

**Institutions and their Agents in Diaspora:  
A Comparison of Armenians in Athens  
and Alevi in Germany**

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WPTC-2K-11

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Presented at the 6<sup>th</sup> European Association of Social Anthropologists Conference,  
Krakau, 26-29 July 2000.

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# **Institutions and their Agents in Diaspora: A Comparison of Armenians in Athens and Alevi in Germany**

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As a theoretical concept to explore forms of mobility and migration, diaspora has currently gained much importance in social and cultural sciences. The concept has undergone a crucial re-conceptualisation during the last decades. Indeed, our paper itself reflects this shift of conceptualisation because we seek to compare and analyse the role of institutions in two contrasting examples of diaspora: the Armenian diaspora in Greece, which is widely accepted as a paradigmatic case of the classical concept of diaspora and the emergent diaspora of Alevi in Germany, which before the expansion of the concept would simply have been called a migrant community.

However, the increasing use of the term in academic discourse bears also confusion about its epistemological usefulness. As Khachig Tölölyan has recently pointed out: 'We now have more studies with fewer shared key concepts than was the case earlier. This is unhealthy: emerging fields do not need agreement, but it is helpful if they can at least agree on a few of the fundamental issues, terms and concepts about which they would like to disagree fervently' (2000: 23). Steven Vertovec, too, claimed that diaspora is an over-used but under-theorised term (1997: 277). In order to analyse its analytical usefulness he outlined three general meanings of diaspora: as a distinctive social form, as type of consciousness and as mode of cultural production (ibid: 278). The first two meanings are of particular interest in our context.

The distinctiveness of the social form that characterises diaspora communities as well as of a diaspora consciousness has been widely discussed and analysed by numerous authors. Despite all disagreement some central features can be mentioned: 1) Diasporas as social form are created as the result of voluntary or forced migration from a location called home to at least two other countries; 2) they maintain a collective identity which is sustained by reference to a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland - its physical location, history and achievements as well as by common origin; 3) they create triadic relationships between their country of residence, their homeland and the globally dispersed communities who identify themselves with the same origin; 4) they maintain a strong sense of being different from the majority of their country of residence as a result of processes of external as well as internal demarcation; and 5) their sense of belonging to an ideal homeland is combined with a 'homing desire', a myth of return to this homeland (e.g. Safran 1991: 83f.; Vertovec 1997: 278-279). Diaspora consciousness on the other hand is widely described as an experience of 'inbetweenness', referred to by James Clifford as 'a lived tension, the experiences of separation and entanglement, of living here and remembering/desiring another place' (Clifford 1994: 311).

Diaspora is primarily conceptualized in terms of a mode of consciousness that characterizes certain communities. This is not surprising because many types of groups or 'communities' are increasingly understood as being constituted by modes of consciousness. Beyond the small, local level of interactional face-to-face communities, where we could speak of 'communities in the strict sense of the term', the word community is employed in a rather metaphorical way. Since Benedict Anderson's (1983) book it has become conventional wisdom to describe nations as 'imagined communities.' But it is not only national communities that far exceed the range of face-to-face interaction and are constituted and reproduced by ways of imagining a condition of common belonging shared within a certain population or segments of it. We could say that diasporas are imagined communities constituted by imaginations which transcend the immediate local/territorial frame within which the community thus constituted is situated, and these transcending, translocal imaginations postulate and thereby recreate enduring relationships with other members of the 'same' group settled elsewhere, whether in a place called home or at other localities of dispersion.

However, concluding that diaspora is a kind of community characterised by a distinctive mode of consciousness begs a number of critical questions. According to Floya Anthias (1998: 562) the discussion about diaspora involves the uncritical assumption 'that there is a natural and unproblematic "organic" community of people without division or difference, dedicated to the same political project(s).' A diaspora 'community' is only constituted if different individuals are willing to identify themselves at least partly with a common imagination of identity or difference from others. Modes of imagination are historically contingent. Therefore, the articulation of this common imagination of community can be described as a political process related to particular politics of identity connecting individual subjects to a community through constant calls on experiences and memories which are supposed to be shared. At the same time, internally dividing differences, e.g. in terms of subjectivity, gender, and class, are neglected or even concealed.

In order to explore how this common imagination is produced and disseminated, why it is embraced and shared by particular people who thus imagine themselves as belonging to a 'diaspora community' we have to abandon the loose use of the concept 'community'. Instead we should look for institutions and agents which produce, reproduce and spread the imaginations in question.

In empirical studies of diasporas or other migrant communities the description and analysis of all kinds of institutions - voluntary organisations, political parties, economic associations, religious bodies, temples and churches - figure prominently. Likewise, there are many references to community leaders and their following. However, institutions and agents occupy a much less prominent position in the theoretical debate about diaspora. Compared with consciousness, institutions and agents remain clearly under-theorised in diaspora discourse. It seems as if uncritical assumptions of community and

consciousness as well as the emphasis on mobility and non-localisation in itself prove wrong the importance of the production of more stable structures. But after moving, after arriving elsewhere, becoming a diaspora community requires the production of the particular mode of consciousness referred to – a consciousness created through and again embodied in particular discursive and non-discursive practices, pursued by individual and/or collective agents.

