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EDITORIAL

Alevi Kurds: History, politics and identity

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Abstract

This special issue brings together scholarship on Alevi Kurds by focusing on their ethnic, linguistic, religious, political, cultural and social specificity including a range of articles from the disciplines of anthropology, history, politics, linguistics and sociology. The first part focuses on Turkey, exploring the roots of Kurdish Alevism and how Alevi religious identities intersect with ethnic and national identity and political representations, and the second focuses on Alevi Kurds and their creation of a transnational religious identity and their mixed experience of settlement in the UK diaspora.

Keywords: Kurdish Alevism, assimilation, transnational migration, diaspora, community

Introduction

In the editorial of the first issue of *Kurdish Studies*, Martin van Bruinessen (2013) wrote that “Kurdish studies have, in the past few decades, come to be established as a respectable field of academic investigation and publication, after long having been as marginal in academia as the Kurds themselves were in the politics of the Middle East” (van Bruinessen, 2013). The same can be said for the emerging field of Alevi studies, although it has taken longer (*cf.* Jenkins et al, 2018). Gultekin (2019) dates international academic interest in Alevism and Kurdishness back to the Alevi revival in the 1990s, whilst interest in Kurdish Alevism did not develop until the 2000s. Gezik and Gultekin’s (2018) book on Kurdish Alevism is one of the first to appear in English. In fact, this is the first time that *Kurdish Studies* has published articles on Kurdish Alevism. Just as Martin Van Bruinessen introduced the first issue of *Kurdish Studies* in 2013, there is a sense of history in his opening this special issue with an interview. When we approached him for an

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interview to be included in this special issue on Alevi Kurds, he said that it provided him an opportunity to reflect on how his understanding of Alevism and Alevi identity has evolved over the thirty years in which he has written about these issues. This late development of Alevi studies reflects the fact that the largest group of Alevis, those in Turkey, have experienced generations of assimilationist “Turkification” and “sunnification” policies that has rendered them officially invisible, whilst in the diaspora it has been assumed that they are Turks and therefore Muslim (Jenkins et al, 2018; Cetin, 2014; Aydın, 2018; Gezik & Gultekin, 2018). The term “Alevi” is itself contested as it is generally seen as an umbrella term for groups that are found mainly in central Turkey but also scattered elsewhere in the Balkans and the Middle East, along with diasporic communities largely in Europe (Dressler, 2013; Özkul, 2019; Aydın, 2020; Karakaya-Stump, 2020). Kurdish Alevis live in several eastern and central provinces of Turkey such as Dersim, Malatya, Kayseri, Sivas and Maraş. They have diverse religious rituals, customs and practices and speak Kirmanci and Zaza languages. They have diverse historical backgrounds, belong to various identities and have different experiences of multiple citizenships. Gultekin (2019) offers the most recent formulation of “Kurdish Alevi identity”, which does justice to its complexity. He suggests that its “cultural sphere creates a unique cultural identity, in that both identities gain new socio-political and ethno-religious aspects” (Gultekin, 2019).

Historical scholarship offers diverse interpretations of the religious identity of Alevism, demonstrating that it is a source of controversy with tensions also emerging in the political context in terms of whether it can be linked to Shia Islam, Sufism, Zoroastrianism or Shamanism or whether it is seen as an entirely distinctive syncretic religion (see Aydın and Karakaya-Stump, this issue). What all writers appear to agree on is that Alevism had a political dimension historically in relation to both the Ottoman and Iranian Empires although much less consideration, until recently, has been given to their place in the modern political world. However, it is the politicisation of Alevi identity, and its association with leftist political movements and secularism, which has been such a notable feature of Alevism that emerged in Turkey towards the end of the last century (Tekdemir, 2018, Gunes, this issue).

Despite the fragmented and heterogeneous nature of Alevi communities, there is increasingly a sense of a transnational community, albeit one which is imagined as much in terms of who they are not as much as who they are (Emre-Cetin, 2018). With this in mind, it is not surprising that this collection of articles, all with their focus on some aspect of Kurdish Alevism in Turkey and the UK diaspora, draws on a multidisciplinary scholarship ranging across a variety of topics. The articles on Turkey concentrate on the historical context of Kurdish Alevis and Alevism, while those on the UK diaspora

