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THE ALEVIS IN MODERN TURKEY AND THE DIASPORA

*Recognition, Mobilisation and
Transformation*

**Edited by Derya Özkul and
Hege Markussen**

EDINBURGH
University Press

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Edinburgh University Press Ltd
The Tun – Holyrood Road
12 (20) Jackson's Entry
Edinburgh EH8 8PJ

Typeset in 11/15 Adobe Garamond by
IDSUK (DataConnection) Ltd, and
printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd,
Croydon, CR0 4YY

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

ISBN 978 1 4744 9202 7 (hardback)
ISBN 978 1 4744 9205 8 (webready PDF)
ISBN 978 1 4744 9204 1 (epub)

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ALEVISM AS A 'MAJORITY': ALEVI AND SUNNI COMMUNITIES IN DERSİM

AHMET KERİM GÜLTEKİN

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Introduction: An Alternative Understanding of Alevism¹

As elaborated in Chapter 2 in this volume, the term 'Alevism' should be considered in the context of Turkey's modernisation processes throughout the twentieth century.² Alevism today refers to different ethno-religious groups, located from the Balkans to the Middle East. Discourses on Alevi identity presented in the literature are mostly guided by preconceptions reflecting an understanding of Alevism as the religion or socio-cultural reality of a victimised minority. These include the idea that Alevis have always been subject to oppression and discrimination; yet, despite this, they managed to preserve their beliefs and worldviews. Therefore, the Alevis have maintained a dissident and rebellious attitude in the face of oppression,³ which led to

¹ This chapter is a revised part of the author's MA thesis (submitted to the Department of Social Anthropology and Ethnology, Ankara University, in 2007), which focuses on ethno-political aspects of ethno-religious identities in Dersim. The thesis was published by Berfin publications; see Gültekin (2010). The data used in this chapter were obtained through fieldwork conducted in Dersim (Tunceli) and Elazığ between November 2005 and August 2006.

² See also Dressler (2013).

³ For examples of this see Zelyut (1990), Köksal (2006) and Öz (2008).

an alliance with the Kemalist Revolution.⁴ Furthermore, Alevism is generally considered a rural culture, with the consequence that the comparison of rural and urban forms of Alevism produces descriptions of urban or modern Alevi practices as examples of the dissolution of 'authentic rural Alevism'. Although this does reflect a determining aspect of reality, it is possible to present an alternative interpretation, based on the unique character of the Alevis in the province of Tunceli (in connection with the historical background of Dersim).

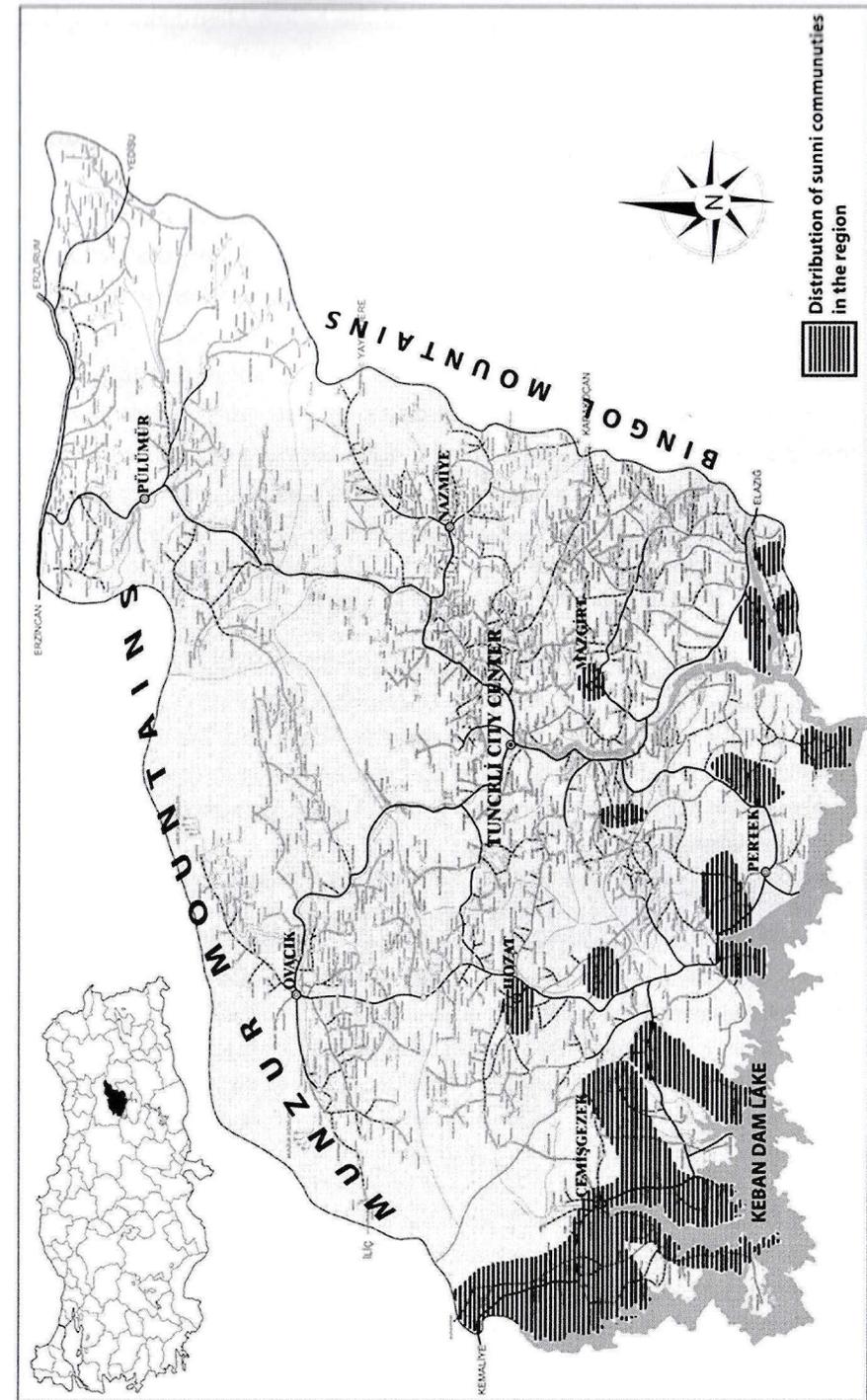
The scholarship on Alevi Kurds in Turkey has grown over the last three decades (see Gezik and Gültekin 2019, Cetin et al. 2018, 2020). The politicisation of Alevism and Kurdishness has also increased the visibility of Kurdish Alevis. In this context, Tunceli comes to the fore with a new Kurdish Alevi identity, with similarities with other Alevi communities and specific oral traditions, sacred place (*jiare*) practices, religious organisations, discourses and rituals. Nowadays, Kurdish Alevis mostly define themselves as Kurds, but their cultural heritage features many differences from other Kurdish communities (Gültekin 2019, pp. 3–6; Gezik 2014, pp. 19–45). The purpose of this chapter is to understand Alevism (as associated with Kurdish identity) in Tunceli where – in relation to the Sunni population – Alevis constitute the majority. This approach will present an alternative picture of the relations between Alevi and Sunni communities.

