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Religious Freedom Governance or Institutionalization of a Heterodox Religion? Turkey's Urban Policies with Respect to Alevi Population

Gözde Orhan*

Abstract

In a country where Sunni Islam is hegemonic and the place of worship of Alevi, called *cemevi*, is not recognized by the state, mosques function as symbolic manifestations of power. The *cemevi* can be interpreted as space of a counterculture or as a counter-space in urban life of Turkey. Because it is the place of worship of an oppressed community, its meaning exceeds the boundaries of religion. Throughout the country, *cemevis* are not only the gathering places of Alevi but also serve as the milieu in which counterhegemonic approaches flourish. These places are legally “undefined” and embrace people who do not belong to that form of Sunni Islam controlled and shaped in accordance with the needs of the regime. At the beginning of the 2000s, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government claimed to embrace Alevi population through democratic openings, in the context of religious freedom governance of religious and ethnic minorities and supported the construction of *cemevis* although it seems to still disregard giving them legal status. This paper examines spatial interventions of the AKP government in order to reconfigure Alevism. In this context it firstly examines the “joint mosque-*cemevi* project” consisting of complexes attempted to be built in the Alevi-populated neighbourhoods. Secondly, it focuses on the case of Dersim and scrutinizes in detail the removal of open places of worship; nature cults – trees, stones, mountains, caves, some animals, and water – treated with great reverence and worshipped by Kurdish Alevi people who live in this city. In other words, this paper seeks to introduce how a Sunni-conservative government tended to regulate or reshape conflicts between Sunni and Alevi populations in spatial scale. It discusses through which mechanisms the AKP government approaches Alevi population in cities and analyses the dynamics of negotiations and resistance between Alevi and the Turkish state in spatial scale.

Keywords: *Alevi, cemevi, heterodox religion, heterodoxy, place of worship.*

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Introduction

What would remain of the Church if there were no churches? (Lefebvre 1974, 44)

Conceptual movement of religion from the private to the public sphere at different scales and its public role, albeit its changing function in new structures, still needs to be discussed by interdisciplinary studies (Giordan and Zrinščak 2018, 3). Considering religion as a social and cultural construct with highly variable meaning and the source of considerable social conflict and disputes (Beckford 2003, 5), one may follow the traces of religion in urban and natural spaces in order to seek new opportunities for revealing the relationship between religion and human rights. It is obvious that secularism is an effective mode of governmentality of religion; however, ‘religious diversity’ can also be concerned a form of governmentality (Burchardt 2016; 2017). States and city administrations actively shape the understandings of religious diversity and reconfigure the significance of religion for individuals and groups (Burchardt 2017, 181). ‘For policy-makers the public construction of religion in terms of religious diversity is both cogent and significant as emergent forms of “governmentality through diversity” are premised on the comparatively unproblematic nature of religious commitments” (Burchardt 2016, 188). From this point of view, this research focuses on the Turkish state’s attempts to govern ‘religious diversity’ in space.

In Turkey where Sunni Islam is hegemonic, mosques function as symbolic manifestations of power (Shankland 2003, 63-64). The place of worship of Alevis is not legally recognized by the state; indeed, the cemevi can be interpreted as space of a counterculture or as a counter-space, which means all attempts to change or challenge the extension of dominated spaces. Space includes struggle: counterplans and counter-projects challenge the state’s rational and organizational capacity. Identities are rediscovered from below in everyday life by producing and defending counter-projects and counter-spaces. The production of counter-spaces is both the consequence of the rise of non-state actors and the initiator of counterhegemonic movements (Lefebvre 2003, 88). Considering historical and political connotations of the cemevi, this paper defines it as a counter-space referring to Lefebvre.

This research is based on in-depth interviews conducted between 2012-2015 for my dissertation with prominent figures of Dersim (Tunceli), the only province in Turkey in which the population is predominantly Alevi: state officers, local governors, the provincial chairmen of political parties and organizations, religious figures and the representatives of NGOs. My aim was to explore their perspectives on religion and state policies towards religion;

their experiences and expectations related to these policies. For this paper, I selected the interviews with the governor at the time and religious men in order to demonstrate official views and those with ordinary people to display the standpoint of local people. Secondly, local and national newspaper archives collection that covers news about joint mosque-cemevi projects and Tunceli Cemevi were examined. In this way, I was able to verify stories, narratives and anecdotes transmitted via interviews and eliminate some of them.

With the suppression of all dervish orders in 1925 in parallel with the secularist drive of the Kemalist regime, popular religions went underground. Although some orders had had close relations with the Committee of Union and Progress during the First World War, their closed and secretive culture and the unrestrainable organizational structures of these mystical brotherhoods made them unsustainable under the new regime (Zürcher 1998, 192). After being banned, they continued their activities in secret. The restrictions of the regime reinforced mystical features of the forms of worship and belief. Some Alevis who abandoned their villages in order to save themselves from the military operation lived for a long time in mountains and continued to worship there beyond the control of the state.

