

PERFORMANZEN PERFORMANCES

Interkulturelle Studien
zu Ritual, Spiel und Theater

Intercultural Studies
on Ritual, Play and Theatre

herausgegeben von/edited by

Christopher Balme
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Band/Volume 15

LIT

Transformations in Sacrificial Practices

From Antiquity to Modern Times

Proceedings of an International Colloquium,
Heidelberg, 12–14, July 2006

edited by

Eftychia Stavrianopoulou, Axel Michaels
and Claus Ambos

LIT



Gedruckt auf alterungsbeständigem Werkdruckpapier entsprechend
ANSI Z3948 DIN ISO 9706

Cover Photo: Muhammad Bazuki (© Reuters Media)

Publication of this book has been made possible by the generous funding of the
DFG (German Research Council) within the framework of the Collaborative
Centre *Ritual Dynamics*, University of Heidelberg.

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek
The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche
Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at
<http://dnb.d-nb.de>.

ISBN 978-3-8258-1095-5

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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Verlagskontakt:

Fresnostr. 2 D-48159 Münster

Tel. +49 (0) 2 51/620 32 - 22 Fax +49 (0) 2 51/922 60 99

e-Mail: lit@lit-verlag.de <http://www.lit-verlag.de>

Auslieferung:

Deutschland/Schweiz: LIT Verlag Fresnostr. 2, D-48159 Münster

Tel. +49 (0) 2 51/620 32 - 22, Fax +49 (0) 2 51/922 60 99, e-Mail: vertrieb@lit-verlag.de

Österreich: Medienlogistik Pichler-ÖBZ GmbH & Co KG

IZ-NÖ, Süd, Straße 1, Objekt 34, A-2355 Wiener Neudorf

Tel. +43 (0) 2236/63 535-290, +43 (0) 2236/63 535 - 243, mlo@medien-logistik.at

Distributed in the UK by: Global Book Marketing, 99B Wallis Rd, London, E9 5LN

Phone: +44 (0) 20 8533 5800 – Fax: +44 (0) 1600 775 663

<http://www.centralbooks.co.uk/html>

Distributed in North America by:



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Transaction Publishers
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The Alevi Animal Sacrifice (Kurban) Between Professionalisation and Substitution: Recent Developments in the Context of Migration and Urbanization¹

by

ROBERT LANGER

Within the last decades, traditional Near Eastern animal sacrifice (*kurban*,² Arabic: *qurbân*) has undergone significant alterations in the Alevi context. Its inner structure, its technical and social organisation and its ideological and social framing changed in response to the transformations that Alevi groups underwent during the process of migration (within Turkey as well as from Turkey to Western Europe) since the 1950s. During that process, the most significant change was the development of urban Alevi communities, a modern phenomenon for a formerly almost exclusively rural culture.³ One of the central (economic, communicative, representational) functions of animal sacrifice, the redistribution of food, has been either reinforced (due to the practical needs of an impoverished Alevi population in urban settlements of Turkey) or replaced by the rather symbolic distribution of different types of food at communal rituals (e.g. in Germany). The revived practice of slaughtering sheep even in Germany and the criticism it has aroused shed light on the problems of replacing a ritual element which is considered by many Alevi as the essential 'framing' for several other ritual complexes. On the one hand, traditionally socialised Alevi see sacrifice of sheep as necessary for the efficacy of other rituals (such as the congregational

¹ I am very much indebted to my student assistant Christian Funke for the photographs in this article. He also proofread the first version of the paper. My colleague Janina Karolewski (M. A.) thoroughly read and corrected different versions. I am grateful to both of them for their help. Any remaining errors and inconsistencies are my own responsibility.

² Terms and names that are common to different Oriental languages (mainly Arabic, Persian, and Turkish) are transcribed in this paper in a simplified system based essentially on the system applied in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*. Transcriptions of Turkish terms and names from an Arabic script context are based on Latin alphabet Turkish orthography according to the usage applied in the *İslâm Ansiklopedisi*. The French *accent circonflexe* represents the long vowels in Arabic script. ' stands for Arabic 'ayn; ` for hamza. Diacritics representing certain Arabic consonants could not be used for typographical reasons. Nevertheless, double consonants representing one Arabic letter are marked by underlining. In all other cases, modern Turkish orthography is applied.

³ For a concise overview on the Alevi in Turkey, see Kehl-Bodrogi 1989.

cem-ritual). On the other hand, especially younger Alevi educated in a Western style consider it to be a barbaric act, which their co-religionists should replace with other acts of 'sacrifice'. Additionally, German law forbids Muslims (including Alevi) to slaughter animals according to the rules prescribed by Islamic law and custom.⁴ Nonetheless, certain Alevi (as well as Sunnî Muslim) individuals still find places and occasions in Germany in which they conduct a proper sacrifice by slitting the animal's throat and letting it bleed to death.

In any case, the urban and 'modernised' contexts of the ritual (in Turkey and e.g. in Germany) influence the technical, social and ideological aspects of sacrifice. This change of context from a rural to an urban setting causes alterations within the traditional structure and 'dimensions' of Alevi ritual practice.⁵ There is an ongoing struggle between 'traditionalists' who want to reinforce animal sacrifice even in an urban context, and those who argue against the traditional *kurban* and set against it the (rhetorical) propagation of other methods of rather individualised 'sacrifices' (e. g. giving up smoking and the like). A kind of compromise is made by the substitution of meals of sacrificial meat with homemade or purchased foodstuffs, which are distributed as *lokma* (morsel) after the congregational *cem*-ritual. This paper will present findings gathered during fieldwork amongst Alevi in Turkey and in Germany from the year 2003 to the present.

1 *KURBAN* AND RELATED TERMS IN ISLAMIC CULTURES

The Alevi animal sacrifice, like the Islamic animal sacrifice in general,⁶ can be conceptualised as part of the so-called 'Abrahamitic' tradition. This is generally confirmed in every Muslim context – including the Alevi⁷ – by reference to the story of Abraham: in order to fulfil a divine command, Abraham (İbrâhîm in a Muslim context) acquiesced to sacrifice his own son to God (in the Muslim case the son was İsmâ'îl, not Isaac). In the end, after proving his strong faith and obedience, God sent a ram, which İbrâhîm could slaughter instead of İsmâ'îl, which prevented İbrâhîm from sacrificing his own son.⁸ The central position of this ritual practice is shown by the

⁴ Muslim individuals and organizations were not able to convince the authorities that their method of slaughtering is prescribed by Islamic law without any possible alternative. Jews are allowed to apply the method of *shehitah*, as they could prove that there is no possible alternative according to their religious law.