The Distribution of Alevi and Sunni Communities in Tunceli

Tunceli (Dersim) is a province where both identities are uniquely combined, and Kurdish Alevi (Kırmancki- and Kurmanci-speaking)⁵ communities constitute the majority of the population. Tunceli is located in the Eastern Anatolia region and surrounded by high mountains, as well as big dam lakes. I assume that these mountains and lakes create a kind of psychological boundary for Alevi Kurds. The Munzur Mountains cover its western and northern borders,

⁴ For a critical analysis of these views, see also Massicard (2013, pp. 140–50).

⁵ The heated debate between those who claim that Kurmanci and Kırmancki are different dialects of Kurdish and those who hold that they are entirely different languages (Kurdish and Zazaki, respectively) continues. On one side of the debate stand those who dissociated themselves from Kurdish nationalism and described Kırmancki and its various dialects as Zazaki, whereas the other side is mainly comprised of certain foreign linguists with their own theses. For sources supporting each view, see Bulut (2002), Keskin (2010, pp. 221–45) and Gezik (2014, pp. 19–32).



Map 6.1 Distribution of Sunni communities in Tunceli

the Bingöl Mountains delimit the east, and the Keban Dam Lake completes this circle to the south. I have named this province 'Inner Dersim' in my previous studies (Gültekin 2010, p. 35).⁶ Inner Dersim has been the geographical, historical and religious centre of all Alevi Kurdish tribes. It is still important according to their cosmology and ritual practices. In particular, Inner Dersim's other names are *Jaru Diyar* (Land of Sacred Place) or *Herdu Dewres* (Land of Dervishes) in Kirmancki. These terms refer to a cultural identity that belongs to a special region, which for Alevi Kurds is inherited through both ancestral ties and secret religious knowledge.⁷

The way in which Alevi and Sunni communities are settled throughout the region is worthy of attention. The settlement pattern is connected to the province's geography, in relation to a 'highly mountainous north' and a relatively 'bottomland south', where one can find the local Sunni⁸ villages.⁹ This

⁶ The term 'Inner Dersim' refers to those regions where Alevis who speak Kirmancki and define their religious identity as *Raa Haq* (literally, 'the way of truth') are demographically and socio-culturally dominant. It is possible to regard Inner Dersim as the core of a vast region encompassing the lands inhabited by Kurdish Alevis who speak both Kurmanci and Kirmancki, and as the religious and social centre of these communities. For a substantial guide on the ethno-cultural, religious, historical and social aspects of Dersim, see Gezik and Gültekin (2019), Gezik (2014) and Deniz (2012).

⁷ For detailed information about the religious terms of Kurdish Alevis, see Gezik and Çakmak (2010) and Çakmak (2013).

⁸ There exist no official data regarding the number of Alevis and Sunnis in the province of Tunceli. However, I was able to identify and mark some Sunni villages during my fieldwork (see Map 6.1). These data depend on my personal experience as well as my field notes. I estimate that Sunnis constitute a maximum of 7 to 10 per cent of the population of Tunceli. According to Tunceli's last census data in 2020, the current population is 84,660. See Tunceli Nüfusu (2020). However, this population also includes other Sunnis who were not born in Tunceli, such as military officials and civil officers of the state, their families and the majority of the students of Munzur University. With the term 'local Sunnis', I refer to the Sunni population who originate from the villages and district centres of the province and who speak Kurmanci or Turkish. Hereafter, I use the terms 'Sunni' or 'local Sunni' to refer to these communities exclusively. For more information about the increasing population of 'new' Sunni groups in the province and its effects on daily social life, see Gültekin and Yeşiltepe (2015, pp. 108–19).

⁹ According to data obtained from fieldwork, in the past some Sunni communities attempted to settle in the northern and eastern districts of Pülümür and Nazımiye, but because Kurdish Alevis dominated these areas, they failed to do so and were forced to migrate. See also Deniz (2012, pp. 46–47). However, one can still find some Sunni families in the district centre of Hozat and even in Pülümür.

is an area ranging from the southwestern part of the province to the southeastern part, aligned with the borderline of the dam lake of Keban, in the districts of Çemişgezek, Pertek and Mazgirt. Besides this general pattern of settlement, Sunnis can even be found in a village in Hozat, which is the oldest administrative centre of Dersim. The Sunnis of Tunceli province mostly speak Kurmanci, and a few of them have spoken Turkish for generations. However, after the *coup d'état* of 1980, under the Turkish state's immense nationalist pressure, the 'Kurdish language' lost its visibility in the public space and was replaced by Turkish. Interestingly, most of these Sunni communities are connected to the Kadiri sects of Islam, which base themselves on the notion of love towards the Prophet's family and especially his cousin Ali, as do Alevis. Moreover, they share sacred place practices with their Kurdish Alevi neighbours (Gültekin 2010, pp. 125–35).

The district of Çemişgezek in the southwestern part of the province is home to the largest community of Sunnis in Tunceli, who constitute three-quarters of the district's population. The way in which Sunni and Alevi settlements are distributed throughout the district bears a resemblance to how the settlements of these communities have spread throughout the province. The majority of the Alevi communities in the area resides in the mountainous territories in the northeastern part of the district. Nevertheless, it is also possible to come across Alevi communities in various rural settlements near the district centre and the southern regions. It must be mentioned that there is a crucial distinction between Alevi communities in Çemişgezek. Those residing in the mountainous villages and hamlets¹⁰ of the northeast speak Kirmancki and therefore have stronger ties and cultural affinities to Inner Dersim, whereas the Alevis in the southwestern and southeastern parts of the district speak Kurmanci (Gültekin 2010, pp. 125–35).

