

## SPACE AS AN IDENTITY STRUGGLE AND INTERVENTION SYMBOL AT URBAN AREAS: DJEMEVI IN TURKEY

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After centuries under pressure by the government and Orthodox-Sunni authorities, Alevi people could migrate to cities and became apparent in Turkey just only as from 1950's. Alevi people, cohabitated with Sunni majority in cities, have encountered difficulties on keep their belief and culture. One of these difficulties is "djemevi" problem (Alevi place of worship) in urban areas. Due to the fact that djem – Alevi worship- was prohibited, Alevi people didn't have independent places of worship in villages where they lived isolated from the society and government. They prayed secretly in some big rooms at houses or some big-closed places as barns or lairs. When they migrated to cities, they needed formal-public places of worship in urban areas. The state of Turkey adopts Alevis not as a religious but as a cultural group only. Because of that djemevis are still not been legalized and recognized officially. So, as a space unit, djemevi has become a symbolic struggle object for protecting Alevi belief and cultural identity in urban areas. Main purpose of this study is to deal Alevi's djemevi struggle in Turkey from the point of space-identity arguments and equality on public services. Djemevi is not only a place of worship of a faith group in 2014's Turkey but also a political symbol that determine the form of relation between government and citizens. For Alevi people, this prayer place symbolizes the struggle of identity maintenance on the face of discrimination and exclusion by the government and mass of society. On the other side, djemevi means of historical prejudices and politically-religiously restrain Alevi people in Turkey for the government.

**Keywords:** Alevism, Space, Identity, Discrimination.

### Introduction

In this paper, I will discuss the djemevi problem of Alevis in Turkey today. Djemevi is the Alevi place of worship and as an unpermitted space; it is a symbol of the struggle and intervention between Alevi people and government. This position canalizes us to aspects of place or –in broad terms- space: Social and political. Massey (1994,- p. 254) remarks the perceiving of dialectic relation between space and social structure on literature as:

*"...to the aphorism of the 1970s –that space is socially constructed — was added in the 1980s the other side of the coin: that social is spatially constructed too, and that makes a difference. In other words, in its broadest formulation, society is necessarily constructed spatially, and that fact –the spatial organization of society— makes a difference to how it works."*

Social one is absolutely a part of politics. That means space is political as well. Space has always been used as a means of show strength by powers in history indeed. As Lefebvre says,

*"Space is not a scientific object removed [detourm?] from ideology or politics; it has always been political and strategic. .... Space has been fashioned and molded from historical and natural elements, but in a political way. Space is political and ideological. It is a product literally populated with ideologies. .... Space is a historical product -like anything else- but, moreover, is historical in the classical sense of the term." (Lefebvre, 2009, pp. 170-171).*

Foucault (1997) consolidates this claim by saying the space is an area of struggle for power (in Özden, 2014). Space is a point of conflict of embodier and discipliner over against lived and instinctively.

Djemevi problem of Alevis in Turkey is a noticeable example of these two aspects of the space. Before this case, let me give some basic informations about Alevism. Alevism is often confused with Shia (Shiite in Iran), Alawi (Syrian origin), Yarsanism (Ahl-e Haqq in Iraq and Iran), Alawites (Arabic Alevis in Syria and Turkey) on international literature. Even though there are some similarities on belief between Alevism and these beliefs, Anatolian Alevism has lots of separate and authentic features. There is a wide incomprehensibility on Alevism in Turkish literature as well. Kızılbash (Qızılbaş), Bektaşî (Bektashi), Tahtacı, Caferî (Jafari), Nusayrî terms used with or instead of Alevism sometimes (Mélíhoff, 2011; Yaman, 2012; Olsson, Özdalga and Raudvere, 2003; Kehl-Bodrogi, 2012). For today, there is not an agreement on definition, history, theology, terminology and demography of Alevism. My approach is that (Anatolian) Alevism is a heterodox, syncretic, traditional folk belief that irruptively based upon oral culture and sufistic-esoteric interpretation of Islam. Because of some well-known religious, social, historical, political and cultural factors, they have been despised, excluded and suffered from repression by the governments and Sunni majority since the earlier period of Ottoman Empire. Persecuted and massacred under Ottoman Empire, Alevis obligated to live in hiddenness at villages on top mountains for approximately five hundred years (Salman, 2014, p. 49). So they called as a "secluded-closed society" (Soyyer, 1996; Subaşı, 2008). It started to change beginning from 1950's. Alevi people populously migrated to cities and they faced to troubles of urbanization and modernization.

