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Alevi Kurds in the United Kingdom: Community Formation, Visibility, and Integration

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Abstract

This chapter presents a unique example of the diaspora settlement of Turkey-originated Alevi Kurds in the UK. Alevi Kurds constitute the majority of Turkey-originated migrants in the country, providing the largest concentration of Alevi Kurds in Europe. Most research on Alevis focuses on Turkish Alevis, contributing to the invisibility of Alevi Kurds as a ‘twice minority’ ethnically and religiously. This chapter traces the successful settlement of first-generation Alevi Kurds into a positive ethno-religious community. It describes the community’s response to the legacy of a ‘negative identity’ and its detrimental impact on the second generation. What is particularly interesting is how Alevi Kurds have used education and the introduction of Alevism lessons in schools to raise the profile and visibility of the community and to consolidate their integration into British society. The chapter concludes with a discussion on the future of the Alevi community and their ethno-religious identity in the UK context.

Introduction

This chapter presents the processes of community formation, visibility, and integration of Alevi Kurds who emigrated to the United Kingdom (UK) from Turkey as a crucial example of diaspora settlement. Alevi Kurds constitute the majority of Turkey-originated migrants in the UK and the largest concentration in Europe. The chapter examines the role of cultural, political, and religious associations in the settlement, community formation, and increasing visibility of first-generation immigrants. It discusses the problem of negative identity affecting the integration of second-generation Alevi Kurds within Alevism and into British society. The chapter then describes how these issues are addressed by introducing Alevism lessons in state schools to foster a sense of belonging for Alevi youth. It highlights the key role the lessons have played in the wider politics of recognition of Alevi rights and Alevism in the UK and the redefinition of Alevism as distinct from Islam in the diasporic context. The chapter concludes with observations about the increasing visibility and integration of Alevis in contemporary British society. It is important to offer a brief account of the migration flow from Turkey to the UK. However, it is not possible to provide actual numbers of Alevi migrants as there are no official records of Alevis in any Turkish national statistics and neither are they differentiated from other Turkish migrants in the UK’s classifications. The first known group of emigrants from Turkey arrived in the UK in the 1960s. They were predominantly Sunni Muslim Turks originating from the central and western parts of Turkey (Issa 2004; Eskioglu 2019). They were motivated by the ‘pull’ factor of the demand for labour in the growing industries in the UK (Issa and Atbaş 2017; Bilecen 2020; Akdemir 2022). The flow of migrants from Turkey to the UK increased in the 1970s, and the migrant community became increasingly

diverse in terms of ethnicity, religion, and political orientation (Issa 2004; Atay 2010). For these new Turkish, Kurdish, and Alevi migrants, many of whom were involved in left-wing politics in Turkey, the underlying ‘push’ factors were more political than economic (Bilecen 2020). They were forced to leave Turkey as a result of violent events, such as the military coups of 1970 and 1980, the Alevi massacres at Maraş (1978) and Çorum (1980), and the rise of guerrilla warfare between the Kurdish Workers’ Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*, PKK) and the Turkish state. Additionally, in the 1980s, the growth of Islamic fundamentalist and ultra-nationalist groups and political parties in Turkey increased the number of migrants, especially Alevi Kurds.

