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ARCHAEOLOGY, ANTHROPOLOGY AND HERITAGE IN THE BALKANS AND ANATOLIA: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF F.W. HASLUCK, 1878-1920

Edited by

David Shankland

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To the memory of

KEITH HOPWOOD
1958-2007

CONTENTS

Acknowledgements 9
Preface 11
Contributors 13

1. David Shankland, *Hasluck Revisited* 15

PART ONE:
NATIONALISM AND HERITAGE

2. Kraus Kreiser, *The Turkish discovery of Anatolia*.............. 29
3. Gianclaudio Macchiarella, *Albania and the FYR of Macedonia: Two recent laws concerning cultural heritage protection in the Balkans* 45
4. Eisuke Tanaka, *Turks and Trojans: Turkish approaches to the Anatolian past* 57
5. Debbie Challis, *Charles Newton: The keeper, the British Museum and the Ottoman Empire* 71

PART TWO:
HETERODOX CURRENTS

6. John Norton, *Tracking Turkish tribes* 89
7. Rıza Yıldırım, *Investing the socio-cultural background of the Kızılbaş 'heresy' in the Ottoman Empire: the case of Seyyid Rüstem Gazi* 105
8. Hande Birkalan-Gedik, *Reconsidering gender and genre: female* aşıks, *tradition and tactics* 123
9. Caroline Tee, *Seyfili Dede — the life history of an Alevi* dede-aşık 155
10. Zeynep Yürekli, *Two shrines joined in one network: Seyyid Gazi and Hacı Bektaş* 171
11. Esra Danacıoğlu Tamur and Amed Gökçen, *Fieldwork among the Ezidis/Yezidis of Viranşehir* 191

PART THREE:
RELIGION AND RITUAL

12. Robert Langer, *The transfer of the Alevi cem ritual from Anatolia to Istanbul and beyond* 205
13. Afrodite Kamara, *Religious extremism in Anatolia and Syria: A comparative study of ecstatic and destructive behaviour* 215
14. Glenn Bowman, *Hasluck Redux: contemporary sharing of shrines in Macedonia* 229
15. Tijana Krstic, *The ambiguous politics of 'ambiguous santuaries'; F. Hasluck and historiography on syncretism and conversion to Islam in 15th and 16th century Ottoman Rumeli* ... 247
16. Edith Wolper, *Khidr and the language of conversion: creating landscapes of discontinuity* 263

PART FOUR:
MATERIAL CULTURE

17. Ömür Bakırer, *Two essays on the Divriği great mosque and hospital* 281
18. Ali Uzay Peker, *Imprisoned pearls: the long-forgotten symbolism of the Great Mosque and Dār al-shifā' at Divriği* 315

PART FIVE:
HISTORY AND CHANGE

19. Colin Heywood, *Standing of Hasluck's shoulders: Another look at Francesco Lupazzolo and his* Aegean Isolario *(1638)* ... 349
20. David Barchard, *The clash of religions in nineteenth century Crete* 377
21. Harry Norris, *Bucharest (Bucureşti), 'Bektashi Pages' and Kosovo (Kosova); Three neglected corners of changing Albanian culture language and identity during the days of travel and discovery of the Haslucks in the Balkan* 399
22. Keith Hopwood, *Cyzicus* 413

12

THE TRANSFER OF THE ALEVI *CEM* RITUAL FROM ANATOLIA TO ISTANBUL AND BEYOND

Robert LANGER

This paper describes the transfer of the Alevi *cem* ritual from a mainly rural context in Central and Eastern Anatolia to the cities of Turkey and even beyond, into the Turkish and Kurdish Alevi diaspora communities of Western Europe. This research was conducted by a Heidelberg team as part of a large Collaborative Research Group (*SFB*) initiative entitled *Ritualdynamik* [Ritual Dynamics] sponsored by the German Research Foundation.[1] The theory of ritual transfer which we are developing within the framework of that project is not extensively elaborated in this article, as we have treated it elsewhere.[2]

