The Alevi Kurds: Identity, History, and Struggle for Recognition Before 2010

I. Introduction: The Alevi Kurds – An Overview (Pre-2010)

Defining the Alevi Kurds: A Distinct Ethno-Religious Community

The Alevi Kurds represent a significant ethno-religious minority predominantly residing in Turkey, whose distinct identity is forged at the complex intersection of Alevism—a heterodox tradition often situated on the periphery of Shia Islam—and Kurdish ethnicity. This Kurdish component encompasses speakers of both Kırmancki (also known as Zazaki or Dersimki) and Kurmanji, the two principal Kurdish language groups in the region.[1] Before the year 2010, this community endured a profound and multifaceted marginalization, often described as a "double exclusion".[4] This arose from the Turkish state's persistent refusal to officially recognize either their Alevi faith as a distinct religious system or their Kurdish ethnicity as a separate national identity. Consequently, Alevi Kurds found themselves set apart not only from the Turkish-Sunni Muslim majority but also from Turkish Alevis (with whom they shared faith but differed in ethnicity and often cultural practice) and Sunni Kurds (with whom they shared ethnicity but differed in religious belief).[2] This systemic non-recognition was not a passive oversight but an active policy that contributed to centuries of discrimination, political oppression, and coercive assimilation efforts aimed at dissolving their unique cultural and religious heritage into a homogenized Turkish national identity.[1]

Significance of the Pre-2010 Period

The period leading up to 2010 is of paramount importance for understanding the historical trajectory and contemporary situation of the Alevi Kurds. This era encompasses several critical junctures that profoundly shaped their collective experience. These include the tumultuous transition from the Ottoman Empire to the modern Turkish Republic, the cataclysmic Dersim events of 1937-1938 which inflicted deep wounds on the community, and the subsequent socio-political transformations that saw the emergence of an "Alevi revival" and the heightened politicization of both Kurdish and Alevi identities, particularly from the 1980s and 1990s onwards.[1] The "Alevi revival," which began to gather pace in the 1980s and intensified significantly in the 1990s, marked a crucial shift for many Alevi communities, including Alevi Kurds. It represented a move away from centuries of enforced concealment and the practice of *taqiya* (religious dissimulation) towards a more open and assertive expression of their identity, accompanied by increasingly vocal demands for cultural rights, religious freedom, and an end to discrimination.[3] An analysis of this timeframe is therefore indispensable for comprehending the complex socio-political demands, the nuances of

identity construction, and the enduring quest for justice that characterized the Alevi Kurdish community as it approached the second decade of the 21st century.
The historical context of the pre-2010 period reveals a persistent effort by the Turkish state to render Alevi Kurds invisible, both culturally and politically, through policies of non-recognition and forced assimilation. This state-driven agenda, however, produced an outcome contrary to its intentions. The sustained pressure, compounded by traumatic historical events such as the Dersim massacres and later pogroms in Maraş and Sivas, did not lead to the erasure of Alevi Kurdish identity.[2] Instead, these experiences fostered a potent sense of shared victimhood, resilience, and a collective determination to resist annihilation. The official denial of distinct Alevi and Kurdish identities, aiming for a monolithic Turkish-Sunni national character [1], and the associated policies of suppression [3], inadvertently catalyzed a more conscious, politicized, and public articulation of their unique heritage. The "Alevi revival" and the broader Kurdish politicization that gained momentum in the 1990s were, in significant measure, direct responses to this enduring state pressure and a collective refusal to be culturally or politically effaced.[1] Thus, the very mechanisms designed for erasure paradoxically contributed to the strengthening and public assertion of the identities they sought to suppress.
Furthermore, the severe oppression and the constriction of political and cultural space within Turkey before 2010 were instrumental in shaping a significant Alevi Kurdish diaspora. The intense persecution and political violence experienced in Turkey, particularly during the latter half of the 20th century, compelled many Alevi Kurds to seek refuge and new lives in Western Europe, with Germany becoming a particularly important destination.[3] In these new European homelands, Alevi Kurds discovered greater freedom to organize, express their distinct identity, and establish cultural associations and political groups that were untenable in Turkey.[8] These diaspora communities rapidly evolved into crucial centers for the preservation, redefinition, and active promotion of Alevi Kurdish identity. They played a pivotal role in the broader "Alevi revival," articulating demands for recognition and rights on an international stage and fostering a dynamic transnational Alevi Kurdish consciousness.[8] The discourses, cultural productions, and political strategies developed within the diaspora subsequently permeated back into Turkey, influencing and invigorating the Alevi and Kurdish movements there. Consequently, the pre-2010 era of oppression in Turkey acted as a direct catalyst for the formation and consolidation of a resilient and politically engaged transnational Alevi Kurdish identity.

II. Historical Roots and Context

Theories of Origin and Early Influences

The historical origins of Alevism itself are traced to Central Anatolia in the 13th century, a period marked by the confluence of various spiritual currents. Itinerant Muslim mystics, often referred to as *babas* or dervishes, played a crucial role in its early development, blending their teachings with pre-Islamic Turkic shamanistic beliefs and practices. Alevism also absorbed significant influences from mainstream Shia Islam, particularly through cultural and political

contacts with Safavid Iran, which championed a form of Shiism.[6]
The specific genesis of *Kurdish* Alevism, however, is a subject of considerable debate and varying interpretations. In the early years of the Turkish Republic, some state-affiliated researchers and ideologues advanced the theory that Alevi Kurds were essentially assimilated descendants of pre-Islamic Turks. This narrative strategically emphasized religious identity as a Turkic survival, aiming to downplay or erase their Kurdish ethnicity.[1] According to this perspective, Kurdish-speaking Alevis were originally Turkoman tribes who, having fled Ottoman persecution to remote mountainous areas, gradually lost their Turkish language and adopted Kurdish.[3] Conversely, other theories, often emerging from within the community or from scholars focusing on linguistic and cultural distinctiveness, posited that Alevi Kurds possess unique ethnic origins. Some of these narratives highlighted the Kırmancki (Zazaki) language as a defining feature of a distinct Zaza cultural heritage, separate from both Turkish and other Kurdish groups.[1]
More recent academic research has shed further light on these early influences, pointing to the significance of figures such as the Kurdish saint Abu'l-Wafāʾ Tâj al-ʿArifîn (d. 1107) and the Wafāʾiyya Sufi order. These are considered to have been among the early representatives of heterodox Islamic traditions in eastern Anatolia, the heartland of Kurdish Alevism. Prominent Alevi Kurdish sacred lineages (*ocaks*), such as the Ağuçan family, trace their spiritual ancestry directly to Abu'l-Wafāʾ.[3] This evidence suggests that Kurdish Alevism may have roots that predate, or are at least distinct from, the Haci Bektash Veli-centric narrative that is often predominantly applied to Turkish Alevism. The Upper Euphrates basin, a region that experienced significant Safavid influence, is widely regarded as the core geographical area for the development and consolidation of Kurdish Alevism.[15]

Alevi Kurds under the Ottoman Empire: The Kızılbaş Legacy

Under the Ottoman Empire, Alevis were frequently identified by the term "Kızılbaş" (Red-Heads), a designation derived from the distinctive red headgear worn by the followers of the Safavid order. This term, however, often carried pejorative connotations, as the Kızılbaş were systematically branded as "heretics" by the Sunni Ottoman administration.[3] They faced centuries of sustained persecution, discrimination, and periodic massacres. This hostility was significantly exacerbated by the prolonged political and military conflict between the Sunni Ottoman Empire and the Shia Safavid Empire of Persia. The Kızılbaş, with their reverence for Ali and other Shia figures, were often suspected of sympathizing with or actively supporting the Safavids, making them targets of state repression.[10]
This environment of intense persecution compelled many Alevi communities, including Alevi Kurds, to retreat into remote, inaccessible rural and mountainous regions, such as Dersim. In these isolated strongholds, they were able to preserve their faith and cultural practices, often in secrecy, employing *taqiya* (religious dissimulation) to avoid detection and further oppression.[3] Despite the overarching Ottoman control, some of these regions, notably Dersim, managed to maintain a considerable degree of relative self-rule. This autonomy allowed Dersim to evolve into a crucial geographical and spiritual center for many Kurdish *sayyid* (sacred lineage) families, who could expand their religious activities and influence under the

protection afforded by the local tribal structures.[3]

The Turkish Republic: Erasure, Assimilation, and Resistance (Pre-2010)

The establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923 did not bring an end to the marginalization of Alevi Kurds. Instead, they continued to be ostracized as a distinct ethno-religious group, subjected to what has been described as a "painful suppression" throughout much of the 20th century.[3] The new republic, while ostensibly secular, embarked on a project of nation-building that prioritized a homogenous Turkish national identity, often implicitly or explicitly intertwined with Sunni Islam.