Because the *cemevi* is the place of worship of an oppressed community, its meaning exceeds the boundaries of religion. Throughout the country, *cemevis* are not only the gathering places of Alevis but also serve as the milieu in which counterhegemonic approaches flourish. These places are 'undefined' and embrace people who do not belong to that form of Sunni Islam controlled and shaped in accordance with the needs of the regime; therefore, they have been perceived as a threat by the state. Martin van Bruinessen, an anthropologist who has published a number of publications on Alevism,¹ argues that when the state relaxed the ban on Alevi associations in 1989, *cemevis* were opened, Alevi communities began to discuss the issues of Alevism, and these developments triggered the emergence of new publications. In other words, an Alevi revival occurred, transforming the character of Alevism: it entailed

¹ See for example Martin van Bruinessen, "‘Aslımı İnkâr Eden Haramzadedir!': The Debate on the Ethnic Identity of the Kurdish Alevis." In *Syncretistic Religious Communities in the Near East*, edited by Krisztina Kehl-Bodrogi, Barbara Kellner-Heinkele and Anke Otter-Beaujean, 1-23. Leiden: Brill, 1997; Martin van Bruinessen, "Constructions of Ethnic Identity in the Late Ottoman Empire and Republican Turkey: the Kurds and their Others." paper presented at the workshop *Social Identities in the Late Ottoman Empire*, New York, Middle Eastern Studies, 08.03.1997; Martin van Bruinessen, "Kurds, Turks and the Alevi Revival in Turkey." *Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP)* 200 (Summer 1996); Martin van Bruinessen, "Nationalisme Kurde et Ethnicités Intra-Kurdes." *Peuples Méditerranéens* 68-69 (1994): 11-37; Martin van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh, and State: The Social and Political Structures of Kurdistan*. London; Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Zed Books, 1992.

a 'transition from a secret, initiatory, locally anchored and orally transmitted religion, which it had been for centuries, to a public religion with formalised, or at least written, doctrine and ritual' (Bruinessen 1996, 8).

This institutionalization (or re-institutionalization) has certainly been a crucial step towards the recognition of Alevism within the law. The founding of *cemevis* required a great struggle. Since the beginning of the 1990s, the construction of *cemevis* has generally been undertaken illegally by Alevi associations and they are presented as "cultural centres" because of their lack of legal status (Es 2013, 28). The fact that the state has rejected the demand for the recognition of *cemevis* as places of worship for years has made their legal status a central issue for Alevi movements. In other words, the policy that has reduced the *cemevi* to a cultural centre is perceived by Alevis as the most concrete example of discrimination targeting them. This longstanding discrimination policy of the Turkish state for Alevis' place of worship has rendered *cemevis* counter-spaces.

It is possible to claim that the construction of *cemevis* is itself a kind of resistance against the regime and hegemonic religious discourse, institution and culture. Moreover, historical events have reinforced the counter-space character of *cemevi*. The funeral ceremonies of leftist activists, guerrillas, and political prisoners are generally organized in *cemevis*. The Gazi Cemevi was both a gathering place and a symbol of resistance during the Gazi events that occurred in March 1995.² Many leftist and socialist groups take an active role in these places. This is of course directly related to the fact that Alevi communities are loyal supporters of leftist parties and organizations. Low-income neighbourhoods of big cities that exclusively house Alevis who immigrated from their hometowns during the import substitution industrialization period or Alevi districts in Anatolia have tended to vote for social democrat parties from the beginning of the 1960s (Ertan 2017, 49). The relation between Alevis and leftists/ socialists strengthens the image of *cemevis* as the places where people who oppose the state and the regime gather. This view has been frequently expressed even by politicians.³ Although most Alevis moved away from leftist politics and focused on identity politics after 1980, the relations between the two groups – based on historical roots and mostly on *hemşehrilik*⁴ – have continued. These intermingling social ties have produced the *cemevi* as a 'political' space - a space for doing politics - partly abstracted from its sacred content and characterized by the interests specific

² The events that occurred in March 1995 at the Gazi Neighborhood, a working-class neighborhood in İstanbul.

³ Recently, AKP deputy Mehmet Metiner defined *cemevis* as terror nests. Yurt, 08.10.2013.

⁴ 'Hemşehrilik' roughly means economic and social solidarity among people who come from the same city or village.

to a class position or ethnic identity. Considering that all public spaces derive from and produce conflicting strategies, representations, appropriations and practices (Lefebvre 1973, 53) and that religious spaces are not exempted from abovementioned dynamics, the attempts to assert control over *cemevis* at a variety of scale are required to be examined in detail in order to emphasize how different actors compete with each other to mobilize the revolutionary potential of a heterodox religion or to frame it in favour of the official religion of the state.

1. Joint Mosque-Cemevi Project

Turkey's constitution declares that it is secular or laic referring to French *laïcité* and defines a principle of neutrality toward matters involving religion in public life. Taha Parla and Andrew Davison argue that laicism includes three stages: the separation of religion and politics; the control of religion by the state; and the disestablishment of religion in various spheres of social and political life. Kemalist laicism can be said to have established the separation of spheres through law and education. Secondly, it banned the ritual places of gathering for the institutions of folk Islam because they viewed them as "springboards for potential opposition groups" and thus took legal measures to prevent rival political movements from challenging their own monopolistic position (Parla and Davison 2008, 61). On the other hand, the Kemalist regime could not succeed in disestablishment of religion. The institutions established to control religion contributed to the rise of conservatism in the course of time (Buğra and Savaşkan 2014). From the beginning of the 2000s when the Justice and Development Party came to power, a greater emphasis on Sunni Islamic roots has been visible in public life (Borovali and Boyraz 2016, 72).

