Turkey's Secular Heretics: Exploring the Effects of Kemalist Secularization on Alevi Communities in Anatolia

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> "When people asked us who we were and where we came from, we simply avoided the question. We did not want to tell that we were Alevi; and we could not tell them we were from Dersim, because, you know, everybody knows Dersim is the land of Alevis…So we pretended we were nobody. Some of us even went to the mosque voluntarily to attend Sunni prayers. We tried not to speak our language in public, especially when authorities were around. We sent all our children to school so they could learn Turkish, but we never let them forget who they really were."[1]

For historians maintaining a traditional Kemalist view of Turkish secularism, this quote from a survivor of the 1938 Dersim relocation poses a problem. This resettlement, following the Dersim uprising, has traditionally been understood as an attempt to erase Kurdish ethno-linguistic difference by subsuming the deported Dersimlis into a homogenous Turkish culture.[2] While this survivor does indeed make note of his community's attempt to pass as Turkish, he also speaks of another type of dissimulation: *taqiyyah,* or the concealment of religious identity. But why would someone need to feign their religious affiliation in an aggressively secular state like Kemalist Turkey?

Popular perceptions of Kemalism, the political ideology of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk's Republican People's Party, continue to be misled by the Eurocentric assumptions. For many people from these cultural backgrounds, secularism either means the separation of religion and state (as in the case of the United States) or the complete relegation of religion to the domain of the private sphere (as in the case of France).[3] In Turkey, however, secularization involved the establishment of state control over Islamic institutions in order to create an Islamic practice compatible with the regime's goals of national sovereignty and modernization. An example of this distinctly Turkish understanding of secularism can be seen in Law 677 abolishing Sufi orders, which was passed by the Turkish Grand National Assembly in 1925. In this article, I analyze Law 677, highlighting the state's efforts to shape the development of a modernist, secularist Islamic practice. I disclose how this new state orthodoxy conflicted with traditional Alevi understandings of Islam. This conflict resulted in state efforts to produce conformity within Alevi communities, the effects of which had dire consequences for many within those communities, as is illustrated in the above story of citizens feigning their religious affiliation

Historiography and Conceptual Frameworks

Within the last few decades, Turkish historians have begun to take a more critical view of Kemalist secularism. For instance, Soner Çağaptay argues that as secularization dismantled the institutions of caliphate and *şariat* abolishing Islam as the state religion, "nominal Islam"

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[1] Murat Yüksel, "Forced Migration and the Politics of Internal Displacement in the Making of Modern Turkey: The Case of Dersim, 1937-1947." (Columbia University: PhD Dissertation, 2008), 199.
[2] Paul J. White, "The Debate on the Identity of 'Alevi Kurds,'" in *Turkey's Alevi Enigma*, ed. Paul J White and Joost Jongerden (Leiden: Koninklijke Brille, 2003), 19.
[3] Niyazi Berkes, *The Development of Secularism in Turkey* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 1964), 479.

became a "marker of Turkishness" due to the legacy of the Ottoman millet system.[4] As a result of the association between Christianity and nationalist separatism during the late Ottoman period, non-Muslims became "imperfect citizens" in the eyes of the early republican state as people of questionable loyalty to the Turkish nation.[5] Lerna Ekmekçioğlu has also remarked on this paradox. Under the Turkish Republic, she argues, Armenians, Greeks, and Jews became "secular dhimmis." The term itself is paradoxical because it "places an Islamic legal category, dhimmi, in the framework of a secular, majority Muslim state."[6] Unfortunately, this critical revision of the experiences of non-Muslims under the secular Turkish state has yet to be extended to non-Sunni Muslims.

Alevi historiography continues to be hindered by three main nationalist misconceptions: First, that Alevis experienced persecution under a theocratic Ottoman state. Second, that they achieved emancipation under Mustafa Kemal's secularist reforms. And lastly, that they became the bulwark of secularist policies in the face of rising Islamist sentiments since 1950.[7] These views are particularly noticeable in David Shrankland's work. The Alevis, he claims, "have felt able to identify strongly with [the Kemalist state's] aims, and have prided themselves upon their loyalty."[8] This loyalty to the new Turkish Republic stems from Alevi exuberance for secularism, which they "supported wholeheartedly."[9] However, while Shrankland's scholarship was the first serious anthropological study of Alevis and secularism, recent works present a more nuanced view of the relationship between Alevis and the Turkish state.

Kabir Tanbar's pivotal work *The Reckoning of Pluralism: Political Belonging and the Demands of History in Turkey* (2014) represents a major break with Shankland's thesis. Tanbar demonstrates that pluralism as a political discourse can perpetuate marginalization, by providing legitimacy to the Turkish nationalist narrative.[10] The existence of Alevis as a culturally distinct community is necessary for nationalists as proof of lingering pre-Islamic Turkic practices in Anatolia, and yet simultaneously this difference must be contained within the orthodoxy of Turkish nationalism.[11] Tanbar's anthropological study makes inferences about the past based on current political realities, which have largely been supported by recent historical scholarship.

