

INVENTED TRADITIONS OF THE TURKISH ALEVIS – THE GATHERING HOUSE (*CEM EVİ*), PRAYER CEREMONY (*CEM*), AND RELIGIOUS MARRIAGE CEREMONY¹

ABSTRACT: The Alevis form a heterogeneous community in Turkey, which was historically associated with the Turkish tribes called *Kızılbaş*. Their descendants created a syncretic socioreligious system that consisted of various elements, mainly of the pre-Islamic Turkish beliefs, as well as Sunni and Shia Islam (including diverse Sufi movements). The 20th century brought political, economic, and ideological changes, which necessitated the modification of the social and religious worldview of the Alevis. These changes may sometimes be perceived as an invented tradition or as changes that are indispensable to preserve the integrity of the group and its worldview. In both cases, they may cause important modifications in the traditional institutions and the symbolic culture. The phenomenon may be observed in many aspects of the Alevis' culture. The aim of this paper is to analyse the problem of cultural change and the re-construction of the tradition of the Alevis' culture on the basis of three examples: the creation of the gathering house (Tur. *cem evi*), rituals of the prayer ceremony (Tur. *cem*) related to the ceremony of Raising the Light (Tur. *çerağ uyandırması*) and the contemporary religious marriage ceremony which takes place in front of the Alevi leader (Tur. *dede*) in the gathering house.

KEYWORDS: Turkish Alevis, invented tradition, religion, religious ceremonies

ALEVIS – DEFINITION

The Alevis are a heterogeneous socio-religious community that is present in Turkey. Historically they were affiliated with the Turkmen tribes called *Kızılbaş*, supporting the Safavid dynasty in Iran. But their worldview is often described as syncretic. It contains mainly Sunni and Shia Islam elements (including diverse Sufi movements and a great reverence for Imam Ali and Twelve Imams), as well as the elements of pre-Islamic Turkish beliefs (with a strong position of animism), Buddhism, Zoroastrianism or Christianity. The socio-ideological specificity of the group is expressed, among others, in their rituals connected with the tribe-kinship system, as well as with the initiation and introduction of a new member into the society. All of that differentiates the Alevis' culture from their Sunni environment in Turkey.

Another element, that is very important to the Alevis' doctrine and their identity, is the historical consciousness of the group, which they have created on the basis of a common perception of being in danger and the necessity to hide. At the end of the 15th century, the ancestors of the contemporary Alevis were treated as internal, ideological, and political enemies by their rulers because they had sympathized with and supported

¹ The text is based on the research which has been conducted by the author of this article in Turkey, Germany and Poland since 2005.

Safavid and Shia enemies of the Sunni Ottoman dynasty. Especially sultan Selim I the Grim (Tur. Yavuz Sultan Selim) is connected with the first humongous tragedy which has been preserved in the collective memory of the Kızılbaş-Alevis. Before the campaign against Shah Ismail I, approximately 40 thousand men and boys were killed on the sultan's order. And because some parts of the Kızılbaş were connected in Anatolia with the Bektashi Order of Dervishes in Hacibektaş, the central *tekke* was closed and the dervishes were persecuted as well. The second great wave of persecution that the Kızılbaş-Alevis survived took place after 1826 when the janissary corps was abolished because the Bektashis were tightly connected with this formation. The Bektashi Brotherhood was delegalized and many dervishes were killed. The acts of intolerance, pursuing, and tormenting of the Alevis could be observed throughout the whole history of the Ottoman Empire, and unfortunately, many examples can be found in more recent times (Bozkurt F. 2005, pp. 66–68; Inalcik, pp. 51–52, 279, 189, 291–298; Shaw, p. 142; Yaman A. 2007, p. 96). In the past, global persecution, as well as local acts of intolerance, caused the Alevis to hide their ideas and rituals. What was worse, the transition of the tradition was very often broken, and new generations had to re-create their knowledge and rituals if they had no one qualified to teach them.

INVENTED TRADITION – WHAT IS IT? WHAT IS IT IN THE CASE OF THE ALEVIS?

We can think of cultural change, which is a natural process happening in every society, as a special kind of change understood as the invention of a tradition. All traditions, even those that claim to be very old, were invented in the past and are usually subject to change and modification all the time, even though the process has not been noticed by society. As a matter of fact, the invented tradition may represent both types: a tradition that is invented and constructed by some authorities from scratch for a particular purpose or which is developed by them because of some needs, and a tradition spontaneously created and established in a relatively short period of time (within a few years or during the lifetime of one generation). According to Eric Hobsbawm's definition, the "invented tradition is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual of symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past" (Hobsbawm, p. 1). Actually, every tradition is constantly invented as it is changing as long as the culture changes. In the case of the Alevis, we cannot speak about "inventing" their traditions from the beginning. However, the challenges of the 20th and 21st centuries linked with great political and social transformations in Turkey, as well as with the progress of the technological civilization make some changes and inventions necessary for their tradition to continue.

The present paper presents an attempt to analyse three elements of the Alevis' tradition, which may be regarded as invented, profoundly modified, or transformed. The first one refers to the invention of the gathering house (Tur. *cem evi*), where almost all religious ceremonies take place. The second one concerns the ritual of Raising the Light (Tur. *çerağ uyandırması*), which is an important part of the prayer ceremony (Tur. *cem*). The third one is focused on the contemporary religious marriage ceremony, which is held in front of the leader of an Alevi community (Tur. *dede*) in the gathering house.