The district of Pertek has the second-largest population of Sunnis. It constitutes a region of the southern border of Dersim, and nearly a quarter of the population is Sunni. Here, most of the Sunni communities are found in the western and southern parts of the region. There are only a few villages and hamlets in the district inhabited by Sunnis exclusively. They mostly live side by side with Alevis. However, in the district centre and the villages, the Sunni and Alevi neighbourhoods are usually separate. Through the specific

¹⁰ A hamlet consists of a few houses and is administratively related to a village.

names of these neighbourhoods, these communities create a kind of spatial differentiation, and this practice of discernment can be understood as a way of strengthening their identities (Gültekin 2010, pp. 125–35).

The district of Mazgirt, on the southeastern border of Tunceli, is home to the third-largest Sunni community in the city. They reside in the township of Akpazar, in the southeastern part of the district. In Mazgirt, there are almost no townships, villages, or hamlets with an exclusively Sunni population. According to my fieldwork, it seems that the only settlement with a homogenous Sunni community is a village in the township of Akpazar. In the district centre and other settlements with Sunni residents, the population is mixed. And within Akpazar, Sunnis are mostly concentrated in the southern regions, encompassing the township centre. In other parts of the district, communities are predominantly Alevi (Gültekin 2010, pp. 125–35).

The last district in Dersim (Tunceli) with a Sunni population is Hozat. Some Sunni families live in the district centre; moreover, the village of Inciga (Altınçevre) in the southern township of Çağlarca, which borders on Çemişgezek and Pertek, is home to a Sunni community. The district centre has a mixed population, and Alevis are in the majority. While the village of Inciga also presents a mixed settlement, the majority there is Sunni. Compared to the other Sunni inhabited districts of Tunceli, Hozat has the lowest number of Sunni residents (Gültekin 2010, pp. 125–35).

A Short History of Sunni Communities in Dersim

Dersim (including present-day Tunceli) became an administrative province as late as 1880. Before that, some of the districts currently within the province (such as Çemişgezek, Çarsancak [Akpazar], Mazgirt, Pertek, Kuzuçan, Ovacık, Pah and Kızılkilise)¹¹ were parts of other, larger provinces in the area (Yılmazçelik and Erdem 2017, pp. 223–43).¹² Because of the region's political

¹¹ As a look at the administrative and social history of Dersim proves, these districts and townships are settlements with far-reaching historical roots. Throughout history, they have constituted important administrative and commercial centres. They had originally been located in the foothills of the Murat River Valley before the region was submerged by the Keban Dam Lake.

¹² See also Yılmazçelik (2011), Gül (2015, pp. 23–54) and Yıldırım (2012, pp. 23–37).

and military instability, these regions' administrative status was subject to constant change. With the declaration of the *Tanzimat* in 1839, the Ottoman state's policies towards the eastern territories changed. The state intensified its policy of intervention in the Dersim region. The reforms aimed to transform the administrative structure of the region. Military operations were conducted to end the autonomous structure of the Kurdish Alevi tribes. In this period, the area's economic centres, located in the southwestern, southern and south-eastern regions of the province, gained importance. The spheres of influence of Çemişgezek, Pertek and Mazgirt waxed and waned as a result of the relationship that the Ottoman state formed with the tribes of Inner Dersim. It can be said that the Ottoman state, with the change of its eastern policies after the declaration of the *Tanzimat*, started to view Dersim as a constant threat to public order and state rule (Yıldırım 2018, pp. 59–69). The strained relationship, often marked by clashes between the above-mentioned district centres and the inner regions to the north of Dersim, continued for nearly a century, until 1938. Historical changes in areas with Sunni communities can be better understood in light of this relationship.

Administrative reports in the Ottoman Archives of the Prime Ministry clearly show that, during the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, districts with a high concentration of Sunnis were, in fact, the commercial and social hubs of the province. Despite the confrontations between the two communities, commercial relations continued to maintain their significance during this period. The mines in Elazığ, to the south of the province, and, to a lesser extent, those in Diyarbakır and even further south were one of the main motivations for trade. The charcoal essential for these mines' functioning came from present-day Pertek and Mazgirt. Those engaged in mining activities were exempt from various local taxes, as they were under constant threat of raids by the tribes of Inner Dersim (Yılmazçelik 1998, p. 175).

Apart from mining, artisans' production and local animal and agricultural products were other important pillars of commercial life. Almost all such productive activities took place in the southern district centres, mostly inhabited by Sunnis. In the Inner Dersim regions inhabited by Kurdish Alevi tribes, geographic conditions made the land unsuitable for agriculture. This, combined with the constant raids and skirmishes between the various tribes, made

the Alevis of the north dependent on the south's commercial markets. The limited amount of arable land in the province lies mostly within Çemisgezdek, Pertek and Mazgirt.¹³ Also, small land ownership and 'share-cropping'¹⁴ were general practices in these lands. This led to a perpetual increase in the number of landless peasants, and over time residents were forced to emigrate. This was one of the most important determinants of population movements in the region.¹⁵ Similar processes continued with ever-increasing intensity throughout the twentieth century.

Another factor that determined the nature of population movements in the area consisted of armed confrontations, which lasted from the second half of the nineteenth century until 1938. After thirty years of intermission, these confrontations recommenced in the 1970s and have continued until today. Before World War I, there occurred uprisings in the area, and the state conducted campaigns of suppression. Many Alevi and Christian (Armenian) communities were displaced during this period.¹⁶ Similarly, many Alevi (and even some Sunni) communities were forced to migrate due to the massacre of 1938.¹⁷ Most recently in 1994, as the clashes between the PKK and the state

¹³ For a brief study on this 'plunder economy' of Dersim tribes, see Deniz (2013, pp. 71–113).

¹⁴ Share-cropping is a system of production and distribution based on landless peasants selling their labour to land or herd owners in exchange for products. For further information about the pre-republican era of the Dersim economy, see Yıldırım (2013, pp. 41–70).

¹⁵ Yılmazçelik (1998, p. 177) cites an Ottoman document demonstrating that there was another important factor leading to peasants losing their land. *Çerçis* (hawkers) who came from Iran were crucial to commercial life in the region. They often sold their commodities for a payment deferred for six months, at an extremely high rate of interest. Due to the poor quality of production and the large number of share-croppers, the peasants were often unable to pay the interest rates and had to sell their land for less than what it was worth. Thus, the peasants were left landless and found themselves forced to migrate to larger settlements or other rural areas.

