“LET’S RECLAIM OUR HISTORY AND CULTURE!”—
IMAGINING ALEVI COMMUNITY IN CONTEMPORARY TURKEY

BY

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“pasts are restored, fellowships are imagined, and futures dreamed”

In March 1995 a violent assault on Alevi coffee houses in an Istanbul squatter area killed two people and left several others injured. The mass rally that followed the shooting quickly turned into a violent political protest, and more than twenty people were shot dead by police. Though for some ten years the Alevis of Turkey had been the subject of a lively public debate in the country itself, the massacre drew world attention to a socioreligious group that had to then been more or less unknown.

My contribution to the understanding of the process of revival and cultural self-assertion that has recently grasped the Alevi community will first sketch the background and contours of the theoretical problem and then will consider the role of “history” and “tradition” in the processes of the formation and maintenance of this movement. Simultaneously I hope to introduce orientalists to

1 This article is the revised and enlarged version of a lecture presented at the Orient-Institut der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft in Beirut on May 3, 1995. The manuscript was concluded in August 1997. The title of the paper has been changed (I am grateful to Jan Jansen for the hint), the present version being inspired by the call for the foundation of an archive of Alevi religious texts and documents published in Kervan, no. 25 (1993): p. 19.

I am obliged to Christopher Houston for his help with editing the text. Likewise I thank Charles Brown.

Note on transcription: As my contribution deals with affairs in modern Turkey, I will use the contemporary Turkish spelling and only add the Arabic version for persons or terms that are associated with the Arabic-Islamic world. When referring to the arabophone 'Alawís the Arabic spelling will be used to distinguish this group from the Turkish Alevís.

the most important issues of a debate that has been mainly conducted in the social sciences. This approach not only stresses the essential ambiguity of the concepts of ‘nation’, ‘ethnic group’, and ‘ethnicity’—terms that are unfortunately often used in an unreflective way—but will also show that it is nevertheless useful to resort to the explanatory potential of these concepts in order to come to a deeper understanding of the underlying dynamics of the Alevi “problem.”

History, Nationalism, Ethnicity

Since the seventies there has been general acceptance in the historical sciences of the idea that historical work consists not so much in the ordering of uncontradictable, objective facts as with the construction and interpretations of these ‘facts’. Though earlier generations of historians may have admitted in private that history was not simply the cut and dried re-presentation of what actually happened, they only rarely presented their historical monographs as the outcome of their respective interpretations. However, with the rise of hermeneutics and increased sensitivity to the problems of history writing it became debateable whether it was sufficient to go to the archives, become engrossed in the documents, and arrange them in some reasonable order. Gadamers’s notion of the historian’s necessary ‘prejudice’, for example, problematized the biases that might have shaped not only the very records that were being studied, but the historian’s research as well. The dominant historical “method” of narration was criticized as being less innocent in its positivistic approach to the texts than it tried to make the reader believe, and a younger generation of historians insisted on the need for open theorizing in and on the process of historical research.3 Further, the controversy stimulated much debate about the development of the historical sciences