

A never-ending story of an identity crisis or a creative reformulation of an Alevi-mindset? What the case of Alevi youth in the German diaspora suggest today?

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Abstract

The Alevi movement, originating more than three decades ago in Turkey and the Western European diaspora, has led to significant social and cultural shifts within Alevi communities. This movement witnessed the emergence of Alevi associations, increased religio-political activities, and a fervent search for a redefined Alevi identity. The quest for a comprehensive understanding of Alevi identity remains a contested debate, prominently reflected within Alevi youth, who navigate complex socio-cultural landscapes and encounter challenges in defining their identity amidst competing narratives and associations. This paper examines the identity formation strategies of young Alevis in Berlin, drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2021 and 2023. Contrary to mainstream portrayals of Alevi youth experiencing a loss of identity, this study argues for the presence of continuity dynamics, emphasising inherited Alevi mindsets and emotions. Through interviews and analysis of a documentary produced by Berlin Alevi youth, the paper explores new narratives about Alevi history, sociology, and theology constructed by young Alevis, highlighting their role in shaping contemporary Alevism in Germany. This research contributes original data and discussions to the existing literature on Alevi youth, shedding light on their evolving identities and the dynamics of Alevi discourse in diasporic settings.

KEYWORDS

Alevis, Kurdish Alevis, Germany, Alevi Youth

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INTRODUCTION

It has been more than thirty years since the Alevi movement emerged in Turkey and simultaneously in Western Europe, commonly known as the Alevi Awakening. This refers to the mobilisation of Alevi communities in Turkey and the Western European diaspora, the extensive formation of Alevi associations, the increase of religio-political activities on a transnational level, raised public and media visibility, and a passionate search for a redefined Alevi identity that especially encompasses young Alevi's new cultural standards, that eventually resulted in contested debates and the proliferation of Alevi-literature in academic, intellectual, and political circles (Bruinessen, 2023, 115-36; Lord, 2020, 455-80; Walton & İengiz, 2024). The political status of the Alevi population in various European countries has been significantly influenced by differing migratory patterns, policies towards minority groups, and constitutional rights. Since the 1990s, Alevi have created and transformed a transnational space through political mobilisation, resulting in increased visibility and differentiation of their community, particularly in Germany and wider Europe (Özkul, 2019, 259-73). Alevi began organising in the late 1990s to sustain their identity and seek recognition in their host countries. The Alevitische Gemeinde Deutschland e.V. (German Alevi Association) was the initial Alevi organisation founded in Germany, subsequently inspiring the creation of analogous associations throughout Europe. The approaches employed by these associations in the public domain exhibit considerable variation, contingent upon specific political and geographical contexts. In response to political developments in Turkey, immigration policies in Western countries, and the opportunities presented by multiculturalist frameworks, Alevi associations' politics vary (Gedik et al., 2020). The German constitution acknowledges Alevism as a distinct religious group. As a result, Alevism is included in the German school curriculum as a separate religious subject. Additionally, Alevi Associations in Germany offer training for religious leaders, further solidifying Alevi religious practices and education within the country (Coşan-Eke, 2021, 100-12).

Today, Alevism has evolved into an international umbrella concept, encompassing heterogeneous Alevi traditions from different historical, geographical, sociological, linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Consequently, the search for a comprehensive understanding of Alevi identity (either as a politicised philosophical/cultural ethics or as a religious belief and practice) is still a contested debate, strongly reflecting itself within the Alevi public and especially echoing in the Alevi youth, creating new approaches to the religion and diverse Alevi historiographies among younger generations.

Young Alevi's ambitious pursuit of satisfactory answers for Alevism as a cultural identity in global times has been a subject of considerable academic interest since the Alevi Awakening. This is because these generations are believed to offer a comprehensive picture of the massive social transformation that Alevi have undergone in the last half-century. For example, the emergence of new sources and opportunities for younger generations to learn about Alevism in modern times has contributed to changing social structures and has brought forth challenges concerning generational social differentiation. In this regard, the waning of the traditional knowledge transmission, coupled with the novel socio-cultural and geographical aspects that younger Alevi were born into, has decisively contributed to the situation. This, in conjunction with the lack of standardisation and public education on Alevism until the last decade, and the existence of competing Alevi associations claiming the true practice and representation of Alevism, has further complicated the matter, leaving the young Alevi in a state of confusion (Tol, 2017). Consequently, their ambivalent self-definitions, diverse political stances, confusing emotions towards their identity, interest in involving with other religions, or desire to learn the veritable nature of Alevism have aroused the attention of academia both in Turkey and in the European diaspora.¹

It is also noteworthy that despite Alevism's official recognition in European countries with constitutional rights, including public education, the third generation in diaspora (also referred to as German Alevi or Euro Alevi)² appears to encounter the same obstacles, uncertainties, and debates regarding their self-definition as Alevi youth did in the 1990s and early 2000s (Özmen, 2011b, 11-22; Şahin, 2012; Tol, 2005). In this regard, German Alevi youth today, like their peers, remain ardent in their search for the roots of Alevism that could be relevant to their contemporary social reality, which they perceive as concealed and awaiting discovery. In this quest for religious and intellectual discovery, or "journey to the roots", dependable sources, including academia, play a critical role. The fervent efforts of German Alevi youth to embrace and publicise their identity, participate in social and political activities, and establish a broad organisational structure (as discussed in the case of "Der Bund der Alevitischen Studierenden (The Federation of Alevi Students)", BDAS³ in this paper) are indicative of a robust continuity dynamic present among the new generation, rather than a loss of identity, as frequently depicted in the academic study of Alevism.