The secularization reforms implemented in the early years of the republic had a particularly detrimental impact on Alevi religious structures and leadership. The "Law for Closing the Dervish Lodges and Shrines" enacted in 1925, for instance, led to the closure of Alevi centers of worship and learning, such as *dergahs* and *ocaks*. This law, and subsequent measures, significantly weakened the authority of Alevi religious leaders (*pirs*, *dedes*) and prohibited them from providing religious services, thereby disrupting traditional modes of religious transmission and community organization and facilitating state-led assimilation efforts.[4] Access to Alevi holy sites was severely restricted. An amendment to this law in 1949 even sanctioned the exiling of Alevi religious leaders who continued to offer religious services.[4]

State policies were consistently aimed at creating a singular Turkish-Islamic (Sunni) identity, which inherently involved the denial of Alevi religious distinctiveness and Kurdish ethnic particularity.[2] These policies manifested in various forms, including attempts to reframe Alevism as a purely Turkish cultural phenomenon or as an assimilated remnant of pre-Islamic Turkic shamanistic beliefs.[3] Furthermore, the compulsory religious education implemented in Turkish schools was overwhelmingly focused on Sunni Islamic teachings, a practice widely perceived by Alevis as a direct tool of assimilation aimed at indoctrinating their children into the dominant religious ideology.[7]

The early Republican narrative that portrayed Alevis, including Alevi Kurds, as "pure Turks" or as descendants of Central Asiatic shamans [3] represented a sophisticated and multifaceted assimilationist strategy. This narrative sought to co-opt Alevism into a Turkish nationalist framework, ostensibly to resist what was termed "Arab cultural expansionism" (a veiled reference to orthodox Sunni Islam), while simultaneously negating Kurdish ethnic identity and the unique, often non-Turkish, syncretic elements inherent in Alevi Kurdish faith and practice. This official discourse created profound internal contradictions and identity crises within the broader Alevi community itself, with some Alevi writers and intellectuals even embracing this Turkish-centric interpretation of their heritage.[3] The new Turkish Republic, in its quest for a unifying national identity [4], found Sunni Islam, albeit under strict state control via the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet), to be a de facto component of this desired homogeneity.[7] Alevism, with its heterodox practices and distinct social structures, posed a challenge to this vision. By framing Alevism as an "authentic Turkish" or "pre-Islamic Turkic" belief system, the state could attempt to claim it for Turkish nationalism, differentiate it from "Arab" Sunni orthodoxy when politically expedient, deny its status as a distinct religion requiring separate recognition and rights, and, crucially for Alevi Kurds, erase their Kurdish

ethnic component.[1] However, this official narrative and its associated claims did not translate into any tangible improvement in the legal status or rights afforded to Alevis [3], underscoring its primary function as a mechanism for assimilation and control rather than a genuine embrace or recognition of Alevi identity.

Moreover, while the secularization laws of the early Turkish Republic ostensibly aimed to curtail the societal influence of all religious orders and institutions, their impact on the Alevi Kurds' socio-religious organization was uniquely devastating and enduring. Sunni Islam, despite being brought under state control, found a new, albeit circumscribed, institutional framework through the establishment of the Diyanet, which provided a degree of continuity for Sunni practices, education, and clergy, albeit in a state-sanctioned interpretation.[7] In stark contrast, the Alevi *ocak* system—the hereditary spiritual leadership structure—along with their *dergahs* (lodges) and other communal centers, were effectively dismantled or driven further underground by the 1925 law closing such institutions, without any alternative recognized structure being offered or permitted.[4] This direct assault on the Alevi *ocak* system, which formed the very backbone of their religious hierarchy, knowledge transmission, and communal cohesion [1], left Alevi communities with no institutional support or official recognition; their unique structures were simply outlawed or allowed to decay.[4] This created a profound vacuum in religious leadership and organized practice, forcing Alevism deeper into secrecy and significantly complicating the transmission of religious knowledge and traditions. The subsequent "Alevi revival" in the later 20th century was, therefore, a process of attempting to rebuild their communal and religious life from a severely weakened and fragmented foundation. The loss of these traditional institutions also rendered their rich oral traditions even more critical for cultural survival, yet simultaneously more vulnerable to erosion and loss.

The following table provides a chronological overview of key historical events and their impact on the Alevi Kurdish community before 2010, illustrating the sustained pressures and transformative moments that have shaped their collective experience.

Table 1: Key Historical Events and Their Impact on Alevi Kurds (Pre-2010)

Event	Approximate Date/Period	Brief Description	Specific Impact on Alevi Kurds
Ottoman-Safavid Conflict	16th-18th centuries	Political and military rivalry between the Sunni Ottoman Empire and Shia Safavid Persia.	Increased persecution of Kızılbaş (Alevis) as perceived Safavid sympathizers; retreat to isolated regions; development of secretive practices (*taqiya*).[3]
Establishment of Turkish Republic	1923	Founding of the modern Turkish state on secular principles, but with an emphasis	Continued ostracization as an ethno-religious group; initial hopes for secular

		on Turkish national homogeneity.	equality largely unmet; policies aimed at assimilation into a singular Turkish identity.[3]
Law for Closing Dervish Lodges and Shrines	1925	Legislation shutting down Sufi lodges and other religious centers not aligned with state-sanctioned Islam.	Dismantling of Alevi religious institutions (*dergahs*, *ocaks*); weakening of traditional religious leadership; facilitation of assimilation policies; disruption of communal religious life.[4]
Dersim Massacres	1937-1938	Large-scale military operations by the Turkish state in the Dersim region.	Mass killings, forced deportations, and destruction of villages predominantly inhabited by Alevi Kurds; severe disruption of socio-religious structures; profound and lasting collective trauma; targeting and execution of leaders like Seyit Rıza.[1]
Maraş Massacre	1978	Anti-Alevi pogrom in Kahramanmaraş involving nationalist and extremist groups.	Significant anti-Alevi violence resulting in many deaths and injuries; increased fear, politicization among Alevis, and contributed to emigration; highlighted the community's vulnerability.[4]
Çorum Events	1980	Anti-Alevi violence in Çorum, similar in nature to the Maraş events.	Further instances of targeted anti-Alevi violence, reinforcing patterns of

			persecution and deepening distrust of state protection and the Sunni majority.[7]
Military Coup	1980	Military takeover in Turkey leading to widespread political repression.	Increased repression of leftist, Kurdish, and minority movements; promotion of a Turkish-Islamist synthesis ideology that further marginalized Alevis; provided an impetus for Alevi organization in the diaspora.[11]
Start of Alevi Revival	Late 1980s-1990s	A period of increased cultural and religious reassertion and political mobilization among Alevis.	Greater public visibility for Alevi identity and issues; cultural reassertion through music, literature, and festivals; formation of Alevi associations in Turkey and Europe; increased demands for rights and recognition.[1]
Sivas Massacre	1993	Arson attack on the Madımak Hotel in Sivas during an Alevi cultural festival, targeting intellectuals and artists, resulting in 35 deaths.	A major turning point that galvanized Alevi mobilization both in Turkey and internationally; deepened collective trauma and distrust towards the state and extremist Sunni groups; significantly increased political consciousness.[4]
PKK Conflict Intensification & Village Evacuations	1990s	Escalation of armed conflict between the Turkish state and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), leading to	Forced displacement of many Alevi Kurds from their ancestral rural areas, particularly in the Dersim region

		widespread displacement.	and other parts of Eastern Anatolia; further disruption of traditional village life, agricultural practices, and socio-religious ties; accelerated urbanization and migration.[1]

This chronological framework underscores the cumulative nature of historical trauma experienced by the Alevi Kurds, while also highlighting the critical junctures that catalyzed their resistance, politicization, and the ongoing struggle for the recognition of their distinct identity and rights.

III. Ethno-Religious Identity: Navigating Alevism and Kurdishness (Pre-2010)

The Symbiosis and Tensions of Dual Identity

The identity of Alevi Kurds is uniquely characterized by the profound intersection of Alevism as a religious belief system and Kurdishness as an ethnic and cultural heritage. This confluence creates a distinct cultural sphere where both constituent identities acquire new socio-political and ethno-religious dimensions, setting Alevi Kurds apart from other groups.[1] This "double minority" status meant that they were not only different from the Turkish-Sunni majority that dominated the socio-political landscape of Turkey but also occupied a unique position relative to Turkish Alevis (sharing faith but differing in ethnicity and often in specific cultural practices and historical experiences) and Sunni Kurds (sharing ethnicity but differing fundamentally in religious beliefs and practices).[2] This often engendered a complex sense of being a "minority within a minority," navigating multiple layers of otherness.