The most recent spurt in migration from Turkey to the UK took place due to the Ankara Treaty (*Ankara Anlaşması*) signed earlier in 1963 between Turkey and the European Union (EU). The agreement enabled Turkish citizens with the necessary skills and educational qualifications to apply for a settlement visa and work in EU countries. However, following the UK’s accession to the EU in 1973, the British government was also bound by this treaty but blocked any applications. This continued until it was successfully challenged by the European Court of Human Rights in 2002 (Bilecen 2022).¹ Thus the treaty became the main channel of migration from 2004 up until the UK departed from the EU in 2020. In addition to this, the attempted coup in Turkey in July 2016 prompted a large-scale migration of relatively well-educated, white-collar, and middle-class youth. These immigrants include Kurds, Turks, Alevis, leftists, and pro-secular groups who had lost hope in the future of Turkey and sought a better life in the UK. The background context of migration from Turkey to the UK identifies the interplay of push and pull factors and the increasingly diverse characteristics of migrants in terms of ethnicity, religion, and political orientation. However, the largest group of Turkey-originated diaspora in the UK are the Alevi Kurds, who are the focus of this chapter. Much of the academic research on Alevis in diasporic contexts concentrates on Turkish Alevis. By contrast, we focus on Alevi Kurds as a distinct ethno-religious group to capture the complexity of their identity (Jenkins and Cetin 2018). The UK’s Alevi Kurds are unique because they are identified as a ‘twice minority’ (Cetin 2013). In Turkey, the majority of Alevis are ethnically Turkish, and the majority of Kurds are Sunni Muslim. Thus, Turkish Alevis share an ethnic identity with Turks while Kurds share a religious identity with Sunni Muslims. However, Alevi Kurds lack this religious or ethnic ground for inclusion. The boundaries of ethnicity and religion are highly intertwined and difficult to separate and have resulted in the misrecognition of Alevi Kurdish identity. This contributes to their invisibility in the UK as well, where they are seen as ethnically Turkish or Kurdish and religiously Sunni Muslim (Jenkins et al. 2018; Cetin et al. 2020; Emre 2023).

As stated above, this chapter presents Alevi Kurds in the UK as a crucial example of diaspora settlement because the UK is the only country where Alevi Kurds constitute the majority of migrants originating from Turkey and is home to the largest concentration of Alevi Kurds in Europe and possibly in the rest of the world (Cetin et al. 2020). Around 200,000 of the estimated 300,000 Alevis in the UK are concentrated in London, according to the British

¹ For a detailed analysis of this issue, see Bilecen (2022).

Alevi Federation (*Britanya Alevi Federasyonu*, BAF, 2023).² The shift from a marginalised, invisible community to a visible one is described by Sökefeld (2008) as a ‘politics of recognition.’ This was achieved initially through the establishment of places of worship (*cemevi*) and the practising of religious ceremonies (*cem*) (Akdemir 2022). The transition to greater public visibility was largely achieved through education, enabled by the introduction of Alevism lessons into state primary schools in 2011 and secondary schools in 2013.³ This recognition then led to the official legitimisation of Alevism as a distinct religion, which subsequently facilitated wider state recognition of the rights of Alevi Kurds in the UK. Also, the lessons played an important part in redefining Alevi identity and Alevism as distinct from Islam, drawing attention to internal differences within the Alevi community around whether they identify as Muslim.

Our collaboration with the Alevi Kurdish community began as a request to help them address the negative identity of the second generation rather than as a research-directed activity, and we named it the Religion and Identity Project (see Jenkins and Cetin 2014, for more details). We draw on an anti-discriminatory action research model, based on collaboration and sharing of knowledge and skills with affected communities to overcome normative research hierarchies and effect change (Dockery 1999). Our analysis derives from our ongoing ethnographic collaboration in London over the past 12 years, including approximately 30 semi-structured interviews and 10 focus groups with Alevi Kurdish community leaders and associations, youth, parents, and local schools in London. Most of our information comes from informal conversations or attending events rather than research interviews.

Moreover, whenever we publish our findings, we check the validity of our claims with the community.

Before proceeding to the rest of the chapter, there are a few general points to be made about research on UK Alevis. Most of the existing research on Alevis in the UK, including our own, is based in London, where most Alevis live and work, and is heavily dependent on the England Alevi Cultural Centre and Cemevi (*İngiltere Alevi Kültür Merkezi ve Cemevi*, İAKM-C)⁴ for information and contacts. Existing research on UK Alevis pays little attention to gender analysis in relation to Alevi settlement, identity, and community organisation. Although in this chapter we make specific reference to the problems experienced by second-generation disaffected young men and consider recent gender-inclusive reforms by the BAF, this does not constitute a gender analysis and is a limitation of our research. Our discussion of Alevi Kurds applies an intersectional approach to their identities, focusing, in particular, on ethno-religious, political, transnational, and generational aspects. In this chapter, we abbreviate Alevi Kurds to Alevis unless we wish to draw attention to the Kurdish dimension of their ethno-religious identity. The next section

² The BAF was launched in 2013 as an umbrella organisation that is now home to around 17 cultural centres and *cemevis*. Previously, the main hub of Alevi activity was the London Cemevi (*Londra Cemevi*).