In order to initiate a discussion about structure and agency in diaspora we will deal with the following questions: Who imagines the diaspora community? Which socio-economic, political and cultural conditions mark the trajectories of these imaginations? What is the relationship between institutions and agents? To find tentative answers to these questions we will look at two very different cases of diasporic communities.

Susanne Schwalgin will start with the case of the Armenian diaspora in Athens, followed by Martin Sökefeld's discussion of the Alevi community in Hamburg. At the end of our paper we will give a comparative conclusion of these two cases.

## Armenian Institutions and Agents in Athens

### **The Armenian concept of diaspora community**

In order to avoid an uncritical and essentialist use of the term 'community' I will start with a brief analysis of the Armenian concept of diaspora community. Armenians call their community with all the relevant institutions like church, parties, associations *paroikia* (Greek) or *gaghut* (Armenian). Both terms contain the idea of living in diaspora. While the Greek term diaspora or the respective Armenian term *spürk* designates the situation of (forced) dispersion, *paroikia/gaghut* are used to describe the social formations that developed as a result of dispersion. Beyond that, *paroikia/gaghut* involve the concept of an Armenian nation in exile (Dabagh and Platt 1993: 119, Pattie 1997: 28, Tölölyan 1988: 62, 1996: 9).

The question of who belongs to the Armenian diaspora nation in Greece is a critical one. As elsewhere in the diaspora, Armenians in Greece are engaged in an unending and conflicting discussion about the definition of Armenianness. However, the diaspora elite's dominant concept of Armenianness is based on the ideal of a 'pure' Armenian identity and culture. According to their belief this purity is not attainable under the difficult conditions of exile. Therefore, Armenian identity cannot be taken for granted, but has to be maintained through constant activities and sacrifices if it is not to be lost. The concept of sacrifice is a key element in the construction of Armenian identity in the diaspora (Antoniou 1995: 121-378, Pattie 1997: 23-26). Widely accepted as sacrifices are, for

example, efforts to preserve the Armenian language, the transmission of Armenian names, the foundation of a purely Armenian family as well as the commitment to the local community and the community's institutions. This commitment has to be proved in terms of offering at least a minimal amount of money, time or energy in the visible body of the community, the community's institutions. Only those who, to various degrees, participate in the activities of the community's institutions are accepted as more or less 'true' Armenians and members of the community. According to estimations by Armenians this only amounts to between a third and a half of the 12,000 Armenians 'of origin' living in Greece today. The approximately 30,000 undocumented immigrants from Armenia are excluded from belonging to the Armenian nation of exile. However, when Armenian institutions demand particular rights from the Greek government, such as financial support for Armenian schools, they claim to speak for all individuals who by the criterion of descent may be categorized as Armenians - whether they are perceived internally as 'lost' Armenians or if they do not identify themselves as Armenians at all.

### **The Structures of the Armenian Community in Greece**

The structures of the Armenian diaspora in Greece are characterised by traditional transnational institutions. They are embedded in a hierarchically organised institutional network connecting Armenian diaspora communities worldwide. 'One Armenian, one church, two Armenians, one school, three Armenians, three political parties' - this saying was frequently used by my Armenian informants in order to explain the structures of their community. The regional and local branches of the traditional transnational institutions - the Armenian Orthodox church and the Armenian diaspora parties Ramgavar and Dashnaksutiun - are perceived as the most important points of identification and as basic organisational principles of the community's structures. However, with the narrative of one church and one school but three parties, Armenians refer also to another important characteristic of Armenian diaspora communities worldwide: the division into two ideological-political factions. One of them is the Dashnaksutiun, which is affiliated with the catholicosate of Cilicia in Antelias, a suburb of Beirut. The second is the Ramgavar, which is affiliated with the catholicosate of Holy Etschmiadzin near Yerevan (Bakalian 1993, Björklund 1993, Pattie 1997, Phillips 1989, Talai 1989, Tölölyan 1988, 1991, 2000).

### **History and development of Armenian diaspora institutions**

In order to understand the present structures which characterise the Armenian diaspora in Greece today it is necessary to take a brief look at their historical development. The present structures need to be explored first against the background of Armenian history during the Ottoman Empire - the 'place

of origin' for the ancestors of most Greek Armenians, and second in the context of the arrival and settlement in Greece.

The establishment of an Armenian diaspora in Greece is seen as the result of two catastrophes: the genocide of the Armenians in Turkey committed by the Young Turk Government in 1915 and the war between Greece and Turkey from 1919-1922. It ended in a chaotic flight of the Greek and Armenian population of Asia Minor and a compulsory exchange of population between Greece and Turkey. The transmission of these traumatic experiences continues to be a key element in the construction of Armenian identity (Schwalgin 2000a).