THE INVENTION OF *CEM EVI*

For centuries the Alevis have been keeping in secret their cultural characteristics, including their religion and ceremonies, because of the fear of persecutions. In the Alevis' villages there were no mosques, as there was no need for that. Nevertheless, they also did not build their own prayer houses. Moreover, the Alevis' group did not develop their own architectural pattern either. In the past, the religious ceremonies of *cem* took place in secret, whenever the participants of the ceremony considered it appropriate. Thus, the *cem* ceremonies could be conducted in the rooms of the biggest houses in the village as well as in a sheep shed, a stable, or in the forest in an open space. In the democratic, secular, respecting human rights Republic of Turkey, the Alevis have not had any official *cem evi*s, which means the places for religious ceremonies. Still, the status of *cem evi*s is not fully regulated, although it is one of the most important problems for contemporary Alevi society. But at least since the middle of the 20th century, when large groups of people started migrating to the cities, the Alevis felt the need to have their own places of worship and wanted to construct them. In contemporary times, the *cem evi*s are usually built by the members of the Alevi society with the help of fees and contributions (Godzińska 2016, pp. 150–170; Rençber, pp. 73–86).

The architectural plan and concept for the *cem evi* had to be constructed almost from scratch. Some examples of such construction could have been taken from the prayer chamber in the Bektashi *tekke* in Hacibektaş. However, those who wanted to build their houses of worship and gather since the middle of the 20th century did not have the chance to see the Bektashi ceremonies in the ceremonial chambers and halls of the *tekke*. Thus, the space had to be arranged according to the needs dictated by the *cem* ritual itself.

In the ceremony of *cem*, men, and women participate as equal members of the society, souls (Tur. *can*) in which the Absolute Truth, which means God, is present. Therefore, the participants sit in a circle facing each other just like they would face the God who is present in every participant of the gathering. That is why *cem* is sometimes called *halka namazı*, which means 'prayers in the circle'. The space should allow the participants to sit and pray in the circle. The special place is reserved for the community leader, *dede*, who runs the ceremony, as well as for the *zakir*, a person who recites all prayers with the accompaniment of the traditional instrument *saz*. During the ceremony, candles or electrical lamps are lit as a symbol of Enlightenment. There is also the *semah* ritual dance whirled by participants. And at the end of the ceremony, the participants share the ritual food, which is very often prepared after the sacrifice of an animal. Therefore, in the *cem evi* not only the prayer hall should be arranged, but also some space for the provision and kitchen facilities.

The whole functional and practical space must be filled with ideological elements. Therefore, on the walls are pictures of the twelve imams, imam Ali, Hacı Bektaş Veli or other patrons of the local community, a portrait of Atatürk, or a Turkish flag. Sometimes books about Alevism, anthologies of the prayers, or *saz* instruments are kept and exposed in the prayer halls or the chambers.

In the past, *cem* rituals were organized in private houses or even in stables, since the functional aspect was the most important. Such a space could be arranged *ad hoc* for the time of the ceremony. It must also be noticed that a special arrangement is needed in the space which has not been originally designed as a ritual space and which has been adapted for the purpose of the ceremony. Not only basements but also attics full

of construction elements such as niches, columns, stairs, etc., could be arranged for the ceremony space (Godzińska 2014, pp. 31–34).

All elements of the Alevi worldview and their full ideological program may be displayed in the *cem evi* or ceremonial *cem* halls, which are constructed from scratch or arranged in an empty space.

The central *cem evi* in the city of Erzincan (Tur. *Erzincan Merkez Cem Evi*) is a big architectural complex and the worship chamber is only a part of the Erzincan Province Centre of the Hadji Bektash Veli Foundation for the Anatolian Culture (Tur. *Hacı Bektaş Veli Anadolu Kültür Vakfı, Erzincan Şubesi*). Within the Centre, the offices of the Foundation, except for the *cem evi* chambers, the kitchens, the place to sacrifice animals, an eating room, a conference room, classes for *saz* training, a library and a reading room, a little hostel, and even a funeral office with a necessary infrastructure are located.

The *cem* hall in the Erzincan Cem Evi is of a circular shape, with the vault divided into twelve parts as a symbol of the twelve imams. The circle plan of the hall, without any additional divisions, makes all gathered people look into each other's faces, regardless of age or sex, which is expected during the Alevis rituals. The place for the leaders who conduct the *cem* ceremony – *dede* and *zakir* – is situated on the ambit of the circle, just opposite the main doors. Inside the general space, there is a little circle set apart, which is connected with the big one, where participants who perform special roles during the ceremony (the so-called masters of the twelve duties, Tur. *on iki hizmet sahipleri*) sit and where the most important rites of the *cem* are conducted.