⁵ For the analytical concept of 'transfer of ritual' and the interdependencies of 'context factors' and 'dimensions' of the ritual, see Langer – Lüddeckens – Radde – Snoek 2006.

⁶ For Muslim *qurbân* in general see: Wensinck 1941, 362a–362b.

⁷ See e.g. Yaman 2001b, 53.

⁸ Described in a very detailed manner by the German-Alevi *dede* Seyit Derviş Tur: Tur 2002, 523–532. He and Yaman (2001b) refer extensively to Qur'anic verses which are related to İbrâhîm (Khalîl [Allâh] = 'the friend [of God]', as he is also referred to). The main point in these discourses seems to be that İbrâhîm feels more love for God than for his own son.

fact that the (at least theologically) most important religious festival of Islam is the *'id al-adhâ* (Arabic)⁹ or *kurban bayramı* (Turkish; both meaning 'feast of the sacrifice'), which concludes the season of the pilgrimage to Mecca every year. The ritual regulations prescribe the slaughtering of an animal by every Muslim family who is economically able to do so.¹⁰ This practice includes the aspect of food redistribution, as the sacrificer is required to give a considerable part of the meat to the poor and to friends and neighbours. Today, this practice is frequently replaced with the donation of a sum of money representing an animal: The idea behind this substitution is that an animal will be slaughtered somewhere else and the meat distributed, e.g. in underdeveloped regions or disaster areas within the Islamic World.

In the Qur`ân, the term *qurbân* occurs twice in the sense of 'animal sacrifice'. The word is probably – like many Arabic words – of Aramaic origin. It is interesting to note that although Christian ideology rejected the practice of animal sacrifice as 'pagan', it is still practiced in Eastern Christian cultures.¹¹ This is especially the case with Armenian Christians, who lived in close contact with Alevi communities in Anatolia until the extermination of the Armenians in this region in the course of the deportations and massacres, which were committed under the Young Turk government during the First World War. We still find animal sacrifice amongst many different religious communities in this region today and it can surely be considered as an integral part of the 'ritual idiom of the Middle East'¹².

Eastern Christians also use the word *qurbân* (in modified forms according to their native languages). Here, *qurbân* does not always refer to animal sacrifice. The term is also applied to offerings of bread, wine, or other food in the name of a saint.¹³ In a more specific meaning, though, the word *qurbân* is used to denote the Eucharist (Holy Communion, Lord's Supper), which corresponds to the Christian ideology of Jesus Christ's crucifixion as the 'last sacrifice'. Nevertheless, the Oriental practice of *qurbân* is differentiated from 'pagan' traditions insofar as the edible parts of the meat of the *qurbân* are always consumed completely. There is no cremation or other form of immolation or offering parts of the sacrificed animal to a deity.¹⁴

In Muslim tradition, the slaughter of every domestic animal and even – if possible – captured wild animals had to be conducted according to the rules prescribed

⁹ Mittwoch 1941, 195a–195b.

¹⁰ See Kappert 1974, 175: As the 'feast of the sacrifice' is considered theologically to be the most important Muslim feast-day, it is also called *al-'id al-kabîr* (Arabic) and *büyük bayram* in Turkish, which both means 'the great feast'.

¹¹ See e.g. for Nestorian Christians (Northern Iraq) Drower 1956, 117.

¹² This concept was coined by Ethel Drower, as the subtitle of her comparative study of different Middle Eastern religious traditions. The focus of her work lies on bread, water, wine, and rituals making use of foodstuff and meals, in general.

¹³ Drower 1956, 92: The name invoked in this kind of *qurbân* can also be Jesus.

¹⁴ The uneatable parts which can still be used such as the skin, in a Muslim context shall be sold and the benefits used for charitable purposes. In the First World War, a campaign was started within the Ottoman Empire to collect the benefits from the skins of the animals slaughtered during the Muslim 'Feast of Sacrifice' to supply the starving army. See Karakışla 2004, 98–99.



Fig. 1: Slaughtering of the animal, placed on its left side, by a single cut opening the carotid artery, Karacaahmet Sultan Dergahı (Üsküdar – Istanbul) March 2007 (© Christian Funke).

by Islamic law. In principle, the meat is just as lawful when a member of another so-called book religion (*ahl al-kitâb*) recognised by Islamic law, mainly Christians and Jews, slaughters the animals according to the Muslim practice. That is why, for example, French Muslims prefer to buy meat from Jewish butchers' shops rather than from normal French ones, as the Jewish practice of slaughtering animals conforms in principle with the Muslim prescriptions. These are: the formulation of an intention to slaughter ritually (*niyya*), the evoking of the name of the One God (*basmala* and *takbîr*)¹⁵ and the special method of slaughtering that is technically identical with the Jewish *shehitah*. The latter practice, cutting the main arteries of the animal in ideally one, uninterrupted sweep with a sharp knife is 'rendering the animal unconscious and permitting the blood to drain from the body'¹⁶ (fig. 1).

¹⁵ In Turkish, it is *besmele* and *tekbir*.

¹⁶ *Encyclopaedia Britannica* 2001, s.v. "kosher".

A Muslim slaughterer would – of course – invoke God with the *basmala*-formula ('bi-'smi 'llâhi 'r-rahmâni 'r-rahîm') and by pronouncing the *takbîr* ('Allâhu akbar'). The animal should lie on its left side and face the prayer direction *qibla*, its face pointing in the direction of Mecca. This is also the practice within an Alevi context (fig. 1). Additionally to the *besmele*- and *tekbir*-formula, an Alevi may invoke other characters considered as holy by Alevi teaching, such as the Twelve Imams of the *Shî'a* and specific saints, for example Hâccî Bektâş Velî or Abdâl Mûsâ (who is a saint invoked in one special kind of *cem*-ritual). Even Şâh Hatâ'î (Şâh İsmâ'il), the 16th century leader of the Safavî Sûfî order and founder of the Safavid dynasty in Iran, who is considered as a saint by many Alevis, might be invoked.