Alevism is not been still accepted as a licit-permissible belief in the eye of government and official ideology in Turkey today. Because of political interventions and continued prejudices of Sunni majority, it's still difficult to research Alevism in Turkey. So, we are not sure about demography of Alevism in Turkey now; but, there are some disputed figures about it. Presidency of Religious Affairs (PRA-Diyanet in Turkish) doesn't give place Alevism even as a name at official researches or studies on religious groups. Therefore, it's not known according to official figures that how many Alevi lives in Turkey. But, there are some different figures about it. 6 or 7 million said by some official statements, 11 or 12 million according to some independent researches and around 20 million according to some Alevi organizations (Yaman, 2012, p. 56-57; Soyyer, 1996, p. 19; Kehl-Bodrogi, 2012, p. 82; Shankland, 2006, p. 81). Although not yet certain, it is estimated that 15 or 20 per cent of population -10 to 15 million people- is Alevi in Turkey; nevertheless, there are only 937 djemevi all across the Turkey. Most of them are in Alevi villages. There is not a single one in 31 province of 81. On the other hand, there are 85.412 mosques that only related to Diyanet (Diyanet Statistics, 2013). There are also small mosques, pray room or worship houses in nearly all public organizations, universities, grand metro stations, shopping centres etc... Diyanet takes religious services only to Sunni majority. Mosques related to PRA are financed by public fundings. Existing djemevis are all financed by Alevi people and organizations by theirselves and by reason of not having juridical status djemevis can be opened as cultural association, NGO or local solidarity associations. Although civil society finance them, Alevi people face difficulties on build a djemevi or put into operation it.

### Discussions on Djemevis

Alevis keep away from the hard-line of Ortodox-Sunnism in terms of belief, worship and some daily life habits. For example, Alevi people do not go to the mosques and salah (prayer of Islam) because of some religious and political reasons. Their main worship is djem. Djem (means gathering) made on certain days of the year and it is a collective worship. Besides Alevi belief, culture and philosophy are treated; interior

law and social order are found out in djem in company with prays, special-religious musics and ritual dances called “semah” (Yaman, 2011, pp. 157 and 206; Kehl-Bodrogi, 2012, pp. 150-155; Dedekarginoğlu, 2013; Zeidan, 1999, p. 80). All this reason, djem is very important on arise, is formed and maintain of Alevi identity. Beside troubles on freedom of belief and worship; Alevi people have some other difficulties as educational and cultural rights, accessing public employment and work opportunities, political exclusion and discrimination etc. Djemevi problem I discuss in this paper is embodiment of all these problems concrete on space. Djemevi is a striking example of power repression by the way of space in Turkey.

Making djem was prohibited until 1990's. Alevi people made djem in secret under the gun of government and some Sunni groups at villages. Due the fact that djem worship is forbidden, they did not built separate and independent djemevis at villages. According to my field researches at Alevi villages in central Anatolia, djem worship has made in some large, closed and temporal spaces in Alevi villages until quite recently. These places were a part of daily life: for example large rooms at “dede” houses (whom socio-religious leaders of Alevis) and sometimes porches (hayat), storehouses and even barns and lairs that emptied for djem days. With Foucault's conceptualization, all we can term these places as heterotopias from the point of discontinuity on time.



**Figure 1.** A traditional djemevi decoration. I took in an Alevi village, Sivas, Turkey.

After Alevi awakening and struggles in 1990's, prohibitions on djemevis were untightened by governments. Alevi people started to build or set their own djemevis. But, interventions and fear on djemevis has not disappeared completely. There is an example of it that I observed in 2013 summer:





**Figure 2.** A “new” djemevi that I took in an Alevi village. It’s transformed from old Primary School building. Striking one is the signboard (marked red): We read “Dernek” here. That means “Association”. And the original signboard is inside. Look Figure 3.



**Figure 3.** “Cem Evi” (Djemevi) signboard behind (I took in the same village in Sivas, Turkey).



**Figure 4.** A djemevi (as association) in the basement of a building. I took in Tuzluca, Ankara.



**Figure 5.** A djem worship in a gym. I took in Porz, Köln, Germany.



Untill 1950's Alevi people lived in villages all together. Since that time they have been migrating city centres. Besides normal effects of the urbanization/modernization process, they have been faced with some other problems originating from political and social conditions. One of most important problems that Alevi people confronted in urban areas is lack of djemevis to worship and come together. I observed directly in the course of my field researches that Alevi people faced difficulties to open and use a djemevi. Except that to open a djemevi as a physical worship place, even the name of djemevi was forbidden: therefore, Alevi people had to make djem worships in temporal-secret places –as they used to do in villages-. Some associations used for djemevis sometimes were shutted down by governors. Alevi people used large slum rooms, townsman associations, cafes, indoor sports halls for djem worship but oppression has continued.

Because of all these difficulties, djemevi has been a symbol of identity struggle for Alevi people at urban areas. And the other side, interference and repression attitudes of government and Ortodox-Sunni memory reappeared via djemevi space.