The walls are decorated with images of the twelve imams, imam Ali, imam Hasan and Hüseyin. Just behind the leader, on the main wall, which everyone sees during the ceremony, images of the twelve imams, Haji Bektash Veli, and Mustafa Kemal Atatürk were displayed, now there are images of imam Ali, Haji Bektash Veli, and Alevis whirling *semah*. In front of the leaders, three lamps are situated, which are connected with the Alevi Sacred Trinity of the Divine Truth, prophet Muhammad, and Imam Ali (Tur. *Hak-Muhammad-Ali*) treated as the Unity.

Moreover, a very similar arrangement may be found in the Can Dostlar Cem Evi in Ankara. Here, the *cem evi* was organized and arranged in an open office space. A quite big square room offered freedom to organize the space according to the Alevis' needs. The participants of the *cem* gathering may sit along the walls, as expected, facing each other. *Dede* and *zakir* sit opposite the door, back to the windows, but in front of them; on a little table, a candlestick with three candles is placed during the ceremony. Number five, as well as number three, are very important. But in this context, it is connected with the Sacred House of Imam Ali (Tur. *Ehl-i Beyt*), which consisted of the prophet Muhammad, Imam Ali, his wife and daughter of Muhammad, the Blessed Fatma, and two of Fatma and Ali's sons, the second and the third imams, Hasan and Hüseyin, who gave a start to the line of the twelve imams. The walls are decorated with wallpapers representing huge images, whereby all of them (except for Fatma) represented especially Imam Ali, the twelve imams, Haji Bektash Veli, and Kemal Atatürk. One of the most interesting pictures is the allegoric image of the circle of the twelve imams with Kemal Atatürk in the center of the circle, which is a very significant expression that shows great respect and even displays the cult of Atatürk among the Alevis.

All the plans and arrangements for the interior of *cem evi* have been recently created and were absent in the past. If one compares the possibilities offered by a room in a home where the family lives with the *cem* halls in *cem evi*s, the invented elements are

exceptionally clear. It is obvious as well that the functional and symbolic circle space, symbolic numbers (twelve, three, five), and images of Alevis' cultural heroes chosen in a very thoughtful way carry a message that is present in the Alevi tradition, but which was not as clearly expressed before the time when the *cem evi* was invented.

RISING OF THE LIGHT MYSTERY – ÇERAĞ UYANDIRMASI

One of the most important moments of the *cem* is the ritual of Raising the Light. Light is the symbol of the Highest Absolute Enlightening, which is the purpose of every Alevi following the Path of True through the Four Gates of Knowledge.² The unification with the Divine Reality is possible for the Perfect Man (Tur. *İnsan-ı Kamil*). The Light is also identified with the Sacred Trinity God Muhammad Ali. Prophet Muhammad and Imam Ali are not only part of the Light and they were not only unified with the Light as the Perfect Men, but they both came from the Light. It is also sometimes suggested that other imams among the Twelve Imams came from the Light, and it is of course acknowledged that they are the Perfect Men. Light also symbolizes the hope for a better future, when justice and order will prevail. Light will shine upon the people in the whole world according to the principles of the Path.

The Light cannot be interrupted or extinguished. In the past, the only situation in which it could happen was during the *cem* gathering if some danger came into the village, i.e. the troops of the gendarmery or an army attacked the habitants. The Light was lit usually in an oil lamp, and in the course of the ritual, it was kept burning by adding oil to the lamp. When the ritual was nearing an end, the person responsible for the Light (and the lamp) stopped adding the oil so that the light went out by itself, but not through a human act of extinguishing. Today, nobody uses oil lamps, but candles or electric lamps. Candles are perceived as the traditional solution, though they were not so popular in Turkish villages even in the middle of the 20th century. Naturally, if during the *cem* ceremony, the Light is represented by a candle or an electric lamp, there is no possibility of waiting until it burns out or until someone cuts the electricity. Someone must extinguish it, which is done in every group and at the end of every *cem*. Usually, it was done without any accompanying ritual, so the participants did not even notice this fact. But in some Alevi groups, the light may be extinguished in a ceremonial way. To do that, a certain ritual was created.

In one of the Ankara communities, the ritual of Raising the Light is carried out according to the following scheme. One of the masters of the twelve duties, who must

² The doctrine of Four Gateways (Tur. *dört kapı*) is a basic concept of the Alevi worldview. It represents the way in which a man or a woman improves oneself on the Path of Learning and Uniting with God. The Four Gateways are: I. the gate of sharia (Tur. *şeriyat kapısı*), which means the Islamic religious law, the state, and conditions every person is born in; II. gate of *tarik* (Tur. *tarik kapısı*), which is the gate of the path when one learns the secret religious knowledge. Every Alevi should get through that gate in the initiation ritual when two married couples established the relation of cultural (social) kinship, which is the brotherhood of the path (Tur. *yol kardeşliği*) to become *musahibs* (Tur. *musahip*), which means one soul in four bodies; III. gate of *marifet* (Tur. *marifet kapısı*), which means mystic learning and the knowledge of God; IV. gate of *hakikat* (Tur. *hakikat kapısı*) means the full and complete unity with the Absolute of God and is connected with experiencing the essence of divine reality. See: Birge, pp. 102–109, 180; Korkmaz, pp. 122, 186–190, 276–281, 394–405, 424–431; Yaman M. 2013, pp. 265–267; Yılmaz Soyoyer, pp. 149–150.

take care of lighting of all *cem evi* and who is called *çerağcı* or *mumcu*³ takes part in the rite of Raising the Light. He steps into the middle of the ceremonial circle with the candlestick with five candles and recites a short prayer, mentioning everyone whom the Light represents:

Allahın Nuru, Hak Muhammet Alinin ışığı, Kırklar ceminin çerağı, Pir Cabiri ensur⁴ olan delilimiz uyanıyor.⁵

Our Light, which is the Light of Allah, the Light of Hak Muhammad Ali, the Light of the Gathering of Forties, the Light of Pir Cabiri Ensür.