The Turkish state's persistent non-recognition of both Alevism as a distinct religious faith and Kurdishness as a legitimate ethnic identity served as a constant source of discrimination and fueled systematic assimilation efforts directed at Alevi Kurds.[1] However, the politicization of both Alevi and Kurdish identities, which gained significant momentum particularly from the early 1990s onwards, had a substantial impact on the re-production, assertion, and public articulation of a distinct Kurdish Alevi cultural identity.[1] The scholar Martin van Bruinessen observed that while in the 1970s Alevism in general was often associated with progressive political leanings, the rise of a more organized and vocal Alevi movement in the 1990s brought internal differentiations within the broader Alevi community to the fore. This included the highlighting of the distinct traditions, historical experiences, and specific identity claims of Kurdish Alevis.[21] In this period of heightened ethnic and religious consciousness, some younger Alevis, particularly those from Kurdish backgrounds, began to more assertively identify as Kurds, partly as a form of protest against the prevailing Turkish state ideology that

sought to negate their Kurdish heritage.[21]

Linguistic Landscape: Kırmancki (Zazaki) and Kurmanji

The linguistic landscape of Alevi Kurds is primarily defined by the use of Kırmancki (also widely known as Zazaki, and sometimes referred to by regional names such as Dersimki) and Kurmanji. These are the two main Kurdish language groups spoken by Kurdish communities within Turkey.[1] Language, particularly Kırmancki/Zazaki, often became a significant marker for those who argued for a unique Zaza cultural and ethnic origin for a segment of Alevi Kurds, positing an identity distinct from other Kurdish groups as well as from Turks.[1]

Despite the centrality of these native Kurdish languages in their daily lives and cultural expressions, the Turkish language often held a prominent role as a ritual language in Alevi religious ceremonies (*cem*), even among Kurdish Alevi communities.[15] This practice complicated narratives of linguistic and ethnic purity and was sometimes instrumentalized in assimilationist arguments that sought to emphasize a Turkish underpinning to Alevism. Furthermore, the systematic suppression of Kurdish languages by the Turkish state, which prohibited their public use, education, and publication until the early 1990s, severely impacted their intergenerational transmission and overall vitality, posing a significant threat to the cultural continuity of Alevi Kurds and other Kurdish communities.[22]

Dersim: The Heart-Land of Alevi Kurdish Identity

The region of Dersim, which was officially renamed Tunceli province by the Turkish state in 1935, holds a profound and central significance in the cultural, historical, and spiritual imagination of Alevi Kurds. It is widely considered their sacred heartland, a geographic and symbolic space intimately associated with their re-invented and fiercely defended ethno-religious identity.[1] Historically, Dersim was a region where Alevi Kurds, speaking both Kırmancki/Zazaki and Kurmanji, constituted the majority of the population.[1]

For centuries, Dersim maintained a notable degree of autonomy relative to central Ottoman and later Turkish state control. This relative independence allowed it to become a sanctuary and a vital center for Kurdish *sayyid* (sacred lineage) families, who were the hereditary spiritual leaders within the Alevi *ocak* system.[3] However, this autonomy and distinct identity were brutally curtailed by the Turkish state, culminating in the devastating massacres of 1937-1938. These events inflicted catastrophic losses on the Alevi Kurdish population of Dersim and led to the near-total destruction of their traditional socio-religious institutions.[1] Despite the immense destruction, displacement, and the enduring trauma of these events, Dersim remained an exceptionally potent symbol for Alevi Kurdish communities, both within Turkey and in the diaspora. The sacred places within Dersim, imbued with generations of religious significance, became crucial focal points for the reproduction of cultural identity and the preservation of collective memory in the face of attempted erasure.[1]

The profound significance of Dersim as a sacred heartland for Alevi Kurds [1] is tragically and inextricably intertwined with its status as the site of their near-annihilation during the events of 1937-38.[2] This stark paradox has cultivated a deeply politicized, mournful, and resilient

attachment to the land. For Alevi Kurds, the memory of loss, persecution, and resistance became as central to their Dersimi identity as the inherent sacredness of the geography itself. The state's renaming of the region to Tunceli in 1935 was a clear attempt to erase its historical and cultural identity.[2] Consequently, the re-invocation and persistent use of the name "Dersim" by Alevi Kurds themselves, particularly in cultural, political, and academic discourse before 2010 (a practice noted by scholars like Gültekin [1]), was not merely a nostalgic or cultural act. It was a conscious and potent political statement of resistance against state-imposed narratives and the attempted erasure of their history and identity. The identity tied to Dersim, therefore, is not solely about ancestral land and heritage; it is profoundly shaped by a shared history of persecution, the struggle to keep the memory of the massacres alive against official denial, and the assertion of a right to self-definition.
Furthermore, the linguistic diversity among Alevi Kurds, characterized by the presence of both Kırmancki/Zazaki and Kurmanji speakers [1], while representing a rich cultural tapestry, also became a point of contention and, at times, manipulation in the complex identity politics of the region before 2010. The Turkish state and some Turkish nationalist narratives frequently attempted to exploit the linguistic differences, particularly the distinctness of Zazaki from Kurmanji, or the documented use of Turkish in some Alevi rituals, to fragment Kurdish identity as a whole or to bolster the theory of "Turkish origins" for Alevism.[1] It was argued by some state-affiliated researchers and European orientalists that Zazaki was not a Kurdish dialect but an independent language, or that Alevis who spoke Kurdish languages were originally Turks who had been "Kurdified" over time.[3] Conversely, within the Alevi Kurdish community, especially among Zaza speakers, language became a basis for asserting a unique "Zaza" identity, sometimes positioned as distinct from both Turks and Kurmanji-speaking Kurds.[1] This linguistic complexity was thus vulnerable to exploitation by external forces aiming to divide and assimilate Alevi Kurds. Internally, it contributed to intricate and sometimes conflicting layers of self-identification that moved beyond a simple Alevi-Kurdish binary, reflecting a more nuanced and internally diverse understanding of ethno-linguistic belonging.

IV. Raa Haq/Riya Heqi: The Alevi Kurdish Faith (Pre-2010)

Core Beliefs, Syncretism, and Distinction from Other Islamic Traditions

Alevi Kurds have traditionally referred to their distinct religious path as Raa Haq (in Kırmancki/Zazaki) or Riya Heqi (in Kurmanji), both translating to "The Path of Truth".[1] This faith system is characterized by a profound syncretism, weaving together diverse theological and cosmological threads. It incorporates significant elements from pre-Islamic Turkic shamanism, a deep-seated veneration of nature, esoteric Sufi mysticism, and core tenets of Shia Islam, most notably the profound reverence for Ali ibn Abi Talib (the cousin and son-in-law of Prophet Muhammad) and the Twelve Imams.[6] Kurdish Alevism, in particular, is often noted for

its especially strong emphasis on nature veneration, where natural elements and landscapes are imbued with sacred meaning.[24]

Alevism, as practiced by Alevi Kurds, differs markedly from orthodox Sunni Islam in both doctrine and ritual. Alevis typically do not perform the five daily ritual prayers (*namaz*) in the prescribed Sunni manner, nor do they observe the month-long fast during Ramadan, although they have their own specific fasting periods, such as the Muharram fast (commemorating the martyrdom of Imam Hussein) and the Khizir fast (in honor of the mystical figure Khidr).[13] The pilgrimage to Mecca (*Hajj*) is also not considered a compulsory pillar in the same way as it is in Sunni Islam. A fundamental characteristic of Alevi spirituality is its rejection of rigid religious formalism and dogmatism.[7] The concept of God, often referred to as Haq (Truth) or Al-Haqq, is central, with Prophet Muhammad and Imam Ali frequently seen as manifestations or reflections of God's divine light, rather than separate deities.[24] Belief in the immortality of the soul, the existence of angels (*melekler*), jinn (*cinler*), and the influence of the evil eye are also present within Alevi cosmology.[24] The *Buyruk*, a collection of religious teachings, moral principles, and ritual guidelines, serves as an important textual source for Alevis, alongside a rich and vibrant oral tradition that transmits sacred knowledge, poetry, and narratives.[15]

The Ocak System: Pirs, Raybers, Murshids, and Talips

Until the latter part of the 20th century, the socio-religious structure of Kurdish Alevi communities was predominantly organized around a hereditary system often described as "caste-like." This system was based on the relationship between sacred lineages, known as *ocaks* (hearths), and their followers, or *talips*.[1] The *ocaks* are considered sacred ancestral lines, with many claiming spiritual descent from Imam Ali, other members of the Prophet Muhammad's family (*Ahl al-Bayt*), or other revered saints and figures (often referred to as *Sayyids*).[15] Key *ocaks* prominent among Alevi Kurds include, but are not limited to, Axûçan (Ağuçan), Babamansûr, and Kureyşan.[3]

Religious authority and spiritual guidance within this system were embodied by members of these *ocaks*, who held distinct hierarchical roles:

- ***Murshid*** (or *Pirê Piran* - Master of Masters): This title typically denoted the highest spiritual guide, often the head of a major *ocak* or a figure with overarching spiritual authority over several *pirs*.
- ***Pir*** (Elder, Master): A *pir* is a spiritual master or guide from a specific *ocak* to whom a *talip* family or community is traditionally bound by an oath of allegiance (*iqrar*). The *pir* provides spiritual guidance, moral instruction, and officiates at key religious ceremonies, most notably the *cem*.[1]
- ***Rayber/Rehber*** (Guide): The *rayber* acts as a guide and an intermediary, assisting the *pir* in their duties and guiding the *talip* in understanding religious matters and correctly performing rituals. The position of *rayber* is also typically hereditary, with individuals chosen from a *sayyid ocak* from birth.[3]

Talips (disciples or followers) are the lay members of the Alevi community. Each *talip* family is traditionally affiliated with a specific *pir* and *rayber* from a particular *ocak*, forming a lifelong

spiritual bond.[1] This *pir-talip* allegiance was the cornerstone of Alevi social and religious organization, ensuring the transmission of faith and the maintenance of communal cohesion.[3] This intricate and deeply rooted system was severely disrupted by a series of historical events, most notably the Dersim massacres of 1937-1938 and the forced evacuations and village destructions that occurred in Alevi Kurdish regions during the intensified conflict of the 1990s. These events led to the physical destruction of religious institutions and, critically, broke many of the established relationships between *ocaks* and their *talips* through death, exile, and displacement.[1]