¹⁶ Until 1915, the population of Dersim was dominated by Kurdish Alevi tribes and Armenians. Due to the Armenian genocide and forced migrations, the Armenian population decreased immensely. For a description of how the Ottoman bureaucracy saw the Alevis and the Armenians as collaborators, see Akpınar (2019) and Kevorkian (2011). For more information about the demographic situation in the pre-republican era of Dersim, see Sertel (2014, pp. 269–82).

¹⁷ For more information about the 1938 massacre and forced evacuations, see Aygün (2009).

intensified, the state forcibly evacuated more than 70 per cent of the villages in Inner Dersim (Jongerden 2001, pp. 80–86). This was the most critical forced migration of the recent history of Dersim, and its consequences have been manifold.

Prior to the Republic's full consolidation in the Dersim region, Sunnis constituted an important population group in Çemisgezdek, Pertek and Mazgirt. The decrease in their numbers between 1938 and the 1970s is mostly due to economic reasons. The limited amount of arable land, low level of productivity, the increasingly heavy pressure placed on livelihoods due to population growth and, after the 1950s, migration to the western cities of Turkey and Europe were the fundamental causes of population movements. Between 1938 and the beginning of the 1970s, the Sunnis gradually sold their lands and homes to Alevis from Inner Dersim. Many of them invested the earnings from these transactions in the big cities. Some of them, in contrast, preferred to settle on more fertile lands nearby. All in all, the Sunni population, over the past decades, has been continuously on the decrease (Gültekin 2010, p. 133).

The polarisation and conflicts of the 1970s, mostly based on religious identity, were another important reason behind the Sunnis' migration from Tunceli.¹⁸ These events profoundly impacted particularly the eastern regions of Pertek. For example, the township of Pınarlar and the surrounding villages, mostly inhabited by Sunnis, became utterly deserted after the deadly attack that they had organised against their Alevi neighbours in the late 1970s (Gültekin 2010, pp. 331–36). Today there are only eleven Sunni

¹⁸ During the 1960s the struggle for economic, social and political rights in Turkey gradually intensified: eventually, by the 1970s this struggle gave rise to armed revolutionary movements. The most important social basis of such movements was the rural, mostly Alevi, communities who throughout history had generally been at odds with the state. From this period onwards, Tunceli became the most important centre for many armed left-wing movements. One of the state's policies against revolutionary movements in the 1970s was to mobilise Sunni communities against Alevis, with the use of right-wing organisations. Apart from such organisations, which provided an advantage for individuals when it came to accessing political and economic resources, paramilitary organisations such as the Liberation Army of Enslaved Turks (*Esir Türklerin Kurtuluş Ordusu*, ETKO) and the Turkish Revenge Brigade (*Türk İntikam Tugayı*, TIT) were formed. The outcome was violent attacks perpetrated by both sides, and eventually the Sunni communities were forced to migrate from Tunceli *en masse*. For more information, see Gültekin (2010, pp. 306–41).

households in Pınarlar, and most of the settlements in the area are home to mixed communities.

Another factor contributing to the decrease of the Sunni population in the province, especially in the southern regions, was the evacuation of the villages on the Murat River banks due to the opening of the Keban Dam in the 1970s. The evacuation of these flooded villages also opened the floodgates for further southward migrations from Inner Dersim. This, together with the armed clashes and the large-scale Maraş and Çorum massacres of Alevis in the 1970s, strengthened the already existing conflicts between the Alevi and Sunni communities in the region and accelerated the migration process of Sunnis (Gültekin 2010, pp. 125–44).

Sunnis' migration had relatively lost its impetus in the 1980s, but it intensified once again in the 1990s, with the resurgence of armed conflict. This state of war, whose significance to the history of Dersim is comparable to the events of 1938, has shaped the current geographic distribution of Sunni communities in the region (Bruinessen 1995). It has also dramatically influenced how both Sunni and Alevi identities are perceived in Dersim. One example of the migrations of the 1990s is the high number of Sunnis. They once lived in the villages and hamlets to the east of Pertek but migrated to other areas during this period. However, with the intervention of the Turkish state, they were eventually forced to return. Quite a large number of them did, however, settle in the neighbouring provinces, mainly Elazığ. Alternatively, many Alevis from Inner Dersim settled in the Pertek district centre. While the district's Sunni residents continued to stay, the Sunni population in the rural settlements to the east decreased significantly (Gültekin 2010, pp. 336–57).

Descriptions and Self-descriptions among Alevis and Sunnis: *Barmazlı*, Turk and Kurd

A brief look into the complex subject of ethnic boundaries and the definitions that the communities in southern Tunceli produce about each other could help us understand the social relations between Alevis and Sunnis. For example, the terms that Alevis in Tunceli use to describe Sunnis living in the rural areas in the eastern parts of Pertek are worthy of consideration. Among the names they use to describe the Sunnis in the area, '*Barmazlı*' is the most common. This expression is also used by most Sunnis who live in

rural settlements in the area and implies that the person is 'different from Alevis' – in other words, the person is Sunni. While the term means the same thing for Alevis, both groups have different explanations regarding the origin of this identity.

Alevi communities affiliated with the Pilvenk, the dominant tribe in the region, live side by side with the *Barmazlıs*; according to them, this identity describes Alevis who, over time, have become Sunnis. In this context, Alevis find it natural that the Sunnis of the area participate in certain Alevi rituals (although this was more common before the 1980s). They believe that one can explain these Sunnis' continuing visitation at Alevi shrines and other sacred places only in light of their Alevi heritage. Another important indicator of their Alevi origin is that these communities (at least the older generations) maintain the *kirvelik*¹⁹ relations with Alevis.

For Alevis, the question of how the *Barmazlıs* became Sunni is an important one. *Barmazlıs* speak Kurmanci. They pursue livelihoods similar to those of the Alevis' in the region. They worship the same sacred places, love Ali and his descendants, tell their stories (that is, they read *Cenknames*)²⁰ and sometimes even consult Alevi institutions and religious authorities, such as *cem* rituals and *pirs*. Hence, there should be an explanation about these communities' religious differences. Alevis usually describe this process as one where a people who are 'deep down Alevis' gradually became Sunni through external interventions. According to this narrative, Sunnis who 'came' or were 'brought' to the region from outside of Dersim made this 'subsequent Sunnification' possible because, while Dersim identity is conceptualised based on both Alevism and Kurdishness, it directly refers to

¹⁹ In terms of *Raa Haqi* (Dersim Alevism), *kirvelik* is a fictional kinship, or can be considered a godfather relationship between two families. It is also a crucial institution for social solidarity in the region, based on male circumcision. This kinship brings sexual taboos, so that marriages are forbidden between *kirvelik* families. *Kirvelik* relations between Alevis and Sunnis in the region are likely to refer to political alliances or patronage relations rather than its religious aspects. See Gültekin (2010, pp. 173–200). For general information, see Kudat (2004); for a focus on social roles among Kurdish communities, see Strohmeier and Yalçın-Heckmann (2013).

