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Death of a Community: Kızılbaş-Alevi Predicament in 1990s Istanbul

I am staring at the picture of a dead anthropologist on a warm Sunday afternoon in Şahkulu Sultan cloister in Istanbul. It is the second day of the annual youth festival organized by the Kızılbaş-Alevi youth of this *waqf* (pious endowment). The dead anthropologist is Carina Thuijs, a Dutch woman who was one of the 37 victims of the Sunni extremist mob who burned a hotel full of mostly left-wing Alevi intellectuals and artists as they were attending an Alevi festival in Sivas, six years ago on a hot July afternoon. Carina's picture framed in red, stands next to the pictures of other victims on the stage, who have been commemorated as Alevi martyrs for the last six years. A group of youngsters are verbally reenacting the events of that day as they

read aloud the slogans of hate hurled at the victims of that bloody festival. Although this performance is very different in form and style than the Shi'i *tazi* *ya* reenactments of the martyrdom of Imam Husayn in Karbela, there is still an uncanny familiarity. The ancestors of these Kızılbaş-Alevi youth have for hundreds of years preserved the tradition of performing *mersiye* poetry in their *cem* ceremonies lamenting the ruthless massacre of Imam Husayn and his entourage by the Umayyad caliph Yazid's forces. What unites these two different reenactments is the theme of death at the hands of tyrants.

I am standing next to an old Alevi man, who must have migrated to Istanbul from one of the eastern Anatolian provinces within the last couple of decades. Earlier that day he was complaining about the festival to the people around him: "What kind of a program is this? These youth should talk about the 12 Imams and the *Ehli Beyt* (the household of the prophet) instead of this other stuff." Less than an hour after these complaints, the Sivas commemoration reached its climax on stage as an Alevi youth cried out the curses of the Sunni mob setting the hotel on fire: "We lit the hellfire. We are burning the bitches!" At that instance I noticed the same old man, his face buried in his handkerchief weeping loudly, streams of tears flowing down his cheeks. His face was no different than the faces of the religious elders whom I had seen earlier that week in a *cem* ceremony: their faces buried in their handkerchiefs crying out loud as they listened to the *zakir* (the lute player) singing the *mersiye* lamentations which climaxed as the tyrant Yazid's man Shimar decapitated Imam Husayn.

These two reenacted events, although thirteen centuries apart, one in the heat of the Karbela dessert, the other in the fires of an Anatolian town, weld the diverse experiences of 20 million people together to form a somewhat united Alevi community. These two killings, deaths at the hands of tyrants, paradoxically contain the very possibility of the community's unity, survival and reproduction in the global killing fields of late capitalism.

Kızılbaş-Alevi communities in Anatolia comprise what one might call syncretistic and heterodox groups of Muslims who are related to the twelver Shi'i version of Islam. Kızılbaş-Alevi, who belong to the Caferi school, are variously composed of Turkish, Zaza and Kirmanji speaking groups. The population estimates for Kızılbaş-Alevi in contemporary Turkey range between 15 to 20 million (20 to 30 percent of Turkey's population) and the Kızılbaş-Alevi in Europe,