Sacred Rituals: The Cem Ceremony, Semah, and Deyiş

The *Cem* is the central communal worship ceremony in Alevism and is of paramount importance to Alevi Kurds. It is a multifaceted gathering that typically involves the participation of men and women together, a practice that distinguishes Alevism from more orthodox Islamic traditions. The *cem* is characterized by collective prayer, the performance of ritual music, the mystical ritual dance known as *semah*, and the recitation or singing of religious poetry, hymns, and laments, collectively referred to as *deyiş* or *nefes*.[1]

Cem ceremonies are traditionally led by a *pir* or *dede* (a term also used for spiritual leaders). These gatherings serve not only as occasions for religious worship and spiritual reflection but also as vital communal forums for discussing social issues, making collective decisions, resolving disputes among community members, and reinforcing social cohesion.[1] The *cem* historically functioned as a form of internal justice system, where transgressions could be addressed and reconciliation sought. The most severe punishment that could be administered within this framework was excommunication from the community (*düşkünlük*).[1]

The *Semah* is a distinctive ritual dance performed during the *cem*. It is not merely a folk dance but a profound spiritual practice, often symbolizing the cyclical nature of existence, the movement of the planets, or a mystical journey towards union with the divine. The *semah* became a particularly potent and visible symbol of "Aleviness" during the Alevi cultural and religious revival that gained momentum from the 1990s onwards.[25]

Deyiş (and related terms like *nefes* or *beyit*) are religious hymns, mystical poems, and moral allegories that form a cornerstone of Alevi oral tradition and religious expression. They are often sung, typically accompanied by the sacred *bağlama* (saz), and serve to convey Alevi beliefs, historical narratives, ethical teachings, and the emotional depth of the faith.[17] These poetic forms are crucial for the intergenerational transmission of Alevi spirituality and cultural memory.

Veneration of Nature and Sacred Sites (Jiare)

A particularly distinct and deeply ingrained feature of the Alevi Kurdish faith, Raa Haq, is the profound veneration and worship of nature-based sacred places. These sites are known in Kırmancki/Zazaki as *jiare* (or *ziyaret* in a more general Islamic context, but with specific local meanings here). They encompass a wide array of natural formations and elements, including mountains, prominent trees, significant rocks, caves, rivers, lakes, springs, and even celestial bodies such as the sun and the moon.[1]

Each *jiare* was often believed to be imbued with a sacred presence or associated with a particular semi-deific being, a guardian spirit, or an ancestral figure from one of the sacred lineages (*ocaks*).[1] These sacred natural sites played a crucial role in the everyday religious life of Alevi Kurds, particularly in regions like Dersim. Individuals, families, or entire communities would frequently visit these sites to offer prayers, make vows, seek healing, or perform other devotional acts. Following the severe disruption of the formal *ocak* system due to state violence and displacement, these sacred places gained even greater importance. They provided an alternative and resilient locus for religious practice and became increasingly significant in maintaining and reproducing Alevi Kurdish cultural identity, with *talips* (lay followers) often taking a more prominent role in their upkeep and in the continuation of rituals associated with them.[1]

The systematic dismantling of the *ocak* leadership structure, primarily through state violence such as the Dersim massacres and the widespread village destructions and displacements of the 1990s, did not lead to the extinguishment of Alevi Kurdish religiosity. On the contrary, this profound disruption appears to have catalyzed an adaptive shift within Raa Haq towards a more decentralized, *talip*-driven, and place-based form of religious expression and identity maintenance, particularly evident in the period before 2010. The traditional *ocak* system, with its hereditary *pirs* and *raybers*, was undeniably central to the organization and transmission of Alevi Kurdish religious life and authority.[1] However, the targeted violence against *ocak* members—resulting in killings, exile, or displacement—severely fractured these hierarchical lines of spiritual transmission and authority.[1] Despite this, the deep-rooted belief in and veneration of sacred natural sites (*jiare*) persisted as a fundamental element of their worldview.[1] In the ensuing vacuum or weakening of formal *ocak* leadership, lay followers (*talips*) increasingly took the initiative in sustaining religious life and practice. This was often centered around these enduring sacred places, which offered a tangible and accessible connection to their faith and ancestors.[1] This development suggests a remarkable adaptive capacity within the Raa Haq tradition, where the primary locus of religious practice could flexibly shift from predominantly *ocak*-mediated rituals to more direct, community-led engagement with sacred landscapes. This not only ensured a form of continuity for the faith but also inadvertently empowered lay members in what can be described as an ongoing "religion-making process," where they actively participated in shaping and preserving their religious identity in response to existential threats.[1]

Furthermore, the *cem* ceremony, as practiced by Alevi Kurds before 2010, functioned as much more than a purely religious ritual; it served as a living microcosm of Alevi social ethics and political values. It embodied principles of communal accountability, an internal system of justice that included mechanisms for reconciliation and punishment (short of physical violence, with excommunication being the gravest sanction), and the relatively egalitarian participation of men and women in communal worship and decision-making—a stark contrast to the gender segregation prevalent in orthodox Sunni Islamic practices.[1] The *cem* facilitated the resolution of internal disputes and the maintenance of communal harmony, reflecting an autonomous system of social regulation.[1] The emphasis on shared experience, expressed through music, song, and the *semah* dance, fostered strong communal bonds and a collective

spiritual consciousness.[17] As Alevi communities underwent forced migration to urban centers and faced new socio-economic and political challenges, the *cemevi* (the house of *cem*) emerged as a critical focal point for community organization, cultural preservation, and a potent symbol of their struggle for recognition and religious freedom.[27] The persistence of the *cem*, even in adapted urban forms, underscored its fundamental importance as a resilient institution that carried forward core Alevi values of community, justice, shared spiritual experience, and social responsibility, adapting to new and often hostile contexts while retaining its essential social and ethical functions.

The following table offers a comparative overview of selected religious and cultural traits of Alevi Kurds (Raa Haq) alongside those of general Turkish Alevi communities and Sunni Kurds. This is intended to highlight the unique characteristics that define Alevi Kurdish identity, particularly in the context of their "double minority" status, and to clarify distinctions that are often obscured in broader discussions.

Table 2: Comparison of Selected Alevi Kurdish Religious/Cultural Traits with Other Alevi/Kurdish Groups (Pre-2010)

Trait/Aspect	Alevi Kurds (Raa Haq)	Turkish Alevis (General)	Sunni Kurds
Primary Language(s) for Religious/Cultural Expression	Kırmancki (Zazaki), Kurmanji; Turkish sometimes in ritual [1]	Primarily Turkish [15]	Kurmanji, Sorani, Zazaki (for Sunni Zazas); Arabic for formal religious texts
Key Revered Figures (beyond Ali/12 Imams)	Specific regional saints/ancestors linked to *ocaks* (e.g., figures associated with Dersim *ocaks* like Axûçan, Baba Mansur); Abu'l-Wafâʾ [3]	Haci Bektash Veli highly prominent; Pir Sultan Abdal; other Anatolian saints [6]	Prophet Muhammad, the four Rightly Guided Caliphs; founders of Sunni law schools and Sufi orders (e.g., Naqshbandi, Qadiri shaykhs influential among some)
Emphasis on Nature Veneration (Jiare)	Very strong emphasis; worship of mountains, trees, water sources, celestial bodies integral to Raa Haq [1]	Present, but often less pronounced or differently manifested than in Kurdish Alevism; more focus on *türbes* (tombs of saints)	Generally less emphasis on overt nature worship in a theological sense, though respect for nature can exist; sacred sites often linked to tombs of saints or historical Islamic figures.
Structure of Religious Hierarchy (Ocak	Hereditary *ocak* system with *Murshids,*	Hereditary *dede* system (often linked to	Religious leadership through formally

system details)	*Pirs, Raybers* linked to specific tribal/regional affiliations; strong *pir-talip* bonds; severely disrupted by 20th-century events [1]	Haci Bektash lineage or other major *ocaks*); *pir-talip* relations exist; also impacted by historical suppression but perhaps different regional dynamics.	trained Imams, Muftis (state-appointed or community-supported); influence of Shaykhs in traditional Sufi orders; less emphasis on hereditary priestly castes in the Alevi sense.
Role of Music/Semah in Ritual	Central to *cem* ceremony; *bağlama* (saz/tembûr) is sacred; *semah* as spiritual dance; *deyiş* as core oral/musical tradition [1]	Central to *cem* ceremony; *bağlama* is sacred; *semah* and *deyiş/nefes* are core elements [13]	Music generally not part of formal prayer (namaz); some Sufi orders (e.g., Qadiri) use rhythmic chanting (*dhikr*) and drums; Dengbêj tradition for epic/folk singing is secular or para-religious.
Relationship with Bektashism	Historical connections and overlaps, but also distinct Wafâ'iyya influences and regional *ocak* traditions (e.g., in Dersim) that may predate or differ from mainstream Bektashi structures; some Kurdish Alevi *dedes* saw differences [3]	Strong historical and doctrinal links; Haci Bektash Veli is a central figure; many Alevi groups identify with or are influenced by Bektashi teachings and organization [6]	Generally no direct theological link to Bektashism, as it is a heterodox Shia-influenced Sufi order.
Main Locus of Practice (Rural/Urban Pre-1990s)	Predominantly rural, often in isolated mountainous areas like Dersim; significant forced urbanization from 1990s [1]	Historically both rural and urban (Bektashi *tekkes* were often in towns); also significant urbanization.	Both rural and urban; cities like Diyarbakır have long been Kurdish cultural centers.
Key Historical Traumas Shaping Identity	Dersim Massacres (1937-38) as a defining genocidal event; ongoing assimilation pressures; village destructions/evacuatio	Ottoman-era persecution of Kızılbaş; Sivas Massacre (1993) as a major modern trauma (shared with Alevi Kurds); Maraş,	Suppression of Kurdish identity and language by various states; events like Halabja (in Iraq); internal Kurdish conflicts; state

	ns in 1990s [1]	Çorum massacres [3]	violence against Kurdish political movements.