In the 1990s, overcoming theory-practice inconsistencies of secularism was the principal debate among Alevi associations. First, the Directorate of Religious Affairs, whose main task is to regulate Islam turned to a gigantic public institute with an enormous budget and staff (Clayer 2015, 100). Second, there have been reactions from Alevis due to compulsory religion education. They have supported that the government should not use state instruments to endorse Islam and criticized the contents of courses based on the Sunni understanding of Islam (Ziya Meral 2015, 7-8). Some Alevi associations such as Pir Sultan Abdal Cultural Association (PSAKD) have demanded radical changes in state-religion relationships and claimed the principle of laicism while others such as Cem Association have contented themselves with the inclusion of Alevism in textbooks or official institutions (Ertan 2017, 198-199).

As far as different demands of Alevi associations are concerned, Elise Massicard points out that culture is the most consolidative item and the lowest common denominator for Alevis in the eyes of Alevi organizations. However, the emphasis on culture entails a degree of neutralization because focusing on folklore leaves the subversive dimensions of Alevism aside and imposes silence (Massicard 2013, 134). Many organizations hold to culture in order to avoid ethnic, religious, and political categorizations, and they attempt to develop a universal version of Alevism. As Massicard suggests, any religious interpretation implies adopting a position regarding the Diyanet and questioning the foundations of the state. Furthermore, with the rise of the political Islam, the term 'religion' (*din*) has acquired derogatory connotations for many Alevis, and many of them distinguish themselves by making Aleviness a more open and less dogmatic phenomenon. Equally, explicitly positioning Alevism within the political sphere results in very strong demands. The involvement in culture fully makes sense only in relation to these alternatives (Massicard 2013, 135).

The discourse constructed around culture provides both the state and Alevi associations an environment for dialogue and reconciliation. It is clear that even the most dissident Alevi associations give importance to cultural rights of Alevis in addition to civil rights and the concept of equal citizenship and the state prefer to push Alevis towards a 'safer' sphere. Nevertheless, this 'dialogue' does not satisfy the basic demands of the Alevi communities; the agenda is generally restricted to symbolic gestures. This kind of relationship free of 'politics' seems preferable for the state. On the other hand, some associations have always insisted on political and religious demands. The state has tended to eliminate these groups and has pursued a balanced policy in order to prevent the radicalization of Alevis. Massicard emphasizes that the state has made use of the multi-headedness of Alevi society; therefore, it has not supported the development of a unique representative and has played on divisions in Alevi society. Massicard argues that the field is still characterized by conflict due to the Alevi policies of the state and it is possible to pursue these policies by examining insignificant funding given to these organizations for cultural events by state institutions. By funding several associations (no single one), it has avoided establishing a hierarchy among Alevis (Massicard 2013, 140). However, some associations are supported more than oppositional associations in recent years. Certain foundations funded by the government in the scope of the public interest have become prominent and have attempted to act as the movement's dominant actors.

There is a long debate on how Alevism is defined in Turkey: some conceive it as a religion in its own right and support that it has autonomy in its religious affairs; some conceive it as a legitimate branch of Islam (*mezhep*) and demand

its representation within the Directorate of Religious Affairs or the creation of an official Alevi Directorate parallel to the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Dressler 2008, 294). On the other hand, a considerable number of people define Alevism as a philosophical worldview or a revolutionary ethic and this interpretation is marginalized to a large extent (Dressler 2008, 295). Such a materialist notion is seen uncontrollable and dangerous by the state. As Dressler highlights this debate occurs in a climate shaped by anti-Alevi prejudices defining Alevism as a deviation from the right path of Islam and legitimizing assimilation policies (Dressler 2008, 294). The common feature of Alevi associations supported by the state is that they define Alevism as a subgroup of Islam. The AKP government reaffirmed Islam as the framework for the Alevi Opening (Dressler 2011, 196). The approaches defining Alevism as “an interpretation of Islam” enable the state to refuse the autonomist demands of non-Sunni communities (Dressler 2011, 198). The associations defining Alevism under an Islamic reference system – seeking to deprive it of its subversive character and bringing folklore to the fore – have become legitimate and have played a central role in the new era.

During the ‘Alevi Opening’ started by the AKP government in 2010, many Alevi organizations that founded and managed *cemevis* became allies of the state. The most popular is the Cem Foundation (Cem Vakfi), which has developed several projects together with the AKP government such as the ‘joint mosque-*cemevi* project’ devised by Fethullah Gülen, Turkish preacher and the founder of the Gülen movement aligned with Recep Tayyip Erdoğan before 2013. This project entailed a social complex with both a mosque and *cemevi* in the same place. Between two places of worship, a public soup kitchen was located according to the plan. The project was introduced by the government and the Cem Foundation as the spatial manifestation of Sunni-Alevi fraternity.⁵

The construction of the first joint mosque-*cemevi* began in Tuzluçayır, a shantytown of the capital Ankara. It was planned as a cultural centre established on 3,264 square meters, including a room for *dede* (Alevi religious functionary) and another for imam, a conference hall and a public soup kitchen for 350 people, a *gasilhane* (place where the deceased are washed and prepared for burial), a morgue, an altar, reading hall for children, a reception room, and a tearoom (Hürriyet 09.09.2013). The project would be directly managed by the Cem Foundation and Hacı Bektaş Veli Culture,

⁵ After the July 15th Coup Attempt (2016), almost all details about the project were removed from websites of state institutions; therefore, it is not possible to find additional information about architectural and spatial features of the joint mosque-*cemevi* project.

Education, Health and Research Foundation and funded by Alevi and Sunni businesspeople (Hürriyet 09.09.2013).