Although the genocide of 1915 is seen today as the starting point of an Armenian diaspora, Armenians had faced diaspora experiences before. Armenia's history is characterised by foreign dominion. The capture of West Armenia, now called East Anatolia, by the Ottoman conquerors turned the Armenian population into an internal diaspora. According to the Millet system the Armenian population was defined as religious entity which was officially represented by the Armenian patriarchy of Constantinople. Thus, the church became de jure as well as de facto the most important institution. It served manifold functions like administration, political representation, religious and educational authority. Furthermore, the church was the main motivating force in defining the highly heterogeneous Armenian population as one distinctive religious, and later also national, community. However, with the emergence of the metanarrative of nationalism the concept of a religious community was threatened by the notion of secular nationality. The former hegemonic position of the church and its clergy was questioned by an emerging class of Armenian intellectuals who were the leading figures in the process of the formation of political parties.

The Dashnak was founded in Tbilisi, Georgia in 1890 as a party with a nationalist and socialist orientation. During Armenia's first and very short independence from 1918-1921 the Dashnak hold the power. After Armenia's incorporation in the Soviet Union the Dashnak started its successful attempt to be the leading party of the diaspora. They developed a fierce anti-Communist attitude and regarded themselves as the true guardians of Armenian national identity and as a government in exile (Tölölyan 1991). Dashnak claims to a hegemonic position in diaspora were most effectively questioned by the Ramgavar, a liberal democratic party founded 1921 in Constantinople. In brief, the focus of their ideological differences lay on their controversy about the meaning of Armenia. Armenia became the symbolic basis for competing claims to political leadership over the diaspora communities. Whereas for the Dashnaks 'Armenia' referred to their 'heroic' republic of 1918, the Ramgavars accepted Soviet Armenia as the guardian of an Armenian national survival (Barsoumian 1997; Björklund 1993; Phillips 1989; Suny 1993; Tölölyan 1988; Tölölyan 1991).

I will now turn to the conditions which marked the arrival and settlement of the Armenian refugees in Greece.

After the chaotic flight to Greece the former structures of the Armenian millet served as a kind of blueprint for the development of diaspora structures. Wherever possible, Armenians tried to re-establish demarcated ethnic enclaves in proximity of churches and other important institutions. In Athens these settlements were first set up as refugee camps which later developed into shanty towns. After the demolition of the shanty towns in the late 1960s, most of the Armenian institutions like churches, schools and clubs remained in these areas. Even today Armenians refer to these neighbourhoods as the most Armenian places of Greater Athens because of the concentration of Armenian institutions being regarded as the heart of their community (Schwalgin 2000b).

As during the Ottoman Empire the church served as a mediator between the Armenia refugees, the Greek government and the League of Nations, which had been the official authority since the refugees were defined as stateless subjects. Besides that, the church and its clergy accomplished administrative, social, educational, and religious functions in the refugee neighbourhoods. Simultaneously, the Dashnak and the Ramgavar started to compete over their influence on the Armenian refugee population. They established local branches of their parties and numerous institutions and organisations like newspapers, kindergartens, schools, homes for the aged, children and youth organisations, scouts, philanthropic and cultural associations as well as athletic clubs which with their activities covered a wide range of social and cultural needs. As a consequence, the most institutions and associations were more or less affiliated with one of the parties.

Besides all their ideological differences and their competition on political influence, the church as well as the parties shared one important aim. They tried to connect the refugee population - consisting of subjects with highly heterogeneous social, cultural, occupational and cultural backgrounds - to their quite controversial imaginations of a common and united Armenian nation in exile. During this process educational institutions belonging either to the church or the parties played a crucial role.

Factionalism has been a feature of the Armenian refugees since the very first beginning of settlement in Greece. However, two incidents transformed the fission into an institutionalised division. This led to the establishment of two communities with autonomous institutional bodies which are even spatially separated from each other. First, in order to extend their power over the diaspora world wide the Dashnak tried to borrow legitimacy from the church and to have recourse to its symbolic resources. In brief, from the early 1920s onwards the Dashnaks argued that the catholicosate in Etschmiadzin could no longer act as an institution independent from the communist rulers. Therefore, the position of the catholicosate in Antelias, near Beirut, should be enforced. Simultaneously, the

Dashnak tried to gain control over Antelias. On the local level of the Armenian diaspora in Greece, Antelias extended its jurisdiction to almost all parishes that had belonged to Etschmiadzin, except one in Athens. This development was strongly supported by the anti-communist policy of the Greek government in the aftermath of the civil war. Secondly, with the granting of Greek citizenship to Armenians in 1968 the bishop of the Antelias churches became the official representative of all Greek-Armenians. Thus, as in other parts of the Armenian diaspora, the Dashnak-Antelias faction became the most powerful force in Greece. In Athens today three churches including the prestigious bishop church, one daily newspaper, two kindergartens and schools, local and regional branches of the party as well as cultural and sports associations in several neighbourhoods of Athens belong to the Dashnak-Antelias side. In contrast, the Ramgavar-Etschmiadzin side runs only one small church, one school and kindergarten, and one weekly newspaper.

