment with the suffering of others. For example, the AABK takes part in the annual commemoration of the victims of the racist attack in Solingen. Furthermore, in several publications, it is argued that the Alevis are the victims of the same religious fundamentalist violence that haunted Europe in the Middle Ages. In the call for the 15th anniversary of Madımak, Giordino Bruno, a Middle Ages philosopher

burned by the Catholic Church, was mentioned as one of the historical victims of religious violence. In the closing paragraph, it was stated, “Did you know that with the support you give, you will not only commemorate the ones massacred in the Madımak Hotel, but also Giordino Bruno?” (as cited in “2 Temmuz’da Madımak Oteli,” 2008, p. 6).

The “unity in pain” defines a strong moral identity of victimhood and thereby construes a position from which Alevis can try to mobilize other minority groups in Turkey, both for the Alevi cause and for broader political aims and ideals. On November 8, 2009, Pir Sultan Abdal Derneği of the AABK’s sister organization, Federation of Alevi Unions, in Turkey, called for a demonstration in support of Alevis. In doing so, he made an appeal to other minority groups in Turkey:

The day came we were Armenian together with Armenians; the day came we were Kurdish; the day came we were women; the day came we were workers; the day came we were unemployed; the day came we were students; the day came we stood by all aggrieved and oppressed. Now, on November the 8th, we expect you all to become Alevi for one day. (as cited in “Gün Geldi Dostlar!,” 2009, p. 12)

Here, the expressions of a sense of inclusive victimhood are used to make a moral appeal on other minority groups in Turkey to support the Alevi cause. As a form of reciprocity, the aggrieved and oppressed are asked to support the Alevi political demands. An additional reason for requesting support is that the AABK interprets Madımak as an attack on Alevis and their political values of secularism, egalitarianism, democracy, and humanism. These self-defining values are also important for other minority groups that face discrimination and oppression in Turkey. An example is the call of the AABK and its four sister organizations in Turkey for the 15th anniversary of the massacre:

For 15 years Alevi organizations have been struggling not just to expose the Sivas massacre but any massacre that destroys the culture of coexistence. Standing side by side with all forces that defend secularism, emancipation of the individual and the democratization of the state is a priority of the Alevi movement. As part of this common struggle, we would like to see our allies in front to the Hotel Madımak on the 2nd of July. (as cited in “2 Temmuz’da Madımak Oteli,” 2008, p. 6)

In this extract, and in many others, Madımak symbolizes the threat to the liberal values of peace, individual freedom, and democracy. The endorsement of these values is not specific for Alevis, but shared with other groups

such as oppressed minorities, leftists, and secularists. These groups are defined as allies in the continuing political struggle in Turkey.

Embodying Liberal Values

What is specific, however, is that Alevi identity is built around these liberal values. In the publications, it is argued that Alevi exemplify and embody these values. Therefore, Alevi would have a special position and responsibility for leading the political fight for the institutionalization of secularism and democracy in Turkey. For example, Alevi's continuing struggle to bring the perpetrators to justice and to transform the Madımak Hotel into a museum would not be a struggle of Alevi only. Rather, it would be a struggle of all democratic and progressive forces because it will help Turkey to deal with its dark past and to shape a brighter future. This representative role of Alevi is clearly expressed by Turgut Öker, the president of the AABK. In our interview with him, he stated the following:

Alevi have always dreamed of making the world a better place. To bring a peaceful solution to conflicts. To address issues of poverty and hunger. That is why, Alevism is not restricted to performing religious duties. If you do not see Alevism in this way, then you ignore its defining history. Pir Sultan Abdal did not only struggle to be able to perform Cem or practice Alevism without fear. He also claimed to be the spokesperson of all aggrieved and oppressed. He raised his voice on their behalf. . . . Today, we experience the same things. We cannot limit ourselves to the demands for the recognition of Cem houses or courses on Alevism in schools. The state oppresses Assyrians; the religious freedoms of Christians are limited; Greeks are already destroyed. What we have to do, like our ancestors did, is to help them, to side with them. We have to speak for them. (personal communication, June 2, 2008)

This discourse about Alevi's history of struggle and Alevi exemplifying and representing "the oppressed" and "the democratic forces" is not only stated but also put into practice. The advisory council of the AABK and its sister federation in Turkey, representing 483 Alevi associations in Turkey and across Europe, held a meeting in Ankara on February 10 through 11, 2007. The council decided to "intervene into politics," and issued a press release that stated that conservative ideologies and increased nationalism threaten the peaceful coexistence of different groups in Turkey. Therefore, minority groups and forces of democracy are urged to form a powerful political alternative based on democracy, secularism, and universal values (Alevi Bektaşlı Federasyonu, 2007). In May 2007, in another assembly with 3,000 participants, the urgency of a political union was emphasized, and Alevi were presented as the ones that should take the lead in such a union

(“Laik ve Demokratik,” 2007). The initiatives of the AABK and the federation in Turkey played a central role in the formation of the Equality and Democracy Party in Turkey on March 2010. The party is not an “Alevi party,” but aims to represent all aggrieved, oppressed, poor, disadvantaged, and disabled people (“EDP Parti Tarihi,” 2010).