This research paper is based on the results of ethnographic fieldwork carried out as a part of a scientific research project at Freie Universität Berlin (FU) between 2021 and 2023.⁴ Apart from the social transformation of socio-religious institutions in diasporic settings, the study also focused on the identity formation strategies of young Alevi residing in Berlin. Drawing on the results of the ethnographic study, this paper begins with a brief review of mainstream academic narrativisation on Alevism, which predominantly portrays Alevi youth as experiencing a loss of identity and emotional belonging to the community. The paper will then explore and argue some counterarguments, highlighting continuity dynamics in relation to an inherited Alevi-mindset and -emotions instead of a break. The data are extracted and analysed from young Alevi from BDAS-Berlin, most of whom are bachelors, and who participated in interviews. Furthermore, a recent documentary produced by BDAS-Berlin members, narrating the journey of a young German Alevi individual to discover his cultural heritage, is part of the discussion. The documentary successfully reflects how young Alevi engage with their cultural background and integrate their understanding.

The leading research questions framing this paper are as follows: How do young German Alevi in Berlin construct new narratives about Alevi history, sociology, and theology? What are the primary arguments they present, and upon which sources do they rely in the process? How do these inquiries compare with those put forward by Alevi youth in the 1990s and early 2000s? What do current academic studies suggest about this topic? Finally, given the participants' self-perceptions and reflections on self-definition and Alevism, what can be said about the role of Alevi youth in the formation of contemporary Alevism in Germany? This chapter aims to contribute to the existing literature on Alevi youth by presenting original data and new discussions.

PORTRAYING ALEVISM AS A "DRASTICALLY TRANSFORMED RURAL SOCIETY" OR A "LOST IDENTITY": UPON SOME POSTULATES OF ACADEMIC NARRATIVIZATION

Since the Alevi Awakening, the international academic interest towards Alevism has constantly increased. Among such piled academic intellectual studies, even though there are some pioneering monographs and ethnographies on Alevism suggesting inspiring approaches to highly contested issues, what is mostly portrayed repeating arguments on the very same storyline. That is the mass mobilisation of Alevi communities from their relatively enclosed rural cosmos to a transnational space, through traumatising violent experiences that ultimately shaped a highly politicised community and modern Alevi-identity politics.⁵ In this regard, the transformation of rural societal structure (highlighting here the dissolution of traditional



religious authority structures and respective cultural institutions), the adaptative strategies that reshape the concept of Alevism from “a tradition” to a reformulated “cultural identity” or to “a religion”, or to a sum of “modern philosophical ethics” in line with new political movements have been the leading academic discussions (Massicard, 2013; Sökefeld, 2008; Yıldırım, 2018). Simply put, the societal-, structural- and spatial-transformation of Alevism is a broad way of understanding the changes that have happened to Alevi as they moved out to global settings.

Here, it is also important to note that such academic narrativisation of Alevism is often built upon some dichotomies, that frame the social-cultural, societal-structural, political-organisational, religious, historical and spatial contexts in two, such as “rural-urban,” “centre-periphery,” “sedentary-nomadic,” “tradition-modernity,” “orthodoxy-heterodoxy,” “high culture-public culture,” “high Islam-public Islam,” and more (Gültekin, 2020, 23-58). Seemingly, all are now classified into two overly used categories: (1) “traditional-” or “authentic-Alevism” (this portrayal is rather an idealised or invented representation of Alevism in a highly contested historical past) and (2) “modern-Alevism” (which is often used to describe “the chaotic state” of the contemporary Alevism).⁶ Indeed, such descriptive and informative approaches are factual and, to some point, highly practical as they provide a chronological understanding of the various stages of transformation of centuries-old Alevi institutions, religious discourses, political tendencies, or ritual repertoire. In this frame, however, academic interest has mainly revolved around *Ocaks* and the *dedes/pires*⁷ and *anas*, since they are believed to represent the only religious authority mechanism and the main carriers of oral-tradition-based Alevism. That approach not only excludes the main carriers of the culture, *talips*, since they constitute the majority but also ignores an important aspect of practising contemporary Alevism, the personalisation/individualisation of the religion. In this frame, while *Ocaks* (and *dedes/pires* or *anas*) represent a fading aspect of Alevism as a historical-traditional religious belief and practice, the Alevi youth, on the other hand, has always been considered an intriguing mirror to the social transformation, which is always described as devastative.⁸ In the end, such framings usually conclude with a cliché, which is the loss of Alevi authenticity, as the Alevi youth is often described as experiencing an identity crisis. However, this viewpoint fails to explain the continuity or adaptation dynamics that can be seen in the reformulation of meaning patterns, emerging new symbols, emotional settings and the new actors such as young Alevi organisations such as BDAS or BDAJ, who are actively shaping the modern discourse and practice of Alevism in the German diaspora.

At this point, it is necessary to explicate some key terms and arguments that conceptualise Alevism as a social phenomenon that has deviated from its primordial roots. Doing so would enable us to better grasp the portrayal of Alevi youth in such approaches, which I will discuss in detail in the coming subchapter. Accordingly, three main processes are seemingly overly mentioned. (1) First, since the 1960s, **modernisation** has significantly impacted everyday life in both rural and urban Turkey. This has resulted in substantial social and spatial changes to relatively isolated rural Alevi communities. Consequently, there have been waves of migration, first to major Turkish cities and later to Western Europe as “Gastarbeiters”. This social mobility, driven by economic and political factors, has caused a gradual dissociation of the *Ocak* and *talip* networks, resulting in the collapse of traditional caste-like religious institutions. In a globalised world, Alevism has evolved from an oral-traditional religious belief into a politicised identity movement, where modern concepts and ideas play a significant role (Subaşı, 2019; Yaman, 2004; Yıldırım, 2018). Secondly, **social transformation** has ensued. The caste-like religious obligatory relations within the community structure and centuries-old traditional institutions have undergone significant social transformation and dissolution. In this frame, the village-based *Ocak* and *talip* relations have given way to Alevi-associations-based (*Cemevi*) new spatial and socio-organisational structures. More importantly, such new socio-political and religious settings are rather dominated by *talips*’ expectations, political views, and social trends,