This comparative table helps to delineate the unique contours of Alevi Kurdish identity by situating their specific traits against those of groups with whom they share either their Alevi faith or their Kurdish ethnicity. It underscores that Alevi Kurdish identity is not a simple amalgam but a distinct formation with its own historical trajectory, linguistic specificities, and socio-religious nuances.

V. Socio-Cultural Fabric Before 2010

The Power of Oral Tradition: Storytelling, Myths, and Proverbs

Given the centuries of persecution, the necessity for secrecy, and the systematic suppression of their languages and distinct cultural expressions by state authorities, oral tradition served as the paramount vehicle for Alevi Kurds in preserving and transmitting their religious beliefs, cultural norms, historical narratives, foundational myths, and epic stories prior to 2010.[3] In an environment where written documentation in their native tongues was scarce or actively prohibited, the spoken word, memorized and passed down through generations, became the lifeblood of their cultural and spiritual continuity.

Storytellers, known in the broader Kurdish context as *çîrokbêj*, and bards or minstrels, referred to generally among Kurds as *dengbêj* (with Alevi communities having their own specific terms for religious poets and reciters of sacred verse), played an indispensable role in this process.[29] These individuals were not merely entertainers but were revered as custodians of collective memory and sacred knowledge. The genres of oral literature were diverse, encompassing religious poems and hymns such as *deyiş* and *nefes*, which articulated the core tenets of Alevi faith and ethics; epic romances (with *Mem û Zîn* being a prominent Kurdish example, though its specific resonance and interpretation within Alevi Kurdish communities would require nuanced handling); historical narratives recounting significant events, including periods of suffering and resistance; and moral tales and parables that imparted wisdom and reinforced communal values.[26] Even the *Buyruk*, a key Alevi textual source containing religious teachings and principles, while existing in some written forms, was also extensively transmitted, interpreted, and elaborated upon orally by religious leaders and learned individuals. Alevi poetry, in particular, was instrumental in transmitting moral principles, guiding social and individual behaviors, recounting the history of the Alevi community, narrating the legendary lives of *dedes* and other spiritual figures, and, most importantly, nurturing the profound love and respect for Imam Ali and his family, which is a cornerstone of Alevi faith.[26] The Yezidi religion, another ancient faith originating in the Kurdish-speaking lands, similarly relied heavily on oral transmission for its sacred texts and traditions, highlighting a broader regional cultural pattern where orality was central to the preservation of distinct religious heritages.[28]

Music as Cultural Expression and Resistance

Music is profoundly and inextricably woven into the fabric of Alevi Kurdish life, serving as a

vital medium for religious devotion, cultural expression, social cohesion, and, significantly, resistance against oppression. Its presence was pervasive both in sacred religious rituals, such as the *cem* ceremony where music and the singing of *deyiş* accompany the mystical *semah* dance, and in a wide array of secular contexts, from communal celebrations to private reflections.[8]

The *bağlama* (also commonly known as *saz*, or *tembûr* in Kurdish contexts) is the quintessential Alevi musical instrument. It is far more than a mere accompaniment; it is a sacred symbol of Alevi identity, often referred to as the "stringed Quran" (*telli Kuran*), and is used to accompany the vast majority of Alevi religious and folk songs.[9] The *dede sazı*, a shorter, older variant of the *bağlama* with fewer strings and frets, experienced a notable resurgence of interest among younger Alevi Kurdish musicians in the period leading up to 2010, as part of a conscious effort to connect with and revive older, perceived purer forms of Alevi religious rituals in which this instrument was once indispensable.[9] *Türkü*, a broad term for folk songs in Turkey, many of which are in Turkish but also include Kurmanji and Kırmancki/Zazaki songs, formed a significant part of the Alevi Kurdish musical repertoire, alongside specific Alevi Kurdish musical forms and melodies that were central to their unique cultural expression.[8]

In the Alevi Kurdish diaspora, particularly in countries like Germany, music assumed an even more critical role. It became a particularly potent mode for articulating collective histories of migration, suffering, and resilience; for fashioning new narratives of belonging in unfamiliar lands; for expressing the complexities of multiple and sometimes conflicting identities (Kurdish, Alevi, Turkish citizen, German resident); and for resisting dominant cultural labels or assimilationist pressures.[8] "Türkü bars," musical venues featuring folk music, emerged as important social and cultural gathering places for Alevi communities in Europe.[8] Furthermore, protest songs and political marches, sung in both Turkish and Kurdish, were integral to their political struggles, serving as powerful tools for mobilization, expressing dissent, and fostering a sense of group cohesion and shared purpose.[9] While the *bağlama* was central, the broader Kurdish musical landscape also included traditional instruments such as the *kaval* (shepherd's flute), *mey* (double-reed wind instrument akin to the duduk), *zirne* (oboe), and *dahol* or *davul* (large double-headed drum), which were also part of their rich sonic heritage.[29]

Community Structures and Daily Life (Pre-Urbanization Focus)

Until the significant socio-economic transformations of the mid to late 20th century, Alevi Kurdish social structures were predominantly tribal in nature. Religious life and, to a large extent, social organization were guided and directed by tribally organized holy families, the *ocaks*.[3] The intricate system of *pir-talip* allegiance formed the very core of their religious and social world. This system operated on multiple, interlinked levels: between entire tribes and their affiliated *sayyid* lineages; between different *sayyid* lineages themselves (establishing hierarchies and spheres of influence); and between the various subfamilies belonging to the same *sayyid* lineage.[3]

Life for most Alevi Kurds was centered in isolated rural areas, often in rugged, mountainous regions like Dersim. This geographical isolation, while contributing to the preservation of their

distinct culture and religious practices and fostering a degree of autonomy from direct state control, also rendered them vulnerable to periodic state repression and economic hardship.[3] To maintain community boundaries, preserve their esoteric religious knowledge, and protect themselves from external hostility, endogamy (marriage within the community) was widely practiced.[6] However, this traditional way of life was catastrophically affected by large-scale destruction, state-led violence, and forced evacuations throughout the 20th century. These disruptions reached a devastating peak in the 1990s during the intensified conflict between the Turkish state and Kurdish armed groups, which led to the forced depopulation of thousands of Alevi Kurdish villages. These events tore apart long-established religious relationships, shattered traditional communal structures, and compelled a massive and often traumatic shift away from rural lifestyles towards uncertain futures in urban centers or in exile.[1]

The profound reliance on oral tradition for the transmission of cultural and religious knowledge among Alevi Kurds before 2010 served as a critical survival mechanism, particularly in the face of persistent state suppression of their written languages and distinct religious practices.[3] This oral system, characterized by its flexibility and adaptability, allowed the faith and its associated cultural expressions to endure, often in clandestine ways, away from the direct scrutiny and coercive power of the state. However, this very orality, while a source of resilience, also rendered their rich heritage exceptionally vulnerable to disruption and loss. When communities were forcibly displaced, as occurred on a massive scale during the Dersim massacres and, later, during the widespread village evacuations of the 1990s, the delicate chains of oral transmission were often broken.[1] The loss of elders, who were the primary repositories of this invaluable oral knowledge—including sacred texts, historical narratives, genealogies, rituals, and musical traditions—meant that significant portions of their collective heritage were at grave risk of disappearing entirely. This acute threat of cultural erosion spurred a reactive and urgent effort among younger generations of Alevi Kurds, as well as intellectuals and activists, particularly those in the diaspora and in newly formed urban communities from the 1990s onwards. They embarked on initiatives to record, document, and thereby "preserve" what was being lost, marking a significant, though often fraught, transition from a predominantly oral mode of cultural memory to increasingly textualized and mediated forms of heritage.[23]

Similarly, for Alevi Kurds, especially those who found themselves in the diaspora in Western Europe before 2010, music—particularly the evocative sounds of the *bağlama* and the poignant melodies of *deyiş* and *türkü*—transcended its conventional roles as mere entertainment or ritual accompaniment. It evolved into a primary and powerful vehicle for navigating and negotiating their complex, often contradictory, layers of identity: as Kurdish, as Alevi, as former citizens of Turkey, and as new residents in Germany or other European nations.[8] Music became a mobile and adaptable form of cultural heritage, a spiritual anchor that could be carried across borders and recreated in new, often alienating, environments. It served as an indispensable tool for political expression, allowing for the articulation of grievances, hopes, and calls for justice. Moreover, music was instrumental in community building, fostering solidarity and a sense of shared experience among those displaced from

their homeland. The emergence of hybrid musical forms, such as "Alebesk" (a fusion of Alevi musical sensibilities with Arabesk lyrical structures) [9], or the overtly political content embedded in many songs, demonstrated that music was not merely a passive vessel for preserving tradition but an active and dynamic site of cultural adaptation, innovation, and ongoing identity (re)negotiation. It became a language understood across generational divides and geographical distances, connecting the past with the present and linking dispersed communities in a shared cultural and emotional landscape.