The Joint Mosque-Cemevi Project



Source: Cumhuriyet

Some Alevi associations strongly encouraged the project. The president of one of them, Nurikan Akdemir, expresses his support as follows: “Some Sunnis have prejudices about Alevis. This project will break down them. They will see that there is only a nuance between the forms of worship of Alevis and Sunnis.” (Available online at: <http://www.haber7.com/guncel/haber/1071606-cami-ve-cemevi-projesine-alevilerden-destek>). Another supporter, Kemal Kaya, president of an Alevi association close to the government, interprets the project as a step towards legalization of *cemevis*. Later in 2018, he would stand trial with other 4 founders of the Hacı Bektaş Veli Culture, Education, Health and Research Foundation on charges of serving Fethullah Gülen Terrorist Organization in 2018 (Available online at: <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/feto-nun-cami-cemevi-projesi-davasi-ankara-yerelhaber-2645299/>).

On the other hand, the project was widely criticized by Alevis and Alevi associations which adopt “rebellious heritage.” The Cem foundation was accused of assimilation – melting Alevisism down within moderate political Islam. Most Alevi communities highlighted that without legal recognition of *cemevis*, “subjoining” it to a mosque would make it an outbuilding of the mosque (Available online at: <https://t24.com.tr/haber/alevi-dernekleri-cami-cemevi-projesi-asimilasyonun-yeni-bir-yuzudur,238808>).

This spatial organization would imply that Alevisism is a sect of Islam (not a distinct religion), although the sect-religion discussion is still a matter for debate among Alevis. To be more precise, the *cemevi*, which was interpreted as a counter-space above, has been re-institutionalized by the government and some Alevi associations in accordance with the needs of the *de facto* official religion of Turkey. The example of the joint mosque-*cemevi* project

reveals that some counter-spaces reflect existing power relations (Lefebvre 1974, 382) and do not constitute a challenge to the state. They may even contribute to the hegemonic consolidation of a specific ideology.

In addition to Tuzluçayır, the first complexes would be built in İstanbul (Kartal), İzmir (Çiğli), Gaziantep, Adana and Çorum. The constructions of mosque-cemevis could not be realized. After the July 15th coup attempt (2016), the government accused Fethullah Gülen and his network for being behind the failed incident and classified the Gülen movement as a terrorist organization. Thus, the joint mosque-cemevi projects were abolished with the claim of being the projects of Fethullah Gülen. However, the re-institutionalization attempts of the government are not limited to them. Although the places of worship of Alevi are still not recognized by the state, an 'official Alevism' compatible with Sunni Islam is developed in certain cemevis ruled by government-oriented Alevi associations.

2. From a Natural to a Man-made Space: The Case of Dersim

How is a universal Alevism defined in urban space? How is Alevism framed within the context of Islam with the elimination of natural religious elements? The case of Dersim (Tunceli), the only province in Turkey where the population is predominantly Alevi Kurd who has religious rituals different from those of Alevi Turks, is a crucial example to answer these questions. In this part of the paper, I focus on Dersim as an urban space in which a universal Alevism is embodied through the *cemevi*.

Dersim Alevism, unlike other Alevisms, is directly related to nature; therefore, it is generally considered deviant and primitive by the Turkish state and Sunni Islam. From this point of view, I firstly discuss the transformation of the places of worship in Dersim in accordance with the government's attempt to institutionalize Alevism. Secondly, the Tunceli Cemevi, the construction of which was finished in the second half of the 1990s, is scrutinized in terms of its relationship to the Dersim people and the state.

2.1 Gole Çetu: A Short Story about the "Freedom of Thought and Faith"

In the current city centre, the Munzur River joins Pülümür Brook at a place known as *Gole Çetu* (*Gole Çetu*, *Lake of Hızır*) which is enshrined by the inhabitants of Dersim. Apart from its life-sustaining function in the daily life of both the people and other creatures, it has spiritual connotations. Gole Çetu is one of the most important natural places of worship (*ziyarets*) for Dersim

people.⁶ However, the reservoir behind the Uzunçayır Dam, constructed in 1994, began to be filled on 17 August 2009. After the water was retained, a channel of twenty kilometres was flooded (Radikal, 08.09.2009). Apart from villages, many *ziyarets* were doomed to disappear under the water. With the submerging of Gole Çetu under the artificial reservoirs of dams, both dam projects – the number of which has increased dramatically since the beginning of the 2000s – and government's approach to Alevi places of worship have become current issues. The process of the destruction of Gole Çetu and its relocation by the dam construction company coincides with the entering into service of the *cemevi*.

A representative of the Human Rights Association, the lawyer Barış Yıldırım, filed a complaint on 19 August 2009 about the dam, denouncing that places of worship would be destroyed. He argued that this situation was contrary to the freedom of thought and faith, and the offence of damaging a place of worship would be committed (Radikal, 22.02.2010). The office of the chief prosecutor of Tunceli opened an investigation in order to determine whether Gole Çetu is a worship place or not and charged a police team with making an examination of the area. The team examined the area on 28 September 2009 and wrote an official report: 'From interviews it is understood that the point where the Pülümür and Munzur rivers unite is enshrined according to Alevi customs and belief because Hızır was seen there and Ali passed by there. It is understood that it is a space where people sacrifice animals, make wishes, light candles, and pray. Moreover, it is seen that at the mentioned *ziyaret* there is no building for worship' (Radikal, 22.02.2010). On 11 February 2010, the decision not to take legal action was issued. According to the office of the chief prosecutor, Gole Çetu could not be considered a place of worship because 'it is an open space consisting of some trees and rocks and there is no *ibadethane* made by the hand of man and allocated for worship' (Radikal, 22.02.2010).