Introduction

The so-called 'Alevi Renaissance' starting in the 1980s was strongly linked to an innovative re-construction of the central, congregational-communal ritual within the Alevi tradition, the *cem* or *ayin-i cem*. In urban Istanbul, these Alevi *cem*-rituals are conducted often nowadays in large modern *cem*-houses on Thursday evenings, thus matching a traditional Oriental time reckoning, where the day starts with sunset, the 'Friday evening' (*Cuma akşamı*). The usual setting of this communal ritual is as follows: at one end of the room sit the religious leaders presiding over the ritual, called *dede*, usually together with a singer-musician, called *aşık* or *zakir*, who accompanies the hymns (*nefes*) and songs (lit. 'sayings' *deyiş*) with his *saz* (an instrument similar to a long-necked lute). In front of the ritual specialists lies the space for the ritual dance *semah*, called *meydan*, where also other rites are performed by lay people during the ceremony. Around the *meydan* sits the congregation (*cemaat*), divided into men and women. The ceremony is characterised by a sequence of prayers, rites performed by individual lay participants on the *meydan*, and collective singing by the congregation, which may be accompanied by gestures.[3] It is this part which resembles most a Dervish *zikir* that can lead to trance-like states of consciousness.

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[1] More information on this project may be found at http://www.ritualdynamik.de/.

[2] On this, see Langer, Lüddeckens, Radde and Snoek (2006).

During the last three decades, this Anatolian ritual has not only been transferred to Turkey's urban centres such as Ankara and Istanbul but also to other smaller cities such as Erzincan, Sivas, and so on, and even abroad to Western Europe. This transfer was stimulated by the migration of many Turkish, and also Kurdish (both Kurmancı and Zazaki speaking) Alevis from the 1960s onwards. These came initially often as labour migrants or, especially in the German case, subsequently also as political refugees. Up until this time, the Alevis were a mainly rural community living in Anatolia and some former Ottoman territories of the Balkan Peninsula.[4]

The congregational *cem*-ritual in its full form was performed traditionally within the village community on occasion of a visit of one of their spiritual leaders (*dede*). If the *dede* connected to the certain village community was residing far away, this could happen only once or twice a year. The ceremony had the explicit function to reaffirm both their Alevi identity and communal solidarity, for example by conducting at the beginning of the *cem* a court led by the *dede*, in order to solve internal quarrels. In this traditional form, the *cem* lasted for several hours into the night.

The migration of many Alevis into urban centres and abroad led them to a major break in ritual tradition. Sometimes, migrants continued to participate in *cem*-rituals while visiting their home villages; later on their *dede*s, to whom the lay people are attached by hereditary links, were invited to come to the cities and even to Germany. During my fieldwork in Turkey, I met aged *dede*s who had travelled extensively through Germany conducting *cem* rituals.

After the *coup d'état* of 1980 in Turkey, religion became an important marker of public identity again, in spite of the theoretically secular basis of the Turkish nation. This also had an effect on the migrants from Turkey in Germany, as political developments in the country of origin were mirrored within the political spectrum of the diaspora communities. Thus, it is widely thought that the emergence of religion as a force within the Alevi community was a reaction against the rise of political Islam among the Sunni majority, and against too the Sunni-Hanefi Islam that was henceforth encouraged by the Turkish state. At that point, Alevi attempts to establish cultural associations in European countries and also in Turkish cities accelerated.[5] One function of these so called *kültür dernekleri* was to rent, acquire or even build architectural structures in order to house *Alevi kültür merkezleri*, i.e. 'Alevi cultural centres' with the, initially not openly declared, aim to have a space to conduct their traditional congregational rituals. Consequently, these houses could also be referred to as *cemevi* or '*cem* ritual house' in daily speech. Additionally, these places of worship could be referred to in a more general sense as *ibâde-*

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[3] For a systematic description see Karolewski (2005), and also Langer (2008a; esp. 97-98).

[4] Hasluck (1921).

[5] For a historical overview, see Şahin (2002).

thâne. Here, the term *ibâdet* plays a crucial role, as it integrates the *cem* into an Islamic framework, and is part of an ongoing struggle over the acceptance of the *cemevis* as officially recognised places of worship in the Turkish legal system.[6]