Australia and the US are believed to be over a million people. Kızılbaş-Alevi have a long history of persecution in the period of Ottoman rule, in part due to their support of the rival Safavids. This was one of the reasons why the Kızılbaş-Alevi remained marginal and peripheral, while increasingly turning to the secrecy of gnostical forms and esoteric teachings. Although the Sunni persecution of the Kızılbaş-Alevi did not cease in the republican era, most Kızılbaş-Alevi continued to support the secular Turkish republic with the expectations of becoming equal citizens. However, the Sunni religious and nationalist conservatives have identified the *3K* (*Kürt* [Kurd], *Kızılbaş*, and *Komünist* [Communist]) as the main threats to the Turkish state, and continued the exclusion and persecution of the Kızılbaş-Alevi. The capitalist development in the countryside and the urban centers beginning in 1950s resulted in the mass migration of rural Kızılbaş-Alevi to the cities, and the subsequent inter-communal clashes which led to mass killings of Kızılbaş-Alevi in 1970s and 1990s. Inspired by the left wing political teachings, the Kızılbaş-Alevi began to question and redefine their identities and political loyalties. The Kurdish insurgency and the guerrilla warfare led by the PKK (Kurdish Workers Party) in the Southeast Anatolia, which left more than thirty thousand people dead during the 1990s, and the growing Sunni extremist opposition, forced the conservative state elite to lighten its tight hold on the Kızılbaş-Alevi, encouraging a secular and Turkified form of tame Alevism to flourish as a precautionary measure against Kurdish separatism and Sunni extremism. The cultural “revival” [1] of Alevism and the advance of Alevi identity politics during the 1990s manifested itself through the explosion in the number of Alevi cloisters, lodges, publications, radios, and civic organizations [2].

Şahkulu Sultan cloister, which is the setting of my talk, is one of the pioneer institutions of Kızılbaş-Alevi cultural revival in Turkey. Founded on the ruins of a *Bektaşî* lodge in Merdivenköy, İstanbul, which is locally believed to date back to a 14

th

century

Ahi serhad tekkesi

(frontier lodge), this site has been recently renovated and reinvented as an

Alevi-Bektaşî

cloister by a Kızılbaş-Alevi pious endowment. With four to five thousand visitors a week, this site is currently the leading Kızılbaş-Alevi institution in İstanbul.

I will now briefly present my reading of the political economy of the post-1980 Turkey in order to expose the structure of the networks of hegemonic power operating in the Anatolian setting. This in turn would empower my audience to situate the techniques and discourses surrounding the revival of Alevi identity while enabling them to proceed with their own readings -which could very well be counter to my readings- of the material which I am going to present.

It has been customary to start the histories of liberalization of the Turkish economy in the last two decades, with the military takeover in September 12th, 1980. However, both to contextualize the coup d'état, and also to

emphasize the process leading to it, I will briefly discuss the 1970s. Turkey at that time had an import substitution economy, with a manufacturing sector protected from foreign competition by high tariffs and customs regulations. Throughout the 1970s, the oil crisis, the US embargo, high inflation, shortage of basic consumer goods, and the climaxing armed clashes between right and left wing extremists destabilized the economy, legal system and the multi-party democracy. In this turmoil, the conservative prime minister Süleyman Demirel attempted to introduce measures which called for a liberalization of the Turkish economy along the lines of typical austerity plans dictated by the International Monetary Fund. Since the civilian authorities did not have the political power to implement these austerity measures, on September 12th

, 1980 the army was drawn into the picture, in Çağlar Keyder's words, to "usher... in a regime that became identified with orthodox policies counseled by the International Monetary Fund and applied in the hope of restructuring the economy toward greater openness and liberalization" (Keyder 1999:13). This "ushering" was enforced by the military at enormous human costs. Within four years "178,656 people were detained, 64,505 formally charged, 41,727 convicted and 326 death sentences passed. Of those sentenced, 25 were executed" one of whom was under the age of 18 (Pope and Pope 1997:152). Not surprisingly, the survival of such a brutal and despotic military regime was facilitated by Western complicity. As Pope and Pope argue:

Strong backing from Washington was another key element in the junta's success, with the United States anxious to prove to weak-willed Latin American governments that its austerity-led IMF packages could fix inflation-ridden economies. During those years Turkey was receiving nearly one billion dollars a year of American assistance, third in the world after Israel and Egypt. Within months of the coup, new American and British credits were approved (1997:151).