It is clear that, the decision about Gole Çetu is inconsistent with the identity approach to religious freedom. According to the identity approach, religion is conceived as a part of identity and the state equally approaches citizens with different religious commitments. Religion is considered as a

⁶ It is a general belief that Gole Çetu is the home of Hızır. The cult of Hızır (Xızır) underlies Dersim Alevism. In everyday life, he takes the place of god in the eyes of indigenous people. He is "*hazır ve nazır*" (ready and waiting) and he is everywhere. He comes to rescue people in need wherever they are. According to another legend, Gole Çetu is the space where Ali became visible. Some people believe that Munzur Baba and Hızır, who were not on speaking terms, made peace there and turned into confluent rivers. Because this sacred space is at the center of the city, it is frequently visited by Dersim people for worship. Hewtemalo Pîl, Black Wednesday (Kara Çarşamba), Newroz, and the ninth of March (Mart Dokuzu) are crucial sacred days memorialized at Gole Çetu.

non-negotiable characteristic of a person's identity: 'a law that privileges the practices of one religious group over others [...] may violate religious freedom if it appears to expose minorities to disrespect or disadvantage, or if it is viewed as denying them dignity as members of a particular group. [...] Laws that convincingly have the effect of alienating or marginalizing some citizens are ones that violate religious freedom' (Eisenberg 2016, 311). The decision of non-prosecution hints at the approach of the state to the natural places of worship of Alevis. In accordance with the attempt of the state to *define* a single, overarching Alevism, the Tunceli Cemevi has replaced natural sacred spaces. Although the Tunceli Cemevi was founded long before the submersion of Gole Çetu and its construction can be considered a form of resistance because of the legal obstacles, it has served the purposes of both standardizing and depoliticizing Alevism.

The submersion of Gole Çetu is an interesting case because it not only reveals the cultural policies overlapping the Alevi Opening but also the government's approach of prioritizing economic growth and maximizing the benefits of capital flow. The story of the 'relocation' of Gole Çetu demonstrates that the sacredness attributed to a specific place is open for discussion if it belongs to a non-hegemonic belief system and if its presence conflicts with the economic interests of investors. The submersion and reconstruction of Gole Çetu can be seen also as an example of negotiation among investors, the central administration, and the local government.

Ozan Munzur, a young documentary filmmaker, attempted to shoot a documentary during the submersion of Gole Çetu. The film Jiare (Ziyaret) focuses on the last thirteen days of Gole Çetu. The thirteen-minute film displays the anxious wait of elderly people crying for their worship place. The ziyaret completely disappeared under the waters of the reservoir at the end of thirteen days despite the strong resistance of inhabitants. The documentary film finishes with this scene; however, the process that followed the destruction of Gole Çetu is more interesting. Limak Incorporated, the company that had built the Uzunçayır Dam, announced that it would reconstruct the ziyaret in a high, safe area. The company and the governorship collaborated on the "new" Gole Çetu (Tuncelinin Sesi, 29.03.2011). Not only the ziyaret but also a large park was established by the company as a kind of social responsibility project. The governor at the time, Mustafa Taşkesen, describes the establishment of the new worship place:

It is I who led Limak Incorporated to build the park of Gole Çetu. When I saw the people coming there for worship, I asked the dedes if it is alright for them to change the location of Gole Çetu. They saw no harm. They said that it would not matter if it were established in a higher area. I gave instructions to the relevant company to fill the

riverside with land. I am satisfied; I am very happy (Interview by the author, 23.07.2012).

The submersion of Gole Çetu was protested by the majority in Dersim. The pro-Kurdish municipality of Dersim also participated in the protests. After the relocation of the ziyaret and the landscaping by Limak Incorporated, the municipality built part of the environmental design of the park and hung a sign at the entrance. Yusuf Cengiz, the chief of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Tunceli, emphasized that the Tunceli governorship did not accept the name "Gole Çetu Parkı" at first, but the municipality insisted on it. The park is one of the largest green spaces of the city. A corner of the park was designed as a ziyaret. The municipality annexed the area into its sphere of activity and took charge of landscaping, irrigation, and tree and plant upkeep.

Although the new ziyaret and park were built by the dam company, Dersim people adopted these spaces in a short span of time. Because the stance of the municipality towards the park changed, the 'created' worship place gained legitimacy more easily. As far as the high percentage of housing and the lack of green spaces in the city are concerned, a park of 16,500 square meters clearly fulfilled a crucial need. The park has been widely accepted, and both the municipality and the governorship have attempted to take credit. Each seeks to arrogate the establishment for itself and highlights its own contribution to the making of the new Gole Çetu (Tunceli'nin Sesi, 29.03.2011).

One of the *dedes* of the Tunceli Cemevi and the director of the Research and Application Center of Alevism at Tunceli University Kadir Bulut, expressed his opinion on Gole Çetu:

The submersion of Gole Çetu is not so important. Frankly, a bit of a populist approach has emerged. Look, this geography as a whole is Gole Çetu. The people were lighting candles there because it was the shallowest point of the river. Then the dam retained water. People struggled with all their might against the dams. Unfortunately, this place has been submerged. Then, thanks to struggles in the democratic sphere, legal means, and the tolerance of the dear governor, a place was formed on the upper side of Gole Çetu. Look, the place [or] space is not so important in the Alevi belief system. However, in the course of history, some spaces, of course, take on specific identities and they must be protected. The disappearance of this identity means the disappearance of the social fabric. Look! The space where two rivers unite, as a whole, was called Gole Çetu ziyaret. People were going under the bridge to light candles. Of course, I am in favour of protecting [Gole Çetu] in its original state; however, unfortunately

we could not. In addition to it, two or three other ziyarets were submerged. The company that built the dams is wrong. The general inclination was for the dams to not be built. It was demanded that other methods be used to produce electricity. It was wished that the natural environment be protected. However, I am opposed to creating the perception that Gole Çetu has been completely submerged and that it has been destroyed. Gole Çetu still exists today. A place was made 100 meters above [its original location]. The people fulfil their religious duties [there] (Interview by the author, 04.07.2012).