### **Agency in the Dashnak *gaghut***

As described above this is the institutional frame where agency takes place. The requirements for agency must include at least a public identification with one of the two parties. Party membership is not a precondition for agency. In fact, the number of party members is very small. The process of identification with one of the two parties is generally a matter of socialisation. The affiliation of parents determines where a child will be christened, which kindergarten, school, youth organisation etc. it will attend. Although a change of affiliation is theoretically possible, it is rather rare, because the subject would lose his/her social environment.

Within in this institutional framework there are various forms of agency which range from passive participation to an extraordinary involvement in organisational matters of the community and identity politics. In order to explore this range of agency in detail I will focus on the Dashnak community. The possibilities of agency follow a hierarchic structure.

The top of the hierarchy is formed by a small elite of agents consisting of the higher clergy and subjects in key positions of the community's and party's hierarchy, as in the Armenian National Assembly and the Armenian National Committee. The Armenian National Assembly is the official and elected representative body of all Armenians belonging to Antelias churches. It consists of the clerical as well as the lay delegates (party members and non-party members) of all Antelias parishes in Greece. The bishop is the head of the organisation. They are supposed to represent the concerns of their local parishes and define their local and national issues towards the Greek Government as well as the world wide Armenian diaspora. They also provide delegates for international meetings of Armenian diaspora communities. The Armenian National Committee serves as a kind of ministry of foreign and internal affairs for the Dashnak party, which officially does not exist in Greece. It consists

exclusively of party members. Beside the clergy they are the agents with the highest transnational significance. Transnational significance in this context does not only refer to their attendance at international conferences. Above all it stands for their ability to link the 'global flow of meanings' in the Armenian diaspora space with the local conditions and needs. In brief, they define politics of identity according to the ideological guidelines of the Dashnak party world wide and adapt them to the political context of the Greek nation state.

At the next level there are agents (party members as well as affiliates) of local significance who run the various community affairs on the local level of a particular parish. Their activities range from dealing with financial issues and the current matters of the local branches of the different associations, as well as organising extraordinary events. The lower level consists of the majority of community members who simply participate to various degrees in activities provided by a small group of activists.

These three general categories of agents should not be regarded as fixed. Within each category agents perform different kinds of activities and participate with different intensity in the affairs of the Armenian community on the national as well as local level. In addition, it is possible and quite normal to float between the categories, in particular between the upper two levels. For example a subject can be highly active as an agent in the first category for a certain amount of time and then withdraw to an activity at the local level consuming less time or vice versa. Reasons for changing the mode of activities can be private or occupational. Controversies with other agents frequently lead to a partial or complete withdrawal from activities.

However, party members are generally more active than the majority of those who are simply affiliated. The identification as a party member is linked to notions like pride, prestige and exclusiveness. These are embedded in the party's ideology which focuses heavily on the concept of sacrifice for the party and Armenia. The persuasiveness of this ideology is reinforced by a wide range of rituals and norms of behaviour. Offences against the claims to loyalty are sanctioned by different means, e.g. temporary exclusion from party meetings to definite exclusion from the party. As mentioned before, the concept of sacrifice is a key concept of Armenian identity in diaspora. However, while the party's elite is able to force its members to perform particular activities its influence on non-party members is limited.

Finally, I have to emphasise that agents are highly differentiated in terms of gender, age, class, occupation, and even concepts concerning the politics of identity. Thus, agency is clearly gendered, classed and also directly linked to age. Although women provide a lot of effort they do not hold key positions in the party's and community's hierarchy. Their activities are restricted to spheres

traditionally defined as female such as cultural and charity work. Highly-skilled agents providing relations to Greeks with economic or political influence have better chances to obtain key positions. Most senior positions are occupied by males between 40 and 60. The involvement of younger people is limited to the party's youth organisation. The Dashnak's youth organisation is often regarded as too radical by many young Armenians. They are not willing to accept the pocketing ideology of the party. Therefore, loyalty to the party and commitment to the community today is mainly a question of generation. This dis-identification of the young generation is regarded as a serious threat to the future existence of the community.