This US-backed junta banned political parties, labor unions, civic associations and mass organizations, annulled the constitution, conducted mass detention, torture, extra-legal executions, and caused more than a million dissidents to leave the country to seek political asylum in Europe and elsewhere. The second half of the 1980s witnessed the boom in the Turkish economy as it turned into an export oriented one under the guidance of president Turgut Özal's conservative doctrines, an odd mix of neo-liberal and populist cocktail with a twist of Islamic flavor. This boom was accompanied by the decline in the real wages for middle and lower classes, chronic hyperinflation, skyrocketing foreign debt, widespread corruption, deunionization of the workers, undermining of the rule of law, and the rising Islamic extremism encouraged by the government's propagation of a conservative ideological frame, properly named, Turkish-Islamic synthesis.[3]

The 1990s were marked by the Gulf Crisis and the intensification of the Kurdish insurgency led by the PKK. The recession of the economy and increase in the foreign debt were accompanied by thousands of extra-judicial executions, many more being declared “missing” under police custody, growing Islamic extremism as well as the intensifying Turkish and Kurdish nationalisms. Millions of workers were left unemployed; many more peasants in East and Southeast Anatolia were forced to leave their villages which were then burnt mostly by the state security forces to destroy the logistical base of PKK’s guerrilla insurgency in the region. Meanwhile a massive but unsuccessful privatization campaign blocked the access of the lower classes to government subsidized services in health, education and social security. This political economic process went parallel to the increased monopolization of the printed and visual media which have managed to keep labor unions out of their workplaces up to this day.[4]

The major cultural and social phenomenon of these two decades of turmoil were the establishment of neo-liberal identity politics as the central hegemonic discourse which then became the only legitimate avenue to claim individual “rights” in the language of “injuries to be the redressed.” Following Wendy Brown (1995) I argue that such a replacement of “freedom as a collective project” (1960s and 1970s in Turkey) with the Nietzschean *ressentiment*, even if it is just a discourse of, and not yet a practice of, “redress” (1980s and 1990s in Turkey), is a regulatory technique of containment. That is one of the reasons why the early 1980s, which was the peak of the junta’s repression, also witnessed the flourishing of liberal feminism and environmentalism which were then joined by Kurdish, Alevi, Islamic and other identity politics. These developments were applauded as the institutionalization of civil society and multiculturalism in Turkey by many intellectuals and scholars. For example, according to Nilüfer Göle:

In terms of the state-society relationship, the post-1980 era has been a turning point in Turkish political development. During the 1980s, the autonomization of civil societal elements from the grip of the center ... became even more pronounced ... Only in the 1980s did future-oriented revolutionary political utopias lose their appeal, a change that permitted a more diverse spectrum of political participants. Women, ecologists, veiled students, and homosexuals and transsexuals appeared on the political scene... (1994: selections from pp.213-222).

Göle does not find it odd, that this “autonomization of civil-societal elements” were coinciding with wide-spread detentions, torture, extra-judicial executions, impoverishment and exploitation. Yael Navaro-Yashin, in her astute critique of the discourse on civil society in Turkey, points out the major problem with such interpretations:

However, in seeking to isolate almost an ideal typical picture of an “autonomous” public sphere,

this account overlooks the ongoing presence and power of representatives of the state -city governor, police, riot police, traffic police, municipal police, secret service, soldier, military officer, mafia, judge, university professor, dean, clerk- in the same public sphere... Perhaps Göle and others who read “the development of civil society” into their analyses of contemporary Turkey have confused a changing discourse or technique of state power with an autonomous rise of the civil society (1998:3-4).

Therefore it is not surprising to observe the degree to which the Alevi revival of the 1990s, which is a sign of “the breaking of the state’s taboos restricting the discourse” for some scholars such as Karin Vorhoff (1998:23), is structured and produced as an effect as well as a “changing technique of state power” in its efforts to contain the “collective projects of freedom” in their counter-hegemonic formulations.