³ The primary school is from 5 to 11, and the secondary school is from 11 to 18.

⁴ In our earlier publications, the İAKM-C was translated and referred to as the London Alevi Cultural Centre and Cemevi (Jenkins and Cetin 2018). However, to denote a more decolonising sensitivity, we prefer the original language to prevent the anglicisation of names, events, and places.

identifies the key historical points in the settlement and formation of the Alevi Kurdish community in the UK from the 1990s onwards. We examine their trajectory of segregated integration as an ethnic community in the UK and discuss how Alevis, in this national context, have managed to raise their visibility by engaging in a politics of recognition. What we are describing here is a process of adaptation and integration. The dates provided for each period are approximate with some activities beginning earlier or continuing beyond the specified period.

Alevi Settlement and Community Formation in the UK from the 1990s Onwards

The formation of Alevi communities in the UK was predominantly linked to their villages of origin in Turkey located mainly in the Anatolian cities of Maraş, Sivas, Malatya, Dersim, Kayseri, and Antep. Alevis arrived in the UK as asylum seekers in large numbers in the late 1980s and early 1990s due to the fear of persecution (Cetin 2013). In Turkey, for the majority of the Sunni population and authorities, Alevi identity is synonymous with negative ethnic (Kurdish), religious (Alevi/Kızılbaş), and political (leftist) identities, referred to as the 3Ks (*Kürt–Kızılbaş–Kommünist*) (also see Chapter 11). Fenton's (2010) observation that the ethnic, religious, and political aspects of a person's identity are the source of conflict in one situation, and a positive affirmation in another applies to the Alevis in the UK. Here, they encountered for the first time a context where they could openly declare their ethnic, religious, and political identities, which were oppressed and concealed back in Turkey. They could make a fresh start in their country of settlement because their ethno-religious identity became a positive resource for them to gain asylum and settlement rights and to build their own community.

The emergence of the community began with small numbers of Alevis in London boroughs where they settled and found employment in the textile industry (Cetin 2013; Akdemir 2022). By the end of the 1990s, the textile industry almost disappeared and relocated to developing countries, reducing job opportunities for Alevis (Cetin 2013; Eskioglu 2019). After working long hours in unsafe conditions and being paid by piecework, some saved enough money to invest in corner shops, restaurants, and cafes in the boroughs of North-East London, including Hackney, Islington, Haringey, and Enfield. This created an ethnic enclave for Alevis in these areas, which are still well known as the heart of 'Turkish' restaurants, although the majority are run by Alevi Kurds. The adaptation of these first-generation Alevi Kurds has been conceptualised by Cetin (2013) as 'segregated integration.' This term echoes what Morawska (2009: 18) calls "the ethnic-path adaptation within [one's] own community," one that creates a community by assimilating within their own ethnic group rather than integrating into the mainstream British society. A key feature of the early phase of community formation was that new Alevi migrants came from rural areas of Turkey with limited technical skills and competency in the English language and relied heavily on the assistance of community centres catering for all migrants from Turkey. These community centres were established by left-wing Turkish and Kurdish migrants who had already settled in the early 1980s. They provided legal, employment, and welfare-related advice and support to Alevi newcomers. They were initially organised along ethnic (Kurdish) and political (Marxist) lines that largely ignored religious and cultural differences (Griffiths 2002; Cetin 2013). The community centres mobilised members around political identities reflecting the existing political polarisations in

Turkey, such as the Revolutionary Communist Party of Turkey (*Türkiye Devrimci Komünist Partisi*)⁵ (Wahlbeck 1999; Bloch 2002; Griffiths 2002; Akdemir 2022). Many of their members and leaders were Kurdish and Turkish Alevis. Most of the Alevis who mobilised around the Alevi movement were formerly associated with Kurdish and left-wing associations oriented around Marxist-Leninist and socialist ideologies. However, although Alevi Kurds largely joined Kurdish and leftist organisations, the religious and cultural differences between them and Sunni Kurds remained. Some Alevi Kurds who had prioritised their religious-cultural identity over their ethnic and political identities mobilised around the Turkish Communist Party (*Türkiye Komünist Partisi*) or the Workers' Union (*İşçi Birliği*), as it was called in the UK. This organisation was established by Rıza Yörükoğlu and his comrades, who organised the *cems* in London in the early 1990s, albeit on a small scale.⁶