which hold much more sway than *Ocak* members in the stage of late 20th and the early 21st centuries. As a result, it is assumed that Alevism has been consigned to obscurity and has lost its “authentic” character. As the gap between *talips* and *Ocaks* widens, *talips* have more opportunities to participate in important community matters and to increase their intellectual capital. Inevitably, *Ocak* members’ non-negotiable and -questionable traditional religious positions and charismatic acceptance have come to be heavily criticised by *talips*, framing and limiting their role in the community by providing religious services only (Subaşı, 2019; Yaman, 2004; Yıldırım, 2018). Thirdly, **politicisation** has played a significant role in the making of contemporary Alevism. Starting from the 1960s, Alevi began participating more in politics, specifically in socialist and social democrat circles. This increased their political knowledge and enabled them to effectively utilise this socio-political capital in Alevi politics during the emergence of the “Alevi movement”, especially in Turkey and the Western diaspora during the 1990s. By participating in socialist politics and confronting violent attacks from radical Islamists or far-right Turkish nationalists, the Alevi developed a more non-authoritarian, egalitarian, environmentalist, and multi-cultural understanding of religion. Furthermore, it prompted a fresh idealisation of Alevi theology in response to contemporary social, economic, and ethical challenges humanity faces (Bahadır, 2020, 86-115).

In recent decades, the scholarly and intellectual community has witnessed a series of debates surrounding the nature and definition of Alevism in relation to the above-mentioned conceptual framings, and the complexity of the subject has given rise to various classification patterns and key terms that attempt to frame the structural underpinnings and cultural differences of Alevism. Historically, the Alevi in Turkey were a diverse group of local communities that were linguistically and traditionally highly heterogeneous until the mid-20th century. This historical and cultural reality has made the task of defining Alevism a challenging one for Alevi intellectuals and academics. Consequently, the social dynamics of Alevism have been unpacked through analytical steps formed using classifying notions such as “culture”, “ethnicity”, “ideology/politics”, “philosophy” and finally “religion”. Such conceptual framings and analytical steps have also been reflected upon Alevi youth as a case study, which is often regarded as a sample group that mirrors the confusion and intense debates surrounding the definition of Alevism and mostly featured for “identity crisis” or “a search for identity” themes.

A NEVER-ENDING CRISIS AND SEARCH FOR THE ULTIMATE ANSWERS OR A SELF-REALIZATION? WHAT HAS ACADEMIC RESEARCH SUGGESTED FOR THE ALEVI YOUTH IN TURKEY AND THE GERMAN DIASPORA SO FAR?

Academic studies on Alevi youth often employ specific conceptual frameworks, using Alevi youth as case studies to highlight broader themes. Özmen’s analyses (2011a, 31-54; 2011b, 11-22) examine the complex relationship between Alevi youth and Turkey’s unstable political climate throughout modern history. She argues that Alevi, depicted as a politically vulnerable group due to their alignment with left-wing movements, engaged in political actions to make their identities visible while avoiding explicit public identification as Alevi. From 1960 to 1980, a period dominated by socialist movements, Alevi youth’s political activities indirectly aimed to highlight their Alevi identity. In her second study, Özmen examines the evolution of Alevi youth’s political actions from the 1980s to the 2000s, suggesting that despite a shift towards identity politics influenced by liberal ideology, the core motivation remained the search for a publicly accepted identity. She also discusses the proliferation of Alevi organisations following the Alevi Awakening and the intense debates among them, rooted in the violent rivalries of socialist factions before the 1980 coup. Özmen argues that the post-1980 period involved redefining Alevism with modern values like gender equality, egalitarianism, modernism,

and secularism. Emerging Alevi leaders challenge Islamist and Turkish nationalist politics, asserting these modern values are intrinsic to Alevism's historical, cultural, and theological foundations.

In a more recent study conducted by Tol (2017), Alevi youth in low-income neighbourhoods in Istanbul, Turkey, were approached using qualitative methodology. Tol also adopts the common academic conceptual framings through social transformative processes and external threats such as modernisation, migration, politicisation, and violence. Discussing Alevi youth are forced to undergo a forced social transformation, especially the Alevi youth who are being exposed to new conditions to adapt. Tol suggests three main concepts⁹ to analyse the case of identity perceptions of young Alevi in Istanbul: (1) becoming more religious, (2) framing Alevism as a cultural identity (with an emphasis on secularism) or (3) becoming more politicised (mostly through socialist organisations). However, Tol takes the analytical frame of politicisation a step further by exploring the way in which Alevi youth engage with political mechanisms. He identifies three categories revolving around *Cemevis*, political parties (particularly in the Republican People's Party [Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, CHP]), and finally legal or illegal socialist organisations involving more radical actions. Tol argues that contemporary young Alevi experience being with "others" (the Sunni majority) much more compelling than the older generations (who experienced a relatively isolated village life), and the encounters with others force them to build new narratives, which means to find solid answers about their identity. More importantly to this paper, he also emphasises some hybrid forms among (cultural, religious, and political) suggested identity categories that Alevi youth actively switch as a strategy to adapt or confront the changing social conditions. Tol concludes that the cultural category is the most taken since its boundaries are more flexible.

Geçgin (2019, 1030-75) also conducted an in-depth interview-based study on how Alevi youth perceive and express their self-identity. His study, following the same overused conceptual framing and analytical categorisation, found that Alevi youth seek to express themselves not only through political means but also through religious, cultural, and ethnic considerations. Once again, we see the academic study of Alevism typically follows the same patterns in framing the social outcomes of a "destructive social transformation" through modernisation and politicisation effects. However, the analytical steps may vary. Geçgin's analyses e.g. built religious, cultural, ethnic, and political categories but concluded the same: the search for identity through several strategies. Accordingly, although young Alevi are more likely to express themselves relatively freely, they still face tacit and explicit discrimination and suppression. Therefore, they have built several survival strategies, such as creating new discourses and new political patterns, to express themselves and explain their surroundings in a more consistent narrative. Geçgin, as can also be seen in Tol's study, emphasises an individual aspect of identity positioning. This is reflected in the way Alevi youth can easily switch between different discursive patterns of defining Alevism.