Then the 24th verse of Quranic sura the Lihgt (Tur. *Nur*) is recited:

Bismillahi Rahmanirahim! Allahü nurüssemavati vel'ardi. Meselü nurihi kemişkatın fiyha mısbah. Elmusbahu fiy züccaceh. Ezzüccacetü keenneha kevkübün dürrriyyünç Yükkadi, min mübareketin zeytunetin la şarkıyyetin ve lev garbiyyin etin yekadu zeytiha. Yudi'ü ve lev lem temseshü. Narün, nurün 'ala nurin, yehdiyullahü linurihi men yeşa'u, ve yadribullahül'emsale linnasi, vallahü biküllü şey'in 'aliymün.⁶

And the candlestick is placed on a little table in front of the *dede* who runs the whole ceremony of *cem*. Next to him sits *zakir* who recites all the prayers. Both *çerağcı* and *dede* light the candles using a match. The first match is lit by the *çerağcı* then the *dede* lights his match from *çerağcı* and they light the candles together. During the entire ceremony, the *çerağcı* recites his prayers called *selavat*. Its aim is to convey the greeting of twelve imams:

*Allahümme Salli ala Seyyidina Muhammed Mustafa
Allahümme Salli ala Seyyidina Aliyye'l Murtaza
Allahümme Salli ala Seyyidina Şah Hasan Hülkü Rıza
Allahümme Salli ala Seyyidina Şah Hüseyin-i Kerbela
Allahümme Salli ala Seyyidina imam Zeynel Aba
Allahümme Salli ala Seyyidina imam Bakır Baha
Allahümme Salli ala Seyyidina imam Cafer Rehnüma
Allahümme Salli ala Seyyidina imam Musayı Kazım
Allahümme Salli ala Seyyidina imam Ali Rıza
Allahümme Salli ala Seyyidina imam Şah Takı
Allahümme Salli ala Seyyidina Ba Naki*

³ Tur. *Çerağcı* 'the one who carries the wick of a lamp'; *mumcu* – 'the one who carries the candle'. *Çerağ* means 'a wick (of a candle)' or generally any device that provides light with a flame (candle, oil lamp).

⁴ *Ensür* – an inhabitant of the city of Yatreb, a follower of the prophet Muhammad in the first years of Hicra.

⁵ All quotations of the prayers recited during the ritual come from the author's archive and from the ceremony that took place in one of Ankara's Alevi communities on the 21st of August 2008 (author's archive: AB – 2008.08.21 – Ankara CanDostlar- cem a).

⁶ Quran, Nur, 24:35. The text has been written down according to the recorded materials and it has been corrected according to the *Ehlibeyt Muhiblerine Kelam-ı Kadim Kur'an-ı Hakim ve öz Türkçe meali, Kur'an Heyet Alevi Dedeleri* (Ayyıldız Yayınları, Ankara, no printing date available).

Allahümme Salli ala Seyyidina imam Ali Askeri
Allahümme Salli ala Seyyidina Muhammed Mehdi...

God! Give your mercy to Muhammed Mustafa and His descendants!
 God! Give your mercy to Aliyye'l Murtaza and His descendants!
 God! Give your mercy to Şah Hasan Hülkü Rıza and His descendants!
 God! Give your mercy to Şah Hüseyin of Kerbela and His descendants!
 God! Give your mercy to Imam Zeynel Aba and His descendants!
 God! Give your mercy to Imam Bakır Baha and His descendants!
 God! Give your mercy to Imam Cafer Rehnüma and His descendants!
 God! Give your mercy to Imam Musayı Kazım and His descendants!
 God! Give your mercy to Imam Ali Rıza and His descendants!
 God! Give your mercy to Imam Şah Takı and His descendants!
 God! Give your mercy to Imam Ba Naki and His descendants!
 God! Give your mercy to Imam Ali Askeri and His descendants!
 God! Give your mercy to Imam Muhammed Mehdi and His descendants!

Then he kisses the table three times and says the following words:

Ya Allah, Ya Muhammed, Ya Ali
Pirimiz hünkarımız Hacı Bektaş Veli gelmişiz

Oh Allah! Oh Muhammad! Oh Ali!
 We have come to our Lord Pir Hacı Bektaş Veli

and takes all the candles to the *meydan*, which is the centre of the ritual circle and recites the continuation of the *selavat* prayer, mentioning all persons in the name of whom the Light was woken up.