Works like, Krisztina Kehl-Bodrogi's "Atatürk and the Alevis: A Holy Alliance?" (2003), Hans Lukas Kieser's "Alevis, Armenians, and Kurds in Unionist-Kemalist Turkey," (2003) and Talha Kose's "Alevis: Between Nationalism, Modernism and Secularism" (2013) represent the best examples of the latest historical scholarship by highlighting the contentious relationship between Alevis and the Kemalist state. First, Kehl-Bodrogi traces the emergence of Atatürk as a messianic figure within Alevi political discourse during the 1960s, dispelling the myth that all

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[4] Soner Cagaptay, *Islam, Secularism, and Nationalism in Modern Turkey. Who is a Turk?* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 13.
[5] Ibid., 1.
[6] Lerna Ekmekcioglu, "Republic of Paradox: The League of Nations Minority Protection Regime and the New Turkey's Step-Citizens," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 46 (2014), 108.
[7] Hamit Bozarslan, "Alevism and the Myths of Research: The Need for a New Research Agenda," in *Turkey's Alevi Enigma*, ed. Paul J White and Joost Jongerden (Leiden: Koninklijke Brille, 2003), 3.
[8] David Shankland, *The Alevis in Turkey: The Emergence of a Secular Islamic Tradition* (New York: Routledge Curzon, 2003), 1.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Kabir Tambar, *The Reckoning of Pluralism: Political Belonging and the Demands of History in Turkey* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014).
[11] Ibid.

Alevis wholeheartedly supported Mustafa Kemal's secularist vision from the outset.[12]Next, Kieser further complicates the traditional narrative by arguing that some Alevis feared the nationalist movement due to its continuity with the Committee of Union and Progress, which had planned the genocide of the neighboring Armenian community with whom they had friendly relations.[13] Lastly, Kose analyzes the various political projects within the Kemalist ideology, emphasizing that while the secularization project offered legal protection to religious minorities, the authoritarian demand for cultural uniformity and homogenization adversely shaped these same communities' perceptions of the state.[14] Nevertheless, scholars remain insufficiently skeptical of the assumption that secularism was inherently beneficial to Alevis in Turkey. As the introductory quote of this paper indicates, clearly the Kemalist state made efforts to assimilate Alevis into the majority Sunni culture of the early Turkish Republic.

Drawing from the recent scholarship, I argue that Ekmekçioğlu's concept of "secular dhimnitude" has a logical corollary in Turkish Alevism. If Christians and Jews under Mustafa Kemal's regime were secular dhimmis, Alevis during the early Turkish Republic were secular heretics. My usage of the term "heretic" is not without reservation, as it reproduces the unequal power dynamic already built into Turkish society. Alevism is not "heretical" or "heterodox" any more than Sunnism is "orthodox." What enabled Sunnis to define their practices and beliefs as correct against Alevi difference was their relationship with the Ottoman state, which recognized Sunnism as the state religion. Alevism is in no way a deviant form of Islam; it is rather a minority variation of Islam that failed to win state-backing. Nevertheless, I choose to use the term "secular heretics" to highlight the paradox of the secular Turkish state viewing its citizens through what essentially remained a religious framework. Alevis deviated from the Kemalist state's understanding of the proper secular practice of Islam, and for that they were subject to coercive attempts to achieve religious conformity. In this way, the emergence of a hegemonic secularist practice, the identification of deviant groups, and subsequent attempts at eradicating non-conformity mirrors the process traditionally associated with the emergence of orthodoxy and heterodoxy within religious traditions. The passage of Law 677 abolishing Sufi orders demonstrates that Turkish Alevis were indeed regarded as heretics by the secular state.

The Formation of Orthodox Secularism

Secularism does not mean a-religious or anti-religion, but rather an ideology that attempts to delineate religion as a distinct dimension of life in order to disentangle it from other social institutions. As Talal Asad argued, secularism relies on the assumption that religion is "essentially a matter of (private) belief." The secular state makes no claims to interfere with the privately held beliefs of its citizens nor does it try to regulate the observance of religious practices within the private sphere. Nevertheless, generally speaking, secular states recognize that religious practice in public spaces should be contingent upon maintenance of public order.[15] Asad notes disapprovingly that the secularization of religious beliefs frequently results

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[12]Krisztina Kehl-Bodrogi, "Atatürk and the Alevis: A Holy Alliance?" in Turkey's Alevi Enigma, eds. Paul J. White and Joost Jongerden, 53-70 (New York: Routledge Curzon, 2003).

[13] Hans-Lukas Kieser, "Alevis, Armenians and Kurds in Unionist-Kemalist Turkey (1908-1938). In *Turkey's Alevi Enigma*, eds. Paul J. White and Joost Jongerden, 177-196 (New York: Routledge Curzon, 2003).