Özata (2020: 3-25), however, suggests a new point on how Alevi youth enforce themselves to create a consistent identity discourse that aligns with their new generational worldview. Inheriting a traumatised self-consciousness from older generations, who were exposed to extreme violence, and by still being subjected to discrimination, alienation, and state violence, the Alevi youth living in low-income Alevi neighbourhoods in Istanbul tend to find their way through the radical left. The way they express their identity through socialist narrativisation of "the struggle for justice" and through spatialisation politics, Alevi youth establishes its existence against all odds and sustains continuity. Özata also draws attention to an emotional dynamic. As members of socialist organisations and through solidarity against powerful oppressors, Alevi youth substitute the lack of belonging to the Alevi community as their parents or older generations experienced in more traditional (or religious) ways in the past "Alevi village". Thus, in this distinctive study, Alevi youth is considered a new influential actor in contemporary Alevi



politics, contributing to public visibility by creating new discourses and claiming public recognition regardless of being official.

Apart from the studies dealing with Alevi youth in Turkey, there is also growing attention on Alevi youth living in Germany; some still reflect the above-mentioned conceptual frameworks and discussions in Turkish academia, while some suggest new data on the topic. According to Bozkurt (2015), for example, the liberal identity politics adopted by Western European states create conducive conditions for the emergence of new social movements based on ethnic or religious identities. Immigrants from underdeveloped countries find it easy to organise themselves under such politics, which bestow recognition and legal rights upon them. As an example, in the case of Alevi, such legal support collides with the protracted history of violence against them in Turkey, resulting in a rupture from Turkey's socio-political identity codes. Bozkurt, based on his interviews in Manheim, also argues that as the Alevi youth become more educated, they develop a clearer consciousness about Alevism. Conversely, the less educated Alevi youth tend to fall apart from the community, which he defines as the "lost youth". To support his claims, he also refers to the overly used categories of "Alevism as a religion" and "a cultural identity". He proposes that accepting Alevism as a religion helps Alevi youth in Germany stay close to their roots while defining it as a "cultural or "political" identity pushes them away, as can be observed through Alevi youth in socialist fractions or in Kurdish national movement that always tend to politicise Alevism overly.

Another interesting academic study (Yüksel, 2017) in Turkish academia on the perception of the concept of "religion" and "god" among the younger Alevi generation living in Berlin, suggests "modernisation", which is seen as an outcome of the foundation of the Turkish republic and the social transformation of village-based traditional Alevi-life through internal- and external-migrations, are the main reasons that Alevi youth has eventually fallen into a dispute with older generations and started to pave its own way. Although Yüksel explains the social differentiation of the younger Alevi generations from traditional Alevism through overly used academic narrative patterns, he also recognises the role of young Alevi in reformulating new religious concepts. Thus, Alevism in the German diaspora, even though formulated here as a further example of being departed from traditional social and spatial spheres, can also be seen as a living phenomenon creating its own path through younger Alevi's perceptions instead of a dying culture.

Another recent study by Deniz in 2017 sheds light on the Alevi youth in the German diaspora. The study (Coşan-Eke, 2017, 274-84) provides factual insights and new analytical frames through BDAJ members. Although factually the third generation Alevi consider Germany as their homeland and speak German naturally more than their mother tongue, they still face cultural problems with German society. They also have difficulties harmonising inherited cultural knowledge with everyday life in a German setting while negotiating it with older generations. Thus, they seemingly tend to create a more homogeneous space for themselves and seek public visibility and recognition in the Alevi public by being politically and socially more active on behalf of Alevi identity. Deniz emphasises that young Alevi do not consider Alevism a "religion". Instead, as Tol (2017) and Geçgin (2019, 1030-75) detected in their works on Alevi youth living in Turkey, Alevi youth in Germany also adopt a flexible concept of "a lifestyle shaped through political and ethical concepts stemming from Alevi history", creating a flexible space in between various concepts. This includes and empowers their socio-generational perceptions of social life in German society as a distinct religiopolitical group. By shedding light on BDAJ activities, Deniz releases the fact that Alevi youth plays a crucial role in shaping German Alevism in the process.

On the other hand, there also seems to be a notable difference in the way the third generation Alevi in the German diaspora is approached and conceptualised in Turkish and European academia. The latter tend to evaluate the German Alevi generation not as a case of dissolution or degeneration but rather as a new sociological phenomenon that emerges as Alevi seek new

ways and take advantage of socio-political circumstances to sustain the continuity of their long-suppressed identity. As Coşan-Eke (2017, 274-84) remarks, the role of continuity of suppression and discrimination on Alevis as a dynamic that motivates Alevi youth to mobilise within Alevi organisations; Loth and Tepeli (2019, 249-74) also underline the advantages, which the former generation did not have, and new sociological dynamics in the process.¹⁰ They frame the past fifty years of Alevi history, from enclosed Anatolian villages to transnational levels, through social transformative settings such as “secularism”, “culturalism”, “religious revival”, and “political recognition”. Loth & Tepeli’s work distinguishes the socialisation of the new generations within Alevi society, highlighting the overlooked role that adolescence plays in shaping Alevi identity settings. They then focus on Alevi youth whose parents were also born in Germany (the third generation), exploring how these young Alevis navigate the challenges they face in constructing an Alevi identity that empowers both a satisfying public narrative and an emotional-individual sense of belonging, which they can embrace and utilise in German society. Loth and Tepeli (2019, 249-74) successfully demonstrate the crucial role of BDAJ as a place for German Alevi youth to find their place within Alevism. This is different from the experiences of older immigrant generations. Through religious, social, and political activities, the youth collectively raise important questions about the nature of religious and non-religious identities in a transnational modern society, therefore creating more successful ways to create sustainability for the identity from what they could inherit from older generations or Alevi actors in the contemporary.