The community associations had an important role to play in the formation of Alevi identity within and beyond the Alevi Kurdish community. They raised the visibility of the community and served as the public face of Alevis in British society (Akdemir 2022). Sökefeld (2008) identified the emergence of Alevis in the public sphere as a social movement with demands for public recognition for the first time in Germany in the late 1980s and early 1990s. He argues that the developments in Germany inspired Alevi intellectuals in Turkey to assert their rights and to publish the Alevi Declaration (*Alevi Bildirgesi*). This declaration was published on 6 May 1990 in the pro-secular Turkish newspaper, *Cumhuriyet*, as a statement of the will to protect the human rights of Alevis and to express their identity without fear of reprisals. Sökefeld (2008: 16) identifies this declaration as marking the birth of Alevism as a social movement, moving from a “belief and practice to a public affair.” He also saw this declaration as shifting the status of Alevis from ‘non-recognition,’ which forced them to hide their religious identity, to a political demand for equal treatment both in Germany and in Turkey. He describes this process as the politics of recognition and applies it to Germany, whereas we apply it to the UK context, which closely follows the German lead. Following these developments, Alevi cultural centres were established in other European countries, such as France, Belgium, and Austria. In the UK, Alevis opened their first religious and cultural centre, the İAKM-C, in 1993 to provide for the religious and cultural needs of Alevis, especially funerals (Zırh 2012). Until then, when Alevi deaths occurred in London, there was nowhere to hold the ceremony other than the local Turkish mosques, where Alevis were unwelcome.

The establishment of the İAKM-C was not only inspired by the Alevi Revival in the diaspora; it also came as an insurgent resistance to the Alevi massacres that took place in Sivas on 2 July 1993 and the Gazi neighbourhood of Istanbul in 1995 (cf Göner 2005; also see Chapter 11). As Mutluer (2016) notes, shaped by the imprint of violence and loss, these events generated anger, resistance, and new political agency within the Alevi community in Turkey. For example, Alevis in Turkey started their own associations and publicly practised their Alevi identity. In the UK, the İAKM-C initially attracted many ‘apolitical’ Alevis, and there is a commonly held view among Kurdish and

⁵ The UK extension of this organisation is known as the Turkish and Kurdish Community Centre (*Türk-Kürt Dayanışma Merkezi*).

⁶ Interview with İbrahim, *İşçi Birliği*. London, 15 May 2021.

leftist Alevi migrants that the establishment of the İAKM-C was supported by the Turkish state to discourage Alevis from supporting Kurdish nationalism, which was strong both in Turkey and in London in the early 1990s. This is a plausible argument because Alevism and Alevi communities were the ‘battleground’ for Turkish and Kurdish nationalists at that time (Van Bruinesen 1996; Sökefeld 2008; Gezik 2012). In 2009, the management of the İAKM-C was replaced by a more ‘politicised’ leadership independent of the Turkish state’s influence. What set the new management apart from the old was their successful mobilisation of Alevi Kurds regardless of their political views and their desire to make *cemevis* more inclusive and active around political and cultural issues (Cetin 2020; Akdemir 2022).