VI. The Dersim Genocide/Massacres (1937-1938): Trauma and Enduring Legacy (Pre-2010)

Events Leading to the Massacres

The region of Dersim, historically inhabited predominantly by Alevi Kurds (speakers of Kırmancki/Zazaki and Kurmanji), possessed a long-standing tradition of relative autonomy and a history of resistance against the centralizing efforts of both the late Ottoman Empire and the subsequent Turkish Republic.[2] This distinct socio-political and cultural character of Dersim was perceived as a direct threat by the newly established Turkish Republic, which was founded on principles of national unity, centralization, and the promotion of a singular Turkish identity (Turkification).[2]

In 1935, the Turkish government enacted the "Tunceli Law" (Tunceli Kanunu). This legislation fundamentally restructured the governance of the Dersim region, officially changing its historical name to "Tunceli" – an act widely seen as an attempt to erase its distinct historical and cultural identity. The law also redrew the region's administrative borders and effectively placed it under military rule, thereby paving the way for direct and forceful state intervention.[2] The official pretext often cited by the state for the ensuing military operations was the need to suppress alleged rebellion, disarm the local tribes, and "civilize" what was portrayed as a "backward" and "lawless" region.[33]

The Massacres of 1937-1938

Beginning in 1937 and intensifying through 1938, the Turkish military launched large-scale and brutal operations in Dersim. These operations resulted in the mass killing of tens of thousands of civilians, including a significant number of women, children, and the elderly. Alongside the killings, there were widespread forced deportations of survivors to other parts of Turkey, and the systematic destruction of villages, livestock, and agricultural lands.[1] While precise casualty figures are still debated and difficult to ascertain due to historical suppression of information, estimates consistently point to a death toll in the tens of thousands.

The methods employed by the military were exceptionally harsh and included aerial bombings of civilian settlements, artillery bombardments, and ground assaults. There are also credible allegations and testimonies regarding the use of poisonous gas against civilians sheltering in caves, and the widespread burning of people alive in their homes or in communal barns.[18] Alevi Kurdish religious and tribal leaders, who were seen as symbols of resistance and local

authority, were specifically targeted. Prominent figures such as Seyit Rıza were arrested, subjected to summary trials, and executed by hanging.[19] These events are described by many Alevi Kurds themselves, as well as by a growing number of scholars and international observers, as constituting genocide or, at the very least, genocidal massacres aimed at the physical and cultural annihilation of the Alevi Kurdish population of Dersim.[2]

Consequences for Alevi Kurdish Society and Identity (Pre-2010)

The Dersim massacres of 1937-1938 had catastrophic and enduring consequences for Alevi Kurdish society and identity, the repercussions of which were still profoundly felt in the period leading up to 2010.

- **Devastation of Socio-Religious Structures:** The mass killings and subsequent repression led to the death or forced exile of a vast number of members of the sacred Alevi lineages (*ocaks*), including *pirs*, *raybers*, and other spiritual leaders. This inflicted irreparable damage on the traditional socio-religious institutions of Dersim Alevism, severely disrupting the *pir-talip* system and the transmission of religious knowledge. The events marked a major and tragic breaking point for the continuity of Dersim Alevism as it had existed for centuries.[1]
- **Collective Trauma and Memory:** The sheer brutality and scale of the violence inflicted a deep and lasting collective trauma upon the survivors and their descendants. This trauma became a defining element of Alevi Kurdish historical consciousness and identity, passed down through generations via oral testimonies, laments, and a culture of mourning. Fear, silence, and secrecy about the events intensified in the decades that followed, as the state actively suppressed any public acknowledgment or discussion of the massacres.[2]
- **Forced Assimilation and Displacement:** Many survivors of the massacres, particularly women and children, were forcibly displaced from Dersim and resettled in other regions of Turkey, often in Western Anatolia. This policy was explicitly aimed at breaking their communal ties, dispersing the Alevi Kurdish population, and accelerating their assimilation into the Turkish majority. There are numerous accounts of children being taken from their families and given to Turkish families to be raised as Turks, thereby erasing their Alevi Kurdish heritage.[1]
- **Politicization of Memory:** Despite decades of state-enforced silence and denial, the memory of Dersim did not fade. Instead, it became a central and powerful rallying point in the later Alevi Kurdish struggle for recognition, rights, and justice, particularly as political and cultural spaces began to open up from the 1990s onwards. The demand for an official apology from the Turkish state, the acknowledgment of the events as genocide, and the restitution of rights grew significantly in the years leading up to 2010.[3]
- **Cultural Loss and Resilience:** While traditional Alevi Kurdish culture and religious practices in Dersim were severely impacted by the violence and its aftermath, the memory of Dersim also paradoxically fueled a profound resilience and a determination to preserve and reinvent cultural identity. This was often centered around the symbolic

importance of the land of Dersim itself, its sacred sites, and the Kırmancki/Zazaki language, which became potent emblems of survival and resistance.[1]

The Dersim events of 1937-38 were not merely a historical tragedy isolated in time; they constituted a foundational trauma that fundamentally shaped the trajectory of Alevi Kurdish identity and political consciousness throughout the decades leading up to 2010. The calculated brutality of the state's actions, followed by a prolonged period of official denial and suppression of memory, engendered a deep-seated mistrust of state institutions and cultivated a politicized collective memory. This memory of profound injustice and existential threat became a core element of their shared identity and served as a powerful driving force behind their later, increasingly vocal demands for recognition, historical truth, and justice.[1] The massacres were a clear attempt to violently suppress Alevi Kurdish autonomy and identity [2], resulting in immense loss of life, widespread cultural destruction, and the severe disruption of their unique socio-religious structures.[1] The Turkish state's subsequent efforts to downplay or outright deny the scale and nature of these events for many decades prevented open mourning, historical reckoning, and communal healing.[3] This unresolved and unacknowledged trauma was transmitted across generations, fostering not only a sense of historical injustice but also a distinct "Dersimi" consciousness, deeply rooted in this shared experience of suffering and survival. Consequently, when political and social spaces began to incrementally open (for instance, with the Alevi revival and the strengthening of the Kurdish political movement from the 1990s onwards), the memory of Dersim emerged as a potent symbol and a central grievance. It fueled political activism and demands for acknowledgment that were very much alive and pressing in the years immediately preceding 2010.

Furthermore, the official renaming of the Dersim region to "Tunceli" by the Turkish state in 1935 [2] was a deliberate and highly symbolic act of administrative violence and cultural erasure, designed to complement the physical violence that was to follow. This act aimed to sever the deep historical and cultural connection of the Alevi Kurdish people to their ancestral land and to obliterate the name that was intrinsically linked to their identity and heritage. In the period before 2010, the persistent and conscious use of the historical name "Dersim" by Alevi Kurds themselves—in their oral narratives, cultural productions, political discourse, and even in academic writings by scholars sympathetic to their cause (as noted by Gültekin [1])—was a significant act of counter-memory and profound resistance. It was a direct challenge to the state's attempt to impose a new, sanitized identity on the region and to erase the memory of its distinct past and the atrocities committed there. By insisting on the name "Dersim," Alevi Kurds were, in effect, honoring their ancestors and their unique history, rejecting the state's imposed narrative, and actively working to keep the memory of the massacres and the region's rich, autonomous cultural heritage alive in the collective consciousness. Therefore, the struggle over the name itself was a key, albeit symbolic, battleground in the broader fight for identity recognition, historical truth, and cultural survival that continued unabated into the period just before 2010.

VII. The Struggle for Recognition and Rights

(Pre-2010)

Systemic Discrimination and Human Rights Violations

Throughout the period before 2010, Alevi Kurds in Turkey were subjected to systemic discrimination, political oppression, social alienation, and coercive forced assimilation policies. This was a direct consequence of the Turkish state's persistent non-recognition of their distinct religious identity as Alevis and their ethnic identity as Kurds (including Kırmancki/Zazaki and Kurmanji speakers).[1] Within the dominant Turkish-Sunni national narrative, Alevis were often pejoratively viewed as "heretics" (*rafızi*, *zındık*), "deviants," or even non-Muslims by significant segments of the Sunni majority and, at times, by state authorities and institutions.[3]

These discriminatory attitudes translated into widespread human rights violations. Alevi Kurds were denied full freedom of religion and conscience; for example, their communal houses of worship, *cemevis*, were not granted legal status as places of worship, unlike Sunni mosques, and thus received no state funding or legal protection.[4] They faced severe discrimination in the education system, where compulsory religious culture and ethics classes were overwhelmingly Sunni-centric in content and pedagogy, effectively imposing Sunni Islamic doctrines on Alevi children.[7] Furthermore, Alevi Kurds often experienced a lack of adequate state protection, particularly when faced with religiously or ethnically motivated hostility and violence from extremist groups.