[14]Talha Köse, "Between Nationalism, Modernism and Secularism: The Ambivalent Place of 'Alevi Identities'," *Middle Eastern Studies* 49.4 (1995): 590-607.

[15] Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 205.

in the inability to tell in public who is religious and who is not owing to the confinement of religion to the private sphere and mental space.[16] From the perspective of pious Sunni Muslims, this is an unacceptable situation as their interpretation of Islam goes far beyond the relationship between God and humanity but extends to regulating human social relations in accordance with divine justice. As I will later demonstrate, many aspects of Alevi practice and belief were better suited to a secular expression of Islam than Sunnism arguably was. But because Kemalists derided Alevism as a backward form of superstitious folk Islam, Turkish secularism would ultimately prove as equally oppressive as state Sunni Islam had been under the Ottomans.

The ideological roots of Turkish secularism are best be seen in the writings of sociologist Ziya Gökalp (1876-1924). He was deeply influenced by French positivism, and though deeply religious himself, believed that Islam needed to be reformed to make it compatible with modernity. Gökalp drew a sharp distinction between the religion of Islam and the mores of the *ummet* (Muslim community). In his view Islam had errored because it had taken the mores of seventh century Arabia and crystallized them in Islamic jurisprudence (*fikh*). Only by separating the two could the Islamic world hope to overtake the Western European colonial powers in technological advancement and political power again. *Fikh* needed to be replaced with European jurisprudence. But he argued, "whereas the *ummet* is not reconcilable with Western civilization, the religion of Islam is."[17] In fact, Gökalp believed that this separation would strengthen Islam. For by modernizing Islam, he argued that ordinary Turks would be better able to understand Islam's ethical teachings.[18] As one of the primary ideologues of Kemalism, Gökalp's ideas influenced the secularizing reforms of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk's Republican People's Party in the 1920s.

Historian Erik Zurcher argues that there were three main phases in the secularization of Turkey: "The first was the secularization of the state, education, and law...The second was the attack on religious symbols and their replacement with the symbols of European civilization. The third was the secularization of social life and the attack on popular Islam it entailed."[19] Accordingly, he secularization of the state was achieved through the abolition of the sultanate and caliphate in 1923, the consolidation of secular education in 1924, and the replacement of *şeriat* with the Swiss civil code and Italian penal code in 1926.[20] These were all generally positive developments from an Alevi perspective, as they decoupled Sunni institutions from the state. However, the second and third phases of Zurcher's secularization scheme proved far more detrimental to Alevi interests.

Kemalist state secularization was not simply a matter of imposing a separation between religion and state as might be assumed from the first phase of reforms. Two laws introduced between 1924 and 1925, however, attest to a broader intention to subject religious institutions to state control. The first was the replacement of the Ottoman Ministry of Religious Affairs and Pious Foundations with a new Directorate for Religious Affairs (*Diyanet İşleri Müdürlüğü*) that

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[16] Talal Asad, "Thinking About Religion, Belief, and Politics," in *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies,* ed. R. Orsi (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2011), 49.
[17] Ziya Gökalp, "What is Turkism?—A Recapitulation," in *Turkish Nationalism and Western Civilization: Selected Essays of Ziya Gokalp*, ed. Niyazi Berkes (London: Ruskin House George Allen and Unwin, 1959), 285-286.
[18] Ziya Gökalp "Relgion," in Turkish Nationalism and Western Civilization: Selected Essays of Ziya Gokalp, ed. Niyazi Berkes (London: Ruskin House George Allen and Unwin, 1959), 301.
[19] Erik J. Zürcher, *Turkey: A Modern History* (New York: I.B. Taurus, 1994), 186.
[20] Ibid., 187.

was tasked with overseeing religious institutions in Turkey to ensure that their teachings conformed to a secular outlook.[21] The second act, was the abolition of Sufi brotherhoods in 1925.[22] As it was under this latter law that Alevi *dedes* would eventually be prosecuted, a detailed examination of this legislation follows below.

The Turkish Grand National Assembly (*Türkiye Büyük Milli Meclisi*, TBMM) debated and passed "Law 677: Concerning the Closure of *Türbes* with *Tekkes* and *Zaviyes* and the Prohibition and Abolition of a Series of Titles Pertaining to the Office of *Türbedar*," in November 1925.[23] Its passage was the culmination of a barrage of legislation aimed to vastly expanding the power of the state and suppressing all resistance to the Republican regime in the aftermath of the Sheikh Said Revolt the previous spring led by a Kurdish Naqshbandi Sufi leader. The law contained two major provisions: the closure of the various types of meeting houses used by Sufi brotherhoods, specifically *tekkes* and *zaviyes*; and the prohibition and abolition of the titles used by Sufi orders, including *sheikh, dervish, mürid, dede, seyyid, çelebi, baba, emir,* and *nakib*.[24] The penalty for violating either of these two clauses was a minimum sentence of three months in prison and a fine of no less than fifty lira.[25] While Alevi meeting houses, known as *cemevis* were not explicitly mentioned in the first clause, the prohibition of the titles *dede*, *çelebi,* and *baba* targeted both Alevi religious leaders as well as those of the closely affiliated Bektaşi Sufis.