Bulut's statement is in harmony with state policies attempting to institutionalize (or re-institutionalize) Alevism and with the interpretation of Alevism by the Cem Foundation based on the principle of a single Alevism. Because Bulut defines Alevism as a universal belief system, he does not pay attention to the specific spaces of Dersim Alevism. Indeed, there is not a "Dersim Alevism" according to him. However, from the indifference Dersim people exhibit towards activities organized by the cemevi, it is clear that the people maintain their traditional worship practices and prefer going to ziyarets rather than the cemevi. The sacred spaces identified with the legends of Dersim are seen as basic houses of worship by the indigenous people.

While there are many *dedes* in the Tunceli Cemevi with varied political viewpoints (for example, one indicated that he is a member of the main opposition party), the prevailing approach (especially that of the chairman of the board) overlaps with that of the government. The discourse of the cemevi is not independent from the Alevi Opening of the government. The ideological aspect of the institution and its relations with the central government are a second, maybe most considerable reason for the indifference of the Dersim people to the cemevi.

3. The Cemevi as State Space

In order to overcome legal obstacles preventing the establishment of *cemevis*, the Alevi people founded associations for strategic reasons. In Dersim, the process of establishing a cemevi started with the foundation of the Tunceli Association for the Dissemination and Solidarity of the Culture of Hacı Bektaş-ı Veli (Hacı Bektaş-ı Veli Kültürünü Yayma ve Yardımlaşma Derneği) in 1993-1994. With increasing urbanization, the cemevi has become a requirement for inhabitants. Previously, the people generally attended religious services in the houses of *dedes* or in *ziyarets*. The migration from country to town necessitated gathering places for Alevi people. Kadir Bulut describes its foundation as follows:

An estate was bought in Gole Çetu with the moral and material support of the people and a contribution by the municipality. Indeed, this [estate] belonged to the municipality. The [cemevi] was constructed here upon the initiative of the mayor. In other cities, mayors do not undertake such initiatives. In municipal plans, there are green spaces [and] areas for mosques, parks, and schools; however, there is no space planned for a cemevi. [Tunceli Cemevi] was built upon the initiative of the municipal council. This was made because 90-95 percent of the people – the majority – are Alevis in Tunceli. The rest was done by the administrative body of the association and with the support of the people (Interview by the author, 04.07.2012).

The establishment of the Tunceli Cemevi was well received by the Dersim people. Almost all agreed that founding a cemevi in the city was essential because they needed a place to hold funerals. Indeed, the basic function of the cemevi for the Dersim people is for funeral services since they are not in the habit of participating in cem ceremonies. During my visits to the cemevi I attended some cem ceremonies. The weekly ceremony that takes place every Thursday was never crowded. The indifference of Dersim people to the cemevi's activities has both religious and political reasons.

As far as their declarations and social activities are concerned, the Tunceli Association for the Dissemination and Solidarity of the Culture of Hacı Bektaş-ı Veli is among associations defining Alevism in parallel with the government. However, their relationship is not only a theoretical consensus. More important is that the cemevi acts as a representative of the government by getting involved in the everyday life and political agendas of the city. Returning to the first question, the crucial reason for the indifference of Dersim people to the cemevi is this parallel between the policy of the state with regard to Alevism and the discourses and practices of the cemevi. The close relationship of its members with the agents of the central authority has drawn a reaction from inhabitants. The institution has been perceived as one of the strategies of the government to reach and 'tame' the Dersim people.

On the other hand, some of the *dedes* of the *cemevi* work in government institutions. For example, the head of the cemevi was appointed as director of the Research and Application Center of Alevism at Tunceli University in 2011 (Sabah, 16.12.2011) and became the provincial director of the Ministry of Family and Social Policies in 2012 with the approval of the ministry. He is also member of the development committee of the Fırat Development Agency (FKA). On that matter, the Dersim Branch of the Confederation of Public Workers' Unions (KESK) prepared a written statement in February 2012 titled 'Irrepressible Rise of a Dede' and criticized him for using his status as a 'springboard' (Özgür Gündem, 19.02.2012). The new director

of the Research and Application Center of Alevism at Tunceli University became another dede at the cemevi. These networks bring the cemevi's staff into disrepute. Some think that employment relations with state institutions damage the virtue and neutrality that religious officials must possess.

The stance of the cemevi towards public authorities, government policies, and the dissatisfaction arising from the central administration gives an idea about its role in the political life of the city. During a visit of the President at the time, Abdullah Gül, displeasure and critique directed at the cemevi deepened. In November 2009, Gül came to the city with Minister of State Faruk Çelik and chair of the Cem Foundation İzzettin Doğan to hold official talks. One of the places he visited was the Tunceli Cemevi. As a friendly gesture to Gül, the cemevi organized a cem ceremony, an event severely criticized by the majority of Dersim people for disregarding the values and principles of Alevism and reducing the semah ceremony to a spectacle. Cihan Söylemez, lawyer and author of the local newspaper *Tuncelinin Sesi*, emphasized that bodyguards for Gül entered the house of worship with their guns and that a hierarchy based on state protocol was established although all are equal in cem. Moreover, the timing of the ceremony was determined according to the program of the state officials (Tuncelinin Sesi, 02.12.2010).