The concept of "double exclusion" aptly describes the unique predicament of Alevi Kurds. They were marginalized not only by the Turkish-Sunni majority but also often found themselves as minorities within the broader Alevi community (the majority of whom are ethnically Turkish) and within the wider Kurdish community (the majority of whom are Sunni Muslims).[4] This compounded their sense of isolation and vulnerability. The 20th century in Turkey was punctuated by several violent attacks and massacres targeting Alevi communities, such as those in Maraş (1978), Çorum (1980), and Sivas (1993). While not all victims of these atrocities were ethnically Kurdish, these events created a pervasive climate of fear, insecurity, and deep-seated trauma that profoundly affected Alevi Kurds and underscored their precarious position within Turkish society.[4] The Sivas massacre, in particular, where 33 intellectuals and artists, mostly Alevi, were killed in an arson attack on the Madımak Hotel by a mob of religious extremists, served as a pivotal and galvanizing turning point for Alevi mobilization and political consciousness.[7]

The Alevi Revival: Politicization and Cultural Reassertion

Beginning in the late 1980s and gaining significant momentum throughout the 1990s, a period often referred to as the "Alevi revival" (Alevi uyanışı) unfolded in Turkey and among the Alevi diaspora in Europe. This revival was characterized by a marked increase in the public visibility of Alevi identity, a burgeoning of cultural activities, and the articulation of increasingly assertive political demands for recognition and rights.[1] This resurgence was, in part, a

reaction against the perceived re-Islamization of Turkish society, particularly following the 1980 military coup which promoted a "Turkish-Islamic synthesis," and a response to ongoing assimilationist pressures that sought to dilute or erase Alevi distinctiveness.[6]
During this period of revival, Alevi Kurds, alongside other Alevi groups, began to form new religio-political institutions and cultural associations. They engaged in developing theological discourses that sought to define and articulate Alevi beliefs and practices in contemporary terms, and in some instances, adapted traditional rituals. These reassertions of identity sometimes incorporated modern socio-political notions such as gender equality (highlighting the traditional participation of women in *cem* ceremonies), environmentalism (drawing on Alevism's reverence for nature), and a particular understanding of secularism, often framed as an opposition to political Islam and state-imposed Sunni hegemony.[1] The concurrent politicization of both Alevi identity and Kurdish ethnic identity in the early 1990s had significant and multifaceted impacts on the process of reproducing and reasserting a distinct Kurdish Alevi cultural identity.[1]

Community Mobilization: Associations, Cemevis, and Political Activism in Turkey

The Alevi revival translated into concrete forms of community mobilization across Turkey and within the growing Alevi diaspora in Europe. Numerous Alevi associations (*dernekler*) and foundations were established, serving as focal points for cultural activities, advocacy, and community organization.[13] Prominent among these were organizations like the Pir Sultan Abdal Kültür Derneği (Pir Sultan Abdal Cultural Association), which established branches in many cities and became a significant voice for Alevi demands [[36] (implied by mention of a cemevi named after it)].
The construction of *cemevis* (Alevi houses of communal worship) became a central and highly symbolic activity during this period. *Cemevis* were not only essential for the performance of religious rituals but also evolved into vital community centers, hosting cultural events, educational programs, and social gatherings. The struggle to have *cemevis* legally recognized by the state as legitimate places of worship became a key demand and a powerful symbol of Alevi identity and their quest for equal rights.[5]
In the political arena, Alevi Kurds historically exhibited varied allegiances. In the general elections of the 1950s and 1960s, their votes were often split among various parties, including the Democrat Party, the Republican People's Party (CHP), and emerging leftist parties such as the Workers' Party of Turkey (TİP).[20] The TİP, notably, was one of the first parties to openly mention Alevi rights in its program in the 1960s.[20] The Alevi-led Unity Party (Birlik Partisi - BP), established in 1966, aimed to represent Alevi interests but generally had limited appeal among Alevi Kurds, partly due to its perceived Turkist orientation which did not adequately address their Kurdish identity.[4]
In the 1970s and in the decades that followed, many Alevi Kurds increasingly lent their support to the CHP, viewing it as a secularist bulwark against rising religious conservatism, and also became actively involved in various leftist and socialist organizations.[4] Furthermore, a

segment of Alevi Kurds also participated in the Kurdish political movement, with some individuals playing prominent roles in organizations such as the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).[20] Among urban Alevi youth in the period before 2010, studies indicated three main tendencies in their identity expression: an emphasis on the cultural aspects of Alevism, a focus on its faith-based dimensions, or a strong alignment with leftist and/or socialist political activism. These young Alevis often carried a strong sense of historical victimization and expressed significant tension with the state and its institutions.[27]

The Diaspora Experience: Transnational Activism and Identity Maintenance

Significant waves of Alevi Kurdish migration to Western Europe, particularly to Germany, occurred from the 1960s onwards, driven by a combination of political persecution, state violence (especially after military coups and during periods of intense conflict), and economic hardship.[1] This diaspora rapidly became a crucial and dynamic space for the Alevi revival and the articulation of Alevi Kurdish identity. Indeed, some of the first organized Alevi associations were established in Europe, often by political refugees and guest workers who found greater freedom to express their cultural and religious identity than was possible in Turkey.[11]

These diaspora organizations dedicated themselves to preserving Alevi culture, traditions, and languages (Kırmancki/Zazaki and Kurmanji), establishing cultural centers, organizing festivals, and providing educational programs for younger generations. They also engaged in active lobbying of European governments and international human rights organizations to raise awareness about the situation of Alevis in Turkey and to advocate for their rights.[8] Large umbrella organizations, such as the Federation of Alevi Unions in Europe (FEYKA), which later evolved into national federations like the Alevi Federation of Germany (AABF), emerged to represent Alevi interests at a broader European level.[11] Music, as previously noted, played an exceptionally vital role in the diaspora, serving as a powerful medium for articulating collective histories, negotiating multiple identities, and fostering a sense of community and belonging far from their ancestral homeland.[8] Additionally, Dersim-specific associations also formed within the diaspora, focusing on the unique linguistic, religious, and ideological dimensions of Dersimli identity and advocating for the specific concerns of Alevi Kurds from that region.[12] This transnational activism created a vibrant network that connected Alevi Kurds across Europe and maintained strong links with the movement back in Turkey.

The proliferation of *cemevis*, particularly from the 1990s onwards in urban centers within Turkey and across the Alevi diaspora, represented a powerful and tangible act of Alevi (including Alevi Kurdish) self-assertion and community building.[5] Historically, due to persecution and the need for secrecy, *cem* rituals were often conducted in private homes or less formal, clandestine settings.[3] The Alevi revival, however, brought with it a collective determination to establish dedicated and visible spaces for communal worship and cultural activities. These *cemevis* rapidly evolved into much more than just places for religious rituals; they became vibrant hubs for cultural preservation, social interaction, educational programs, and even the provision of essential community services such as funeral arrangements.[27]

However, the persistent refusal of the Turkish state, heavily influenced by the Sunni-centric Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet), to grant *cemevis* legal status as official places of worship before 2010, turned these vital community centers into potent symbols of ongoing discrimination and a key battleground in the Alevi struggle for religious freedom and equal rights.[7] This "Cemevi Paradox" starkly highlighted the significant gap between the grassroots resilience and organizational capacity of the Alevi community and the intransigence of a state that denied them fundamental aspects of religious equality. Thus, the *cemevi*, while a testament to Alevi communal strength and determination, simultaneously embodied the core of their unequal treatment and served as a focal point for their demands for equal citizenship and religious recognition in the period leading up to 2010.

Furthermore, the political alignment of many Alevi Kurds before 2010, particularly their tendency to support secularist political parties like the CHP and various leftist movements, was shaped by a complex interplay of historical experience and strategic calculation.[1] This alignment stemmed, in large part, from a shared opposition to political Sunni Islam, which they historically perceived as a primary source of their oppression and marginalization, given the centuries of persecution under Sunni Ottoman rule and the recurrent violence instigated by politically mobilized Sunni extremist groups in the Republic.[3] Secularism, therefore, was often viewed as a protective ideology. Alevi Kurds, in particular, frequently embraced secular and modernist values as integral components of their reinvented and asserted identity, often contrasting themselves with what they perceived as the religious conservatism of the state or the Sunni majority.[1] However, this alliance with secularism was not without its inherent complexities and contradictions. The Turkish state's own brand of "secularism" (laiklik) had, paradoxically, historically facilitated Alevi assimilation and denied their distinct religious rights and institutions. The state's secularism was not a neutral arbiter between different faiths but involved active state control over religion and the institutional privileging of a particular, state-sanctioned interpretation of Sunni Islam, while simultaneously suppressing Alevi institutions and practices under the guise of secular reforms, such as the closure of *tekkes* (dervish lodges) in 1925.[4] This created a strategic dilemma for Alevis: they sought refuge in the promise of secularism while simultaneously needing to critique and challenge its state-imposed, often exclusionary and assimilationist, form. This tension was clearly evident in their persistent demands for the official recognition of *cemevis* as places of worship and for the inclusion of Alevi-specific religious education in the curriculum—demands that fundamentally challenged the existing secular framework and its inherent Sunni bias.