In addition to these two main objectives, the law included a couple of additional measures of importance to Alevis. The first was the prohibition not only of the titles relating to the offices of *dede*, *çelebi,* and *baba,* but also of the wearing of attire indicative of these Sufi offices.[26] In other words, even if a man did not call himself a *dede* or perform Alevi rites at a *cemevi*, he could be subject to arrest if he dressed like a *dede* in public. Secondly, the law prohibited the performance of the rites of the *tekke* and *zaviye* so that even their observance outside of the meeting house was still a criminal offense.[27] Based on this stipulation, it is not entirely clear whether the law recognized a division between public and private spheres in regards to the practice of Sufi rites. How such ambiguity was resolved in practice is unclear. But on its surface, the law at least had the potential of allowing the state to completely prohibit the practice of Alevism regardless of whether the *cemevi* remained open.

Besides these aims, there are a number of key points in this legislation that reveal the modernist, textualist, anti-traditionalist, and anti-populist outlook of Kemalist secularism. Firstly, Article 1 includes an exemption for Sufi meeting houses that could remain operational after the passage of the Law 677, namely those that were also legally registered and recognized by the state as *mescids* or mosques.[28] In other words, if the space doubled as a gathering place for communal Friday prayers, reflecting a "high" practice of Sunni Islam, the *tekke* or *zaviye* would not be shut down. Secondly, the list of prohibited titles did not just include Sufi ranks but extended to a number of informal honorifics recognized in Islamic folk practice: *falcı*

[21] Zürcher, *Turkey: A Modern History, 187.*
[22] Ibid.
[23] *Resmi Cedide*, Period: 2. Volume 17 (30 November 1925), 282.
[24] TBMM, "Kanun No. 677: Tekke ve zaviyelerle türbelerin seddine ve türbedarlıklar ile bir takım unvanların men ve ilgasına dair kanun." In *Kanunlar Dergisi*, Period: 2 Volume: 4 (1926): 21.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid.

(fortuneteller), *büyücü* (magician), and *üfürükçü* (healer).[29] Such practices as fortunetelling, magic, and healing ran contrary to logical positivism fundamental to Kemalist thought.

The same disdain for folk traditions is apparent in the parliamentary debate that ensued over this law. Refik Bey, a representative from Konya who served on the committee that drafted Law 677, accused Sufi orders of being "an instrument for misleading[30] and deceiving within our country. Each of them constitutes a fundamentally treacherous disturbance within our country, being a source of malice and time and time again being to the utmost harm of our country and nation."[31] Ekrem Bey from Rize expressed a similar sentiment, calling *tekkes* "dens of the most repulsive social scenes." He then called to mind instances in Ottoman history where dervish orders engaged in factional court intrigues. "History records these most sinister murders," he cautioned his colleagues.[32] His incendiary comments reflect the charged atmosphere that followed the Kurdish uprising in the spring of 1925 in which Sheikh Sait of the Naqshbandi Sufi order used his network of followers to challenge Turkish centralization efforts in the Diyarbekir.[33] In the aftermath, the political threat posed by autonomous religious networks free from the Directorate of Religious Affairs seemed very real.

In addition to the political threat Sufi orders represented, contemporaries also associated that political power with the deadly "serpent that has also been called fanaticism."[34] Ekrem Bey rejoiced to see "that twisted, snarling demon exposed." And by putting an end to it, Turkey "will be an example for the nations that live in fanaticism" still.[35] Once more, the Kemalist reforms seem to have one eye on the outside world. Modernizing Turkey was about regaining the position of power the Ottoman Empire once held vis-à-vis Europe and setting an example for other nations resisting European rule.

Members of the TBMM also took an equally vitriolic stance against Islamic folk practices. Nuri Bey, representing Kutahya, accused itinerant dervishes of wandering from town to town "both harming the people and also leading them down the wrong path…"[36] Magicians, fortunetellers, and healers latch onto villages like parasites and drain them of their money before leaving town never to be seen again.[37] The implication that such people were charlatans deliberating duping ignorant (but otherwise innocent) villagers implies both a rejection of folk Islam as a legitimate interpretation of Islam as well as a government obligation to ensure that villagers are educated to value a modern, scientifically compatible practice of Islam.