²⁰ *Cenknames* are epic texts on Ali and his sons' (Hasan and Hüseyin) war stories, favoured among both Alevis and Sunnis who follow the Kadiri creeds.

the Kurdish Alevi belief system (*Raa Haqi*),²¹ which could only be inherited by birth. Hence, the conceptualisation of 'subsequent Sunnification' carries extremely negative connotations, as in this way of thinking it allows for only two options: either they must have broken the sacred bond (*ikrar*) of Alevism, or they must have been forcibly Sunnified. This approach is the basic justification for all negative opinions on local Sunnis.

The concept of '*Barmazlı*' is, quite interestingly, virtually unheard of in areas outside the territory of the Pilvenk tribe, and especially in Inner Dersim. During my fieldwork, most Alevis residing in Inner Dersim were quite surprised to hear of local Sunnis living in Dersim. Upon hearing of their existence, they immediately started asking questions. This stems from the fact that *Dersimli* identity is seen as synonymous with Alevism, as well as the perception of Kurdishness associated with it.²²

Alevis and Sunnis in the region are divided across religious identity lines, and they also define each other by referring to modern national identities – that is, Turkish and Kurdish. Alevis quite commonly use the term 'Turk' when referring to 'Sunni'. Thus, they regard the Sunnis of rural and urban Pertek as Turks. At this point, *Barmazlı* identity gains a second meaning.

²¹ *Raa Haqi* (in Kirmancki, Path of Truth) or Dersim Alevism are both relatively new terms to explain the unique properties of the belief system of Kurdish Alevis. In this belief system, the religious relationship between *ocaks* and *talips* is organised into four major social positions. From bottom to top, first, there are the *talips*, the objects of holy lineages. They speak mostly Kirmancki, but there are also Kurmanci- and Turkish-speaking *talips* of *ocaks*. Second, there are the *raybers*, members of holy lineages; these can be considered local, practical guides of religious affairs. Third, there are the *pirs* (or *seyits*) who hold the key role in the religious system. They are the spiritual guides of their objects. Fourth, the *mürşids* are also members of holy lineages, like the *pirs*. They hold a type of master or juridical position of other *ocaks*, who obey them. *Rayber*, *pir* and *mürşid* are positions held only by holy lineages, and these *ocaks* share similar obligatory relationships, like those between *talips* and *pirs*. All these positions are legitimised based on paternal hereditary principles. Another central aspect of *Raa Haqi* consists of the beliefs and practices shaped around the sacred places and objects called *jiare* (in Kirmancki) or *ziyaret* (in Turkish). For more detailed information about the Kurdish Alevi belief system, see Gezik and Çakmak (2010), Deniz (2012), Çakmak (2013), Gezik (2014), Deniz (2019) and Gültekin (2019).

²² For more information on terms such as Turk, Kurd, Zaza and Kirmanci (or *aşiret*), see Gültekin (2010, pp. 49–74), Fırat (2010, pp. 139–55) and Gezik (2014, pp. 26–32).

When Sunnis are referred to as Turks, *Barmazlı* refers to those who live in the countryside and are engaged in livelihood practices similar to those of Alevis. Hence, the expression *Barmazlı* is important to distinguish those Sunnis who have come to Pertek or Elazığ from the countryside.

As for Sunnis, the origins of the *Barmazlı* identity are quite clear. Barmaz (or Behrimaz) is the name of a plain located near the Maden district of the province of Elazığ, whence they originally hailed. Thus, they named themselves (or were named by others) after their place of origin. The *Barmazlıs* find the idea that they should be Alevis who have been Sunnified over time unacceptable. Quite the contrary, they believe that the majority of Alevis are the descendants of Turcoman (Turkish) tribes who settled in the region centuries ago and eventually became Alevicised (in other words, 'Kurdified') (Gültekin 2010, pp. 155–63).²³

Sunnis' explanations regarding Alevis also vary from generation to generation. For instance, older Sunnis living in the rural settlements east of Pertek use the terms '*aşiret*' (tribe)²⁴ or 'Kurd' when referring to Alevis. Among younger generations (underage or middle-aged) living in Pertek or Elazığ, the terms used remain the same, but now they have political implications whose roots can be traced back to the 1970s. In this context, being 'Kurdish' or *aşiret* is synonymous with having 'left-wing views' and 'being against the state' – in other words, 'being the political enemy'. In a way, Sunnis view those communities

²³ In the years following my fieldwork, the *Barmazlıs* formed an association, located in the city centre of Elazığ. Their main arguments about *Barmazlı* identity are the following: they are descendants of the famous archaic Turkish tribe of the Oğuzlar; they settled in Tunceli (in the Çemişgezek and Pertek districts) from Erzurum; they are renowned in the region for their religiosity (in terms of Sunni Islam) and interest in education; and they are good neighbours to the Alevis. Moreover, they also used the forced evacuations, which seriously affected them after the 1980 *coup d'état* (due to armed conflicts in the region), as one of their main arguments to clarify ethnic boundaries. This comes in relation to their nationalist and religious 'loyalty', which they describe by the motto 'Motherland-Flag-Nation'. For an extremely striking manifestation of the dominant perception regarding the cultural identity of Dersim's Sunni communities, see Tunceli Nüfusu (2020).

²⁴ Until the late twentieth century, Kurdish Alevis mostly led a semi-nomadic life-style, and their settlements were located in rural mountainous areas. For social and religious tribal organisations, see Gezik (2014, pp. 45–55), Deniz (2012, pp. 52–82) and Gültekin (2019).

who identify themselves as Alevi or Kurdish as people who have been alienated from their true identities (Gültekin 2010, pp. 289–302).