A similar event was organized on the occasion of the opening of the academic year for Tunceli University. Minister of State Mehmet Aydın and the governors and rectors of the region participated in the ceremony which was called a 'unity cem' (*birlik cemi*) (Yeni Şafak, 26.11.2010). However, the event deepened reactions and reinforced the perception that the cemevi represents the government. Many independent dedes and some NGOs accused the rector and the cemevi of playing politics with cem ceremonies. They argued that these made-to-order (*ismarlama*) activities are inconsistent with the essence of Alevism (Vatan, 26.11.2010). They also emphasized that to invite the ministers of the government that do not recognize the cemevi as place of worship is insincere (Milliyet, 26.11.2010).

It seems that the cemevi is seeking to contact with the central authority through the cultural values of Alevism. These values are presented as authentic, touristic components of the city. Massicard theorizes this tendency by defining it as 'the neutralizing effect of spectacle'.

Folklore is a way of imposing silence and producing a 'productive misunderstanding' (Massicard 2003). Cultural markers mean that anybody and everybody is able to attend the transmission of heritage without asking what Aleviness is. This is particularly important in public ceremonies of cems or festivals, attended by people who do not know each other and where disagreements could easily break out about the meaning of Aleviness. Music is a way of drowning out alternative

voices and debate. The cem, the semah and the saz take on a large number of different interpretations, while at the same time providing a collective space in which differences (in experience, interpretation, belief and ritual practice) may be managed and overcome (Stokes 1996, 198). The staging of Alevi culture would seem to be exempt from ideological combat, conferring an appearance of unity and concord both for the group and for those outside the group. But it is difficult to maintain this silence (Massicard 2013, 134).

As Massicard points out, the semah and the cem are the lowest common denominators for both Alevi communities and for Sunnis. The Tunceli Cemevi compromises with the state by bringing culture to forefront and depoliticizing the belief system as a whole. In this way, its performance reduces it to a 'spectacle' (*seyirlik*).

On the other hand, central state's authorities show great interest in the cemevi. This interest is not only related to the Alevi Opening. The cemevi is one of the rare institutions through which the government can communicate with the Dersim people who generally keep their distance from government structures. The AKP cannot attract supporters in the city using conventional methods; instead, it mobilizes civil society. The Gülen and other Islamic communities played an active role in the social construction of the cemevi.⁷

The impact of the Gülen community and others on the cemevi is frequently expressed by the Dersim people in interviews. Especially the representatives of political groups and parties argue that they had sought to be affiliated with the cemevi; however, the administrative body prevented their joining by changing the membership regulations of the association. They indicate that one must - implicitly or clearly - be a supporter of the Gülen community or, at least, not opposed to it in order to take part in the cemevi (Interviews with representatives of local NGOs and socialist groups by the author, 17.07.2012; 13.07.2012; 11.07.2012; 10.07.2012; 10.10.2012; etc.).

The activities of the cemevi reveal its strong ties with Islamic communities. For example, the cemevi organized a wedding ceremony *en masse* for the low-income couples on 29 June 2012 in cooperation with the Mehir Foundation. Located in Konya, the Mehir Foundation was established in 1996 by a group of businessmen and academics to support young people who plan to marry but lack the financial means to do so. It is affiliated to the Association of Turkish Voluntary Enterprises (Türkiye Gönüllü Teşekküller Vakfı, TGTV) that supports the establishment of single-sex schools (Sabah, 16.03.2012) and has come out strongly in favour of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in presidential

⁷ The conflict between the AKP and the Gülen community that came to light in 2013 is a milestone for the AKP government; however, I keep this development out of the discussion.

elections. The Mehir Foundation is also a member of the Union of NGOs of the Islamic World established in 2005 by the TGTV. The union had opposed a lawsuit demanding the closure of the AKP (Zaman, 17.03.2008), and had leaned towards the government in the matter of Syria by protesting the Assad regime (Zaman, 20.11.2013).

On the billboard announcing the wedding ceremony *en masse* was not only the logo of the Mehir Foundation, but also those of the Directorate of Religious Affairs, Tunceli University, and the Governorship of Tunceli. The announcement included a hadith (Hadis-i Şerif) and was signed by Hüseyin Yıldırım, the mufti of Tunceli, Ali Ekber Yurt, the chairman of the cemevi, and Mustafa Özdemir, the chairman of the Mehir Foundation. It was indicated that governor Mustafa Taşkesen and rector Durmuş Boztuğ would participate in the ceremony. Indeed, this simple event announcement encapsulated the pro-government block of the city.

The administration of the cemevi frequently convenes with state officers and provincial representatives of the Directorate of Religious Affairs. They often organize *iftar* (the meal ending a daily fast), not only on the holy days of Alevis (*Muharrem*) but also on those of Sunnis (*Ramadan*). For example, the Munzur Schools – which are known as educational institutions of the Gülen community –, the provincial organization of the AKP, the provincial mufti, and the governor hosted iftars in the cemevi during the month of Muharrem. Moreover, riot police (*çevik kuvvet*) visited the cemevi in the same month and broke their fast with the dedes (*Milliyet*, 19.11.2012). This new habitude can be interpreted as part of the ‘Muharrem Opening’ of the government. In the Grand National Assembly of Turkey (TBMM), an iftar meal has started to be served during the month of Muharrem.⁸ Although many Alevis find such iftar events wrong and inconsistent with the principles of Alevism, the Tunceli Cemevi declared that it regards these invitations as opportunities for unity and solidarity (*Yeni Şafak*, 13.11.2013).