Alevis figured directly in this discussion as well. Suleyman Sirri Bey a representative from Bozok cited the cluster of *tekkes* in the village of Haci Bektaş as a prime example of why such institutions needed to be abolished. For many years, he had lived in the vicinity of that district and observed the "state of degradation" within the *tekkes*. While he wished that place could have become a "House of Wisdom," it was now instead the home to "a number of parasitic *babas*, *dedes*, as resident vagabonds," who "came there and made their living off of the

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[29] TBMM, "Kanun No. 677."
[30] This word can also mean "seducing" implying a sexual connotation to the way in which Sufis tempted the public away from reason and modernity.
[31] *Resmi Cedide*, Period: 2. Volume 17 (30 November 1925), 282.
[32] Ibid., 282.
[33] Zürcher, *Turkey: A Modern History*, 172.
[34] *Resmi Cedide*, Period: 2. Volume 17 (30 November 1925), 282.
[35] Ibid., 282.
[36] Ibid., 284.
[37] Ibid., 284.

dergah's money…"[38] Haci Bektaş is located in the province of Nevşehir and was the home of the two highest ranks of the Bektaşi order of dervishes: the *dedebaba*, the head of the Babagan branch of the order; and the *çelebi,* the head of the Dedegan branch to which most Alevis are affiliated.[39] Therefore, Suleymen Sirri Bey's condemnation of Haci Bektaş was a direct affront to Alevism.

Between 1922 and 1925 secularism, as defined by Turkish nationalist intellectuals and members of government, had been enforced. Within this conceptualization of secularism, there was no room for practices that defied a modern, scientific understanding of the world or for religious institutions that operated independently of the state. As can be seen in Law 677, Turkish secularism viewed both folk Islam and decentralized Sufi orders as a threat to the nation and its forward progress towards modernity. Even an interpretation of Islam sympathetic to the separation of religion from politics, such as Alevism, became a target of secularist ire owing to its instance on maintaining its institutional autonomy and continued observance of "superstitions." But to truly appreciate how Alevism became marked as a heretical variant of secular Islam, we must first examine deeply Alevi practices and beliefs.

Alevism: From Heterodox Muslims to Secular Heretics

Imagine a scenario in which the practices and beliefs referred to today as Alevism became the state religion of the Ottoman Empire. At the beginning of the sixteenth century, Alid loyalism—that is to say the veneration of Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib and the *Ahl al-Bayt* (members of the Prophet Muhammad's family)—inundated the religious milieu of Anatolia and the northwest Iranian Plateau. As anthropologist Albert Doja has argued, this veneration of Ali transcended the boundary between Sunnism and Shi'ism, producing an environment of confessional ambiguity.[40] Among the Kızılbaş Turkmen tribes of this region (from whom a significant portion of contemporary Alevis in Turkey claim descent), Alid loyalism was manifest in the belief that Ali, together with Muhammad, were emanations of God, whose soul was subsequently reincarnated in the twelve imams.[41] The Kızılbaş were instrumental in bringing Ismail I, the head of the Safavi Sufi *tariqat,* to power in Iran as the new shah in 1501.[42] But these same tribes were just as prominent in the Ottoman Empire, where many were affiliated with the Bektaşi *tariqat* that was deeply intwined with the elite Ottoman *Yeniçeri* corps.[43] In other words, it is easy to imagine a scenario in which Alevi beliefs could have come to form the underlying ideology for both the Ottoman and Safavid Empires. Its eventual designation as a heterodox sect of Islam was therefore by no means inevitable. However, the geopolitical rivalry that developed between these two powers soon precluded that possibility.

Eastern Anatolia became a contentious borderland between the emerging Ottoman and Safavid Empires. As the two empires confronted each other, each began to develop a religious ideology to justify the conflict. In the Safavid Empire, Twelver Shi'a *ulema* worked to purge the empire of the earlier legacies of Kızılbaş practices and beliefs. A closely related, though inverse process, was also underway in the Ottoman Empire. After the Battle of Çaldıran in 1514, often

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[38] *Resmi Cedide*, 284.
[39] Hülya Küçük, *The Role of the Bektashis in Turkey's National Struggle* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 22-26.
[40] Albert Doja, "A Political History of Bektashism from Ottoman Anatolia to Contemporary Turkey," in *Journal of Church and State* 49, no. 2 (2007): 432.
[41] Hülya Küçük, *The Role of the Bektāshīs in Turkey's National Struggle* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 17-20.
[42] Janina Karolweski, "What is Heterodox about Alevism? The Development of Anti-Alevi Discrimination and Resentment." *Die Welt des Islams* 48 (2008): 439.
[43] Doja, "A Political History of Bektashism," 441.

regarded as the turning point that cemented Ottoman control over Eastern Anatolia, the Ottoman elite began to profess a much more rigid Sunni understanding of Islam. They suspected the Kızılbaş of being a fifth column that favored Safavi rule and subjected them to intense persecution.[44] Thus, a variant of Islam that seemed poised at the century's opening to become the privileged faith of elites in the Ottoman Empire and Safavid Iran had become by the close of the sixteenth century, marginalized within both empires , regarded by both Sunnis and Shi'is as heterodox. For the remainder of Ottoman history, the name Kızılbaş acquired a pejorative meaning used to slander any Muslim suspected of political disloyalty, latent pantheistic tendencies, or sexual licentiousness. The ethnonym Alevi emerged in the late nineteenth century as a term of self-identification among these Eastern Anatolian communities in part as an effort to distance themselves from these connotations.[45]

The founders of the Turkish Republic attempted to orchestrate a complete break with the Ottoman past. In theory, this contrived discontinuity afforded Alevis a new beginning. There was no reason for the Turkish Republic to perpetuate the association between Alevi religious difference and the ancient Ottoman-Safavid rivalry. This did not mean, however, that both Alevis and Sunnis enjoyed equal freedom to exercise their religious beliefs in the new Turkey.