## The Alevi diaspora in Hamburg

### A Brief History of Alevism

In order to understand the diaspora it is necessary to give a sketch of the situation of Alevism 'at home'. Alevi can be thought of as a heterodox cluster of people which originated in Anatolia. I consciously avoid the term 'community' as a label for Alevi because - if we abstain from the loose meaning of 'community' - it is not at all clear whether or in what sense Alevi as a whole formed a community in historical Anatolia. People who can be grouped together under the label 'Alevi' (there are also other designations like Bektashi or Kizilbash) were characterized by a set of beliefs and practices which differed considerably from mainstream Sunni Islam which prevailed - and prevails - in Anatolia. Alevism has historical roots in the Shii version of Islam, with which it shares certain traits like the reverence for Ali and the twelve Imams. However, in its rejection of most of the 'pillars' of Islam and of the *shari'a* it differs as much from orthodox Shiism as it does from orthodox Sunni Islam. Alevi had no all-embracing institutions and no ideology of a whole and unified community as compared to the Muslim concept of *ummah*. Alevi lived in localized village communities which clustered especially in parts of Central and Eastern Anatolia. The focus of ritual life was the local community, i.e. the group of people which under the guidance of a religious specialist called *dede* celebrated together the most important Alevi ritual, *cem*. These religious specialists, the *dedes*, are genealogically related with the Imam Ali. They form holy lineages (*ocaks*), each of which serves a number of localized village communities. The villagers are thus the *talips* (pupils, followers) of the *dedes*. A *dede* is required to visit each of his villages of *talips* at least once a year. Thus, localized Alevi communities were connected via their *dedes* to a dispersed network of other Alevi communities served by the same *ocak*. Further, there were places of pilgrimage of translocal importance which could serve as foci for a consciousness of Alevism which transcended narrow local boundaries. The same can be said about wandering dervishes or *babas* who roamed the countryside and disseminated their messages to the villagers often by songs and verses. However, there were no central religious institutions, fixed hierarchies of scholars or other kinds of structures producing an *ummah*-like self-imagination. Alevism was for the greater part of its history a dispersed, rural affair. It was a matter of

local and closed communities that, as a consequence of threats or actual persecution by state and majority population, took pains not to reveal themselves to the outside. Alevi even developed their own system of justice in order to avoid contact with state institutions.

These localised structures came under severe pressure after the foundation of the Turkish republic. Many village communities, especially in the Kurdish areas of Dersim, were destroyed by counter-insurgency measures and state-enforced deportation. Especially in the second half of the 20th century rural-urban migration for economic or educational reasons had a similar disrupting effect. Many Alevi who had migrated to the cities found themselves in an extreme minority position in unknown environments, where, for fear of discrimination and violence, they avoided outward identification as Alevi. Alevi religious practice declined. Perhaps an even stronger cause of disruption was an ideological reorientation of the Alevi youth after the late 1960s towards the extreme left. Drawing on Marxist-inspired atheism, all religious practices were rejected. In many instances even the *dedes* were driven out of the villages and denounced as exploiters who lived at the expense of the people. This anti-religiosity had precedents in Alevi support for Atatürk's secularist and laicist reforms after the foundation of the Republic. In the 1970s, many young people joined militant parties and organizations. The left was fragmented into countless rival factions. Until the military coup of 1980, Turkish society became increasingly and very violently polarized, where the right wing tended towards Sunni and the left tended towards Alevism. For the self-identification of these leftists, Alevism was of no importance. However, they were denounced by their antagonists as the 'three Ks': Kürt, Komünist, Kizilbash (i.e. Alevi). Amid this polarized situation, where politically motivated assassinations were the order of the day, a number of attacks on Alevi occurred in the late 1970s in the Anatolian cities of Sivas, Maras, Malatya, Çorum and Tokat (see Laçiner 1985). The Alevi call these incidents 'massacres' (*katliam*).

The military coup brought this polarization to a repressive end. The situation of Alevism at this time in Turkey was one in which religious rituals were rarely practised, *dede-talip* networks were in many instances interrupted, and religious knowledge of the younger generation was very reduced. An atmosphere of fear and caution prevailed among Alevi especially in the cities. There was almost no public discourse about Alevism. As with the case of Kurds in Turkey, the existence of Alevi in the state was covered with silence. Since 1925, Alevism had formally been prohibited like all other more or less heterodox religious practices and orders. This repressive policy of the state against Alevism was in a way complemented by the anti-religiosity of leftist Alevi intellectuals.

### **Alevi in Germany: from 'institutions of Alevi' to 'Alevi institutions'**

Contrary to the example of Armenians, the development of an Alevi diaspora is a quite recent affair.

As a consequence, Alevi diasporic institutions do not have a long and settled history. There have only been a significant number people of Turkish origin in Germany for four decades. Among them Alevis started to organize only two decades ago and the significant shift from institutions formed by Alevis to explicit Alevi organizations occurred only in the past ten years. The Alevi case is therefore a good example to observe and analyse the formation of a diaspora. In what follows I will chart this development from the local perspective of Hamburg, where my study of the Alevi diaspora takes place. But I will also refer to developments in Germany in general if they are of local importance.

The migration of Turkish workers to Germany started after a bilateral treatment was signed by the two states in late 1961. Among the migrants were Sunnis as well as Alevis. Sunnis were quick to establish their own religious institutions in Germany, within a decade of the first arrivals (Blaschke 1985). Alevis, in contrast, remained unorganized and invisible within German society. Both Sunnis and Alevis thereby extended their respective pattern of organization (or lack of organization) from Turkey to Germany. Whereas the religious needs of Sunnis are catered for by mosques in every village and town-quarter, Alevi forms of organization had already been on the decline, as outlined above. And whereas many Sunni Turkish immigrants felt a need to create religious institutions as soon as they realized that their presence in Germany was not going to be short-lived,<sup>1</sup> Alevi immigrants, having a generally more secular attitude, remained largely indifferent to religious questions.