In addition to *qurbân/kurban*, some other specific terms in connection with common Muslim animal sacrifice shall be mentioned here as they shed light on both technical aspects and certain concepts of 'sacrifice' in (Turkish-)Muslim culture. The Arabic word used in Islamic legal texts for the victim of the sacrifice is *dhabiha*. There is no corresponding expression in Turkish. The victim of the sacrifice in Turkish is regularly referred to by the same word that is used for the practice itself: *kurban*. Apart from the sacrifices made during the 'feast of sacrifice', *kurban* is very often conducted in connection with a vow as a votive offering to a saint. This practice also contributes to the terminology of Muslim animal sacrifice. The Arabic term for vow is *nadhîr*, also used in Persian (*nazr*), the Turkish term is *adak*. Accordingly, the victim of the sacrifice, or other things presented to a shrine or a saint and therefore given away by the offering person, are called *nudhûr(ât)* (Arabo-Persian) or *adaklık* (Turkish), that is 'the material pertaining to a vow'. Sometimes, the sacrificial animal or the act of sacrificing is then called rather *adak* and not *kurban*, taking the term for the intention of the sacrifice as a *pars pro toto* for the ritual act and object. The procedure of slaughtering an animal as a sacrifice in Turkish is *kurban (olarak) kesmek* ('to cut, i.e. to slaughter [an animal] as a sacrifice'). In an Alevi context, it seems also possible to call the process of sacrificing 'to stab the sacrifice' (*kurban tığlamak*) rather than to 'cut' it (*kesmek*).¹⁷

The fixed place for the slaughtering of animals in an architectural-spatial context is classically called *madhbâha* (Turkish *mezbâha*, derived from *dhabiha*, s. above) or nowadays *kesim hane*¹⁸. A *kurban* can be slaughtered, however, at almost any place, which is not perceived as ritually unclean.

It should be added that *kurban* in Turkish usage can also be used to refer to somebody offering himself for the sake of his faith or 'Weltanschauung' (in modern, secular

¹⁷ Yaman 2001b, 60. *Tığlamak* is derived from the Persian word *tigh* for 'sword'. If we take *tığlamak* ('to pierce' hence, 'to stab') as a descriptive term, the corresponding practice would not fulfil the requirements of the method of *shehitah* as described above.

¹⁸ The term *kesim hane* probably is non-classical Ottoman, as it is not found in standard Ottoman dictionaries. It is a noun combined out of Turkish *kesim* (the act of cutting) and Persian *khâne* (house). As it is against the rules of the standard Ottoman language to extend Turkish nouns with the Persian *khâne*, it might be either an Ottomanising neologism or a term coined in folk usage.

contexts). So, *kurban* – besides *şehid* (Arabic *shahīd*, literally ‘witness [of faith]’) – can be used in the sense of ‘martyr’. It is noteworthy that poets with a Shi’ite background, such as Muhammed Süleymân Füzûlî (ca. 1480–1556), mention the story of the sacrifice of İbrâhîm when describing the ‘tragedy of Kerbelâ’ in works pertaining to genre of *maqtal-/maqâtil*-literature, i.e. stories about the ‘slaughtering’ of the prophet’s grandson Hüseyin by soldiers of the ruling Umayyad dynasty.¹⁹

The concept of the sacrifice of oneself is also encountered with in daily speech. In the village where I conducted fieldwork in 2006 (Malatya province, Central Anatolia), the word *kurban* is omnipresent in conversation. It is used in the expression *kurbanım* (literally ‘I am [your] sacrifice’, or ‘it is my sacrifice’) in the sense of ‘if you allow me’, ‘I’ll be pleased to do so’, ‘excuse me’ or just to say ‘yes’ or ‘maybe’ in a politer way.

2 ALEVISM (*ALEVİLİK*)

Alevism is a specific form of non-orthodox, non-Sunnî, rural Islam in Turkey. Traditionally, it was localised within agricultural and pastoral, nomadic or semi-nomadic (transhumant) communities. These were part of a tribal system of Türkmên along with Kurdish (Kurmâncî) and Zâzâ traditions. In the course of the second half of the 20th century, an Alevi movement emerged aimed at obtaining political and social recognition and the development of a modern Alevi identity based on common Shi’ite, non-conformist traditions from different parts of Anatolia. In short, Alevism is best described as taking the Alevi perspective towards history.²⁰

In this sense, Alevism is seen as going back as far as to the family of the prophet (Ehl-i beyt), and to ‘Alî, the nephew and son in law of the prophet Muhammad in particular (hence ‘Alawî, Turkish: Alevî, pertaining to ‘Alî). ‘Alî’s offspring, the Twelve Imams of the Shi’a (*Oniki İmam*) who commence with ‘Alî, continue with his sons Hasan, Hüseyin, and the descendants of the latter, are especially revered. Many of the Alevi ‘holy lineages’ (*ocak*) from which the ritual specialists and spiritual leaders (called *dede*) are recruited see themselves as descendants of the family of the prophet. In their genealogies, this is realised by claiming descent either from one of the Twelve Imams or from one of the Anatolian ‘saints from Horâsân’ (most frequently Hâccî Bektâş),²¹ who are said to have been *seyyids* (i.e. descendants from Hüseyin, the son of ‘Alî, who was martyred at Kerbelâ’).

The central religious narrative of Alevism is – apart from the heavenly journey of the prophet, which leads to the first mythical prototype of the Alevi congregational

¹⁹ Yaman 2001b, 54, paraphrasing a dialog between God and İbrâhîm from Füzûlî’s Turkish work *Hadîkat üs-sü’edâ*.

²⁰ A thorough overview of Alevi history reflecting the historiographical discourses within the field of recent Alevi identity formation is given in Dressler 2002.

²¹ On the role of saints in heterodox Turkish (Anatolian) Islam, see Mélikoff 1998.

ritual (*kırklar meclisi*) – the suffering of Hüseyin, the son of ‘Alî, at Kerbelâ` in Iraq. At that place, Hüseyin himself together with a large number of his family and followers were murdered by the soldiers of the Umayyad Caliph Yazîd ibn Mu`âwiya. This story of the martyrdom (*şehid*) of Hüseyin is re-actualised in every Alevi communal ritual. One might call it the ‘foundation myth’ of Alevism. Moreover, referring to the Kerbelâ` incident functions as a symbol of every ‘tyrannical act’ along with ‘Yezîd’ (Yazîd ibn Mu`âwiya) as a symbol of the ‘tyrant’ *per se* in Alevi discourse.