These opposing perceptions of Turkishness and Kurdishness demonstrate that the people of the region associate themselves with political codes of identity. This could be considered a consequence of the uses of Turkishness and Kurdishness as categories of ethnicity in Turkey. They became more commonplace in the 1970s in Tunceli, Elazığ, Sivas, Maraş and Malatya, where particularly (Kurmanci- and Kırmancki-speaking) Alevis from Dersim live together with Sunnis.²⁵ The meaning associated with these terms has displayed a certain variety and continues to do so. Nonetheless, it can be said that there exist two general trends. The Turkish nationalist discourse, which is dominant among Sunnis residing in Tunceli, sees Turkish and Sunni identities as inseparable elements defining each other. Moreover, it claims that Alevis are Turcoman communities who have gradually become Kurdified. Interestingly, this discourse differentiates the Kurds of Dersim from the Kurds of the east and southeast because of their Alevi identity. Furthermore, the Turkish nationalist discourse, presently dominant throughout Turkey, marginalises the Kurmanci- and Kırmancki-speaking communities of Dersim, be they Sunni or Alevi. However, the Turkish nationalist discourse prevalent among local Sunnis perceives the Alevis of Dersim as leftist and secular. This discerning description emanates from the fact that they, too, 'are from Dersim'. To clarify, the Kurds are mostly Sunni, but in Tunceli this Sunni identity happens to be the only factor that determines 'Turkishness'.

However, being a Sunni plays a diametrically opposed role to the Alevi – or, in other words, Kurdish – identity in Dersim. Therefore, the differentiation between 'their own Kurds' (who are Alevi) and the other Kurds (who are Sunni) draws the borders of a cultural space dividing the Sunni community as well. The Sunnis of Tunceli identify themselves as Turkish, whereas other Sunnis in the wider region identify themselves as Kurdish. In sum, the relationship that the Sunnis of Tunceli have with the Alevis of Dersim is what

²⁵ The Alevi massacres in the 1970s may help to understand how the usage of Turkish and Kurdish ethnic definitions in relation to religious differences started. Moreover, Turkish and Kurdish nationalist interests in Alevis are important regarding their political and historical discourses. See Ağuiçenoğlu (2010, pp. 119–39), Ertan (2017, pp. 123–73) and Massicard (2007, pp. 58–67).

gives meaning to the perception of Turkishness in the province. Therefore, for the Sunnis of Tunceli, the Kurds of the east and southeast, even though they share a common religious identity, signify a far more distant identity than their Alevi neighbours whom they, nonetheless, marginalise.

At the same time, the Kurdish nationalist discourse in Tunceli claims that the Kurmanci-speaking Sunni communities of Dersim have been assimilated (in other words, Turkified) due to the state's Turco-Islamic cultural interventions. The language spoken by Sunni communities constitutes the basis of this argument. Moreover, various aspects of Sunni daily life in the region are regarded as proof of their connection to Kurdish culture. All in all, the Sunni identification with Turkish identity is based on the divide between the basic religious identities of Alevism and Sunnism. This continues to be the dominant viewpoint on the matter. The following words of a Sunni interviewee clarify my point:

We speak Kurmanci. Our culture is Kurdish. But ever since we first came here, we have been called Turks. They forced the name on us; they never accepted us as Kurds. Yet, the generation before us cannot speak a word of Turkish.²⁶

Kurdish and Turkish identities are built on this distinction. For either side, Kurdishness and Turkishness constitute an entire group, which they perceive as the 'other', depending on their group affiliation. For example, Alevis refer to *Barmazlıs* as well as Sunnis from Pertek or other regions of Dersim as 'Turks'. Likewise, Sunnis use the general identifier 'Kurd' to describe all Alevis, regardless of their tribal affiliation.

'Alevi', 'Kurd' and *aşiret* are the most popular terms used by Sunnis to describe Alevis. However, there exist important distinctions between the Kırmancki-speaking Alevis of Inner Dersim and the Kurmanci-speaking Alevis who live near Sunni communities in the south. For Sunnis, the most important term that differentiates neighbouring Alevis from the complex entirety is the term *kirve*. The expressions *kirve*²⁷ and 'neighbour' display

²⁶ Field notes from a conversation with a Sunni interviewee, Elazığ, dated 22 April 2006.

²⁷ Here, the term *kirve* refers to a specific (closer) degree of social relations between Alevi and Sunni families. Sunnis categorise the Alevis according to the social, political and economic relations they have with them.

the Sunnis' level of social relations with the Alevi by way of this definition. The vast majority that remains outside of this description is dubbed 'Kurd', 'Alevi' and *aşiret*.

When describing themselves, Sunnis emphasise that they have no tribal (*aşiret*) affiliations. This is used to underline an important cultural characteristic that distinguishes them from the Alevi surrounding them. Identifying themselves according to their place of origin (as seen with the *Barmazlıs*) serves as example of such a characteristic. For instance, while Alevi use the term *Barmazlı* to describe all Sunnis living in Pertek, some Sunnis claim that their roots are different from that of the *Barmazlıs*. The *Hasananlı* Sunnis, for instance, say that they originally came from the village of Hasanlı, in the Hınıs region of Bingöl. According to this narrative, the *Hasananlıs* had initially settled in Inner Dersim, but could not withstand the pressure from Alevi tribes and were forced to migrate to areas with *Barmazlı* settlements. Since Alevi widely use the term *Barmazlı* in the region, these differences among Sunnis bear no relevance in their daily interactions with Alevi. This situation also points to a type of relationship long accepted by Sunnis. Such intra-community differences are sub-identities which, despite their importance, can only be identified 'from the inside' and reveal themselves only in social relations within the community (Gültekin 2010, pp. 155–63).

Co-existence and Power Relations between Alevi and Sunnis:

Kirvelik Relations and Cem Ceremonies

Within the borders of Tunceli, I estimate that Alevi constitute more than 90 per cent of the population. In other words, the Alevi are 'in power'. Nonetheless, this 'power' emanates from being the majority in demographic terms, not in administrative terms. The unequal demographic distribution of Alevi and Sunnis has led to relations of power that have, throughout history, varied in form and content. In my view, both Alevi and Sunnis have taken advantage of some religious institutions (such as *kirvelik* relations and *cem* ceremonies) or authorities (such as *pirs* or *babas*)²⁸ for their

²⁸ Similar to the *talip-pir* relations among Kurdish Alevi, there exists a *mürüt-baba* relationship among Kadiri Sunni communities. For more information concerning the *babas* and their *mürüts* among the Tunceli Sunnis, see Gültekin (2010, pp. 144–55).

economic, political and safety-related benefits. As a matter of course, Sunnis living among the Alevi majority sought the advantages of possessing strong patronage relationships with Alevi families and the help of Alevi religious authorities, and much more. In this regard, when looking at the nature of such power relations, we can speak of two different periods: before and after the 1970s, when Alevi and Sunnis became politically polarised. Nevertheless, some Alevi institutions seemed to be presented as conflict-solving mechanisms, until the politicisation of religious identities.