The following table provides a structured overview of the diverse ways in which Alevi Kurds organized and mobilized in their struggle for recognition and rights before 2010.

Table 3: Overview of Alevi Kurdish Community Organizations and Activism (Pre-2010)

Type of Organization/Movement	Key Period of Activity/Emergence (Pre-2010)	Primary Goals/Activities	Notable Regions/Examples
Cultural Associations (Dernekler)	Primarily 1990s onwards	Cultural preservation (music, language,	Branches of Pir Sultan Abdal Kültür Derneği

		rituals), community building, Alevi education, commemoration of historical events (e.g., Dersim, Sivas), advocacy for Alevi rights.	(PSAKD) in various cities [[36] (implied)]; local Dersim cultural associations in Turkey and diaspora.[12]
Cemevis (as organizational hubs)	Proliferation from 1990s	Providing dedicated spaces for *cem* ceremonies, religious instruction, social gatherings, funeral services; acting as symbols of Alevi identity and focal points for the demand for legal recognition as places of worship.	Numerous urban *cemevis* established in Istanbul (e.g., Gazi neighborhood [36]), Ankara, Izmir, and other cities with significant Alevi populations; also a key feature of diaspora communities.
Political Parties (Engagement with/Formation of)	1960s-2000s	Seeking political representation, advocating for minority and Alevi rights, promoting secularism and social justice, challenging discrimination.	Varied support for parties like the Workers' Party of Turkey (TİP) in the 1960s [20]; the Alevi-led Unity Party (BP, 1966, though with limited Alevi Kurd support due to its Turkist stance) [4]; consistent support for the Republican People's Party (CHP) from the 1970s onwards [4]; active involvement in various leftist/socialist movements; participation of some Alevi Kurds in the Kurdish political movement, including the PKK.[20]
Diaspora	From 1980s,	Maintaining Alevi	Federation of Alevi

Federations/Organizations	significantly intensified in the 1990s	Kurdish identity in host countries, organizing cultural and religious activities, lobbying European governments and international human rights bodies, supporting the Alevi movement in Turkey, combating discrimination.	Unions in Europe (FEYKA), later evolving into national federations such as the Alevi Federation of Germany (AABF) [11]; Dersim-specific diaspora organizations focusing on regional identity and concerns [12]; Alevi cultural centers established in major European cities (e.g., London [34], Cologne [9]).
Grassroots Activist Groups/Intellectual Circles	1980s onwards, particularly prominent from 1990s	Raising public awareness about Alevi issues, conducting research and fieldwork on Alevi culture and history, documenting oral traditions, advocating for human rights, challenging state narratives and denialism (especially concerning Dersim), demanding justice for past massacres.	Activists contributing to the documentation of Alevi beliefs and practices [3]; youth groups organizing in urban Alevi neighborhoods [27]; intellectuals and artists redefining and promoting Dersimli identity [12]; individuals and groups pursuing legal challenges against discrimination.

This overview illustrates the breadth and depth of Alevi Kurdish mobilization before 2010, showcasing a multifaceted struggle that encompassed cultural preservation at the local level, the establishment of vital communal institutions like *cemevis*, engagement with the formal political system, extensive transnational networking, and persistent grassroots activism aimed at achieving recognition, justice, and equal rights.

VIII. Conclusion: The Alevi Kurds on the Cusp of 2010

Summary of Key Challenges and Transformations (as of end-2009)

As the first decade of the 21st century drew to a close, Alevi Kurds in Turkey found themselves at a critical juncture, marked by both enduring challenges and significant transformations. The legacy of non-recognition by the Turkish state, systemic discrimination in various spheres of life, and the profound collective trauma stemming from historical events such as the Dersim

massacres and other violent episodes (Maraş, Çorum, Sivas) continued to cast a long shadow over the community. These historical wounds were compounded by ongoing assimilationist pressures that sought to erode their distinct ethno-religious identity.
However, the preceding decades, particularly from the late 1980s and 1990s onwards, had also witnessed a remarkable period of Alevi revival and the concurrent politicization of Kurdish identity. These movements had significantly raised consciousness both within the Alevi Kurdish community and in broader Turkish society, fostering a new era of organization, cultural reassertion, and political activism. By the end of 2009, the demands of Alevi Kurds were becoming increasingly articulate and focused. Key among these were the call for legal status for their *cemevis* as recognized places of worship, a fundamental reform of the compulsory religious education system to include objective and respectful information about Alevism (or provide alternatives), official acknowledgment of past injustices including the Dersim events, and broader cultural and political rights that would allow them to freely express and practice their unique identity without fear of discrimination or reprisal.
Socio-economically, the community had undergone substantial shifts, largely driven by forced displacement from rural areas due to conflict and state policies, as well as voluntary migration to urban centers in search of economic opportunities and greater security. This urbanization process, while offering new avenues for organization and expression, also presented challenges to traditional social structures, modes of religious transmission, and the maintenance of communal ties.

The Enduring Quest for Identity and Justice

Alevi Kurds entered the period around 2010 with a significantly more visible and vocal public presence than they had possessed in previous decades. Yet, despite this increased assertiveness and organization, they continued to face profound systemic challenges to their identity, rights, and security. Their struggle for recognition and justice was increasingly being waged on multiple fronts. Legally, Alevi individuals and organizations were pursuing cases in domestic Turkish courts and, with growing success, at the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) to challenge discriminatory laws and practices, particularly concerning religious education and the status of *cemevis*.[7] Politically, they engaged with various political parties, participated in civil society initiatives, and sought to influence public discourse. Culturally, there was a flourishing of activity, including festivals, publications, musical performances, and the establishment of cultural centers, all aimed at preserving and promoting Alevi Kurdish heritage. Crucially, this struggle had a powerful transnational dimension, with the Alevi Kurdish diaspora in Europe playing a vital role in advocacy, awareness-raising, and providing support for the movement within Turkey.
The period before 2010 had undeniably laid the groundwork for future developments. The Turkish government's "Alevi Opening" initiatives, which began to be discussed more formally after 2007 (though with workshops commencing later), represented a nascent acknowledgment by the state that Alevi grievances needed to be addressed.[13] However, the scope, sincerity, and ultimate effectiveness of these initiatives were subjects of considerable debate and skepticism within the Alevi community as 2010 approached, with many viewing

them as insufficient or aimed more at political expediency than genuine reform. The full unfolding and impact of these state-led efforts would primarily occur in the period after the timeframe of this report.

As Alevi Kurds approached 2010, a notable tension emerged in their strategies for recognition. On one hand, there was an increasing engagement with official and international discourses of "cultural heritage," exemplified by efforts to gain recognition for practices like the *semah* (the Alevi-Bektaşi *semah* was inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2010, a process that would have been underway before this date [13]). This approach offered a pathway to visibility, legitimacy in certain international forums, and potentially some level of state acknowledgment or protection for specific cultural expressions. However, this strategy also carried the inherent risk of folklorizing what was, for the community, a living faith and a holistic worldview. There was a palpable concern among some Alevis that framing their sacred rituals and deeply embedded communal practices merely as "cultural heritage" could inadvertently detach these practices from their profound religious, spiritual, and social meanings, reducing a complex faith system to a set of performative displays. This created an internal tension for a community whose struggle was fundamentally for recognition as a distinct faith community with full religious and citizenship rights, not merely as possessors of interesting or aesthetically pleasing folklore. The core aspiration remained the acknowledgment of Alevism as a legitimate religious path, with all the attendant rights and freedoms.

Furthermore, the period leading up to 2010 was characterized by a significant generational shift in the articulation and understanding of Alevi Kurdish identity. A new generation, often born and raised in urban environments within Turkey or in the diaspora in Europe, was coming of age.[14] While this younger cohort inherited the collective traumas, historical narratives, and cultural traditions of their elders, their lived experiences were often markedly different. They had greater exposure to non-Alevi and non-Kurdish communities, access to global information flows and diverse educational opportunities, and were shaped by different forms of political engagement and social interaction. Consequently, their ways of understanding and articulating what it meant to be Alevi and Kurdish were beginning to diverge from older, more traditional forms. This led to new internal debates and a dynamic re-negotiation of identity within the community. Questions about the relative emphasis on Alevism as a faith, a cultural system, or a political stance, the role and relevance of traditional hereditary leadership structures like the *ocak* system in a modern context, and how to navigate their multifaceted identity in an increasingly globalized world became more prominent.[14] Thus, the pre-2010 period was witnessing the emergence of a more heterogeneous, internally debated, and dynamically evolving understanding of Alevi Kurdish identity, driven by these generational shifts and the new socio-political realities they faced. This ongoing quest for identity and justice, rooted in a history of resilience against profound adversity, defined the Alevi Kurdish experience on the cusp of 2010.

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