The historically tangible, formative period of the Alevi²² community can be dated between the 13th and 16th century, when, in the turbulent period between the Mongol invasion of the central Islamic heartland up to the Ottoman conquest of Eastern Anatolia, ‘charismatic’ persons were active as political leaders with religious legitimacy among Turkish as well as Kurdish tribes in the wider region, which now comprises Eastern Turkey, Southern Caucasia, Western Iran, Northern Iraq and Northern Syria. These holy figures – from Hâccî Bektâş to Şâh Hatâ`î – are until today part of the ‘repertoire’ of saints in Alevi culture. The Alevi see themselves as the followers of the true mystical Islamic path (*tarikât*, Arabic *tarîqa*, Turkish also *yol*) and believe in having already overcome the obligations of *şeriat* (Arabic *sharî`a*, the orthodox Islamic law) collectively. They follow *tarikât* without necessarily being affiliated with a mystical order, although a considerable number of Alevi, especially amongst the Turkish speaking population, are directly affiliated with the Bektâşî order of dervishes in the form of its Çelebî branch (i.e. descendants from Hâccî Bektâş). The aim of the faithful is to overcome not only *şeriat* but also *tarikât* by *marifet* (Arabic *ma`rifâ*, esoteric/gnostic ‘knowledge’) and finally reach *hakikat* (Arabic *haqîqa*), the ‘truth’, which is God.

In the 15th and 16th centuries, the accentuated affinity of the Alevi to the Safavî mystical order²³ led to massive persecutions of alleged and real supporters of the Safaviyye by the Ottoman state. In this period, the Safaviyye had increasingly developed into a political and radical *Shî`ite* movement that was the main enemy of the Ottomans. The Safaviyye took over in 1501 as the reigning dynasty in Iran. During that time, the followers of the Safavids were called Kızılbaş (red-heads) because of their red headgear.²⁴ In the conflict over Central and Eastern Anatolia, including Azerbaijan and Upper Mesopotamia (the main settlement areas of Kızılbaş groups),

²² It has to be noted that the term ‘Alevi’ referring to a distinct ethno-religious community in Anatolia is a very recent phenomenon. It first occurs at the end of the 19th century. Before that period for the tradition in question, we encounter the names Bektâşî and Kızılbaş, or as pejorative terms e.g. *mülhid*, *zındik* or *vâfizi* (all in effect meaning ‘Heretic’). As is still the case today, the Alevi of Anatolia were sometimes just subsumed under the terms Ca`ferî or Şî`î, both referring to mainstream *Shî`a*.

²³ The affiliation of tribal groups to the Safavî order had probably started as early as the 14th century, and lasted until the 17th century. The 15th and 16th centuries are characterised by enhanced mutual communication between Kızılbaş tribal groups on Ottoman territory and emissaries of the order to Anatolia. On the Iranian side, Kızılbaş tribal groups served as military units of the Safavid army.

²⁴ For the developments from the Middle Ages to modern times, and the religious concepts of the Kızılbaş during that epoch, see Mélikoff 1975.

the Ottomans managed to incorporate the major parts of that territory into their expanding empire from the beginning of the 16th century onwards. In the course of this conflict with a state that has been officially declared *Shî'ite* by Şâh İsmâ'îl, the Ottoman state increasingly stressed its affiliation to orthodox Sunnî Islam. A harsh persecution of Kızılbaş set in, leading to the imprisonment and even the execution of many people on charges of being Kızılbaş.²⁵

Thus, the Alevi – according to their historical narrative – see themselves as victims of continuing persecution and cruelty. In their perception, this persecution started at Kerbelâ' and continued under Sunnî Muslim rule, especially during the period of the Ottoman empire, when assassinations and massacres took place and continued even under republican rule in the 20th century.²⁶ The republican system was at first welcomed by the majority of especially ethnically Turkish Alevis who saw the republic as liberation from the rule of the Ottoman Empire. The last event in the commemorated line of persecutions occurred in 1993 when an Alevi festival in Sivas was attacked by a fanatical Sunnî-Muslim crowd. In the course of this attack the hotel, where the festival took place, was set on fire, but the fire brigades were hindered from saving people by extinguishing the fire and helping the people within the hotel to get out of the fire. In the end, 37 people were killed during the event.

Consequently, from the 16th century onwards, when the Ottoman Empire became increasingly orthodox-Sunnî during the conflict with *Shî'ite* Iran,²⁷ heterodox Muslims such as the Kızılbaş/Alevi conduct their congregational, communal rituals, which orthodox Muslims see as heretical, in secrecy and concealment. This changed in the 1980s, when Alevism developed into a public form of identity and practice in the Turkish urban centres.²⁸

3 MIGRATION AND DEMOGRAPHY

In the course of the urbanisation and industrialisation of Turkey from the 1950s onwards, there were massive migrations of rural populations into the growing urban centres of Turkey, especially to Ankara and Istanbul.²⁹ This brought many Alevi – formerly a predominantly rural community – into urban contexts. Additionally, many Alevi migrated as labour migrants and asylum seekers to Western Europe. At a rough estimate, 10–15 percent of the population of Turkey are Alevi, around two thirds of whom are native speakers of Turkish, and one third of whom speak

²⁵ Imber 1979.

²⁶ See Kehl-Bodrogi 1993.

²⁷ Şâh İsmâ'îl Safavî, in spite of his own heterodox views, reflected in his religious poetry written under the pen name Şâh Hatâ'î, chose orthodox Twelver *Shî'ism* as the religion of his state (Iran).

²⁸ For the different aspects of Alevi identity at the end of the 20th century, see the contributions in Olsson – Özdalga – Raudvere 1998. An earlier ethnographic study by Kehl-Bodrogi (1988) presents a lot of material, though still perceives the Alevi/Kızılbaş as a mainly rural tradition.

²⁹ Schüler 1991, 175–193.