Çün çerağı fahr uyandırdık Hüdanın aşkına
Seyyid el kevneyn Muhammed Mustafa'nin aşkına
Sakii el-Kevser Aliyyel Murtazanin aşkına
Hem Hatice Fatıma Hayrül Nisanın aşkına
Şah Hasan, Hulki Rıza, Şah Hüseyini Kerbela
İmamı etkiya Zeynel Ebanın aşkına
Ol Muhammed Bakır nesli Paki Murteza
Cafer-i Sadık İmamı Rehmümanın aşkına
Ol Musai Kazım Serfirazı Ehli Hak
Ali Musa Rızayı Sabiranın aşkına
Şah Takı, Ba Naki, ol imam Ali Askeri
Ol Muhammed Mehdi sahip livanın aşkına
*Ey Füzüli Pirimiz Hünkarımız Bektaş Velinin aşkına*⁷
 (...)
Candan salavatı

⁷ The prayer, which is recited by the *çerağcı*, is known to have been composed by Fuzuli as well as Şah Hatayi. See: Bozkurt N., pp. 193–194.

We have woken up the Light for the love of God
 For the love of the Lord of two worlds Muhammed Mustafa
 For the sake of el-Kevser Aliyyel Murtaza
 And for the love of Hatice Fatıma Hayrül Nisa
 Şah Hasan, Hulki Rıza, Şah Hüseyini Kerbela
 For the love of Zeynel Eba
 Muhammed Bakır pure descendant of Murteza
 For the love of Merciful Imam Cafer Sadık
 Musa Kazım Serfirazı of the Saint Truth
 For the love of patience of Ali Musa Rıza
 Şah Takı, Ba Naki, Imam Ali Askeri
 For the love of Muhammed Mehdi, the lord of lands
 Oh Füzüli Pirimiz for the love of our lord Bektaş Veli (...)
 The deep respect of our souls

Now, the *dede* recites a short prayer to express his gratitude for completing this part of the duty:

Bismişah! Allah, Allah! Allah, Allah! Hizmetin kabul ola. Hizmetinden şefaât bulasın. Cabur Ensar himmeti üzerinde hazır ve nazır ola. Dil bizden nefes Hünkardan ola. Hüü! Mümine ya Ali!

Bismişah! Allah, Allah! Allah, Allah! May your service be accepted! May your service bring protection [for you]! May the protection and care of Cabur Ensar be ready on your behalf! May the words be from us and spirit from our Lord. Hüü! For believers, Oh Ali!

At the end of the *cem* ritual, there is another ritual, though without a name. Its purpose is to extinguish the spark of the candle. Again, the *çerağcı* steps to the *meydan*, he kneels in front of the candles and extinguishes them with his fingers reciting the short prayer:

*Çeragımızı sır ediyoruz.
 Ya Adamin nuru aşkına!
 Ya Allah! Ya Allah! Ya Allah!
 Peygamberlerin nuru aşkına!
 Ya Muhammed! Ya Muhammed! Ya Muhammed!
 Velayettin nuru aşkına!
 Ya Ali! Ya Ali! Ya Ali!*

We keep our Light in secret.
 For the love of the Light of a Human Being!
 Oh Allah! Oh Allah! Oh Allah!
 For the love of the Light of Prophets!
 Oh Muhammed! Oh Muhammed! Oh Muhammed!
 For the love of the Light of the Messengers!
 Oh Ali! Oh Ali! Oh Ali!

Then, he moves back to the middle of the ceremonial circle and the *dede* thanks him for completing his duty.

The procedure of turning off the light might have been established for a technical reason. No one would dare to leave burning candles without supervision or leave the electricity on. The danger of fire and the fear of the electricity bills is too high. Although in the past there was no problem with leaving the light on because it went off by itself, today the question of “turning off” the Light is sometimes taken into consideration. From the symbolic point of view, it absolutely cannot be accepted. The doctrine of Four Gates, the Path of Learning and uniting with the Divine Absolute Truth and Reality (Tur. *Hak*), the idea of Light as the essence of the Perfect Man, and especially the Sacred Trinity *Hak(Allah)-Muhammad-Ali* and the Sacred House of prophet Muhammad and imam Ali... all are connected as the essence of the idea and the symbol of the Light and Illumination. How could anyone turn that kind of Light off?

In addition, this is not only a doctrinal question but also a problem of the coexistence of the Alevis and Sunnis in Turkey, the “Turning of the Light” mentioned sometimes as *mum olayı* is a part of a very negative stereotype of the Alevis in the Sunni part of the society. According to this stereotype, the Alevis turn the light off during *cem* ceremony to mark the beginning of the sexual orgy. Such a “secret” and common suspicion is allegedly confirmed by other strange and unclear *haram* things like singing and eating during worship or the fact that men pray together with women (Kaplan, pp. 41–53; Yaman A. 2007, pp. 145, 150, 155).

But independently from whether the turning off the Light is treated by the Alevis themselves as a technical act or as a symbolic one, the Light must be turned off. For this reason the need for a ritual to allow it appeared during the ceremony. Currently, the second part of the Light ritual connected with turning it off has become popular, so the symbolic meaning of the act will have to be explained. Of course, the open elements of the culture may be changed relatively easily, while the hidden ones are difficult to change. However, if we understand the problem from the perspective of the invented tradition, it becomes clear that not only the part of the ceremony but also the part of the doctrine will have to be modified.