Alevi immigrants continued to practice *taqiya*, dissimulation, in Germany. In many instances Alevis did not know whether their immigrant colleagues or neighbours were also Alevis or not. On meeting unknown fellow immigrants, one of the first questions normally asked was ‘where do you come from?’ (*memleketin neresi?*). In some instance immigrants are easily identified as Alevis by their place of origin if it is known to be situated in a region with a large section of Alevi population, as is the case with the provinces of Tunceli/Dersim or Sivas. Alevi immigrants were of course known to be Alevis among a limited circle, because they had mostly come to Germany via chain-migration, following in the footsteps of relatives or fellow villagers. In many cases, however, fellow Alevis were identified as such- if at all - only indirectly and incidentally if, for example, their predilection for certain kinds of songs and music became known.

Early immigrants in Hamburg report that in the 1970s there were sometimes private gatherings of relatives and friends in which Alevi songs were sung and the *saz* - an instrument generally identified as a symbol of Alevism - was played. These meetings were very limited affairs. There was no organized religious life; for example no *cem* ceremonies were performed. And I am so far aware of only one case in the 1970s when a *dede* from Turkey visited his *talips* in Hamburg and other places in northern Germany. Rather than devoting their time to religious activities, those Alevis who took up commitments beyond their daily life and work became engaged in political groups or neighbourhood

organizations, often alongside Germans or immigrants of different origin.

Only in 1979 did Alevis in Berlin, Hamburg and some other German cities formed exclusive organizations. However, only insiders were aware that these organizations were in fact Alevi. These organizations' names gave no hint to religion or Alevism. In good Kemalist tradition it was called 'Yurtseverler Birliği', i.e. 'Union of Patriots.' Yurtseverler Birliği in Hamburg was founded by expatriate Alevi members or sympathizers of two Turkish parties, the Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi (CHP) and the Birlik Partisi (BP). The CHP, the party originally founded by Mustafa Kemal, occupied a mildly left-of-centre, social democrat position with a determined secularist ideology. Among Turkish immigrants in Germany the CHP was supported by an expatriate wing called HDF (Halkçı Devrimci Federasyonu). Many of those Alevis in both Germany and Turkey who remained aloof from radical leftist groups supported the CHP because it seemed to be the main guarantor for a staunch secularist policy in Turkey. Birlik Partisi (Union Party) was founded by Alevis in 1966.<sup>2</sup> After initial success in the late 1960s, when it was able to gain eight seats in Parliament, the party lost political significance due to a split. Many former supporters of the BP subsequently sided with the CHP.

From 1977 until 1980 the chairman of the CHP, Bülent Ecevit, was Prime Minister of Turkey. It was under his government that political violence in Turkey escalated and culminated in the aforementioned 'massacres', the bloodiest of which happened in December 1978 in Maras. After this outburst of violence against Alevis, Alevi members of the HDF demanded that their organizing committee filed a protest with Ecevit and called for protection of Alevis in Turkey. The party committee declined this demand, saying that they could not criticize their own government. As a consequence of this refusal, a number of Alevis left the HDF and, together with supporters of the BP, founded the Yurtseverler Birliği in early 1979.

Yurtseverler Birliği of various German cities formed together a federation of their associations. However, the association was a rather short-lived affair. After the military coup in Turkey membership rapidly decreased because many supporters feared repression for themselves or their families in Turkey. After a few years, the Yurtseverler Birliği dissolved. Still, the Yurtseverler Birliği remains an important link in the genealogy of Alevi organizations in Hamburg because it was the first body to organize a public *cem*. Although it originated as a political organization, it also took to religious and cultural activities. Some former members of the Yurtseverler Birliği in Hamburg subsequently founded an association of Turkish Social Democrats which for seven years continued to be dominated by Alevis.

The military coup not only changed the situation in Turkey, but almost equally the conditions of Turkish immigrants in Germany. The years immediately before and after the coup saw the greatest

influx of Turks into Germany since the end of working migration in 1973.<sup>3</sup> This politically-motivated emigration applied almost exclusively to leftists. Many of them came, legally or illegally, as refugees applying for asylum, but especially many of the younger activists were brought by way of ‘family reunion’ by their relatives who lived already in Germany. The big German cities now experienced a mushrooming of radical left Turkish exile organizations. The membership of many of these organizations was again dominated by Alevis, although Alevism played no explicit role in these political groups. To the contrary, the members were Marxists and determined atheists. The most important of these organizations from the viewpoint of the later Alevi organizations was Dev Yol (‘Revolutionary Path’), the exile wing of Turkey’s Dev Genç (Revolutionary Youth). The work of Dev Yol and similar organizations was almost exclusively directed toward political change, i.e. the revolution, in Turkey. In contrast, the Yurtseverler Birliği, whose membership was recruited not from recent refugees but from long-term working migrants, focussed more on the situation of Turkish (Alevi) immigrants in Germany. Both bodies organized or participated in cultural events. But whereas the events organized by Yurtseverler Birliği aimed to fulfil the cultural needs and desires of the migrant population, similar events organized by Dev Yol were targeted mainly at fundraising for the revolutionary struggle in Turkey and its support in Germany.