Kurdish (Kurmâncî) or Zâzâ. The proportion of Alevi within the Turkish community in Germany might be even higher.³⁰

The process of migration and urbanisation changed Alevi society thoroughly. Although people stemming from the same village or region tried to settle together in the same quarters of the cities, the populations mixed in the course of time and a collective village ritual could (only seldom) be realised in the old manner, which included the judging of complaints and accusations within the community by the *dede* (religious leader). At the same time, Alevi villages lost a considerable part of their population, especially the young leaving to seek education and employment in the cities or abroad.³¹ This, and the unwillingness of the younger generation to obey traditional hierarchies (the leading *dede* cast opposed to the lay-men, the *talib*³²), which were acted out in the 'ritual of the assembly', combined with an ongoing persecution by the Turkish administration, police and military forces, has brought about a major break with tradition.

Both the congregational ritual and the *kurban*, are carried out less and less frequently. The word *kurban*, like many other central Alevi terms, was transferred into the realm of political rhetoric (e.g. 'the suppressed class' as the 'victim of oppressors', 'sacrificing' itself for human development), and even today in the era of Alevi religious revival, religious terms are sometimes used in a very symbolic rather than concrete way.³³ This changed with the foundation of Alevi cultural societies (starting around 1980) and the subsequent construction of Alevi cultural centres, which have also served as places of worship, since the 1990s.³⁴ Again, religion became a defining factor of identity construction in Turkey, often in opposition to the politically strengthened Sunnî Islam, which is favoured by the state. For that reason even former political functionaries of leftist movements with an Alevi background have taken over responsibility in the newly founded Alevi (religious) organisations.³⁵ Religious practice became a means of demonstrating Alevi identity publicly when parts of the *cem*-ritual were put on stage in the program of public 'cultural festivals'. Today, most of the so-called *cemevis* ('houses of assembly') in Turkey have not only special rooms for the congregational ritual, but also additional sheepfolds or stables, slaughterhouses (fig. 1) and kitchens to prepare meals from the meat of the sacrificed animals (fig. 4).

³⁰ Spuler-Stegemann 2002, 36, gives the number of 20 percent. Alevi organisations speak of 500 to 700.000 Alevi in Germany.

³¹ For a first hand ethnographic account of the developments within the Alevi community in Turkey, with focus on the village culture, see Shankland 2003.

³² Arabic: *talib*, 'somebody who longs for something', in this context: for the guidance of a spiritual master.

³³ See e.g. Şanlı 2002, who discusses different rather philosophical topics, but not the 'animal sacrifice' itself, although the title of his book is *Alevilik ve Kurban* ('Alevism and Sacrifice').

³⁴ For a very useful account on this development, see Şahin 2002.

³⁵ See Kehl-Bodrogi 1992.

4 THE ALEVI CONGREGATIONAL RITUAL *AYIN-I CEM* AND ITS FRAMING:
KURBAN AND LOKMA

Over the past two decades, the Anatolian rural Alevi ritual of the *ayin-i cem*³⁶ has not only been transferred³⁷ to Turkey's urban centres such as Ankara and Istanbul but also to other smaller cities such as Erzincan, Sivas, etc. and even abroad to Western Europe.³⁸ As the *cem*-ritual is traditionally framed by an animal sacrifice and a communal meal of the sacrificed meat, this development also brought the Alevi practice of *kurban* to urban centres of Turkey and to Europe.³⁹

The congregational *cem*-ritual in its full form was performed traditionally within the village community on the occasion of the visit of one of their spiritual leaders (*dedes*), who sometimes came only once a year to the villages of their *talibs* ('lay-men'). One of the ritual's functions was to confirm the community's unity and group solidarity. A special mechanism connected to that was the so-called *görgü*, the 'seeing' of the *talib* families by the *dede* (*talib görmek*). As the *cem*-ritual could only be conducted with all its attendants being on good terms with each other, the *dede* after his arrival to the village 'saw' all members of the community and questioned them about their quarrels amongst one another. In the end, before the actual *cem*-ceremony, the *dede* conducted a kind of legal court in order to resolve internal quarrels, punishing the wrongdoers, who were obliged either to repent or to leave the community. Furthermore, the congregational form of the concluding *cem*-ritual served as a means to affirm the group's specific identity and self-reflection within the framework of their socio-religious environment.

The migration of many Alevi into urban centres and abroad brought about a major break in their ritual tradition. Some migrants took the opportunity to attend *cem*-rituals while visiting their home villages. Later on, migrants invited their *dedes*, to whom the lay people (*talib*)⁴⁰ are attached by hereditary links, to come to the cities and even to Germany so that the ritual could be conducted in the new environment. During my fieldwork, I have met some very old *dedes* who travelled extensively

³⁶ From Persian *â'in* = order, regulation, ceremony, and Arabic *djam* ' = assembling (*djama'a* = to assemble). For the structure and content of the ritual in its modernized, shortened form see Karolewski 2005.

³⁷ On the analytical concept of 'transfer of ritual' (German: 'Ritualtransfer'), see Langer – Lüddeckens – Radde – Snoek 2006.

³⁸ On this development and its implication concerning the structure and contexts of the ritual, see Motika – Langer 2005.

³⁹ For a presentation of data comparing Alevi communities in Turkey and Germany, see Langer 2006b.

⁴⁰ In the village of Malatya province where I carried out fieldwork the *talib* class is referred to as 'türk' (as opposed to *dede*), a term traditionally applied by nomadic Turkish-speaking groups to sedentarised Turks in a rather pejorative sense. Probably, a (half-)nomadic substratum (the later *dede* caste) settled within a population of Turcified peasants or earlier sedentarised Turks. An approximate date for that development could be the 18th century, as local history puts the advent of saints, who are the mythical founders of the *dede* lineages buried in *türbes* within the villages, into that period.

through Germany conducting *cem*-rituals. But this practice reached only a minority of Alevi in the cities and in the diaspora.

After the military *coup d'état* of 1980 in Turkey, religion became an important marker of identity once again for Turks both in Germany and at home. The two preceding decades had been marked more by the influence of secular ideologies such as Socialism, Communism, Maoism etc. In the case of the Alevi this change was partly a reaction to the growth of political Islam among the Sunnî majority and a form of opposition to the state-favoured Sunnî(-Hanefî) Islam enforced also by the so called *Türk İslam Sentezi*,⁴¹ which became a widely accepted ideology in the 1980s among state functionaries in Turkey.