The Kızılbaş-Alevi groups in Anatolia were at the forefront of collective projects of freedom for the last 500 years. The Kızılbaş-Alevi history is marked by numerous uprisings against the Sunni Ottoman state’s oppression and injustices. The Kızılbaş-Alevi poetry and music have for centuries preserved the tradition of political dissent and resistance in collective memory. This was one of the reasons why in the years following the Kızılbaş-Alevi migration to urban centers (1950s onwards), Kızılbaş-Alevi culture and people have always been central to the left-wing political tradition in Turkey. The replacement of politics of social equality by politics of identity in the post-1980 era, and the erosion of communal values in the traumatic setting of a late-capitalist metropolis have led urban Alevis to resist the approaching cultural necrosis by reverting to identity politics. This was also facilitated by the Turkish state’s growing willingness to contain the members of this counter-hegemonic culture as “injured subjects” in constant need of redress from state institutions which actually happen to be the very source and agents of oppression. As Wendy Brown argues:

Thus, the effort to “outlaw” social injury powerfully legitimizes law and the state as appropriate protectors against injury and casts injured individuals as needing such protection by such protectors. Finally, in its economy of perpetrator and victim, this project seeks not power or emancipation for the injured or the subordinated (1995:27).

Şahkulu Sultan cloister is a lodge of injured citizens in a late capitalist metropolis. Turkish state, and its predecessor Ottoman state, which both persecuted the Kızılbaş-Alevis, have been recently reinvented and re-presented as paternalistic providers of multicultural welfare. While *Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı* (the Directorate of Religious Affairs), generously funded by the Turkish state, continues to serve only the Sunni-Hanefi citizens, and thereby discriminating against the 20 million Kızılbaş-Alevis,

the microscopically small provisional funding for the Alevis in the form of state charity, was propagated as the recognition of cultural and religious diversity by the Turkish state. This charitable act was supposed to redress the centuries long sufferings of the injured Kızılbaş-Alevis. As a conditional bribe which could be renewed each year depending on the conduct and complicity of the injured subjects, the so-called redress was actually a technique of justification and legitimization implemented to perpetuate the state's seizure of the Alevi citizens' tax money to serve the Sunni-Hanefi population. The Şahkulu Sultan cloister was the stage of a similar state conduct aimed at containing Alevis as injured subjects. Although the vast territories of the cloister used to belong to Kızılbaş-Bektaşî institutions for more than five centuries before being confiscated, the Turkish state granted in 1985 the temporary use of a tiny plot of this land so that an Alevi-Bektaşî

waqf

(pious endowment) could be established. The confiscation and subsequent redistribution of this land to real estate brokers, entrepreneurs, Sunni institutions and state offices were disguised behind the discourse that the benevolent Turkish state has recognized the Alevi identity, and generously granted temporary rights of land use to them. The benevolence and the care of the paternalistic state towards its injured subjects were also evident from the frequency of the visits by the secret police and government inspectors to the site.

Şahkulu Sultan cloister's renovation and functioning in the 1980s were made possible by the introduction of a new technique of containment by the Turkish state, called identity politics in the new global capitalist era. Nevertheless, the project of manufacturing fully complicit subjects failed, and for the last two decades Şahkulu Sultan cloister remained as a site of contestation, in which the Kızılbaş-Alevis continuously tried to subvert and resist the hegemonic discourse and practices by utilizing the ambivalent metaphor of death as part of their cultural revival.

The concepts of death and birth, which paradoxically merge as death-in-birth and birth-in-death in many different cultures around the world, are also central in Kızılbaş-Alevi rituals and symbolism. Whether it is the sacrifice of rams, the *mersiye* laments in *cem* ceremonies, or the verbal reenactments of the recent Alevi massacres, the Kızılbaş-Alevi symbolic acts which attempt to resolve real problems at the imaginary level, often end up spilling over to the real resulting in collective empowerment. Rather than being contained by the changing discourses and techniques of state power as injured subjects, Kızılbaş-Alevis, through their symbolic acts at Şahkulu Sultan cloister, unmask the cruel face of late capitalism hidden behind identity politics. The Alevi political unconscious strives to transcend

Ressentiment

by taking refuge in the liminal site of death. Şahkulu Sultan cloister ends up being a site where the so-called "cultural revivalist" politics of neo-liberalism are exposed as the marketing of identities at the expense of destroying individuals.