IN THE SEARCH FOR RELIABILITY AND SPIRITUALITY

During the ethnographic study in Berlin, I noticed the enthusiasm and eagerness of my interviewees to explore their identity issues, which was noteworthy. As an academic and “a reliable source of information” for them, I was invited to several informal discussions and personal meetings organised by young Alevis at the Berlin *Cemevi*. It was surprising to observe that the BDAJ members were facing challenges in learning about their identity, while still being subjected to discrimination and oppression as the young Alevis experienced in the 1990s and early 2000s. However, in the 1990s and even in the early 2000s, when the Alevi movement was gaining momentum, and younger generations were becoming more interested in learning their identity, the above-evaluated academic analyses stressing Alevi generations’ social differentiation or conflict were relevant. Nevertheless, in the first place, one could think that Alevism has been recognised as an independent religion with constitutional rights and is well-organised through Alevi associations in present-day Berlin. Additionally, today, one can easily access a vast range of knowledge on Alevism through the internet or a huge number of publications. Despite the progress, how come these barely Turkish-speaking young people still face almost the same challenges in accessing Alevi knowledge as their coevals did in the 90s and 2000s? How come they report similar discrimination experiences with almost the same words?

Ignoring the common academic narratives and postulations on Alevism and considering the academic studies that view German Alevi youth as a new actor group, I would suggest three prominent aspects to elaborate on third-generation Alevis’ daily challenges as well as strategies in pursuing Alevi-politics in the contemporary diaspora settings. (1) Firstly, they obviously face difficulties obtaining satisfactory information about Alevism from older generations or those who supposedly carry traditional religious knowledge. This issue also extends to communicative challenges with other Alevi (religious or political) actors at *Cemevis*, who belong to first- and second-immigrant generations,¹¹ leading to a search for reliable partners that can provide useful answers to their expectations. Such challenges can be classified through language barriers since older generations cannot master the German language as the third generation does, and

through socio-cultural and political differences, since younger generations have no more intentions of being attached to Turkey's internal politics or having any plans to turn back or live in Turkey anyhow.¹² Therefore, Alevi youth is seemingly quite selective in choosing actors that they can extract information about Alevi-history, -theology, -politics, etc.

"... we are all students at university. We have critical thinking. I don't have to listen to their (*pirs'*) tales and stories in the *Cemevi*. There is reason, logic. They keep telling the same stories. Young people are no longer interested. ... They (the *Cemevi* administration) always see us as children. ... What we question is their (the *pirs'*) religious competence. ... I also think that we are not understood partly because our Turkish is not sufficient. I mean, we can't really explain our problems to these people." (Translated from original field notes. M., female, BDAS member, 28.05.2022)

"The first two generations were immigrants, but the third generation is now German. For the young people growing up here, stories about Hz. Ali slitting the neck of the enemy with his sword do not make sense; on the contrary, they provoke reactions. It alienates them from Alevism. But the stories told by academics are much more scientific and reliable for them." (Translated from original field notes. N., male, BAT member, 01.06.2022)

"Since scientific studies are based on different sources, that is, they use both *pirs*, visits and the Alevi community as sources, they are a little more legitimate, like verified, so the current youth attach more importance to them."

(Translated from original field notes. Z, female, BDAS Member, 25.06.2022)

(2) Even though the level of violence is arguably low, in comparison to older generations' traumas, German Alevi youth also continue to encounter discrimination, alienation and oppression despite residing in vastly different social contexts today. However, such experiences perpetuate the profound trauma embedded in the Alevi history, collective mindset, and emotional sense of belonging. The enduring oppression, discrimination, and violence (particularly in the case of Kurdish Alevis of Dersim (Gültekin, 2020, 2019), where also the majority of interviewees descend from) significantly shape the Alevi identity through political involvement, societal norms, and emotional responses. For many young Alevis, these encounters keep contributing to their identity formation, reinforcing the resilience of identity boundaries.

"In Germany, Alevis are categorised as Turkish and Muslim. But in fact, they only speak *Zazaki (Kirmancki)*. Even though they do not speak any Turkish. They are put in Turkish classes. And we are subjected to discrimination there. So, my father was being assimilated in Turkey into a Turk and a Muslim. In the same way, I am trying to be assimilated in Germany when I am classified as Turkish and Muslim. However, I speak *Zazaki*, I am a Kurdish Alevi from *Dersim*. In short, I was forced to learn Turkish in Germany. In other words, whatever is happening in Turkey, whatever kind of oppression Alevis are subjected to, in Germany, despite all these legal rights, despite the seemingly democratic environment, we are also subjected to these subtle distinctions, discrimination and oppression here. So the trauma continues here."

(Translated from original field notes. M, female, BDAS Member, 28.05.2022)

(3) The final aspect to consider is the BDAJ and BDAS, independent German Alevi youth organisations. Such organisations serve as secure spaces for the third generation to exchange ideas, socialise, discuss common issues, engage in political discourse, and share their experiences. More importantly, within this circle of peers and like-minded individuals, they have the chance to compensate for the lack of knowledge passed on at home or at *Cemevis* and acquire it independently and collectively. Obviously, the act of organising themselves by excluding older generations has facilitated the development of various new discourses of identity, which are effectively utilised in their daily lives, and has boosted self-confidence, opening new channels to intervene with contemporary Alevi politics in Germany. This aspect holds significance as it underscores the predominant independent trajectory of German Alevi youth, as they selectively interact with older generations and academics to create and reinforce their diverse forms of identity formations.

“There have been many tensions between us and the *Cemevi*. They say, they care about young people and we need them... they say, everything is for young people, for the future, but when it comes to what we do, they say, you have to ask us first, you have to get our permission. So we, as BDAS, decided to separate ourselves from the *Cemevi*. So, we established the Alevi students’ organisation. We told them, “You are censoring us”. We do not accept this kind of direction and interference from the *Cemevi*.”