On the surface, many Alevi practices seem to lend themselves toward a secular nationalist understanding of Islam. Alevism does not require society to be organized along the requirements of *şeriat.* As is consistent with many antinomian Sufi beliefs, Alevis maintain that a strict observance of the outward requirements of Islam can be abandoned once higher levels of wisdom are attained.[46] As a result, few Alevis perform the five daily *namaz* prayers, fast during Ramadhan, or make pilgrimage to Mecca.[47] Furthermore, Alevi gender norms differed significantly from Sunni Muslims in Anatolia. While labor in Alevi villages was very much gendered with women being responsible for tending gardens, meal preparation, cleaning, and child rearing, space was far less gendered both in private and in public.[48] Within the sacred space of the Alevi *cemevi*, women and men worship together.[49] It was largely due to a lack of restricted gendered spaces that Alevis gained a reputation for sexual promiscuity among Sunnis.

While this open disregard for common Muslim practices often put Alevis in tension with their Sunni neighbors, secular Kemalists hoped Alevis would be a key ally for abolishing the caliphate and secularizing the Turkish legal and judicial systems. Notable Kemalist ethnographers, like Baha Said Bey, even attempted to coopt Alevism as Turkey's own *millî mezhep* (national legal school).[50] Whether Alevis consented to this nationalist distortion of their beliefs is another matter, although their reactions would have been mixed. After centuries of Ottoman exclusion, the cooption of their religion by Turkish nationalists might have been met with a mixture of relief, confusion, or suspicion.

A deeper examination of Alevi ritual, however, demonstrates a number of practices that seem difficult to reconcile with Kemalism. Perhaps the most problematic from the standpoint of

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[44] Markus Dressler, *Writing Religion: The Making of Turkish Alevi Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 13.
[45] Ibid., 1.
[46] Shankland, *The Alevis in Turkey,* 84-85.
[47] Ibid., 17.
[48] Ibid., 95.
[49] Ibid., 97.
[50] Dressler, *Writing Religion,* 130.

Ankara's centralization efforts were the *ocak* networks around which Alevi society revolved. These *ocak* networks are comprised of teacher-disciple relationships linking together the families of Alevi *dedes* with their client families.[51] Such networks allowed Alevis to preserve a high degree of autonomy and helped ensure that *dedes* retained political power through their wide personal influence. In order for a man to be recognized as a *dede* he must demonstrate *seyyid* lineage descending from Ali.[52] Alevis believe that *dedes* possess the highest degree of esoteric religious knowledge as intermediaries between the community and Hakk-Muhammad-Ali.[53] Within their roles in Alevi village life, *dedes* act as teachers imparting knowledge to future generations, as healers in times of sickness, and as advisors on personal decisions ; they resolve disputes between families, help negotiate marriage contacts, and preside over important rites of passage.[54] In other words, *dedes* performed functions that most modern nation states try to establish control over. All Alevi families, whose social rank is based on their acquisition of knowledge from the *dede*, are bound to follow the guidance of a particular *dede*. Such links once formed cannot be dissolved for any reason.[55] Thus, the loyalty to a *dede* has the potential to supersede any personal or familiar loyalty to state political representatives. Clearly, this type of social organization posed numerous challenges to nation state building.

Compounding these problems from a nationalist perspective were the myths of Alevi religious identity that placed them within a transnational community of Alid loyalists. Alevis share many of their commemorations and holy days with Twelver Shi'ism, chief among them the ritual mourning of Hussein's martyrdom at Karbala in what is today Iraq. Indeed, southern Iraq for this reason holds a special place in Alevi cosmology.[56] As Ayfer Karakaya-Stump has demonstrated, many Alevi *ocak* lineages in Eastern Anatolia can be traced back to *dedes* living in Mesopotamia as far back as the twelfth century. From this evidence she argues that the origins of modern-day Alevism need to be understood within a context of "multifaceted encounters and cross-fertilizations among different Sufi and dervish traditions, and unions of related communities under the Safavid family *ocak*."[57] This sacred landscape serves as the setting of a rich martyrology that extends to most of the *Ahl al-Beit* and the Twelve Imams. These stories shape the way Alevis view Islamic history, and the example of the martyrs can easily be politicized to inspire resistance against state oppression.[58] The world of Alevism extends far beyond the borders of Turkey established by the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923 stretching from the Balkans in the west to Khurasan in the East, from the Black Sea to the Persian Gulf.