From the 1980s onwards, the Alevi began to establish cultural associations in Turkish cities and in European countries. Sometimes the associational activities within Turkey had already begun in the late 1960s and early 1970s on the initiative of a few Alevi intellectuals.⁴² One function of these so called *kültür dernekleri* ('culture associations') was to rent, acquire or even built architectural structures in order to house *Alevi kültür merkezleri*. These 'Alevi cultural centres' aimed at a – in the beginning not openly outspoken – safe space that was undisturbed by outsiders in which the traditional congregational rituals, in general called *ibadet* (worship)⁴³ or – more specifically – *cem* or *ayin-i cem*, the 'ritual of assembly', could be conducted.

Consequently, these houses are referred to as *cemevi* or 'house for the *cem*-ritual' in daily speech. As the only accessible public space to conduct specific Alevi rituals, they also provide a setting for animal sacrifice. An Alevi animal sacrifice should be blessed with a prayer (*tekbir* and *kurban duası*⁴⁴) spoken by a *dede*, or at least by somebody who has sufficient knowledge of ritual practice (fig. 2 [3]).⁴⁵ Sometimes, special sacrifice prayers are prepared (utilising modern ritual handbook texts), and read out over the animal to be sacrificed. I have observed this in Germany, where the slaughtering of animals is otherwise no longer an integral part of daily life.⁴⁶ In the Anatolian village (like in the cities), only the standard formulas (*besmele* and *tekbir*,

⁴¹ This ideology sees Islam as the best religion to preserve Turkishness (in a racist, nationalistic sense). In effect, this favours the official state Islam, which is Sunnî Islam, propagated by the 'Directorate of Religious Affairs' (*Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*). This state organisation and its servants tend to see Alevi as a threat, if they do not assimilate to mainstream Islam. See Çakır – Bozan 2005, 179–185, 194–195.

⁴² The written sources to the early history of the contemporary Alevi revival are dispersed and not easily accessible. Although some works on Alevi organisations were published, mainly by Alevi activists who were part of the movement (e.g. Kaleli 2000), a source based critical history of the pre-1980 Alevi movement remains to be written.

⁴³ Arabic: *'ibâda*. For a short description and analysis of Arabic vocabulary pertaining to 'ritual' see Langer 2006a.

⁴⁴ Arabic: *du'â*, prayer.

⁴⁵ Tur 2002, 369.

⁴⁶ An example of such a *kurban duası* ('prayer of sacrifice'), which is composed based on the available ritual handbooks (Tur 2002; Yaman 2003) is published in Langer 2006b.



Fig. 2: The principal *dede* of Karacaahmet Sultan Dergahı blesses the sacrificial animal outside the slaughterhouse while the master of the sacrifice is holding the animal's neck (Üsküdar – Istanbul) March 2007 (© Christian Funke).

see above, and additional references to holy persons) are recited over the animal to be slaughtered.

In Turkey, the sheep to be sacrificed are mostly bought by the donors directly from the Alevi organisation administering the *cemevi*. In 2006 and 2007 the price for one sheep – in the city as well as on the countryside – was around 160 New Turkish Lira (YTL), which corresponds to almost 90 Euro at the time of writing. Usually, a family donates a sheep on the occasion of a special wish or for the commemoration of a deceased relative. In pre-modern times, every village family that could afford it conducted one *kurban* in connection with a *cem*-ritual or communal religious gatherings of lesser rank, usually referred to as *muhabbet*,⁴⁷ when the presence of a *dede* was not obligatory, usually once a year. This practice put into action the Alevi principle of 'sharing' (*paylaşmak*).

According to Alevi tradition, the donor of the sacrifice (*kurban sahibi*, 'master of the sacrifice') should be present at the act of slaughtering as well. During my fieldwork in 2006, I met a German Alevi who was staying in his native village as a holiday. He had initiated a *cem*-ritual on the occasion of his visit and, in order to have enough food for the congregation at the forthcoming *Abdal Musa cemi*,⁴⁸ he donated a calf, possessed by his family, and a ram, which was bought in the nearest city. He was present when the prayers *tekbir*, *besmele*, and *kurban duası* were spoken, but quickly retreated, when it came to slaughtering the animals. As he admitted, he was no longer used to seeing the slaughtering of an animal and could not bear the sight of blood. In the urban Turkish *cemevis*, the 'masters of the sacrifice' including family members, are usually present before the slaughtering as well. They assist in the blessing by putting their hand on the animal while it is blessed by the *dede* or by the person in charge of slaughtering (see fig. 2, the donor stands to the left of the animal, the *dede* on its right). The victim of the sacrifice is then brought into the slaughterhouse (*kesim hane*). In a similar case, observed in Germany, the 'masters of the sacrifice', two married couples, excused themselves from attendance and only two representatives of the congregation (one being a leading functionary of the local Alevi association) were present, speaking the 'prayer of sacrifice' (*kurban duası*), which was read out from a prepared sheet of paper.⁴⁹

Nowadays, modern Alevi *cemevis* in Turkey have (at least part-time) employed religious functionaries, so a *dede* usually is available at the *cemevis* to bless the animal. Moreover, *cemevis* supply places to perform sacrifices without disturbance and facilities to prepare and consume the communal meal made from the slaughtered animal, such as kitchens and dining halls. Basically, *kurban* (animal sacrifice) and *lokma* (distribution of meat and other food) serve as the conceptual and practical 'framing' of the *ayin-i cem*.

⁴⁷ From Arabic *muhabba*; affection, and as *pars pro toto*: conversation in a state of affection. The term must be understood in the context of mystical Islam, where the *muhibb* (one in the state of *muhabba*) is the one in affection for God. Just as *tâlib* (a person who wants) *muhibb* is a title used for those seeking initiation to the mystical path.

⁴⁸ This is a special term for a shortened version of an *ayin-i cem*, which is named after the saint *Abdal Musa*. According to Yaman (2001a), it is especially a so-called *Abdal Musa kurbanı*, which is conducted in the winter months when people return to their villages. Furthermore, he states with relief, that this tradition is continued in the cities at the Alevi *cemevis* in connection with *cem*-rituals.

⁴⁹ Described in Langer 2006b. The leading functionary on that occasion stated that the officiating persons should be members of a *dede* lineage (*ocak*, literally 'hearth'), who are called *ocakzade* ('born from the *ocak*'), irrespective of whether they serve as active *dedes* or not.