With the greater dispersal of Alevi migrants across the UK, new Alevi cultural centres and *cemevis* were established in places, such as Leicester, Doncaster, Edinburgh, and Bournemouth from the early 2000s. The İAKM-C set up the BAF in 2013 as the national umbrella organisation in the UK. Its role was to unite the 17 regional associations, each coordinating their own activities with the BAF directing policy and strategy. What is interesting is that, in the rest of Europe, Kurdish Alevi associations are associated with the PKK and represented by the Democratic Alevi Federation (*Federasyona Demokratika Elewi*, FEDA) (Emre 2023). In contrast, in the UK, Kurdish Alevis organised as an independent federation, which only later joined the European Alevi Unions Confederation (*Avrupa Alevi Birlikleri Konfederasyonu*, AABK). There are multiple reasons for this choice, but one of the most important explanations, as highlighted by Israfil Erbil, the first chair of the BAF, is their desire to build their own version of Aleviness nationally before forging connections with the transnational Alevi movement. According to Erbil, “[they] wanted to be an independent organisation of Alevis for Alevis because historically Alevis fought for the rights of the socialists and Kurds but now it was the time for fighting for their own rights.”⁷ Evidently many Alevis who were active in the Kurdish and Marxist movements came to join other Alevis and be represented by the Alevi movement as Alevi Kurds. The Kurdish and Marxist movements emphasised Kurdishness in which Aleviness as a religion was (at best) of secondary importance. The Alevi movement, on the contrary, foregrounded Aleviness as an ethno-religious identity with an emphasis on Aleviness and issues affecting Alevi communities transnationally. Alevis who were active and mobilised by the Kurdish and left-wing community centres gradually came to be mobilised by the BAF as a new diasporic force in the UK. This paved the way for Alevism to act as an ethno-religious identity (Aydın 2018; Jenkins et al. 2018). The next section considers the shift from an ethnic path adaptation towards the integration of Alevis into British society in response to the problems faced by the second-generation Alevi community. It examines the introduction of Alevism lessons in state schools and the role of the BAF in promoting Alevi rights through achieving official recognition of Alevism as a religion in its own right, distinct from Islam.

Alevi Politics of Recognition and Integration in the UK

While the first-generation Alevi community considered their settlement experience a success, the second generation has had a more challenging and diverse adaptation process. One of the reasons that Alevi parents migrated to the UK

⁷ Interview with Israfil Erbil, Chair of BAF. London, 19 February 2022.

was their aspiration for their children to succeed in education and employment, opportunities denied to them in Turkey (Jenkins 2020). This ‘aspirational capital’ (Yosso 2005) was realised for many second-generation children, defined as those either born in the UK to first-generation parents or migrated when they were young and attended school in the UK (Cetin 2013). The children wanted to do well for their parents’ sake as much as for their own. Some succeeded academically and progressed into white-collar jobs or became lawyers, doctors, accountants, and real estate agents. Others found employment in the ethnic labour market, working at their parents’ businesses or opening their own. This upward social mobility pattern contrasts with the downward mobility also experienced by some second-generation Alevi youth (predominantly male), who fell into the ‘rainbow underclass’⁸ (Portes and Rumbaut 2001). This anomic propensity led some Alevi young men to join gangs and ultimately **to die by** suicide in some cases (Cetin 2020). Several factors led to this condition, including parents’ lack of social and cultural capital, loss of parental authority, underperforming schools, and living in violent neighbourhoods which predisposed young people to join gangs for protection.

Cetin’s (2020) London-based research focused specifically on second-generation Alevi young men because of the high incidence of suicide among them. This was not the case for young women, whose responses to disaffection were less evident and would need further research. Cetin also found that school failure at secondary school was a key reason for Alevi young men to join the rainbow underclass as they turned away from their families knowing they were a disappointment to them. Similarly, Issa (2009) investigated the integration of children from ethnic minority groups into schools and reported that children from Turkey were identified as underachieving. In the early 1990s, Alevi parents in the UK asked the İAKM-C for support as they felt powerless to stop their young men from getting involved with drugs, petty crime, and gangs (Jenkins and Cetin 2018). These youth-related issues played a crucial role in mobilising Alevi Kurds around their Aleviness, a theme that we explore next in relation to education and ethno-religious identity.

In the mid-to-late 2000s, in a desperate attempt to stop further suicide-led deaths among young Alevi-Kurdish men, the İAKM-C invited sociologists at the University of Westminster to collaborate with them. This collaboration culminated in the Alevi Religion and Identity Project (Jenkins and Cetin 2014). In our first meeting of the project in September 2010, the İAKM-C committee produced a striking description of Alevi youth as so adrift from their Alevi identity that they experienced it mainly as a ‘negative identity.’ The negative identity partly reflects the assumption by the British public that Alevis are ethnically Turkish and religiously Sunni. What led to this perception was partly the fact that Alevis were ‘misrecognised’ as they were neither Turkish nor Sunni (Sökefeld 2008). Historically, the negative identity also stems from within the Alevi community, which has forged its identity through the collective memory of having endured centuries of persecution and massacres under Turkish authorities. Hanoglu (2021) describes this experience as a ‘collective trauma’ burdening Alevis with the negative status of victimhood. Like

⁸ The rainbow underclass consists of people from different ethnic groups who have no stable employment or income, are living in poverty, and usually involved in illegal activities and gangs to support their lifestyle (Portes and Rumbaut 2001).