We have argued that the representation of collective trauma is a powerful symbol and effective tool to create a particular group identity. The trauma defines who *we* and *they* are, and what the nature of the relationship between *us* and *them* is. *Their* oppressive and violent character is contrasted to *our* virtuous nature that makes *us* vulnerable. This vulnerability indicates the need to be united and strong and, because of *our* history of victimhood and resistance, we can represent other minority groups in Turkey. These identity constructions serve political purposes, and the Madımak massacre is vital political capital to the AABK. This can be further illustrated by looking briefly at the Cem Foundation as an alternative Alevi voice.

Cem Foundation and Madımak

The Cem Foundation has close ties with the Turkish state and sees Alevism as intrinsically Turkish (Firat, 2005); and, as a result, interprets the Madımak massacre differently. According to Doğan, the founder and president of the federation, it is wrong to present Madımak as an “Alevi issue” (Bulaç, 2010). Seventeen of the 37 victims of the massacre would have been Sunnis, and he argued that it was not a conflict between Alevis and Sunnis but, rather, a political dispute (Bulaç, 2010). In addition, he has stated that, in history, Alevis and Sunnis have never slaughtered each other and that all the historical conflicts were not religious but rather political with politicians being responsible (Tezcan, 2010). In this interpretation of Madımak, the massacre is not a symbol of the continuing violent oppression of Alevis by Sunnis. This interpretation serves the political project of the Cem Foundation, which focuses on stability and state unity, as well as mutual acceptance and recognition of Alevis and Sunnis. In this context, Madımak is seen as dividing, rather than unifying, people; and, therefore, the hotel should not be turned into a museum but, rather, into a park. Doğan argued:

Transforming Madımak Hotel into a museum is born out of the assumed similarity with the suffering of the Jews in the Second World War genocide. But if the hotel is transformed into a museum, it may become a symbol of hatred perpetuating the hostility between two communities. (as cited in Bulaç, 2010, p. 24)

This position of the Cem Foundation—Madımak is not similar to the Holocaust and should not be used to divide groups of Turks—is much

appreciated by the Turkish state and gives the foundation influence in mainstream politics.

DISCUSSION

The development and maintenance of “groupness” and a sense of collective *we* is a key task for any ethnopolitical movement or organization (Brubaker, 2004). There are almost always intragroup differences, and most movements and organizations try to mobilize various subgroups. Sometimes the internal diversity is substantial, as with the Alevi, making the task of establishing a sense of peoplehood and unity a difficult one (see Kuroiwa & Verkuyten, 2008). In addition, there are always alternative narratives and interpretations possible that challenge and potentially undermine the group-making process.

Establishing a coherent and unified Alevi identity is a continuous struggle, not only in relation to the Sunnis and the Turkish government, but also because of the Alevis’ internal diversity (Massicard, 2007; Sökefeld, 2008). The social identity perspective argues that people will act together when they have a sense of belonging together. A shared sense of *us* forms the psychological basis of collective behavior and social power (Reicher & Hopkins, 2001; Reicher et al., 2005). Our aim was to examine the identity constructions that the AABK uses for its political project. From our material, we cannot decide whether these constructions represent explicit strategic choices, but they do function in intergroup relationships and guide people’s interpretations and self-understandings (Reicher et al., 2005). In addition, there clearly are many other factors that are involved in the success of the AABK and the mobilization of Alevis. However, we focused on narratives about Alevi identity because the psychological basis of social influence derives from the way in which texts and statements invoke social identities (Turner & Reynolds, 2001). We examined the ways in which the AABK narrates what it means to be Alevi and how these meanings serve their transnational political project of addressing the oppression, discrimination, and assimilation of Alevis in Turkey.