(Translated from original field notes. G, male, BDAS Member, 28.05.2022)

During the fieldwork, I also led a seminar at Freie Universität Berlin (Winter Semester of 2022-23) titled “The Alevis of Dersim: Religion, History, Politics”.¹³ To gain valuable insights into the perspectives, emotions, and expectations of third generation Alevis in Berlin, I invited members of BDAS to participate. Although the scheduled lecture time was only two hours per week, each session lasted for at least four to five hours due to intense debates and discussions. The seminar unexpectedly became a valuable field of research for me. The reflections shared by BDAS members were particularly insightful. This gave me a better understanding of how academia is perceived as a reliable source of information in comparison to the actors at *Cemevis*, in terms of gaining knowledge about Alevi-identity. For example, when the participants compare the lectures with “Perşembe sohbetleri” (“Thursday Talks” in English, which are weekly gatherings with *pirs* or *anas* to speak and learn about Alevism at *Cemevi*) or mention continuing the discussions at home, it becomes clear that young Alevis recognise the academy as a highly regarded institution for learning about Alevism.

“We have already missed the lectures very much. ... I hope there will be such an opportunity next year. The lectures were already very successful, and the continuing conversations afterwards were very important. In my opinion, we were having “the Thursday talks”.

(M, course participant, female, BDAS Member, FU Student, 24.01.2023)

“First of all, I would like to thank you very much for sharing your knowledge and the new findings of your research. I have learned a lot and will always be grateful for it. You always took a lot of time for our questions, opinions or experiences and listened patiently every week. You created a space for Alevi students in which our experiences were not a burden to academic teaching but rather bonded us all together. This also provided the perfect opportunity for me personally to make

friends with others interested in Alevism and the Alevi students of Cemevi. ... To be able to re-learn about Alevism on an academic scale and attend your seminar weekly was definitely a privilege. Every Friday I shared the notes I took on my iPad and the slides you sent me with my father, who does not speak English, so that your seminar took place in our home every Friday. I would like to thank you for this.”

(Translated from original field notes. A., course participant, female, BDAS member, Humboldt Uni. Student, 26.01.2023)

In this regard, although there should ideally be a special recognition for *Ocak* members to gain information, due to the Alevi cosmology which privileges the sacred lineages, today, such individuals are more subject to secular criteria. Seemingly, *pirs* and *anas* are being judged according to various individual qualifications today, such as their social capital, prestige, political stand, understanding of Alevism, etc. Secularisation of religious concepts brings *Ocak* members to a level of understanding similar to other sources of knowledge and diminishes their traditional privileges. Additionally, young Alevis in Berlin still leave open the possibility of acquiring reliable and comprehensive knowledge through family, friends, Alevi intellectuals, and also preferred religious figures. It is also important to emphasise that *Cemevis* are still the cornerstone of the Alevi community in the German diaspora, and despite the occasional tensions with Cemevi administrators, German Alevi youth have actively participated in social events and religious ceremonies at Cemevis since their childhood, using them as social spaces.

“But I attended the funeral service of *x dede*, listened to the *devriye* (the metempsychosis of souls between *Zahir* and *Batin* realms in Alevi cosmology) from him and felt relieved because he described a world completely outside Islam. Finally, I realised that there are people in this *Cemevi* who think like me. I was very happy about that.”

(Translated from original field notes. M, female, BDAS Member, 24.01.2023)

A JOURNEY TO THE ROOTS: HOW YOUNG ALEVIS CONCEPTUALISE THE SOURCES OF ALEVI-KNOWLEDGE

“I believe in *Raa Haq*. *Cemevi* wants us to walk “the path” (*yolu yürümek*), but we want to walk a different path. For me, *12 imams*, *ehlibeyt*... are all Islamic figures. I say, I am from *Dersim*, I feel I belong there, but at the same time I am German, I belong here. When I think of *Dersim*, I feel as if I have lived there myself. I admire its nature, it attracts and attracts me more. In other words, most of the BDAS are from *Dersim*. We come from places like Çorum, Maraş, Malatya, Sivas, etc., in other words, our families came from these places, but when we look at them, they all belong to the *Dersim Ocaks* (the sacred lineages). It is very interesting to me, although I grew up here, I feel a great attachment to *Dersim*.”

(Translated from original field notes. G, male, BDAS Member, 28.05.2023)

Surprisingly, *Dersim* and the case of Kurdish Alevism play an important role for some of my interviewees in the search for self-perception of Alevism, suggesting that this heavily contested issue offers more space to the third generation to explore through their mindsets. BDAS members shot an amateur documentary film in 2021 called “Alevitentum - Eine Suche nach Identität” (Alevism - A Search for Identity).¹⁴ Three main questions¹⁵ lead the film, which gives a powerful insight into how young Alevis perceive their identity through various sources

of information and how they build a picture of it. The documentary starts with two BDAS members having a conversation as they walk around Berlin *Cemevi* in Kreuzberg, Berlin. They talk about Alevism, admitting their limited knowledge and their efforts to learn from various sources. By asking Germans passing by the *Cemevi* about Alevis and getting similar responses, the documentary shows how far they are from providing a comprehensive answer about their own identity. The focus then shifts to a female academic of German Alevi descent, who would dominate the rest of the documentary by giving informative speeches on various aspects of Alevism, including history, economics, politics, sociology, philosophy, and ethno-culture. The professor shares research-based academic information that shapes the main picture. On the other hand, the documentary features also a *dede* living in Germany as a secondary source, providing additional insight into Alevism's theological, philosophical, and sociological aspects. The Alevi *dede* is the Chairman of the Clergy Council of the Confederation of Alevi Communities in Europe. However, the *dede's* appearances are less frequent than those of the professor.