5 *KURBAN* AND *LOKMA*: TURKISH CITY, VILLAGE AND GERMAN-ALEVI USAGES IN COMPARISON

The congregational *cem*-ritual is normally framed by the slaughtering of animals as a sacrifice (*kurban*) before the ritual and by the concluding communal meal or distribution of the sacrificial meal after the ceremony. The meal and other edible offerings (which are sometimes a substitute for the meat, if no animal is slaughtered) are prepared by laypersons. Their function (*hizmet*, literally 'service') during the ritual is called *kurbançı* (sacrificer, *kurban hizmeti*) and *lokmacı* (morsel preparer/distributor, *lokma hizmeti*). This *lokma* (morsel), prepared from the *kurban*, is then blessed during the ritual by the *dede* with prayers (*dua* and *gülbeng*,⁵⁰ followed sometimes by special 'sacrifice hymns on the Twelve Imams', *kurban düvazı*⁵¹) and can be taken home or consumed at the place where the congregational ritual was conducted. For the blessing in modern *cemevis*, a part of the meal is brought onto the *meydan* (ritual space; Arabic *maydân*) in front of the *dede* to be blessed. If animals were sacrificed, the meal takes place in the modern *cemevis*' dining halls. Then again, before the people are fed, a blessing is spoken out by a *dede* – sometimes assisted by auxiliary staff (fig. 3), which can be called *lokma duası* or more precisely *sofra duası*, 'table prayer'. In the village context, I observed that in order to be blessed the cauldrons with meat and boiled cracked wheat (*bulgur*) along with the bread were carried in front of the place where the officiating *dede* was sitting.⁵² Afterwards, portions of the meal are brought to the sick and elderly who are not able to attend the ritual themselves. These observations made in fieldwork are confirmed by the modern Alevi ritual handbooks.⁵³

The meat of the sacrificed animal is chopped into small pieces of equal size⁵⁴ and cooked in large cauldrons (*kazan*). When the meat is ready, the meat juice is used to boil the accompanying cracked wheat. Only the innards are kept aside. In the village, they were grilled separately and distributed only to the *dedes* and the honorary guests.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ Persian *golbâng*, a prayer or other formula cried aloud, such as the prayer call of the *mu'adhdhin*, the *adhân*.

⁵¹ *Düvaz* is a shortened form of the originally Persian *davâz-dah*, which means 'Twelve'. As a *pars pro toto*, it stands for the Twelve Imams.

⁵² This space of the *dedes* is termed *post*, Persian (*püst*) for animal skin, as the *dedes* usually used to sit on tanned sheepskins with the fur on their upper side to be used as a rug.

⁵³ For this description, see Yaman 2003, 80–81. For an account of modern Alevi ritual handbooks in general see Sariönder 2005.

⁵⁴ This differs from usages in other agricultural and pastoral communities, where the animal is sometimes cut into larger pieces of different size and quality, which are then distributed to different groups (families, clans etc.) according to the social hierarchy. This is obviously not the case with modern Alevi usage, except for the distribution of the grilled innards to persons of higher status in the village (mainly from the *dede* caste, but also notables from the *talib* caste). I would like to thank Michael Houseman for this observation.

⁵⁵ In Malatya province, this meal was called *can baş lokması*. *Can* means soul and *baş* head. This might refer to these parts as being the bearer of a kind of life force.



Fig. 3: Blessing of *lokma* by a *dede* and helping laypeople at Garip Dede Dergahı prior to the distribution of the food (Küçükçekmece – Istanbul) March 2007 (© Christian Funke).

In modern *cemevis*, the innards are usually sold to increase the income of the institution. The distributed parts of the meal and the other offered food is called *lokma* (morsel, bit of food). This is the practical realisation of the central Alevi ideal of sharing resources under each other (*paylaşma*). For that reason, a communal ritual is not complete without some food being offered to the community, redistributed, and shared during and after the ritual. In modern *cemevi* contexts, the *kurban* is sometimes substituted for other food (fruit, cookies, etc.) that is donated by the participants.

This is especially the case with the shortened standard *cem*-rituals, such as at the *cemevi* of the *CEM Vakfı* (an influential Alevi organisation which is rather close to the Turkish state) at Yenibosna (Istanbul), where the *cem* is conducted every Thursday evening. The donated food is packed into parcels, blessed, and distributed just as the meat of the *kurban*. In Germany, this can even take the form of a buffet of homemade meals. At other Istanbul *cemevis* such as the Karacaahmet Sultan Dergahı (Üsküdar) or Şahkulu Dergahı (Göztepe), *kurban* in connection with *cem*-rituals is regularly carried out on the weekend. There, the distribution of the sacrificial meat together with *bulgur* (cracked wheat) and *ayran* (a yoghurt drink) has the form of



Fig. 4: Preparation of *ayran* (yoghurt drink) in the kitchen of Garip Dede Dergahı (Küçükçekmece – Istanbul) March 2007 (© Christian Funke).

a feeding the people (fig. 4). It can be observed that a lot more people attend the distribution of food than the congregational ritual because some of them are simply in need of a warm meal and use this opportunity to receive it, at least once a week, for free. In the Karacaahmet *cemevi*, the donors of the animals are announced on a flip chart, referred to as *lokma sahipleri*, the ‘masters of the morsel’. This whole process can be characterised as a professionalisation of the *kurban*, as it is conducted in a quite organised manner within the framework of public organisations.