### **Why the Governments Interfere?**

Seemingly accepted of all morphological characteristics of modern state as laicism, rule of law, the equal protection of law etc., formal establishing ideology of Republic of Turkish State was based on “one language, one religion and one nation”. The religious base of this nation-building model was Sunni-Islam. Not the universal law principles as freedom of belief and worship or intercitizenship but formal Ortodox-Sunni ethos formed of governments, bureaucratic institutions and judicial bodies’ view on Alevi belief and djemevis for ninety years of Republic.

We can sum up this point of view thus and so: **a)** There is not an agreement among Alevi people on what is Alevism and is djemevi a worship place or not. **b)** 99 per cent of population is Muslim in Turkey and Alevism is a part of Islam in our opinion. The temple of Islam is mosque. **c)** If Alevism is within Islam, Alevi people must go to mosques to pray. Two temples in one religion is out of question. If they are Muslim too, Alevi people cannot have a separate worship place. Djemevi is a cultural centre and it can be accepted only in this way.

Certainly the last and ruling advocate of this view in Turkey now is the Justice and Development Party (JDP –AKP in Turkish) has been powered since 2002. Chief Spokesman on bureaucracy is Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet). Juridical bodies judges on this subject by referring Diyanet. And there are lots of sections in community at media, in academy or NGO's. These spin-doctors do the job of molding public opinion in the direction of djemevi cannot be accepted as a worship place or temple.

Now I will give some examples that show how political, bureaucratic, judicial or other civil actors think on and explain djemevi issue in Turkey nowadays:

Ali Bardakoğlu (Former President of PRA-Diyanet) says in a response to a parliamentary question:

*“It's not that we are opposed to cemevis, but they are not an alternative to mosques. Alevi can have their semah [ritual dances], but they should fast, too...The cemevi is not an alternate place of worship to the mosque. It is wrong to present cemevis as an alternative to mosques, as this will turn Alevism into an independent religion and will lead to the alienation of Alevi”... (WashingtonTimes and Today's Zaman, 11/04/2008)*

And he adds in another statement: *“Cemevi is an addition to mosque. Cem worship is an addition to salah. We cannot change to bases of Islam. Salah is common worship of everone who see her or himself as a Muslim. We cannot structure our institutions according to sects or mystical groups. We cannot factionalize in case so-and-so group louder.” (Tevhid Haber, 17/01/2008)*

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (President – Prime Minister at that case) says:

*“It [Alevism] is not a religion; it is seen as an institution within Islam. It has no clear definition... The cemevis are not places of worship. There is a single house of worship in Islam — the*

*mosque. Cemevis are cultural houses. The argument that the Alevis have bigger problems than the Kurds is untrue. Their voices are louder.” (Al-Monitor and Radikal, 22/02/2013)*

Emrullah İşler (Deputy Prime Minister):

*“Djemevi is the most important one (problem about Alevis – a.n.). There are statements that our Prime Minister Cemevini made. We cannot accept a djemevi as a place of worship. Because, we take Alevism in the circle of Islam. Most of them accept it in this way as well. If they’re defining Muslim themselves, the temple of Islam is masjid, mosque. So, make a concession is out of question!” (Cumhuriyet, 28/05/2014)*

Cemil Çiçek (Turkish Parliamentary Speaker) directly gives reference to Diyanet in response to a Member of Parliament who demands a djemevi in Statehouse:

*“According to PRA-Diyanet, Alevism is not a separate religion but a development that originated in Islam and a cultural treasure that emerged during the course of Islamic history, and Islam's places of worship are mosques. It is not possible to consider cemevis and other [such] premises as places of worship, because Alevism, which is a sub-group of Islam, cannot have a place of worship other than mosques or mescits, which are common places of worship within Islam,” (Today’s Zaman, 11/12/2012)*

And a current dijudication:

*“Turkey’s Supreme Court of Appeals Wednesday ruled against a non-governmental organization (NGO) that builds “cem houses,” the traditional houses of worship for the country’s Alevi minority. Only mosques and masjids constitute proper houses of worship, the appeals court said in its verdict.” (Sabah, Bianet, Radikal, 26/07/2012)*

It can be found countless examples of newspaper articles, reports, essays, TV or radio program recordings, case or statements of civil actors against legislate of djemevis. Under these discriminatory and unfair circumstances, Alevi struggle on freedom of belief and is getting sharpened day by day.