Sökefeld (2008), she suggests that this collective trauma also serves to unite Alevis around a shared history, creating distinctive boundaries between Alevis and Sunnis. This history shapes the identity formation of Alevis in the UK too, with most parents and young people feeling disconnected from Alevism because it has been suppressed in Turkey and they do not know much about it. Thus the negative emotions around the historical treatment of Alevis prevail among the first and subsequent generations of migrants.

The sense of a 'negative identity' of many second-generation Alevi Kurds was compounded by how others related to them in the UK. At our first meeting with Alevi youth at their youth club in October 2010, there were about 30 young people present ranging from ages 11 to 20, most of whom would have attended secondary school (11–18). They spoke eloquently about their experiences of being marginalised at school because nobody knew they were Alevis (Jenkins and Cetin 2018). They reported that nobody at school had heard of Alevism as a religion and, therefore, did not believe it existed. Most Alevi youth preferred to describe themselves as 'sort of Muslim,' but this caused tensions with some Muslim peers because they did not observe the same religious practices. Alevi youth experienced the most frustration in religious education classes where teachers and peers assumed that they were Muslims. For example, one Alevi student informed us that if the class was split into groups based on different religions, Alevi students would be placed with Muslim students. This caused conflicts because they identified least with Muslims, who were also more likely to challenge their beliefs for not behaving like Muslims. Also, Alevism was never mentioned in religious education lessons about world religions, which they felt was unfair (Jenkins and Cetin 2018). Alevi youth asked whether Alevism could become part of the British school religious education curriculum as a means of raising awareness of their religious identity.

The UK context followed Germany in creating the demand for Alevism lessons, and our Alevi Religion and Identity Project was, in part, triggered by Alevi youth discovering that their German peers were offered Alevism lessons in some public schools (Jenkins and Cetin 2018; Özkul 2022). The demand for Alevism to be included in the school curriculum became integral to the politics of recognition in Germany in the early 2000s (Sökefeld 2008; Özkul 2022). According to Kehl-Bodrogi (2001), the AABK followed the successful campaign by Sunni Muslims to introduce lessons on Islam into schools. Alevism lessons were first offered as an elective in certain German federal states in 2002 (Cosan-Eke 2017) and since 2012, they have been introduced into the religious education syllabus in other areas (Arkilic and Gurcan 2020). The German context of integration of Alevism lessons contrasts with France where religious education is banned altogether in schools and Alevi youth feel less marginalised and achieve better academic results compared to Germany (Arkilic 2022). It is not this chapter's intention to go into much detail about how the Alevism lessons were introduced into British schools (see Jenkins and Cetin 2018 for more details) but to reflect on their pivotal role in contributing to the wider Alevi integration and politics of recognition in the UK.

The Alevism lessons were first introduced in 2010 at a primary school in Enfield, an outer London borough, where there is a growing Alevi population. The school was chosen because it had a significant number of Alevi pupils and one of the support staff was a member of the İAKM-C committee and requested the lessons. The deputy head teacher readily agreed because the school had ethnically categorised all the Alevi children as Turkish Muslims, unaware of any differences between them. This was mainly because Alevi parents had not registered their children's religion as Alevism when they were enrolled and some had registered their children as Muslim, matching their