Shortly after the decline of Yurtseverler Birliği, Dev Yol also experienced a motivational crisis in the middle of the 1980s. After the military coup it had become clear that the revolution in Turkey was unattainable. Like the working migrants before, also the political refugees came to realise that there was no short-term return to Turkey. In 1986 Dev Yol was finally shut down. Leaders detained in Turkey had declared that the way toward revolution was blocked. The members of Dev Yol in Hamburg dissolved. Some of them tried to carry on with the old goals, some simply ended their political commitment and others started a short-lived organization and a journal speaking up for the equal rights of immigrants in German society.

During the 1980s left ideologies lost their purchase, and not only in Turkey. Some of the more dogmatic fractions of the Turkish left continued to celebrate Stalin even in the late 1970s and early ‘80s. But less dogmatic groups like Dev Yol had to acknowledge the significance for their own political perspective of resistance movements in Eastern Europe like Solidarnosc in Poland. The persuasiveness of Marxist ideas decreased. The East-West polarization lost much of its sharpness and the West was about to win the Cold War. However, new thoughts rose on the horizon of ideas. The most important ideas concerned identity and difference. Since the beginning of the 1980s the PKK had started its militant struggle for the rights of the Kurds in Turkey. Defying all the homogenizing pressure of the Kemalist state, Kurds struggled for the right to be different, to speak their distinctive language, to be recognized as a particular community different from Turkey’s majority population and even for an independent Kurdistan. A new wave of repression and counter-insurgent violence by the

state forces swept the Kurdish regions of Central and Eastern Anatolia. It was not a far cry from the Kurdish struggle to the growth of a consciousness among Alevis, that they too were different and that their difference should also be recognized. Many Alevis were more or less directly affected by the Kurdish question because they were also Kurds. At the same time political Islam was again gaining prominence in Turkey. The growth of Islamism was perceived by Alevis as a dangerous threat. Further, Alevis were exposed to severe pressures of Sunnification as Sunni religious instructions had been made compulsory in Turkish schools after the coup and the governmental directorate for religious affairs pursued a policy of building mosques in Alevi villages. All these developments were followed very closely by the Alevi migrants in Hamburg.

Issues of culture and identity had also become an important topic in the discourse of a network of relatively autonomously run institutions for intercultural relations ('Deutsch-Ausländische Begegnungsstätten'), funded by the Senate of the City of Hamburg. Alevi activists of both the radical left and the Social Democratic wing took up jobs or voluntary commitments in these institutions and thereby met in a new common context. The heightened awareness of questions of cultural identity was finally also applied to Alevism. Kurds in Turkey and foreigners in Germany were all struggling for the recognition of their peculiar culture and identity, so Alevis should do the same, it was argued. This was a decisive turn especially for those Alevis who had previously been engaged in radical left organizations. In this context, class commitment and internationalism had been stressed whereas questions of identity and culture had been regarded as more or less reactionary issues that carried the danger of dividing the revolutionary force.

An understanding was reached that something had to be done in the name of Alevism because Alevi identity was repressed in Turkey and because also in Germany, contrary to Sunni Islam, it was not recognized as a decisive element of the identity of a considerable number of Turkish immigrants. In December 1988 twelve Alevis met to discuss the issue. Almost all of them had been, or were still, active in other, related contexts: in the Yurtseverler Birliği, in Dev Yol, in the association of Turkish Social Democrats, or in the institutions for intercultural relations. They came to the conclusion that they should meet and organize explicitly as Alevis, that the time was ripe to break once and for all with *taqiya* and dissimulation. And this they did. They called for regular meetings which took place in one of the intercultural institutions and which each time were attended by more and more Alevis. These meetings were called 'Alevi Culture Group' (Alevi Kültür Gurubu), and this was the first time ever that a number of people met under the explicit label 'Alevi'.<sup>4</sup>

The first aim of the Alevi Kültür Gurubu was to project Alevism into the public realm, to make it recognizable to non-Alevis and to give Alevis thereby a new opportunity to identify themselves as Alevis. The Alevi Culture group organized a number of discussions about Alevism and finally, in

October 1998, the 'Alevi Culture Week', a major event which brought musicians and intellectuals from Turkey for concerts, lectures and debates. A *cem* was also part of the week. An 'Alevi Declaration' was published during the week in which the recognition of Alevism and Alevi identity in both Turkey and Germany was demanded.

The Alevi Culture Week drew an audience of several thousands not only from Hamburg but also from all over Germany. In retrospect many of the participants related that, during this event they, realized that they 'were Alevis'. For many it was the first time that they ever experienced a *cem* and a public debate about Alevism. For most Alevis in Hamburg the commitment for Alevism started with this week. The perception of the Alevi Cultural Week as the commencement of something very new and unprecedented was not limited to Alevis in Germany. For example, one of the Hamburg Alevis who participated was visited by a cousin from Turkey during this event. He related the story that he drove with his cousin directly from the airport to a discussion about Alevism. The cousin was struck by the experience of a large, crowded audience, listening to Alevi intellectuals and debating Alevism. After that event the cousin told his host: 'today it is the first time that I really feel to be Alevi!'