WEDDING AND MARRIAGE

Marriage, with a complex of events, habits, rituals, and beliefs, constitutes one of the most important moments in the life of a human being. The whole group of participants is involved in the organization of the wedding, not only when it is linked with a kind of social and legal agreement, but also with some religious rites. But in the past, in the Ottoman Empire, until the beginning of the 20th century, marriage ceremonies in the Muslim community were rather not related to religious life and there was no distinction between religious and secular weddings and marriages. For Muslims in the Ottoman Empire, marriage was a kind of contract concluded before a judge (Tur. Osm. *Kadî*) in the presence of witnesses representing the spouses and their families. The judge acted and provided his decisions based on the Sharia law which is derived from the Holy Book of Quran, but in the case of marriage, he did not act as a religious leader (although sometimes he could be one), but as a representative of the legal system of the state. Thus, the marriage was not a religious ritual or sacrament, but only an agreement and a contract

between the bride and her family on the one side and the groom and his family on the other side. Of course, not everywhere the judge was available. In little villages or in the nomad groups, he could be replaced by a local religious leader, or the contract was concluded without the participation of the official judge. The marriage was accepted by the society because every element of the traditional ritual was realized and implemented by all relatives and participants of the ceremony.

When the Republic of Turkey was established in 1923, numerous reforms were carried out in every area of life, including the civil code, and family and matrimonial laws. All regulations of the Ottoman Empire laws were abolished, including the element of religious tradition, i.e. polygyny. The marriage rules were based exclusively on the regulations of the new secular code. The person who could perform the act of marriage was no longer a judge connected with some religious functions, but just a civil registrar working at a local Register Office according to the secular law of the Republic. The marriage ceremony was lawful, official, and accepted by all institutions of the state (Tur. *resmi nikah*). Those who had no possibility or just did not feel the need to marry formally in the Register Office, did it as before, following the old tradition (Tur. *geleneksel evlenme*). Marriage concluded according to local customs and traditions was made legitimate in this case through social recognition.

Since the middle of the 21st century, a slow but steady rise of influence and importance of the Sunni Muslim religious circles can be observed in Turkey. They have consistently increased their influence on the authorities and won the public trust. At the end of the century, the marriage ceremony before an imam (Tur. *imam nikahı*) also became increasingly popular. It is an element of an old tradition that has survived in the culture of secular Turkey. However, while in the Ottoman Empire, the wedding was just a contract and a lawyer was needed to conclude the agreement, in contemporary times the imam, who most importantly is a local religious leader who takes care of the mosque, took over the function of the former judge. For many people this renewed way of getting married was not only the basis of their social and family relationship, but it also became a declaration of their religious, social, and even political views. Consequently, the civil, official wedding often was only a kind of supplement and a compromise with the secular law of the state.

Probably, it was the popularity of *imam nikahı* that provoked the specific reaction of the Alevi groups representing different religious views, a different system of religious leadership, and different year and life cycle rituals from the Sunni community. The Alevis usually avoided mosques as centers of worship and imams as religious leaders and teachers of their Sunni neighbors. Their traditional village weddings did not have to be conducted by either a secular authority or a spiritual leader. In the cities, their wedding ceremonies were usually secular. However, it is quite interesting that when some Alevis vehemently denied that something like the *dede nikahı* may exist, others quite confidently spoke about their own and their children's marriage ceremonies run by the *dede*.⁸

Nevertheless, it must be noted that in the Alevi communities, marriage was always connected both with the social as well as with the religious life of the members of the group. As a matter of fact, it was an extremely important event in the life of every Alevi, since only two married couples could enter into the spiritual brotherhood called *musahiplik* and as brothers of the Path could cross the First Gate of *Tarikat*. Furthermore,

⁸ Author's archive: (AB-444-2021; AB-445-2021; AB-446-2021; AB-447-2021; AB-452-2021).

the decision about marrying two people certainly required or rather required in the past when the Alevis lived in relatively smaller communities, a greater consideration, as it was related to the social and demographic future of the group. The reason for it was that those who were to be married under any circumstances must not have been connected by cultural kinship relations, *musahiplik* or *kirvelik*. The rule was obligatory, according to the local traditions, and sometimes it even reached up to the seventh generation in the past (Kaygusuz, p. 18; Korkmaz, pp. 304–314; Örnek, p. 183; Yaman A. 2006, pp. 243–245; Yaman M. 2013, pp. 220–223, 293–296; Yılmaz Soyzer, pp. 309–310).

The group made the decision about the marriage of young people under the leadership of the *dede*. This person, especially in the past, could also act as the president of the local social court of the village community. He was a member of a group of religious leaders and moral authorities. However, that did not mean that *dedes* conducted the marriage ceremony. They could bless the community and the future married couple when the decision to get married was made.

Moreover, in the religious texts, there were no general procedures, descriptions of rituals, or prayers that were supposed to be used during marriage ceremonies. The whole ceremony had to be constructed on the basis of the existing principles according to which other Alevi ceremonies were held and the general principles of the social and religious life of the group. It was not an easy task. Some contemporary publications indicate the problems faced by those who are trying to take up this challenge and develop such a model rite.