The threat of a transnational Alevi political movement drawing upon oral histories of persecution and resistance explains why nationalist ethnographers like Baha Said Bey went to such lengths to argue against Alevi connections with Shi'ism and Iran. Writing at the zenith of secularization efforts in 1925, he asserted, "When examining the pedigrees of Anatolian Turkish Alevis (Kızılbaş and Bektaşis) it is completely inaccurate to connect them to the Shi'is. In a proper division, as will be explained, this community's rite and brotherhood is of the same

[51] Shankland, *The Alevis in Turkey,* 106.
[52] Dressler, *Writing Religion*, 7.
[53] Shankland, *The Alevis in Turkey,* 106-107.
[54] Ibid., 106-107, 116.
[55] Ibid., 18; 116.
[56] Tambar, *Reckoning of Pluralism*, 18.
[57] Ayfer Karakaya-Stump, The Kizilbash/Alevis in Ottoman Anatolia: Sufism, Politics, and Community (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 221.
[58] Ibid., 30-31.

Oguz tradition, within the same Shamanist Turk tent, they are not different."[59] Kemalists needed to deny the possibility that Alevis might look beyond the borders of Turkey for their identity and ensure that such powerful public commemorations could not spark resistance against the nationalist movement.

Finally, there was the conflict of Alevism and modernity. Alevi practices and beliefs were far removed from the kind of textual, "High Islam" that Kemalists favored as compatible with their conception of modernity. While Alevis are said to have their own scriptures, the *Buyruk*, Alevism remains a highly oral tradition and places far less emphasis on the sacredness of the written word than Sunnism.[60] For Kemalists, Alevis' preference for the spoken word over the textual was indicative of backwardness. In place of *imams*, *kadis*, and *muftis* who led communal prayer and studied and interpreted law—all very sober, rationally-oriented acts of piety—Alevi *dedes* won popular acclaim as healers and miracle workers.[61] As noted earlier in the parliamentary debate on Law 677, Kemalists took a particular disdain for these types of behaviors that struck them as superstitious. Such judgements would have also extended to Alevi veneration for the natural world (particularly trees, rocks, and streams) and the importance of esoteric knowledge in *dedes'* teachings, including an interest in Hurufism and numerology.[62] Far from being an exemplar interpretation of Islam for the new secular Turk, Alevism, to quote Nuri Bey again, would be seen as "leading [the Turkish people] down the wrong path."

The Secular Crusade Against Heresy

Law 677 marked a turning point in the relations between Alevism and the Turkish Republic. It clearly defined Turkish secularism as opposing folk Islam and decentralized religious institutions. It set Turkish secularism against a variant of Islam that otherwise would have been most invested in the secularization of the new republic. The consequences for Alevism were not insignificant. As Law 677 made clear, the penalty for opening *cemevis*, holding *cems*, claiming the title of *dede*, or dressing as a *dede* was a prison sentence and a monetary fine.[63] Law 677 would lead to the closure of Alevi *cemevis* and the arrest of *dedes* found in violation.

One such instance of enforcement was the arrest of Deniz and his son Serdal, *dedes* originally from Dersim. Deniz and Serdal traveled widely throughout the Alevi lands during the 1920s, leading *cems* in Erzincan, Malatya, Elazig, Sivas, Tokat, and Kayseri.[64] In 1926, a year after the passage of Law 677, they were arrested in Erzincan.[65] Because of their connections with local *beys*, they were able to negotiate their release. However, their release did not come without conditions. They would be freed, "if you do not lead the people by raising their awareness, by gathering them and by organizing meetings."[66] These conditions suggest that—at least in the eyes of the local *cendarme* in Erzincan—the state was particularly aware of the possibility of

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[59] Baha Said Bey, 'Türkiye'de Alevi Zümreleri: Tekke Aleviliği-İçtima-i Alevilik,' in *Türkiye'de Alevî Bektaşî, Ahî ve Nusayrî Zümreleri.* 2nd ed, Baha Said Bey, ed İsmail Gökem. (Istanbul: Kitabevi, 2006), 167.
[60] Shankland, *The Alevis in Turkey,* 79.
[61] Küçük, *The Role of the Bektashis in Turkey's National Struggle,* 18.
[62] Ibid., 15-20.
[63] TBMM, "Kanun No. 677," 21.
[64] Annika Törne, "Dedes in Dersim: Narratives of Violence and Persecution," *Iran and the Caucasus* 16 (2012): 78.
[65] Ibid., 78.
[66] Ibid., 78.

dedes serving as community organizers who had the authority to reinforce a distinctive Alevi identity separate from Turkish nationalism.

But how successful was Law 677 in curtailing the practice of non-conformist variants of Islam? The Kemalist state was hardly omnipresent; many of the areas inhabited by Alevis, such as Dersim, remained internal frontiers resistant to state penetration well into the 1930s.[67] The story of Deniz and Serdal offers a glimpse into an answer to this question. As Deniz's grandson recounts, after their release from prison in Erzincan, "They came back but, of course, it is a habit; when they came to these people they held *cems* and sang songs in accordance to our own traditions, conventions and belief."[68] If this anecdote is any indicator, Law 677 drove the practice of Alevism underground.