The film then follows the main character, a young Alevi, as he embarks on a journey to “the village”, also defined as “den heiligen Ort” (the sacred place), taking viewers to two important *jiare*s (sacred places, Gültekin, 2020): one in Muş-Varto-Hınıs (*Ziyareta Gül*) and one in Dersim, *Kemerê Duzgı* (Gültekin, 2024, 570-88), both are highly important pilgrimage sites and powerful symbols of *Raa Haqi* (Kurdish Alevism). As the professor and the *dede* keep discussing the essentials about Alevism the young Alevi also seeks answers through mythological narratives and beliefs associated with the *jiare*s. The documentary emphasises that the “*yol*” (the path) in Alevism represents “an actual quest for answers within the village” or “the sacred homeland”, beyond the knowledge provided by the professor and the *dede*. As it is described in the film, the main character seems to be journeying into the unknown past by interacting with the sacred homeland left behind by his grandparents (the first immigrant generation) while exploring this ancestral geography through the surrounding *jiare*s and experiencing a spiritual self-examination. The documentary also introduces a respected *pir*, portrayed as a “traditional” and “authentic” figure, who appears only once but distinguishes himself from his counterpart in Germany as “the *dede* in the village”. The documentary concludes with a workshop-style discussion among several BDAS members in Berlin, sharing and exchanging ideas, experiences, and thoughts on their past and future lives.

In the context described, it is evident that Alevi youth are keen on cultivating an Alevism that is reflective of their social reality, as well as their spiritual, emotional, sociological, and even political aspirations. They have delineated the sources of knowledge into five distinct categories: (1) a professor in Germany disseminating systematised academic information about Alevism, thereby representing a credible and authoritative position; (2) a “modern” *dede* in Germany possessing legal and public representative status and articulating an official Alevism discourse within the diaspora; (3) a “traditional” *pir* in *Dersim* (the sacred homeland) who exclusively communicates through *deyiş*s, embodying a knowledge domain accessible solely through spirituality; (4) the *jiare*s, communicating through mythology and alluding to the unwritten Alevi history and the enigmatic truths about identity embedded in an oral culture and (5) a cohort of BDAS members who provide mutual support in their quest for identity by virtue of their shared experiences, where they would build a new generational understanding of Alevism. Significantly, the film refrains from engaging with *Cemevi* administrations or intellectual figures associated with Alevism as primary sources of information. This stance underscores a notable aspect of the third generation's perception regarding the preferred sources of Alevism they seek to learn from or engage with. The social milieu inhabited by Alevi actors, including Alevi intellectuals, religious authorities, *Cemevi* administrations, or other intellectual figures, is governed by distinct social norms and cultural expectations. These entities are anticipated to fulfil the specific requirements of Alevi youths, reflecting their discerning preferences and interests in accessing Alevi knowledge and discourse.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

“On the wall of my room, there are photographs of İbo (İbrahim Kaypakkaya), Seyit Rıza, Che Guevera, village houses, mountains and my grandmother. This is my room decoration. There are also plaques on feminism, Pir Sultan Abdal, Nazım Hikmet, etc. There used to be Hz. Ali too. ... When I was younger, my family had reservations about these photos. They didn't want the police to see them. My grandfather, for example, still hesitates to openly say that he is Alevi. I think each generation liberates a little more and a little more than the previous one in this sense.”

(Translated from original field notes. M, female, BDAS Member, 24.01.2023)

The emergence of the third generation of Alevis in Berlin represents a novel sociological phenomenon, necessitating the development of new analytical frameworks and academic approaches to elucidate its distinctive characteristics and potential implications for Alevism's future in contemporary Germany. While prevailing scholarly discourse on Alevism, particularly with regard to Alevi youth, has predominantly adhered to conventional scholarly narrative patterns, some recent studies conducted in Europe have sparked noteworthy discussions by recognising the third generation as a pivotal new actor within the public sphere of Alevism. Notably, as exemplified in this paper, organisations such as BDAJ and BDAS illustrate the marked divergence of the younger generation of Alevis from their predecessors, who grappled with issues predominantly shaped by the challenges of migration within German society. Despite facing challenges not unique to German society, but rather encountering anti-Alevi discrimination within immigrant social circles and among their peers, young German Alevis have clearly shown the ability to establish influential organisations to address these issues. Furthermore, it is imperative to discern the distinctions between Alevi youth in Germany and those in Turkey. BDAJ and BDAS are not solely social mechanisms employed by the younger generation to assert their social standing, but they also signify the rise of a nascent societal generation that introduces a novel interpretation of Alevism within the European diaspora.

I find it important to mention that in some academic studies on Alevi youth (Coşan-Eke, 2017, 274-84; Geçgin, 2019, 1030-75; Loth & Tepeli, 2019, 249-74; Tol, 2017), it has been observed that Alevism discourses used by Alevi youth have undergone a process of “personalisation”. Loth and Tepeli (2019, 249-74), in this regard, discuss that the lack of knowledge that ideally should be transmitted through generations creates a certain degree of freedom of interpreting or manipulating the concept of inherited identity and results in creating an individualised faith. In my previous works, I also noted that the traditional concept of *Ocaks* has not completely vanished, but the practice and understanding of Alevism have evolved to become more “individualised” in contemporary times (Gültekin, 2020). This has resulted in a personalised interpretation of the religion, which is heavily influenced by one's sense of identity, political beliefs, and moral values. In her ethnographic study, Claire Wanless (2021) also offers valuable insights into the concept of individualised religious practice. Wanless argues that within such practice, the individual's own personal experiences take precedence, prioritising self over external opinions. She suggests that individuals view themselves as active agents of their spiritual journeys, influenced and transformed by their experiences, while striving to connect with their authentic selves. Wanless's analysis is particularly relevant in understanding how Alevi individuals focus on self-discovery as a key aspect of Alevi identity in contemporary contexts, whether political, social, or religious. In this regard, her examination of how everyday experiences shape an individual's process of finding meaning resonates with descriptions by members of the BDAS, who see their relationship with Alevism as a “journey to the roots or to the *hakikat*”.