Sometimes authors writing about the Alevi marriage rites connect them with a religious act. For instance, they use the term *erkan* to describe them. This term may indicate the religious nature of the ritual (Koç Şinasi dede; *Nikah Erkanı*).⁹ The term *erkan* has a quite broad meaning and it is often mentioned in the Alevi religious texts. It may refer to the Path leading through the Four Gates to know the Absolute Truth, some religious practices, or even to the required moral attitudes (İmam Cafer Sadık 2006, pp. 195–200; Korkmaz 2003, p. 140).

In 1993 Mehmet Yaman, Alevi *dede*, published a book in which he described the main principles of the social and religious doctrine of Alevism as well as some rituals and ceremonies. He also mentioned marriage rituals. He distinguished, among other things, between religious marriages conducted by imams and *dedes*. Such a marriage ceremony was named a religious one, and the institution of marriage was called sacred (Tur. *kutsal*) (p. 299). The scenario of the rite outlined by Mehmet Yaman looks quite clear and simple. The bride and the groom accompanied by their witnesses stand before the *dede*, or another person of social authority and religious knowledge. After recording their personal data, the *dede* makes an opening speech on the importance and meaning of marriage in the life of a young couple and on the irreversibility of the act, as divorce is not acceptable in the Alevi religious community. Then, the *dede* recites the prayers declaring the love for the spiritual ancestors of the Alevi Path to God,¹⁰ and the prayer

⁹ <https://www.kizildelisultan.com/evlilik-ve-nikah-erkani/> [08.07.2021]; <https://osnabrueck-alevi.jimdofree.com/alevilikte-dede-nikah%C4%B1-bir-%C3%B6rnek-yeni/> [08.07.2021].

¹⁰ The prayer is called *Salavat* and it expresses love and desire to follow the Path set by the Prophet Muhammad and the whole Blessed Family (Tur. *Ehl-i Beyt*) consisting of Imam Ali, Blessed Fatma and their sons Imams Hasan and Hüseyin. Sometimes the term *Ehl-i Beyt* may be understood as the entire line of the Twelve Imams. See: Cebeciöglü, p. 185; Korkmaz, pp. 13–135; Yaman M. 2013, p. 300.

for the blessing of the Truth and for the happiness and prosperity of the young couple. After these recitations, the *dede*, who runs the ceremony, asks the bride and the groom if they want to get married. When they confirm their will to marry each other, the *dede*, calling all the gathered participants of the ceremony to witness this event, prays for the prosperity and happiness of the young couple. Then, he declares the marriage as concluded and recites an extensive blessing invoking the protection of the great heroes of Alevism. At the end of the ceremony, the young couple thanks the *dede* and all their relatives who are present for their blessings by kissing their hands (Yaman M. 2013, pp. 299–303).

It seems significant that this description is rather a kind of a textual scenario than a full description of the ritual. It is not clearly stated where it may take place, whether anyone else besides the *dede* himself, the bride and the groom and their witnesses may or even should take part in it, and if so, how they should behave during specific prayers and parts of the ritual. The witnesses of the rite, mentioned as representing both the bride and the groom, do not seem to perform any active role. Nor is there any information of the preferred or customary way of dressing for the participants.

Answers to these questions cannot be fully achieved by analyzing other descriptions published in more recent times on the Internet and which are much more available than the printed text. There is no doubt that they relate to the marriage ceremony, as evidenced by the particular questions to the fiancées and witnesses as well as the customary calling of witnesses and asking for the consent of all others who are present.

However, what draws our attention is that these descriptions and scenarios of the ritual are different. Usually, all, or at least most, of the prayers are recited in the Turkish language, but there are descriptions in which the Arabic language dominates in the prayers. The content of the prayers also varies. Sometimes, one may find in them more references to the Sharia traditions than to the law as practiced in the Alevi tradition. Nevertheless, one of the texts clearly refers to the ritual of the *cem* gathering. During the marriage ceremony, the ritual of waking up the Light, as well as the sharing of ritual food are performed. What definitely links this ceremony with the Alevi religious and social tradition is that sometimes the *dede* conducting the ceremony tries to combine the rite of marriage with the ritual of declaration of one's ascension to the Path of knowledge of divine Truth (Tur. *Hak*) and, following that, the preparation for entering into a *musahiplik* relationship of the spiritual brotherhood with another married couple (*Alevilikte Nikah*, 29.05.2019; Kaptan; Koç Şinasi dede; Koçak; *Nikah erkani*).¹¹

The video materials of the weddings filmed in recent years and published on the Internet do not provide a homogenous picture, though they provide a different kind of

¹¹ <http://www.aleviislamindhizmetleri.com/pages/haftalik-sohbet/105/alevilikte-nikah> [08.06.2021]; <http://www.alevitentum.de/html/156.html> [08.07.2021]; <https://www.kizildelisultan.com/evlilik-ve-nikah-erkani/> [08.07.2021]; <https://alev-i.com/nikah-erkani/alev-i/> [08.07.2021]; <https://osnabrueck-alevi.jimdofree.com/alevilikte-dede-nikah%C4%B1-bir-%C3%B6rnek-yeni/> [08.07.2021]. See as well the video materials: *Alevilikte Dede Nikahı*, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ccAAMk-G5XxU> [09.07.2021]; *Alevilikte Nikah Erkani*, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xznNi-5DQCI> [10.07.2021]; *Alevilik'de Dede Nikahi Erkani*, 2.05.2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XnNM-DwpgF34> [11.07.2021]; *Anadolu Alevi Kültürü – Alevilikte Nikah Erkani (Dede Nikahi)p4*, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y2e1hQnWUVE> [09.07.2021]; *Dede Nikahı*, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SaVq9tYSex0> [09.05.2021]; *Dede Nikahı Hasan*, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DfBAEi8Efrs> [09.07.2021]; *Gamze&Hüseyin Dede nikahi* 23.05.2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c2Okr2mWkNY> [11.07.2021].