It is not the least beneficial outcome of my co-operation with Dr Shankland and his re-vitalisation of Hasluck's work that we can put these cultural processes in a greater ethnographical and historical context, as already in his pioneering work Hasluck spoke of 'transferences' rather than 'survivals'.[7] Of course, Hasluck was referring to developments that took place mainly during late antiquity, the Middle Ages and early modern times. But to give an example, this process of re-actualisation of cultural resources takes place nowadays in a quite similar manner, as several *cem* houses in Istanbul are built at the site of old saintly tombs (*yatır* or even *türbe*), such as Karacaahmet Sultan in Üsküdar or Garip Dede in Küçükçekmece. Some are even thorough renovations or reconstructions of convents (*tekke*) of the Bektaşi dervish order, which were closed down in the 1920s. This order, as we know, was in close contact with parts of the rural Alevi population. This rebuilding of Bektaşi *tekkes* took place in the 1990s at Şahkulu Dergahı (Göztepe) and Erikli Baba in Kazlıçeşme, both within modern Istanbul. This is a most creative use of remains of the past by today's local people, albeit one that is influenced by modern contexts. It has to be added that these buildings would have become derelict without intervention, as we can see in the case of Şahkulu from its documented condition in the beginning of the 1990s.[8]

Ritual transfer and the Alevi cem

The notion of ritual transfer primarily refers to the transfer of a ritual from one context into another, or—more generally—a change of the context surrounding the ritual. Processes of transfer can take place within time or space. In our case, transmission or re-construction of the *cem*-ritual is a transfer through time whilst the transfer of the *cem* to migrational contexts is a transfer within space. Transfer of a rite (i.e. a ritual building block or ritual element) is also subsumed under the concept of 'transfer of ritual'. Indeed, is it more likely, that only parts or partial sequences of complex rituals, such as the *cem*, are transferred. For example, in the processes that we see occurring with regard to the reconstitution of the *cem* in the migrant context, the juridical part of the ritual is often omitted or reduced to a symbol, with little or no function. In addition, as the invention of new rituals usually consists, from an etic perspective, mainly of such a transformative transfer of a number of rites from already existing ritual traditions, the invention—and also the disappearance—of rituals are included under our use of concept of ritual transfer. It thus covers the (re)invention, reception, transformation, and compensation, as well as the loss of rites or rituals.

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[6] See Şahin (2005).

[7] See Hasluck (1929).

[8] See the illustrations in Lifchez (1992).

The concept 'transfer of ritual' therefore offers a perspective on the development of rituals under such circumstances as migration or the emergence of transnational communities, globalisation, pluralism, the information society,[9] world-wide integration, or the re-emerging of 'primal identities' (such as ethnicity or 'religion'), as is the case with the Alevis, especially as Alevi discourses and practices are now entangled in a transnational grid of communication, that is characterised by multi-directional transfer processes, even back into the villages of origin.

Internal dimensions

By definition, 'transfer of ritual' takes place when one or more aspects of the context of a rite or ritual are changed. Here, observable, describable and scientifically interpretable aspects can be discerned, such as the media in which the script and the performance of the ritual are materialized (e. g. oral tradition, written text, real life performance, film, television, Internet, and so on.). In the case of the Alevis, we may perceive a distinct switch from oral tradition to a scripturalised 'handbook culture' on the one hand and a strong media-isation of standard performances in film, television and Internet representations. Geographical, spatial, ecological, cultural, religious, political, economic, social, and gender-specific aspects also change due to the wider urbanisation and modernisation processes within Turkey and most markedly through migration to large cities and Western countries.

In course of these changes, the group carrying the tradition to which the rite or ritual concerned belongs has also changed considerably, as traditional village structures no longer exist in any straightforward way within cities and diaspora communities. Particular attention may also be paid to the specific historical context of the ritual. This especially needs further study not only based on ethnographical but also on historical source material itself.

As well as taking into account external influences, a number of other relevant aspects can be distinguished with respect to the rituals themselves. These can be interpreted within ritual theory as the different internal dimensions of a ritual.[10] We can mention for example the following: its script, its performance, its performativity, its aesthetics, its structure, the transmission of its contents. The use of rituals often pursues (a) specific intention(s), realized in their application, strategic use and instrumentalisation. This is clearly the case with the *cem* when it is instrumentalised in political contexts such as demonstrations and festivals.[11] Moreover, rituals often have elements of self-reference. Interaction, communication, psychological and social functionality, mediality, symbolism, and the meaning(s) which is/are ascribed to it by its participants, are further internal dimensions.

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[9] Concerning the case of transfer of ritual on the Internet see Radde-Antweiler (2008).

[10] Here, we follow the 'dimensions' discerned by Jan G. Platvoet in his seminal article (1995).