Alevi identity is defined in contrast to Sunni Muslims (Sökefeld, 2008) and by a narrative about the collective trauma of Madımak. The contrast and trauma function as symbolic boundaries that create and sustain a sense of groupness and feelings of similarity among Alevis (Lazar & Litvak-Hirsch, 2009; Muro, 2009). The virtuous nature of the Alevi identity is contrasted with the oppressive and violent Sunni character. Madımak symbolizes this group difference and signifies the attack on the essential and vulnerable aspects of Alevi belief. The massacre illustrates the ever-present threats to Alevi existence and shows the need for a cohesive

Alevi identity that transcends internal cultural, religious, and political differences. Interestingly, and something that is not very common (Bar-Tal et al., 2009; Vollhardt, 2009), the AABK also uses *Madımak* to define similarities with other groups that have experienced group-based violence in unrelated conflicts, such as the Holocaust. This sense of inclusive victimhood further establishes and underlines the Alevis' vulnerable position in Turkey. Furthermore, the expressed solidarity confirms their sense of responsibility and claims to a moral identity. In addition, this form of inclusive victimhood confirms their identity of endorsing humanist and universal beliefs and values. More important, this shows that the consequences of shared victimhood do not have to be violent and destructive, but can also lead to increased solidarity (Simon & Klandermans, 2001).

This is also evident not only in the narration of similarities to other victimized groups, but also with groups that experience oppression and face discrimination by the Turkish state. The similarities with these groups are used to define mutual responsibilities in supporting each other in the struggles with the Turkish state and government. These struggles, however, are not only about the specific interests of the different groups, but also about the larger goal of transforming Turkish society in the direction of democratic freedom and equality. The Alevi are numerically too small to achieve this larger goal on their own. They need the support of other minority groups, but these groups cannot be united and mobilized under the name of Alevism. A shared identity of "the oppressed" or "democratic forces" is needed, and this is what the AABK tries to define. In doing so, the story about their long and continuing history of oppression and the *Madımak* massacre construes the Alevi as the prototypical victim group in Turkey: the virtuous group that has always resisted oppression and that has always risen from the ashes of destruction. This self-definition fuses the Alevi identity with the category of the oppressed who fight for democratic freedom. The Alevi seek to embody this category, as well as to speak for the other minority groups and lead them in the political struggle (Reicher & Hopkins, 2001; Reicher et al., 2005).

The achievement of a sense of groupness is never finished. The AABK's attempts at unification and mobilization can be challenged or supported by other groups, can differ across contexts, and can be influenced by developments within Turkey. For example, the Cem Foundation offers a very different interpretation of the *Madımak*—one that serves their specific political project of state unity and stability in Turkey. In addition, although the AABK primarily focuses on the situation in Turkey, they are also concerned about the recognition of Alevism in the Europe. In this context, the political struggle is, for example, around the recognition of Alevism as a separate category within Islam or outside of this religion. For these struggles, an

interpretation of Alevi identity in terms of victimhood is less useful (Rigoni, 2003). Furthermore, Turkey's attempts to join the European Union plays a role in the minority policies of the Turkish government. A stronger emphasis on democratic freedoms and minority rights creates a different political context in which, for example, it might be more strategic to emphasize Alevi identity, rather than an inclusive victimhood against the Turkish state. New developments can create new commonalities or distancing. Narrative opportunities and constraints are not fixed, particularly not for those identities that are currently among the most contested, such as ethnicity, religion, and nation.

In conclusion, we have examined how the Confederation of European Alevi Unions (AABK) uses the collective trauma of Madimak to create a coherent and unifying Alevi identity and a sense of shared victimhood. We focused on the AABK because it is not so much Alevis in Turkey but, rather, those in Europe that try to establish a common Alevi identity and to address the oppression and discrimination of Alevis in Turkey. Alevi organizations face a serious challenge when it comes to unification and unity because the diversity among the Alevis is substantial, and there is a lack of consensus about what it means to be an Alevi. We have tried to show how narratives of the massacre function as political capital in drawing group boundaries, defining intergroup relationships, and creating a sense of inclusive victimhood with other aggrieved and oppressed groups. The analysis indicates that the consequences of shared victimhood do not have to be violent and destructive, but might also lead to increased solidarity among minority groups. Future studies in other contexts and among other diaspora groups should examine these processes further, for example, by focusing on the important role of historical narratives in incorporating and unifying various subgroups and continuing a political struggle (Kuroiwa & Verkuyten, 2008). Future studies should also examine when and why notions of inclusive victimhood lead to solidarity or, rather, to conflicts and violence (Bar-Tal et al., 2009; Vollhardt, 2009). In addition, our interest was in the AABK, but it is important to examine the perceptions and responses of the Alevi public in Europe and in Turkey. Organizations like the AABK do not represent all Alevi, and not all Alevi are interested in the political agenda of this organization.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

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