information. The films, however, have a different length, from 3.57 to 17.07 minutes, and none show the entire ritual. They are also of a different character – sometimes, it is a kind of a document, sometimes a film for future memories, and sometimes an artistic impression of the wedding ceremony. One may assume that the elements shown in the film materials are the most important for the young couple and their families. Thus, we may see the exact place of the ceremony, which may be a *cemevi*, as well as a home, or even a restaurant. Except for the bride and the groom, the participants are usually the witnesses, parents, and the closest members of the family (about ten people). They are dressed in very different ways, especially the brides may have wedding garments characteristic of European fashion, the traditional Turkish dress, and they may even wear clothes that can be worn in everyday life.

The speeches and prayers, recited by the *dede*, are sometimes limited to the moment when the bride and the groom express their will to get married and to what is confirmed and accepted by the witnesses and the few other participants of the gathering. Sometimes it may be a reference to the acceptance of such a union by the whole community which takes the ritualised form of repeating the consent (Tur. *rızalık*) three times. If the film recording is a bit longer, one can notice references to the bride and the groom making a declaration to enter the Path of Knowledge of the Truth and to cross the *tarikât* gate together with their future *musahibs* (Tur. *İkrar*). Sometimes, various elements taken from the *cem* ritual or the *ikrar* itself are woven into the course of the ceremony. For example, the symbolic purification (Tur. *abdest suyu*), awakening of the Light (Tur. *çerağ uyandırması*), humbling oneself and expressing sorrow for transgressions (Tur. *tovbe estafuhurla* prayer), etc. As a matter of fact, one may get the impression that we are seeing a ritual of *ikrar*, not of the marriage. However, the declaration of entering the Path of knowledge of divine Truth should take place among other numerous co-worshippers, who have gathered during the ceremony and are in *musahip* relationship. That was missing in the available recordings. Moreover, the films show that not always the young couples or even the elderly members of the family accompanying them knew how to behave during specific moments of the ritual.¹²

Unfortunately, both descriptions and film materials make it impossible to create a model that could be considered common or even dominant for the Alevi community. One may conclude that it was caused by the heterogeneity of the Alevi groups. But there is a question, if the differences between the wedding ceremonies are the consequence of heterogeneity or if we are dealing here with a phenomenon of the invented tradition. Nevertheless, it was the heterogeneity rooted in the Alevi culture that provided conditions and the courage of the Alevi community to invent a new tradition. It should also be remembered that the new wedding ritual, often combined with the ritual of *ikrar*, is a response to a cultural change and a need that has just arisen, and contains old and new elements. Furthermore, while observing this particular invented tradition, we are

¹² *Alevilikte Dede Nikahi*, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ccAAMkG5XxU> [09.07.2021]; *Alevilikte Nikah Erkanı*, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xznNi-5DQCI> [10.07.2021]; *Alevilik'de Dede Nikahi Erkanı*, 2.05.2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XnNMDwpgF34> [11.07.2021]; *Anadolu Alevi Kültürü – Alevilikte Nikah Erkanı (Dede Nikahi)p4*, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y2e1hQnWUVE> [09.07.2021]; *Dede Nikahi*, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SaVq9tYSex0> [09.05.2021]; *Dede Nikahi Hasan*, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DfBAEt8Efrs> [09.07.2021]; *Gamze&Hüseyin Dede nikahi* 23.05.2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c2Okr2mWkNY> [11.07.2021].

dealing both with the moment of its creation on the one hand, as it is a process that is happening all the time, and with the moment of adding it into a broader religious tradition on the other hand.

CONCLUSIONS

All the elements analysed here can be classified as examples of a cultural change, understood as a change through invented traditions. It is not just a simple modification, but as long as these invented elements start to function universally in this particular community, they can become factors significantly re-formulating the Alevi culture. It also seems that the roots of these changes are problems resulting from the social conflict between the Alevis and Sunnis, as well as the challenges posed to the Alevi community by the modernisation of the living conditions of its members. The need to invent a model for their house of prayer and gathering is connected with the denial of the need for its existence. The modification of the part of the ritual connected with waking up and extinguishing the Light refers to a very unflattering anti-Alevi stereotype and accusations of organising sexual orgies during rituals. Nowadays, the situation requires the Alevi religious authorities to face the problem of the eternity of the Light. The new way of getting married is a part of the defense of endangered elements of the Alevi culture, such as the *musahiplik*, and especially of the endangered Alevi identity. But also this cultural change and the invented traditions seem to create a new reality in which the conflict loses its sharpness and the rites and rituals that allow, among others, the strengthening of one's own group identity, show and build a functionally and structurally integrated culture that can meet the challenges of modernity through change.

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