In this sense, the *kirvelik* institution gains noticeable importance. For example, by forming *kirvelik* bonds with an Alevi family of high economic or social status, Sunnis could gain a strong foothold in the community. Due to the strong and diverse social ties existing among Alevi communities, the scope of these *kirvelik* ties would eventually expand. All Alevi families are connected through patrilineal bonds to larger families in terms of the *aşiret* (tribe). These extended families are in contact with a large number of other families through the ties of *kirvelik* or *musabiplik*.²⁹ In addition to such attachments, the multi-dimensional and complex tribal and *talip-pir* relations of Alevi were also factors determining the range of their social relationships. When we consider that all these relations existed in the close vicinity of places inhabited by Alevi, we can see that Sunnis' *kirvelik* ties greatly enriched their web of social relationships with the majority. Religious faith is both the source of the *kirvelik* and *musabiplik* relations and the basis of their enforcement. Therefore, the social processes emanating from these relations bore a certain consistency, founded on religion. Because of this, the influence that the Sunnis gained through the *kirvelik* institution was significant for them.

The Sunnis living in the villages and hamlets of Pertek have very much adopted the concepts dominant in the social and religious lives of the Alevi

²⁹ *Musabiplik* is a type of fictive kinship, much like *kirvelik*. However, a Kurdish Alevi can only be a *musabip* to another Kurdish Alevi. Accordingly, choosing a *musabip* from outside the community is impossible. It is an obligatory, institutionalised fictive kinship for all Kurdish Alevi created through a brotherhood of two young unmarried male members of the community. *Musabip* families are to have stronger alliances with each other than with their actual blood relatives. For more information, see Çakmak (2013, pp. 47–66), Deniz (2012, pp. 83–101), Munzuroğlu (2012, pp. 70–71), Gezik and Çakmak (2010, pp. 123–28) and Çem (2011, pp. 68–70).

majority. The reason for this is that they have shared this land, where production is based on agriculture and non-nomadic farming, and all its natural resources (such as forests, rivers, pastures and fields) for centuries. Mutual problems independent of human activity (such as natural disasters) affecting these sources, as well as shared difficulties experienced in the markets where the product gains its exchange value, have brought the two communities together on the mutual basis of 'being members of the peasantry'. This has resulted in the emergence of a common attitude and behaviour patterns regarding various problems. This is precisely why the concept of *Barmazlı*, in comparison to non-*Barmazlı*, carries a more positive connotation for the Alevi of Tunceli. Perhaps the unique examples of these relations are the shared beliefs and rituals related to the existence of various practices of *ziyaret*,³⁰ sacred to both Alevi and Sunni. Furthermore, narratives of common religious-social activities sometimes performed under the guidance of *pirs*, and sometimes *babas*, exist among Sunnis.

Until the 1970s, mutual contact between the communities was facilitated through the *cem*, the basis of Alevi religious structure, with the *talip-pir* institution, on one hand, and the Sunni community leaders, known as 'prominent families', on the other. Of course, other religious figures were just as important as the prominent families in Sunni communities: the *babas*. The *pirs* and the *babas* preserved the legitimacy of inter-community competition and communication for centuries (Gültekin 2010, pp. 290–302). The defects in the Turkish Republic's economic and social structure also contributed to the continuation of such feudal actors and institutions.

Additionally, Sunnis did not opt to take advantage of the state institutions. This can also be understood as an indicator of their lack of trust towards the Turkish Republic. Considering the state's view of Turkishness and Sunnism as its founding elements, such an approach would have been wise for the

³⁰ *Jiare* refers to sacred places and holy objects. The integration of natural elements into the religion becomes visible in the ritual of *jiare*, which refers to visiting a holy place such as the grave of a holy *pir*, trees, mountains, rocks, caves, rivers, lakes, water sources and some holy objects (relics) that are kept by holy lineages. *Jiare* cults play an important role in Kurdish Alevi's daily life. For more information about the sacred place cults of Kurdish Alevi, see Gültekin (2004, 2010, 2020), Gezik and Çakmak (2010, pp. 97–98), Çem (2011, pp. 73–101) and Çakmak (2013, pp. 171–76).

Sunnis. However, until the confrontations organised by the state, the Sunnis displayed no such tendency. The reason may have been that Dersim constitutes a region that, despite the constant reform policies put into practice both by the Ottoman Empire and the Republic of Turkey, has maintained its Alevi majority and identity. Thus, one may claim that the general interactions of the Sunni community have been mainly with the Alevi majority. Sharing a common social, economic and religious space with the Alevi has led the Sunnis to accept the majority's authority and institutions.

Even though traditional relations have lost their relevance, due to the dissolving consequences of modernisation and politicisation³¹ influencing socio-religious relations, *kirvelik* has maintained its importance. Alevi customary law still organises and sustains local daily life. Evidence shows that Alevi law has gained legitimacy in areas populated by Sunni majorities, such as the district centre of Pertek. Even today, for many Sunni families *kirvelik* constitutes the basis of their inhabitation in rural settlements in Pertek and the surrounding areas.

Apart from *kirvelik* relations, Sunni communities have developed another strategy around the socio-religious institutions (*cem* rituals)³² of the Alevi majority, which dominated daily life and were strongly re-consolidated in the republican era (after 1938). In this way, they could pressure the problematic individuals or groups through social and religious institutions whose effectiveness far surpassed that of the state. Until this period, Alevi communities'

³¹ The last decades have witnessed large-scale social transformations among Kurdish Alevi. Over barely a quarter of a century they have expanded worldwide, especially in Western Europe. Their lifestyles have dramatically changed, they have faced forced evacuations, their settlements have been mostly demolished, and their socio-religious organisations have been broken up. However, they are still able to maintain close contacts with their sacred and beloved land, Dersim. Dersim is a powerful symbol, as well as a lively image of this cultural identity. Then again, local Sunnis have also had to leave Tunceli. They were associated with Turkish nationalism as well as Islamist movements by state policies. They gained strong positions in public authorities, possessed economic networks and left behind the old *mürüt-baba* religious relations, which they call 'traditional'. As a result, the relations between Alevi and Sunnis gradually weakened. See Gültekin (2010, pp. 135–144).