The emergence of covert Alevi meetings was not an unanticipated development among the Kemalist elite. Tunali Hilmi Bey explicitly warned of this in the parliamentary debate on Law 677, "If there are clandestine organizations and dervishes, what will happen? It will not work to include a punishment like three days or three months in prison. It is not in the least bit proportionate." He proposed setting the minimum sentence to three years in prison to act as a more effective deterrent. Ultimately, the Judicial Committee opted not to amend the law as he suggested.[69] Whether or not a more severe sentence would have compelled Deniz or Serdal to renounce their activities is difficult to surmise, but clearly the TBMM was aware of the difficulties that would result from trying to enforce this law.

Deniz and Serdal did eventually cease conducting *cems* but not because of Law 677. A decade after the passage of the "Law Concerning the Closure of *Türbes* with *Tekkes* and *Zaviyes* and the Prohibition and Abolition of a Series of Titles Pertaining to the Office of *Türbedar*," the Turkish state implemented a heavy handed policy against the Alevis of Dersim, a region described by civil service inspector Hamdi Bey as "an abscess for the republican government."[70] In December 1936, the TBMM debated and approved the Tunceli Law, which reorganized the administration of the district of Dersim as the new province of Tunceli and substituted its former Kurdish name with a Turkish replacement.[71] A month later, Law 2885 placed Tunceli under the jurisdiction of the Fourth Military Inspectorate, effectively a declaration of martial law.[72] With military rule in place, the stage was set for what Inspector General Ibrahim Tali Öngören envisioned for the pacification of the region:

> The whole Dersim region can be confined…It will also work as an economic embargo which would eventually lead to hunger…After thoroughly encircling the region from all sides, the siege could incrementally be narrowed…To achieve the stated goals, the following measures are a must: controlling critical passageways that Dersimlis used for pillaging; destroying the living habitat of dissidents by bombing their villages…; and settling cogent troops in various critical places…[73]

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[67] Percy Loraine to Anthony Eden, "Dersim Kurds" [E 129/129/44], 3 January 1936, in *British Documents on Foreign Affairs: Reports and Papers from the Foreign Office Confidential Print. Part II From the First to the Second World War. Series B Turkey, Iran, and the Middle East, 1918-1939. Volume 33 Turkey, December 1932-November1935,* eds. Robin Bidwell et al. (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1997), 1.
[68] Törne, "Dedes in Dersim," 78.
[69] *Resmi Cedide*, Period: 2. Volume 17 (30 November 1925), 282.
[70] Yüksel, "Forced Migration and the Politics of Internal Displacement," 189.
[71]Loraine, "Dersim Kurds" [E 129/129/44], 1.
[72] Yüksel, "Forced Migration and the Politics of Internal Displacement," 151.
[73] Ibid., 165-166.

Such punitive measures paved the way for the Dersim uprising of 1938. By the time the Turkish military had put down the rebellion, more than 13,000 Alevis perished according to official records.[74] Deniz and Serdal survived this brutal suppression, but Deniz subsequently relinquished his role as a *dede* fearing for his life.[75] For many *dedes* the military's actions in 1938 amounted to an escalation of anti-Alevi policies begun with the passage of Law 677 in 1925.

Conclusion

Turkish journalist Ahmet Altan once said that "the Turkish state establishment wants Alevis to become Sunnis" and conversely, "the establishment expects Sunnis to understand and practice Islam like Alevis."[76] Conceptualizing Alevis as "secular heretics" can help resolve this paradox. Alevi understandings of Islam were in some ways far more compatible with secularism than mainstream Sunnism. They supported the abolition of the caliphate and secularization of Turkish law and education. Consequently, secularization could be seen as an effort to make Sunnis understand Islam in a manner similar to Alevism.

However, if Alevism truly represents a secular Turkish understanding of Islam, it is a heretical secularism at best. As expressed in the debate and enactment of Law 677, Kemalist secularism exhibited a contempt for religious traditions that placed authority in charismatic leaders rather than the written word, understood supernatural miracles as a part of everyday life, and pursued esoteric knowledge of the divine. Alevism did not share the Kemalist orthodox view of a secular Islam made compatible with modernity and nationalism. For this reason, Alevis needed to be made more like Sunnis with respect to some practices and institutions. While scholars argue that Alevis are the foundation of support for Kemalist secularism in Turkey both historically and today, a more nuanced articulation of this claim would be that Alevis are a defensive bulwark against Sunni Islamism. Kemalist secularism remains inherently in tension with Alevism as it was traditionally understood. Nevertheless, both Kemalists and Alevis share a common aversion to a return of a political order rooted in Sunni Islam.

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[74] Törne, "Dedes in Dersim," 72-73.
[75] Ibid., 78.
[76] Köse, "Between Nationalism, Modernism and Secularism," 596.

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