official identity in Turkey.⁹ Some parents adopted a strategy of ‘non-recognition’ (Sökefeld 2008) rather than risk their children being stigmatised for their religious identity whereas others felt more comfortable describing themselves as Muslim.¹⁰ Moreover, the school had significant concerns about this group of pupils because they were underachieving, showing challenging behaviour and their parents were not engaging with the school. The Alevism lessons were designed by the İAKM-C, the school and the University of Westminster. There were no existing curriculum materials in English, which involved a lot of work in researching what and how to present Alevism in the lessons. This provoked a lot of discussion about the relationship with Islam, reflecting divisions between Alevis who describe Alevism as a branch of Islam and others who identify with it as distinct from Islam, which was the preferred response of the İAKM-C committee. Also, the content had to fit in the national curriculum programme for religious education at Key Stages 1 (ages 5–7) and 2 (7–11), and subsequently in secondary school at Key Stage 3 (11–14). The lessons had to be approved by the local Standing Advisory Committee for Religious Education, which comprises representatives of different faiths in each local education authority, who approve the religious education curriculum for schools (Jenkins and Cetin 2018). The curriculum materials are designed to be taught by classroom teachers with no prior knowledge of Alevism, although when they were piloted at a secondary school in Islington, Alevi students requested the lessons and the condition was that they had to prepare and teach them. The project team supported the design and implementation of the lessons and members of the İAKM-C and the University of Westminster were present to support the students.

There were significant outcomes enabled by the introduction of the religious education lessons which went well beyond the immediate school environment. The most important one was that Alevi youth felt an increased sense of belonging at the school, erasing their misrecognition as Turkish and Sunni Muslims. Also, the lessons meant that they no longer had to explain and justify their religion to their peers. Alevi parents were keen to have Alevism lessons taught in the school and this brought them into positive contact through attending the launch assembly (Jenkins and Cetin 2018). In primary school, the children’s academic achievement improved as did their behaviour (Prince of Wales Primary School OFSTED Report 2012, cited in Jenkins and Cetin 2018). At all levels, the lessons were an opportunity for pupils to learn more about their religion and to teach their parents too, as their prior knowledge had been affected by the suppression of Alevism in Turkey. Parents made contact with the İAKM-C to seek further information about Alevism and others requested the lessons be taught in their children’s schools. Currently, over 50 schools across the UK use the curriculum materials which have been made available via the BAF website (including lesson plans, content and artefacts). The BAF also provides guidance and training for teachers.

⁹ Focus group with Alevi mothers. Prince of Wales Primary School London, 21 April 2016.

¹⁰ During the focus group, some mothers expressed themselves at odds with the view presented in the lessons of Alevism as distinct from Islam, which suggests a lack of homogeneity in Alevi identity in the UK.

Two London local education authorities, Enfield and Haringey, have since added Alevism to the curriculum in all their schools.¹¹

In our research, we have identified the importance of education as a source of both disaffection and integration. We have described the role of schooling when Alevi youth felt marginalised and were underachieving, which could lead to the downward spiral into the rainbow underclass. Alternatively, as an integration strategy for the second generation, education has supported Alevi youth through the introduction of Alevism lessons to foster a sense of belonging, encouraged higher achievement, and defined Alevism more clearly within and beyond the community. Indeed, a key concern raised by the Alevism lessons is how Alevism has been described and the ability to define Alevism as distinct from Islam in the UK.¹² This separation from Islam can be seen as an ongoing project for Alevi Kurds, as can be seen, for example, when designing the new *cemevi* in Wood Green London, where care was taken to distance the iconography from Islam (Hanoglu 2021). The concluding section documents the wider changes and struggles within the UK's Alevi community in terms of gaining official recognition and facilitating a greater engagement between Alevis and their local communities to redefine Alevism.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we examined an understudied community, Alevi Kurds, by concentrating on their formation as an ethno-religious group and the processes of raising their visibility and integrating into British society. We have provided an overview of the settlement of the first-generation Alevi Kurds in the UK, who have followed a pattern of successful ethnic path adaptation and created their own ethno-religious community by freely expressing and living their religion. The success of the first generation stood in marked contrast to the second generation, where many felt disaffected and began the downward spiral into the rainbow underclass. We identified the challenges facing the second generation as significant enough for the İAKM-C committee to describe them as presenting a negative identity. This was acknowledged by the community and shaped by the legacy of persecution in Turkey, the 'misrecognition' of Alevi Kurds as Sunni Muslim Turks by teachers, peers, and other officials in the UK and their feelings of marginalisation at school.

It was the second generation who proposed one of the key integration strategies, namely, to introduce Alevism lessons to state schools in the UK as a means of educating themselves and others about Alevism. The lessons helped

¹¹ In England and Wales, education is administered by Local Education Authorities, which are administrative districts to oversee education in that area.