The theory of ritual transfer can be summarised as following: when a ritual is transferred, i.e. when one or more of its aspects are changed, changes in one or more of its internal dimensions can also be expected. However, just as not all aspects need to change equally significantly, it is to be expected that not all internal dimensions will be modified equally intensely. Conversely, if a modification of an internal dimension is observed, it is warranted to ask if this might be caused by a change in one or more of the context aspects. This, however, need not be so: as stated above, changes of internal dimensions may be caused by internal dynamics as well. The theory of 'transfer of ritual' looks at the relationship between cultural contexts (such as society, political systems etc.) and cultural phenomena, specifically ritual. It will provide above all an instrument to analyse these historical and sociological processes and dynamics.

In our case ethnographical as well as historical data is used to realise this analysis. Material is gained through collecting literature, both academic and from Alevi organisations and intellectuals. We also conduct fieldwork, participating in the rituals. Our team has since 2003 documented about thirty rituals with video camera mainly in Istanbul and Germany,[12] but also for example in the Central Anatolian town Erzincan. In May 2006, we also had the opportunity to participate in a village *cem* in the region of Malatya from where we also obtained the manuscript collection of two historical *dede*s, which are now being researched in another sub-project.[13]

The Alevi cem *in Germany and Istanbul*

It might be useful to give a very short outline of the ritual itself. We do this here along the lines of a standard text-book, published by the influential Alevi organisation called *CEM Vakfı*. This standardised *cem* was observed by us several times in the *cemevi* of Yenibosna (Istanbul) and serves as my first example.

The *cem* is normally framed in the beginning by a discussion (*sohbet*) by a leading *dede*. A symbolic court case, the *görgü*, is also conducted before the actual ritual starts. Additionally, other rituals such as a *nikâh* (marriage ceremony) can be included. The actual 'service' (*ibâdet*) starts with *salavât ve*

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[11] For this point, see especially Shankland (2003).

[12] For a first account focussing on sacrifice and communal meal as a means of framing the *cem* see: Langer (2008b).

[13] Karolewski (forthcoming).

selâmlama, prayers to the Twelve Imams (*oniki imâm*) and other holy figures. Then the *oniki hizmet görev deyişi* is sung, a hymn, with which the so-called 'Twelve Duties' are nominated. These are ceremonial roles, which are taken on by the members of the congregation, such as 'sweeper', 'watchman', and so on. *Tevbe* or *tövbe*, prayers of repentance, are uttered by the congregation led by the presiding *dedes*. The *Nâdi Ali(yyan)*, a special Arabic invocation of Ali (the son-in-law of the Prophet), is recited by the *dede*, who then recites another prayer, called *gülbânk*. Then a *düvâz(dah)imâm*, a hymn to the Twelve Imams, is sung by the *zâkir* (musician) or the *dede* himself, when there is no special musician. The *tevhîd*, the hymn of the 'confession of the oneness of / with God' is sung by the congregation. After that, the *dede*-musician or the *zâkir* sings the *miraçlama*, which retells the heavenly journey of the prophet Muhammed and his meeting with the 'Forty', the *kırklar*. This story is accompanied by the congregation with certain gestures and poses according to those referred to in the story. This hymn directly flows into the *Semah*, the ritual dance, as the first, mythical *semâh* is said to have been danced by the *kırklar* (including the prophet and Ali) in heaven after the *mirâc*. A subsequent recitation re-enacts the story of Kerbelâ. There, the *sakî* (*sakkâ*), the 'water carrier' or 'cupbearer', sprinkles water into the *cemâ'at* in order 'to quench the thirst of the people suffering at Kerbelâ'. Then, a *mersîye*, a song lamenting the suffering of Hüseyin and his family at Kerbela, can be sung. Finally, the 'Twelve Duties' reappear, especially the sweeper who cleans the *meydân* again, the *lokmacı* who brings the sacrificial or donative morsels of food to be distributed among the participants after the service, the lighter *çerâğcı* to extinguish the three lights, which he lit in the beginning. Those who have taken on a duty then stay in a special prayer position (*dâr*) while the *dede* recites a prayer to sanctify their work.