In the month of Ramadan in 2013, the administration of the cemevi invited bureaucrats and military personnel in the city for an iftar. The governor, the commander of the commando brigade, the chief public prosecutor, the lieutenant governor, the provincial gendarmerie commander, the provincial police chief, and the directors of several governmental bodies accepted the invitation (Tuncelinin Sesi, 19.07.2013). The participants in these iftars are people with whom the Dersim people have almost no contact.

⁸ This development was sharply criticized by the Tunceli deputy, Hüseyin Aygün. Aygün claims that because Muharrem is a month of mourning, Alevis do not break their fasts with ostentatious invited iftar events and there is no tradition of making crowded iftars (*Evrinsel*, 05.11.2013).

Relations between the cemevi and the provincial security directorate are worth paying attention too. On the notice board of the cemevi was information about their joint work. In January 2012, a seminar to introduce Alevism to police officers was arranged. The honoured guests of the seminar were once again bureaucrats of the city. According to the activity report, the provincial police chief Hayati Yılmaz stated that Alevism, like the police, fights against crime and criminals. Alienation from Alevism increases the burden of the police (Tuncelinin Sesi, 19.01.2012). In other words, because being faithful is seen as a virtue that contributes to social peace, the police prefer the Alevism of the city to the atheism of illegal organizations even though it is different from the dominant religion or religious sect.

However, the provincial security directorate is on the black list of Dersim people for unresolved murders that occurred in the 1990s. In the social atmosphere of Dersim, police are not trusted. The people would rather keep their distance from the police. The police also do not engage with the inhabitants except when using force. The cemevi tries to build a bridge between the security forces and Dersim people through a discourse of complacency and social peace; however, a considerable part of the city thinks that the main intent is to curry favour with the government.

Consequently, due to the legitimacy it has gained through open or implicit support of the state and Islamic communities, the cemevi feels empowered to act as the religious authority of Alevis living in Dersim. It has created a new interpretation of Alevism that occasionally conflicts with the conventional, local religious values and practices of Dersim people. It tries to teach the people Alevism's 'universal' principals and forms of worship. In other words, it assumes a leading role and reconstructs the belief system by restricting it to a specific space. A political activist of the city interprets the process as follows:

Spontaneously, the cemevi has been the means of domestication of the Dersim people. I do not believe that the state or the Gülen community would specifically make a plan to eradicate Dersim Alevism while founding the cemevi. I do not want to propagate a conspiracy theory. However, the directors of the period took advantage of the cemevi. The originality of Dersim Alevism is seen as anomalous by the state. The spaces of Dersim Alevism are Gole Çetü, Mother Fatma, all the mountains, stones, waters, etc. anyone can produce a place of worship next to their home anywhere they want by putting some stones there. In Dersim Alevism, there is no spiritual leader who preaches to people. There are no central spaces speaking on behalf of the community. However, Dersim Alevism has been put into central spaces and has been socialized. The system benefits from this trend. It openly exploits

it. This situation has not been publicly discussed. The active role of the *cemevis* to tame Dersim Alevism. The aim is to produce particular spaces and religious leaders (interview by the author, 17.07.2012).

Conclusion

This paper scrutinized spatial interventions of the AKP government in order to reshape Alevism, a heterodox religion. In this context it firstly focused on the 'joint mosque-*cemevi* project' consisting of complexes attempted to be built in the Alevi-populated neighborhoods. Secondly, it examined the case of Dersim. It argued that the institutionalization of Alevism via the *cemevi* not only enables the state to control cities or neighbourhoods where Alevi population lives but also incorporates Alevis into Islam. It encourages the people to turn to religion and fulfil religious duties, and as the provincial police chief of Dersim expressed, it lessens the burden on security forces.

In the 1970s, leftist organizations ignored all religious values, not only those of Sunni Islam but also Alevism. Their indifference and even hostility towards religion have been criticized long with the rise of cultural politics; however, their rejection of religious values clearly contributed to the development of more materialist approaches in Alevi provinces and neighbourhoods. In this period, the expansion of socialist ideas and the decline of religious customs occurred in parallel and fed each other, which is why irreligion is seen by the state more dangerous than Alevism.

Besides, the Alevism supported by the government is 'formal' type Alevism, free from politics and from the natural patterns that were perceived as deviant. The spatial interventions invented by the state incorporate Alevism into a universal interpretation of Alevism defined by Sunni Islam and framed by pro-government Alevi associations. Thus, it has been 'normalized' and standardized. The discourses and practices of the Tunceli *cemevi* and joint mosque-*cemevi* projects overlap those of the government and of government agencies seeking its restriction in cultural realms. On the other hand, the government seeks to reach Alevi people through *cemevis* with a discourse of the fraternity of the Sunnis and Alevis and of mutual tolerance. Islam has been described as the common ground between Alevis and the state. The mediators of this relation, the *dedes* of the *cemevi*, play the essential role of not only 'teaching' a sterile Alevism purged of dangerous demands but also of transferring the messages of the government and Islamic communities to people. The mutual affinity between the state and the *cemevi* inevitably entails prestigious positions for

the dedes close to the government and offers them a sphere independent of an open merit system.

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