focus on more contemporary issues and alliances. Nevertheless, the possibilities for Alevi communities and the Alevi movement to be active in Turkey are becoming more and more marginalised with the increasing Islamification of the Turkish state (Karakaya-Stump, 2018). However, the opposite is the case for Alevi communities in the diaspora. Both Turkish and Kurdish Alevi have migrated to Europe since the 1960s, with the greatest numbers heading to Germany, where there is an estimated 700,000⁴ Alevi. Although scattered across Germany, they have more established communities, community centres and greater rights and state recognition than in Turkey itself (Sokefeld, 2008). However, the majority of Alevi in Germany are Turkish Alevi, so it does not disrupt the “twice minority” status of Kurdish Alevi. Alevi settlement patterns in the UK are different for a number of reasons. Firstly, the UK is one of the newest European countries of settlement for Kurdish Alevi, who migrated in the late 1980s as asylum seekers and now there is an estimated population of 300,000 (BAF)⁵. Secondly, the majority are concentrated in London (Jenkins and Cetin, 2018). This concentration of Alevi in London can be put into perspective when compared with the province of Dersim population (officially known as Tunceli), which has an estimated 84,660⁶ Alevi (predominantly Kurds). Thirdly, London boasts the largest concentration of Kurdish Alevi in Europe and possibly even the rest of the world. They constitute the largest segment of the UK Kurdish community which gives them a much greater sense of empowerment and community (Demir, 2012). In other words, the UK is the only country where Alevi Kurdish migrants constitute the majority of the migrants from Turkey.

What has been different in the migration experience of Alevi in comparison with Kurds is that for the first time, they are able to express their religious identity openly (Cetin, 2014). This Kurdish Alevi dynamic is evident in the significant shift from a Kurdish to an Alevi identity since the early 1990s in the UK, which is partly explained by them comprising the majority of the Kurdish community in the UK and also as a response to “deturkification” (Demir, 2017). The shifting attention to a religious identity is characterised by the opening of Alevi community centres with a view of Alevism as a distinct religion and the provision for worship and Alevism lessons (Jenkins, this issue; Jenkins and Cetin, 2018). The work of the community centres and the increasingly well organised Britain Alevi Federation offers an example of “religion-building from below” (Gultekin, 2019: 3).

⁴ German Alevi Federation <https://alevi.com/en/about-us/> (Accessed: 24/4/2020).

⁵ British Alevi Federation http://www.alevynet.org/SAP.aspx?pid>About_en-GB (Accessed: 24/4/2020).

⁶ Turkiye Istatistik Kurumu <http://www.tuik.gov.tr/HbGetirHTML.do?id=33705> (Accessed: 24/4/2020).

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This special issue is divided into two parts: the first focusing on Turkey, the roots of Kurdish Alevism and their political representations, and the second focuses on Kurdish Alevi's transnational identity and experience in the UK diaspora. In the first part, Suavi Aydın assesses the significance of "Kurdish Alevism" within "Anatolian Alevism" through a close examination of the historical roots and development of the faith and community and explores the similarities and differences between Kurdish Alevi groups in Turkey. Whilst missionary reports are a common source for tracing Kurdish and Alevi history, Ayfer Karakaya-Stump compares different versions for inconsistencies between them to better understand the historical (Kurdish) Kizilbash identity and religiosity at the time of the initial encounters with Protestant evangelists. Cengiz Gunes discusses the changing political representation of Alevi Kurds since the 1950s. In particular, he focuses on alliances with the Turkish socialist movement and political parties associated with the secular republican regime as well as the impact of the rise of Alevi and Kurdish movements on Alevi Kurds.

In the second part, the theme of the connection between Alevism and socialism continues to define the relationship between Kurds and Alevi in the UK context. Tuncay Bilecen analyses the discourses shaping this relationship in the magazine *Kavga/Kervan* throughout the 1990s. Cemal Salman conducts a detailed analysis of the annual Britain Alevi festival in an attempt to demonstrate how the UK Alevi movement is reconstructing a homeland identity and creating a new medium of traditionalism through the institution of the festival. Birgul Yilmaz undertakes the first analysis of the differences between Bohtan and Maraş Kurmanji and attitudes towards them which identify Bohtan Kurmanji as "good" and Maraş Kurmanji as "bad". She analyses these attitudes of Kurmanji speakers in the UK in relation to their religious affiliation. The final articles by Celia Jenkins and Umit Cetin explore the context of migration and the experience of Alevi Kurds in the UK. Jenkins focuses on the aspirations of first-generation parents for their children to do well at school and how they experienced the British education system and adapted over time. She highlights the particular role of the Alevi community centres in supporting this transition. Umit Cetin focuses on the anomic social consequences of the marginalisation and invisibility of Alevi Kurds for the second generation, especially boys, and their engagement with gangs as they stake out an identity for themselves in the UK.

This special issue aims, in part, to address the relative invisibility of Kurdish Alevi by focusing on their ethnic, linguistic, religious, political, cultural and social specificity including a range of papers from the disciplines of anthropology, history, politics and sociology. We hope in this way to have contributed to a neglected dimension of both Kurdish and Alevism studies.

In this spirit, we are also organising a biennial conference on Alevi Studies at the University of Westminster in July 2021 to bring together scholars and encourage further research and debates around this complex issue about the different aspects of the ethno-religious and socio-political identity of Kurdish Alevis.

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Erratum

For the article "Theorising women and war in Kurdistan: A feminist and critical perspective" which was published in 2018 (*Kurdish Studies*, 6(1), 5-30). The article did not mention that Hamelink's project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 753935. Hamelink was able to work on this article due to the received funding.

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