In a traditionalist or traditionalising framework, the offering of animals is considered to be an especially integral part of Alevi religious life. Through it, the richer members of the community can provide large meals that may feed the whole community. The meat for these meals has to be slaughtered as a sacrifice, as only meat from a *kurban* can be blessed by the religious leader (*dede*) properly. Consequently, no meat bought from a butcher or a shop is allowed. As I could observe during my fieldwork in the village, it is extremely important to get some of the blessed meat. The distribution of only bought or home made dishes is not acceptable in the village context (contrary to the usage in the cities or in the diaspora), although bought foodstuff is additionally brought to the ritual and handed over to the congregation

at the beginning on the *meydan* in front of the *dedes'* post. After the ritual, this food, such as cookies and sweets, is also distributed in packages of equal size. At the village where I did fieldwork, the distribution of the blessed meat took a rather chaotic form, as everybody attempted to get his share. In the handbooks, the regulation for the distribution is formulated such that after all the participants take their parts of the *lokma*, the *lokmacı* (preparer and distributor of the morsels) should announce (as part of the 'table prayer', *sofra duası*): '*Hü, mümin müslim, bacı kardeş! Elimde yok kantar ile terazı, herkes oldu mu hakkına razı?*' (= 'By God, believers and Muslims, sisters and brothers! In my hand I do not have weight and balance, is everybody in agreement [with his lot] according to his right?').⁵⁶

In Germany, on the other hand, people often refrain from slaughtering animals. There, sometimes only meals that were made at home are distributed after the ritual. This development is reflected in the ritual handbook, which was written by the *dede* Seyit Derviş Tur, who spent most of his adult life in Germany. He allows for the possibility of preparing the meat of the sacrificed animal at home, when there is no kitchen available in the place, where the *cem*-ritual is conducted.⁵⁷ That these exceptions from traditional practices are formulated in Germany is significant, as only in Germany an open ritual criticism is formulated towards animal sacrifice.

A tendency to include personal, individual 'sacrifice' to the notion of 'sacrifice' (*kurban*) in the sense of ascetic waiving or abandonment of certain habits (such as stopping smoking or overeating) is observable, especially in Diaspora contexts. A German-Alevi functionary (being himself born into a *dede* family) formulated these ideas very explicitly in an interview recorded by the author in 2005 in connection with an animal sacrifice conducted at a German sheep farm. In principle, he rejected animal sacrifice as something connected to the belief in a special life force, which he implicitly considered superstitious or overcome by science. He was using the ethnological term (of Polynesian origin) 'mana' which he specified with the term 'energy'. He was referring to 'ancient, pre-scientific eras', when 'people believed in such magical concepts'. Nowadays, according to his opinion, animal sacrifice should be replaced by individual 'ascetic' acts.

This attitude also encourages charitable practices such as the giving of alms, which corresponds to the traditional function of the *kurban* to supply sufficient food to the poor of the community. *Dede* Seyit Derviş Tur (Germany) even places this kind of charity – taking care of the needy and the poor – above the merits (*sevab*, Arabic *ṭhawâb*) that can be gained by sacrificing an animal (*kurban*).⁵⁸ Also the *Alevi-tische Gemeinde Deutschland e. V.* (AABF = *Almanya Alevi Birlikleri Federasyonu*), the major Alevi organisation in Germany, officially recognised as a 'Religionsgemeinschaft' ('legal' religious community) in some German states, follows this emphasis on their website. The official description of *kurban* on this site, included in a short

⁵⁶ Yaman 2003, 81.

⁵⁷ Tur 2002, 369.

⁵⁸ Tur 2002, 523.

online-handbook of Alevi religion, places individual symbolic sacrifice and charity above the animal sacrifice. The statement was issued on the occasion of the Muslim 'feast of sacrifice' (*kurban bayramı*).⁵⁹ In this respect the author of the text, İsmail Kaplan, obviously follows Derviş Tur, who was the President of the *AABF* in its founding period in the early 1990s.

Once again, this concept of 'spiritual sacrifice' (in the German text: 'ideelles Opfer'), such as participation in the duties of the community, and 'actual sacrifice' ('tatsächliches Opfer'), such as animal sacrifice, *adak*, is repeated by İsmail Kaplan, who is now in charge of the educational matters of the Federation ('Bildungsbeauftragter') including the re-started *dede* education program.⁶⁰ There is a strong emphasis on mutual solidarity in the context of sacrifice. All texts (Yaman 2001b; Tur 2002; Kaplan 2004 and 2005) reflect a strong inclination towards systematisation and typology. As was already observed in the context of the *cem*-ritual,⁶¹ by doing this, the authors create categories (such as *ikrar verme kurbanı*, i.e. sacrifice in connection with an initiation ritual, *ölmeden önce ölme kurbanı*, i.e. sacrifice to cleanse the soul, and *can kurbanı*, i.e. sacrifice in commemoration of a deceased person)⁶² that suggest different forms of conducting the ritual. As was observed during the fieldwork conducted by the Heidelberg research group, these categories are not observable from the practice of the ritual itself. Although the occasions to sacrifice an animal are clear to the donors (*kurban sahipleri*), this might not be the case for (all of) the other participants when there are no special announcements. Furthermore, the actual occasion of the sacrifice makes no difference in respect to the form of the ritual and its realisation.

⁵⁹ Kaplan 2005.

⁶⁰ Kaplan 2004, 80–81.

⁶¹ Karolewski 2005 and discussions on that matter with Dr. Ali Yaman, the son of the *dede* Mehmet Yaman, during his stay at Heidelberg as a visiting research fellow of the *Collaborative Research Centre 'Dynamics of Ritual'*.

⁶² Yaman 2001b, 54–58 constructs many more categories of *kurban* in *Alevilik*, including a categorical differentiation into 'inner' and 'outer' sacrifices (all referring to animal sacrifice; *içeri – dışarı kurbanları*). Tur 2002, 369, on the other hand states that in 'religious worship' (*ibadet*) there are many names for the same thing ('çeşitli isim altında'), namely to sacrifice an animal ('adak kurbanları kesilir').

6 CONCLUSION

A main function of the *kurban* in an Alevi context is the 'production' of blessed food to be distributed amongst the congregation of a *cem*-ritual. This is clearly observable in the practice conducted at the large Istanbul *cemevis*, where the preparation of meals from the sacrificed animals takes a professionalized form with employed specialists and elaborated architectural facilities. This reciprocal concept of *kurban*, in which the wealthier individuals of the community supply food to the poorer individuals and this food is offered as *lokma*, which is supplemented by further foodstuff brought to the ritual by (ideally) all of the attending families or individuals, becomes less clear-cut in modern diaspora contexts. In Europe, a proper animal sacrifice is not possible or is no longer seen as appropriate. On the one hand, institutions take over the task to organise the slaughter of animals and food distribution, as in the large urban centres of Turkey. In this case, a high degree of professionalisation is observable. On the other hand, homemade or even purchased food can be used as a substitute for the cooked meat of a sacrificed animal, as in diaspora contexts where an at least rhetorical tendency to substitute *kurban* with other 'offered' food was observed. In both cases, the ideology of *paylaşma*, sharing food within a congregation or community, is the underlying discourse.

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