Despite being relatively independent of religious authorities and strict doctrines, this individual space continues to play a significant role in shaping the modern perception of Alevism for the majority of believers, known as *talips* (Gültekin, 2020, 2019). Alevi youth both in Turkey and Germany are engaged in creating and occasionally transitioning between various Alevi discourses, thereby exemplifying the individualisation of Alevism as a comprehensive religious identity, which encompasses flexible social and political subspaces. These self-definitions are dynamic and susceptible to influence from changing environments, social agendas, political attitudes, and other pertinent factors. As young Alevi individuals increasingly seek out individualistic and value-based identities, it is important to consider how religious identity fits into this broader context.

Given the evaluations of Alevi youth on Alevism as a religion to believe in, it appears to be a loosening of the spiritual aspect, which can be seen in the decrease of prestige and authority of *Ocak* members among the younger and so in the wider Alevi public. Seemingly, this void is being filled by new channels such as (1) academia as it offers a more rational and scientific perspective on Alevis and (2) a concept of imagined symbolic “the sacred land” which provides spiritual aspects through *jiars*, mythological narratives, and *pirs* as representatives of this ultimate and sacred source of Alevi existence of diasporic new generations. I believe it’s important to recognise the influence of individualised interpretations of Alevism on the community’s development, particularly in how young Alevis reinterpret the Alevi knowledge. While mainstream scholarly work often portrays this as a disengagement or dissolution of Alevism, I see it as a continuation of a more personalised approach to maintaining Alevism within evolving circumstances and a quest for reinterpretation and spirituality.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ In the following subheadings, I will briefly argue on such academic studies before evaluating my field data.
- ² For the term, “German Alevis”, see Schwalgin & Sökefeld, 2000, 26; Sökefeld, 2022, 136. For “Euro Alevis”, see Zirh, 2008, 103-32.
- ³ BDAS is part of a larger Alevi youth organization in Germany called BDAJ (Bund der Alevitischen Jugendlichen in Deutschland (Alevi Youth in Germany) e.V.). BDAJ is affiliated with the largest umbrella Alevi organization in Europe, Alevitische Gemeinde Deutschland e.V. (Alevi Federation Germany), and has local members, including children, adolescents, and young Alevis at each Cemevi in Germany. On the other hand, BDAS members are only university students.
- ⁴ The ethnographic research methodology utilized in this project prioritized qualitative research methods, including participant observation, engagement in religious ceremonies and social activities at Berlin Cemevi, and conducting in-depth interviews employing semi-structured open-ended questions. This approach aimed to comprehensively investigate the practices and perceptions of diverse Alevi generations residing in Berlin. The categorization of Alevis into three generations facilitated interviews spanning various age groups and genders, enriching the depth and breadth of the study’s data collection.
- ⁵ The literature on Alevism is vast and diverse, encompassing a wealth of scholarly and intellectual publishing. While attempting to provide a comprehensive overview of the various scholarly approaches to Alevism is beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth noting that recent reliable works offer valuable insights into mainstream academic considerations. See Bruniessen, 2023, 115-36; Lord, 2020, 455-80; Walton & İlgiz, 2024. Also see recent edited volumes: Jenkins et al., 2018; Özkul & Markussen, 2022.
- ⁶ For such conceptualisation of the terms see Subaşı, 2019; Yaman, 2004; Yıldırım, 2018.
- ⁷ *Dede* is a commonly used Turkish term for male religious authorities among Alevis. On the other hand, the term *Pir* is commonly used among Kurmanci- and Kirmancki-speaking Kurdish Alevis. For more details see Deniz, 2019, 45-75.

- ⁸ In the following sub headline such approaches are being discussed in detail.
- ⁹ Seemingly stemming from the commonly known categorical discussions that deeply influenced further studies: “Is Alevism a religious, a cultural identity or a religious identity?” See Massicard, 2013; Sökefeld, 2008.
- ¹⁰ The integration of “Alevism lessons” into German educational institutions, particularly with the increased participation of the third generation, warrants significant attention. These structured educational initiatives provide the new Alevi generation with the chance to learn about Alevism in diaspora languages, often proving more effective than learning in their native tongue. This phenomenon mirrors observations made by Jenkins and Cetin (2014a, 1-4; 2014b, 105-23) and Jenkins et al. (2018, 105-23), offering valuable insights into the evolving dynamics of continuity among new diaspora generations. The introduction of Alevism classes serves a dual purpose: not only familiarizing students with Alevi culture but also advocating for the recognition of Alevism as a distinct religious and cultural identity, historically overshadowed by a broader Muslim categorization in Europe. Moreover, engaging Alevi youth in these educational efforts is perceived as a proactive measure to counter potential disaffection and disengagement prevalent among this demographic, evident in both German and British contexts (Cetin, 2020, 185-208).
- ¹¹ To my idea, the second generation includes those who were brought to Germany during their childhood or as adolescence and also those who were born in Germany but raised more within the community having limited interactions with German society in comparison to the third generation.
- ¹² Such problems were also noticed by some previous academic studies that were conducted either at Berlin Cemevi (Yüksel, 2017, 45) or with BDAJ (Coşan-Eke, 2017, 274-84; Loth & Tepeli, 2019, 249-74)
- ¹³ To reach the syllabus see the personal account Ahmet Kerim Gültekin at website “academia.edu”.
- ¹⁴ The documentary is available on YouTube.
- ¹⁵ “Aleviten? Schon mal gehört, aber keine Ahnung wer die sind!” (Alevi? I’ve heard of them, but I have no idea who they are!), “Aleviten? Keine Ahnung noch nie gehört!” (Alevi? No idea, never heard of them!), “Ich bin zwar Alevit:in, aber was ist meine Identität?” (I am an Alevi, but what is my identity?)

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Gültekin has made considerable scholarly contributions throughout his career, which are reflected in numerous articles, book chapters, and authored works. Among his notable publications are “Tunceli’de Kutsal Mekan Kültü” (2004), “Tunceli’de Sünni Olmak” (2010), and “Kutsal Mekanın Yeniden Üretimi” (2020). He has also co-edited and contributed to seminal works such as “Kurdish Alevis and the Case of Dersim” (2019) and “Ethno-Cultural Others of Turkey: Contemporary Reflections” (2021).

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