³² *Cem* ceremonies in Dersim were practised once a year, during visits by *pirs* of their *talips*. These times were also the chance for Sunnis, if they had any problems with their neighbours, to seek help from their religious authority. See Gültekin (2010, pp. 289–395).

internal issues, especially those in rural areas, were never resolved through state institutions (Korkmaz 2003, p. 125). According to an elderly Alevi interviewee, during the Ottoman period, applying to a *şeriat* court for the resolution of an internal issue was seen as such a heinous crime by Alevis that it was punishable by *düşkünlük* (excommunication). Therefore, in an environment where most of the population refused to acknowledge the state as a tool of reference for resolving intra-community matters, the Sunni minority applied to those institutions that held power over the members of the majority.³³

For the Sunnis of Pertek, the Alevi majority's dominance has been more limited when compared to the countryside, where the Sunni communities rely on the Alevis' social structure. The relationship between Alevis and Sunnis in the countryside reflects the social institutions of the Alevi majority. In contrast, the Sunni-dominated official institutions and the dominant traditional structure determine commercial and social life in the district centres. This spatial difference came to the fore in various forms in the 1970s.

Concluding Remarks

Until the early twentieth century, Dersim was an Ottoman principality. It was a vast area in eastern Anatolia, dominated mostly by Kurdish Alevi tribes. It covered a cluster of Turkey's present-day eastern provinces, with the province of Tunceli almost at its centre. After the Ottoman-Safavid wars, the region's borders were redrawn several times due to administrative regulations. Eventually, it gained formal status in the nineteenth century and was still renowned for its Kurdish Alevi tribes, who have always been a problem for the state. For almost one-hundred years, a period that ended with the 1937–38 large-scale massacres in Tunceli, Kurdish Alevis gradually lost their dominance in the region.

Yet, Tunceli, which could also be called Inner Dersim, has always been a historical and important religious centre for Kurdish Alevi tribes. It has always been considered a sacred land as well as a stronghold. Until 1938,

³³ Nonetheless, it must be stated that this 'local Alevi power' is not related to political subordination. Sunni communities maintain their own internal customary laws, while they rely on the cultural mechanisms of the dominant majority.

Kurdish Alevis held on to tribal social organisation models and maintained a kind of socio-religious caste system between 'holy families' (*ocak* tribes) and subjects (*talip* tribes). They conducted rather complex socio-religious and economic relations within *ocak* tribes and *talip* tribes separately. Tunceli (Inner Dersim) is still the homeland of these *ocaks*. Furthermore, it is the land of sacred places (*jiare*s), which are also important pilgrimage sites for Kurdish Alevis today. Accordingly, Kurdish Alevis still refer to this territory as 'sacred land' (*Jaru Diyar* in Kırmancki). Today, Tunceli is the only province of Turkey where the Kurdish Alevi population holds the majority and socially dominates without dispute.

With the rising influence of identity politics, especially the politicisation processes of Alevism in Turkey over the past decades, Tunceli has come to the fore with its controversial historical past. Accordingly, as Zırh shows in Chapter 5 in this volume, the term Dersim has once again become well-known, after a long period of silence. This time, it carries the symbolic significance of Alevism and Kurdishness with a unique ethnic identity in contemporary Turkey. Regarding the ongoing political and military struggle between the Turkish state and Kurdish nationalism, as well as the Alevi movements' ongoing battle for formal recognition, discourses about Dersim have become more noticeable but also highly controversial. In fact, as Zırh highlights in Chapter 5 in this volume, Dersim has become one of the most contentious topics in contemporary Turkish politics.

Religious identities (both Alevi and Sunni) have been determinant aspects of all other ethnic definitions in Tunceli for centuries. After the Turkish Republic's foundation, this differentiation resulted in the labelling of national identities as Turk and Kurd. Nonetheless, Alevi and Sunni identities continue to form the main identity borders for all forms of ethnic belonging. Hence, the situation creates a unique social sphere to understand Alevism as a majority and dominant socio-religious identity. Local Sunnis in Tunceli are a minority, as Turks among Kurds and Sunnis among Alevis; yet they possess a national (major and formal) socio-political identity in Turkey.

Regarding the Alevis' relations with the Sunni minority living among them, some Alevi religious institutions should be examined from this perspective. As we see in the case of Sunnis who live in Pertek, the *cem* institution's

social functions are not limited to Alevi only, as once thought. Sunnis are also able to seek juridical considerations regarding their problems, and they are well-received. Furthermore, in some cases, these kinds of relations have also had an assimilative function for Sunnis. On the Sunni borderline of southern Tunceli, from Çemişgezek to Mazgirt, some Alevi tribes still remember their 'Sunni past' (Gültekin 2010, pp. 282–89), and they talk about the miracles of the *pîrs* who made the conversion possible.

Likewise, *kirvelik* institutions between the Alevi majority and the Sunni minority may serve to show an alternative way of looking at patronage relations and Alevi strategies of survival in Sunni-dominated social spheres. For example, it is commonly believed that Alevi have to hide their religious identity to maintain economic relations with Sunnis and not face suppression. Otherwise, they have to find strong alliances with those superior to them in terms of political influence or economic power. However, in the case of Pertek, it appears that this common assessment is false. Alevi use the same strategy while patronising Sunnis. In this way, they can manage the Sunnis' wide networks and official institutions.

As this case study-shows, due to their status as a majority in Tunceli, Alevi have created hierarchical relations with minorities. Their religious institutions and oral traditions have supported this superiority. Their economic opportunities and security-related power relations, which they also provide to Sunnis, constituted strengthening points behind their majority. According to them, the Sunnis' existence on 'sacred lands' can only be possible due to an external factor, such as the state. According to the Kurdish Alevi of Dersim, local Sunnis could either be settled as outsiders or Turkified – or, in other words, Sunnified – Alevi. The Kadiri sect's presence among the Sunni minority explains their acceptance by Alevi in this matter. Until their dominance came to an end, they ruled over the minorities of Dersim. After the Turkish Republic's victory, Kurdish Alevi maintained patronage relations, bracing to become the majority of the local population. The politicisation of identities such as Kurdishness (in relation to leftism) and Turkishness (in relation to political Islam and Turkish nationalism) significantly changed the relations between Alevi and Sunnis in Tunceli. This unique case needs to be examined for a better understanding of Alevism.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Çiçek İlgiz and Markus Dressler for their comments. I would also like to thank Sinan Jabban, for his contributions to this chapter's first translation, and Ömer Akyüz, who created the image. A debt of gratitude is also due to the reviewers and editors for their contributions, which helped the chapter take its most recent form.

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Part II

ALEVIS IN THE DIASPORA: PROSPECTS FOR RECOGNITION