If we now compare the *tevhîd*-section of the *CEM Vakfi cem*, which exhibits a high degree of participation and a high level of involvement of the participants, with the *tevhîd* sequence from another *cem*, but now as performed in a small South German town, we observe that these Alevi living in Germany are no longer so sure how to conduct the ritual. More than half of the allocated time the evening the *cem* was performed had to be used by the *dede* to rehearse its songs and roles. Those performing the 'Twelve Duties' had leaflets with notes to read out their parts. The degree of participation and engagement was low compared to the first example from Istanbul. Most striking is the use of chairs, which is often found in Germany but frequently disapproved of in Turkey. Another aspect is the change of media concerning the language of the ritual. One young Alevi-German *dede*, who is regularly conducting *cem*-rituals all over the country, has begun to translate parts of the ritual into German. He has even composed German-language *deyiş*-hymns, which he uses during the rituals and on other occasions.[14] He is often invited by German-Alevi youth organisations in order to conduct special 'youth

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[14] See Langer (2008d).

cems' with German as the main language. This is extremely interesting for young Alevis in Germany, as many of the third generation-migrants do not feel comfortable in a ritual conducted only in Turkish, as they fear that they would not properly understand every supposed 'meaning' of texts and practices.

Generally, a comparison between *cem*-rituals in Istanbul *cemevis* and in German Alevi communities shows that the degree of bodily engagement and the knowledge of ritual texts (prayers and songs) differs considerably. In Istanbul, we encounter well-rehearsed congregations (which, this has to be kept in mind, comprise itself only a minority of the overall Alevi population in the mega-city), who show a high degree of embodiment of the ritual and who know the texts and practices employed during the ritual. In German communities, *cem*-rituals have the obvious character of a rehearsal, where the *dede* interrupts the *cem* often in order to explain the 'meaning' of the ritual; acting lay people depend on notes to read prayer texts during the performances of one of the 'Twelve Duties'.

Two rather spectacular transfer phenomena further illustrate the flexibility of modern Alevi ritual. In Turkey, I observed the staging of the Kerbelâ events in the *cemevi* of the *CEM Vakfı* in Yenibosna (Istanbul). It resembles a Persian *ta'zîye*, a theatre play, that in Iran was usually staged during *Muharrem*.[15] In Yenibosna, it was performed within the *cem salonu* and the assembled congregation was the same that normally attended the Thursday evening *cems*. This folk theatre is not attested for Alevi villages, but rather is inspired by performances that are realised by the East-Anatolian Twelver Shiis (*Ca'ferî*) that — parallel to rural Alevis —migrated to Istanbul and represent an — albeit rural — tradition of Iranian Shiism. In Germany, on the other hand, I could observe a "St. Nicolas *cem*" on the eve of the 6th of December (evening of the 5th of December). It was officially called so by the *dede* and the officials of the local Alevi community, arguing that the Holy Nicolas was, as bishop of Myra, an Anatolian just like them. Moreover, he was identified with the holy figure of Hızır. This *cem* was opened with the distribution of parcels containing fruit and Christmas cakes by the *dede*, dressed as Saint Nicholas [Sankt Nikolaus]. This clearly is a transfer from the mainstream German culture of *Weihnachtsfeiern* and its accompanying ritual

Conclusion

The research described in this paper is ongoing. In very preliminary fashion, we may conclude that in the *cemevis* of Turkey's urban centres regular ritual activities have been established. Although these are attended only by a comparatively small minority of the Alevi population, this part of the community is often very engaged and active in constructing the image of Alevism as a distinct religious group.[16] This pattern of 'self-delegated devotion' resembles the general picture of modern industrialised societies and is potentially sufficient to maintain a line of religious tradition. Nevertheless, in Germany and the rest of Europe such uniform Alevi religious life and established performance practices do not obtain throughout. In other words, regular Turkish urban Alevi practices appear to be more uniform than those in Germany and Europe. This said, youth groups and youth organisations - often now with participants from the third generation of migrants - are strongly interested in practicing religious ceremonies, and it is possible to suggest that, as they are rooted in their respective European nations, a specific ritual culture will be established through a change of language to the vernacular. Other transfers, such as the above-mentioned use of St. Nicholas, were already performed by *dede*s who were amongst the first generation of migrants. A total change of language, however, is likely to be prevented by the continuing use of Turkish-language media and partly through travel to Turkey.[17]

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[15] See for example Funke (2005).

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[16] For a preliminary, though comprehensive, overview of Alevi ritual see Langer (2008).

[17] On language and language politics, see Langer (2008).

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