Hüseyin is a madman in search of asylum. I met him in the summer of 1998 as he was wondering around the cemeteries of the Şahkulu Sultan cloister. With his dirty, torn clothes, unshaven face, and friendly manners he was the amusement of the youth who hanged around in the cloister. Hüseyin's mother was a blue-collar worker in Germany, one of those *Gastarbeiter*

(guestworkers) who were no longer needed, and therefore no longer welcomed as "guests" by the post-unification German economy. This was one of the reasons why Hüseyin never managed it make it back to Germany, back to his only happy days with his mother. His memories of Germany were stuck to the

Hauptbahnhof

(main train station), the so-called "home of the Turkish trash," and Hüseyin's endless complaints were about not being able to make it back to the

Hauptbahnhof

. He was also curios to know whether I was able to see Rambo often at Harvard. Once as a Turk in Germany, and now as a Kızılbaş in Turkey, he was an orphan, an outcast, a madman, a waste not needed by late capitalism. One late night, as he was strolling the cemeteries as usual, he encountered a gang of robbers who beat him and stole his Turkish ID card, his sole valuable property in life. After that day, Hüseyin as a non-citizen with no formal ID, no longer existed for the Turkish nation-state, except for those days when he was beaten and tortured by the police who wanted to amuse themselves. Even then, Hüseyin continued dreaming about making it to Germany although he had no chance of obtaining an ID card, passport, Schengen Visa for Germany, or a German residency and work permit. Hüseyin's madness and delirium were his only ways of making sense of the changing regimes and techniques of late capitalism. He did not see the forces keeping him away from his mother. He also had a hard time making sense of the disposable cigarette lighters which littered the sidewalks around the cloister. Hüseyin belonged to an era before the disposable Japanese lighters replaced the Turkish lighters and the poor street vendors who struggled to make a living by refilling gas to these lighters. He never understood the times which made Hüseyins and the cigarette lighters a waste, easily disposed of. Until the day he disappeared, he never hesitated to display all the empty lighters he gathered around the town, whenever people jokingly asked him: "Hüseyin, do you have light?" Hüseyin, who had pockets full of empty lighters, was a madman in search of asylum.

The neo-liberal cultural revival, as the commodification and reification of identities, or, as the re-territorialization, containment and taming of identities for and by the market, is a manifest sign of communal death. The only possible revival as emancipated communities can be achieved through, what Fredric Jameson calls "great collective projects," whose examples are abundant in the Kızılbaş-Alevi history:

What is wanted is a great collective project in which an active majority of the population participates, as something belonging to it and constructed by its own energies. The setting of social priorities... would have to be a part of such a collective project. It should be clear, however, that virtually by definition the market cannot be a project at all (Jameson 1997[1991]:278).

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[1] On "Alevi Revivalism in Turkey" see Reha Çamuroğlu (1998).

[2] For an extensive bibliography of the publications on Alevism, see Ali Yaman (1998). Also, see Hakan Yavuz (1999) for a brief account of the flourishing of Alevi media.

[3] Yael Navaro-Yashin defines the Turkish-Islamic synthesis as "a version of Turkish nationalism that has developed in Turkey in the twentieth century. Advocated by certain Islamists as well as by certain activists of pan-Turkism, it maps out a Turkish and Muslim heritage for Turkey, externalizing Europe as well as all elements deemed "non-Turkish" or "non-Muslim" within Turkey" (1999:74n).

[4] The only exceptions to the this are the left-wing *Cumhuriyet* daily and the state-run *Anadolu* News Agency which are the only two institutions that allow their staff to be labor union members.