¹² One of the challenges of preparing the material to be taught at school was about how to build up the content of the lessons in terms of situating Alevism and its relation to Islam. To avoid any one-sided definition, we organised a workshop in 2015, and the materials were shared with representatives of the European Alevi organisations, religious leaders, and academics.

raise the visibility of Alevis and legitimise Alevism as a distinctive religion apart from Islam in the UK. Moreover, the lessons provided evidence to support the Charity Commission's recognition of Alevism as a separate religion in 2015 and the inclusion of Alevism as a religion in the 2021 national census. The census has officially identified Alevis as a religious group for the first time in the world (AleviNet 2020). A further dimension of raising the visibility of Alevism in the public sphere has been through greater public engagement with local communities, for example, through annual festivals in local parks. Alevis have raised their profile by engaging in local politics by becoming councillors, mayors, and MPs to further address their community's needs and to play an active role in local and national politics on behalf of Alevis. In 2015, the All Parliamentary Group of Alevi Affairs was set up to ensure advocacy for the Alevi community and its political campaigns, such as requesting the British Government protect Alevi rights in Turkey.

Alevi religion and identity have been our main focus of research for over ten years, and, like other scholars, we have observed a strong tradition of religion-building within the community. This has entailed redefining Alevism, especially through the Alevism lessons, and adapting it to appeal to future generations in the changing context of the Alevi diaspora in the UK. As part of our concluding thoughts on the future direction of Alevi Kurds in the UK, we briefly note three key changes taking place within the community. Firstly, a more progressive stance towards gender equality has been adopted by the recently elected management board of the BAF, the İAKM-C, and other *cemevis* across the country, particularly since 2022. All of these institutions have adopted an 'equal chair' model with leadership roles shared between a woman and a man. This change is in line with Alevi teachings about gender equality and is likely to attract more women and younger members to participate in the religious life of the community. The second major change is conducting religious *cem* ceremonies in Kurdish to reflect the fact that most Alevis in the UK are Kurdish. The importance attached to conducting religious ceremonies in Kurdish ensures continuity of language traditions and enables Alevi Kurdish youth to learn about their Alevi belief and culture in their own language.¹³ Also, this is a reactive strategy against Turkey's assimilation of Kurdish languages. The third change is to re-connect the youth to the wider transnational Alevi movement. British and German Alevi youth federations have developed a joint project to exchange ideas, not only about Alevism but also about socio-political issues in their country of settlement, such as racism, antisemitism, environmental issues, and poverty.¹⁴ This shows how young Alevi diasporans are shifting their attention away from Turkish to British politics and are beginning to identify more strongly as British rather than Turkish or Kurdish Alevis.¹⁵

The significance of these three new commitments suggests a shift in the meanings associated with Alevi Kurds' ethno-religious identity. The dissociation of Alevi youth from religion is an aspect we are exploring in our current research concerning British Alevis. Their sense of 'Aleviness' is very much shaped here, contrasting with their

¹³ Interview with chair of a Village Association, London, 6 May 2022.

¹⁴ For more details about this project, see the Enfield Alevi Youth, 2023 Facebook at:

https://www.facebook.com/britishaleviyouthfederation/?locale=en_G

¹⁵ Interview with project coordinator, London, 10 July 2022.

parents, whose identities are based on the collective traumas of the past and from which young people feel excluded. The British Alevi Youth Federation (*Britanya Alevi Gençlik Federasyonu*, BAYF) was formed in 2013 and has developed its own projects. For example, it has campaigned for Alevi student associations at universities and initiated its own education project, the School of Alevism, producing videos about Alevism in English. The chair of the BAYF stated that “we live in the UK and this country interests us more than Turkey. Many of the new generations speak English as their mother tongue, therefore Alevism needs to be taught in English too.” In conclusion, our overview of Alevi Kurds in the UK demonstrates the distinctiveness of their identities across generations and in interaction with the transnational environment in Turkey, Europe, and the UK. The distinctive case of Alevi Kurds in the UK has demonstrated their progress towards both integration and a more developed and positive self-definition, especially among Alevi youth. There is evidence of new directions in redefining Alevism and developing its inclusivity to ensure its future in the transnational context.

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