## **What Alevis Struggle For?**

Even though the government and Diyanet assert the contrary, almost all of the Alevis regard djemevi as a place of worship and as a symbol of recognition of Alevi rights they speak out this spatial recognition (Demir, 2008, p. 478; cited in Sevinç, 2013, p. 64). Of course, djemevi has some other functions more or less all worship places has as well: for example cultural symbol, religious education, assembly place etc... But, the major function of the djemevi is being house of worship and it is not an object at issue among Alevis. The main concern is how government act on the right of equal citizenship:

*“Djemevi has become major axis of urban Alevism where we stand now. Existence of Alevism at urban condition indexed this axis. Id est, djemevi demand is a social existence demand in fact.” (Yıldırım, 2013)*

Although roughly 15 million adherent, there are only 900 djemevis in round numbers all across the Turkey. Vast majority of these djemevis are in Alevi villages and all of them are still appear to assocations or cultural centres. There is not a single one in 31 province of 81. And there is also that existing djemevis come up against various difficulties as legal, political, financial or social pressure and de facto destruction, witch-hunt and oppress by lawsuits. On the other hand, there are 85.000 mosques in round that only related to Diyanet. There are also small mosques, masjids, pray rooms or worship houses in nearly all public organizations, universities, grand metro stations, shopping centres etc... Diyanet takes religious services only to Sunni majority and mosques related to PRA are financed by public funding.

In reaction to all these figures Alevis speak up on djemevi struggle. Actually, whether accept djemevi as a house of worship or not, all of the Alevis think that the government must give a legal status and bring services to djemevi in compliance with principle of objectivity. Separately their position in front of the belief, almost all Alevis and most of the egalitarian intellectuals in Turkey take djemevi problem as a discrimination case:

<b>Sunni population (estimated aprx.): 60 million</b>		<b>Alevi population (estimated aprx.): 10-15 million</b>	
<b>Years</b>	<b>Number of mosques</b>	<b>Years</b>	<b>Number of Djemevis</b>
<b>2002</b>	<b>75.941</b>	till 1990	106
<b>2005</b>	<b>77.777</b>	1990-2000	169
<b>2010</b>	<b>81.984</b>	2000-2012	668
<b>2013</b>	<b>85.412</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>937</b>
<b>(705 mosques per capita)</b>		<b>(15.000 djemevis per capita)</b>	
<b>85.000 mosques that are related to Diyanet only! Furthermore masjids, prayer rooms, Quran courses etc.</b>		<b>Diyanet doesn't accept djemevi as a place of worship.</b>	
<b>Main expenses defrayed by Diyanet.</b>		<b>All djemevis financed by Alevi people.</b>	
<b>There is not a province that has not a mosque...</b>		<b>31 of the 81 province have not a single one!...</b>	

**Figure 6.** Comparing places of worship of Sunni and Alevi people in Turkey (I prepared using sources: PRA-Diyanet Statistics on <<<http://www.diyamet.gov.tr/tr/kategori/istatistikler/136>>>; reports and news on newspapers as <<<http://www.haber7.com/guncel/haber/1002426-hangi-ilde-kac-cemevi-var-liste>>>)

“Alevs are a group of Turkish Republic citizen who have a distinctive belief and culture. It’s impossible to claim that they are less careful on perform their legal obligations which citizenship requires. However, as they couldn’t profit by public researches and services which some other groups hold unconditional, they are continually exposed to systematic discrimination in lots of subject that we could put in the universal human rights frame.” (Zırh, 2012, p. 54).

They have three basic argument and demand on this subject: **1)** Being a religious community, what should be our worship and where should be our place of worship cannot be defined by the government or Sunni “ulema” (the body of scholars who are authorities on Muslim religion and law). **2)** The ordinary care in a state the government to act politically neutral in the face of belief and demands on belief of all citizens. Laicistic state must cut the cord to all religious communities. **3)** If necessary, all public services must be taken in objectivity and djemevis benefit the rights which all other worship places and temples have. All public resource allocation must be done in principle of equal objectivity.

## Conclusion

Space is a political, ideological and historical product as Lefebvre clearly said. Space has been used as a means of obtain and keep hold of by power in history. It may become a symbol of taking a stand against power as well. Djemevi problem of Alevs in Turkey has been hit the fan that precisely include both of these two aspects of space. Even though seeming as a worship place problem of a faith group only, djemevi is a symbol of a struggle-interfere line among Alevs, government and the mass society of Sunni in Turkey today. For Alevs, this prayer place symbolizes the struggle of equal citizenship and identity



maintenance on the face of discrimination and exclusion. On the other side, despite 90 years of constitutional laicism, Ortodox-Sunni attitudes are being continued. Sunni-Islamist and Conservative politics of JDP-AKP that's been in power for 12 years has strengthened both struggle and interfere. Djemevi used as a means of restraining Alevi people in Turkey by the government. Even though the government stretch the rules and take some symbolic steps, djemevis still does not have a legal status and obstructionism about freedom of belief and worship. Under these circumstances, except for the fact that all religious arguments, demands on djemevis are justified and rightful from the point of equal citizenship and freedom of religious. In my humble opinion, regardless of their belief, population or political stance, governments should address an issue not taking as a reference of discussions on religion or theology but within the principles of citizen rights and objectivity on public services. As a state of law whose constitution based on secularity, The Turkish Republic is expected to address djemevi issue from the point of this view as well.

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