The Alevi Culture Week became a great success. In subsequent meetings of the Alevi Culture Group, which so far had only been an unregistered working group, a strong section called for the rapid foundation of a formal, registered organization. This organization, called Hamburg Alevi Kültür Merkezi (Hamburg Alevi Culture Center) was finally founded in May 1990. The Alevi Culture Week and the subsequent foundation of the Alevi Culture Center sparked off a wave of Alevi self-organizations in Germany and other West European countries. It was as if the event of collective and public self-representation had once and for all lifted the self-imposed restriction of dissimulation for Alevi migrants.

Alevi Culture Centers were founded everywhere. In Hamburg, however, the formal organization already carried the seed of fission. During its first year, a serious conflict broke out in the Culture Center's committee. Only the center's chairman had been among the founding members of the Alevi Culture Group, whereas the other members of the committee had joined the Groups' meetings later. And while the chairman wanted to carry on as before, stressing public activities and the representation of Alevism in the German public, the rest of the committee opted for more closed, internal activities, offered mainly to Alevis. In this conflict two fractions became apparent, one, personified in the chairman, which had thorough organizational experience in parties and all kinds of political and other organizations, and another, lacking all such experience. The second faction, including almost all members of the committee except the chairman, suspected that the first faction simply wanted to pursue its political activities under the disguise of Alevism. A few months after the foundation of the Alevi Culture Center the committee declared the forced suspension of the chairman from his office

and his expulsion from membership in the organization, defying, however, all procedural provisions of the Center's rules. The chairman's supporters called for an extraordinary general meeting in which the chairman was readmitted as a member and a new committee consisting of his supporters was elected. The other faction, all in all some thirty persons, left the Alevi Culture Center. Shortly after, they founded their own organization called 'Hamburg Anadolu Alevileri Kültür Birliği' (Haak Bir, Hamburg Culture Union of Anatolian Alevi).

This early fission clearly marked the condition of Alevi institutionalization in Hamburg. Today there are eight Alevi organizations in Hamburg and its suburbs. The two suburban organizations were founded with support of the Alevi Culture Center simply with the intention to get closer to those Alevi living in the surroundings of Hamburg. However, there were strong elements of conflict, competition and differing visions of politics and Alevism in the foundation of all other Alevi organizations. This is not the place to explain all these differences but it is important to note the tendency of fission and conflict.

All organizations except the first two (the Alevi Culture Center and Haak Bir) were founded after a major event of violence against Alevi occurred in the Turkish city of Sivas. On July 2 1993 the participants of an Alevi cultural festival celebrating the memory of the poet Pir Sultan Abdal were attacked in their hotel by Islamists. The hotel was set on fire, the local authorities of Sivas, at that time under the power of the Islamist Refah Partisi, made no serious efforts to stop the violence or to extinguish the fire, and 33 Alevi were killed. This new massacre produced a very strong protest movement among Alevi in both Turkey and other countries. 'Sivas', as the event is simply called most of the time, became the major thrust for Alevi to organize further. After the Alevi culture week of 1989 it was the second important step to make Alevism an issue among Alevi. Not only in Hamburg but all over Germany many more local organizations were established. Also the major translocal Alevi organization was a direct result of 'Sivas'.

### **Translocal Alevi organizations**

In 1991 a few organizations of Alevi in Cologne, Dortmund and Rüsselsheim called 'Haci Bektash Veli Kültür Derneği' (Haci Bektash Veli Culture Association) formed an umbrella organization which was named 'Alevi Cemaatları Federasyonu' (Federation of Alevi Communities). These organizations, having existed already before the Alevi Culture Week in Hamburg, had not posed explicitly as Alevi organizations. However, they too got a new momentum from the movement originating in Hamburg. But from the beginning there was a certain competition and disagreement between these associations (and others formed subsequently following their model) and the Alevi Culture Centers, established after the example of Hamburg. Even today a debate over which of the two was the real source for the

movement of Alevi organizations continues. To a certain extent, this rivalry paralleled the split between Alevi Culture Center and Haak Bir in Hamburg. Like Haak Bir, these other associations stressed the services for their own membership and especially the religious dimension of Alevism.<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, also Haak Bir became a member of the Alevi Cemaatlari Federasyonu. A number of meetings between Alevi Cemaatlari Federasyonu and the Alevi Culture Centers were held but it seemed impossible to form a common body. This, however, was immediately changed by the incident of Sivas. By coincidence, a meeting of all the organizations had been scheduled for July 3 1993 just one day after the attack at Sivas. Under the impression of this murderous violence, greater unity of Alevi organizations seemed to be the first and foremost necessity. The Alevi Culture Centers, having the experience of political campaigning that the Alevi Cemaatlari Federasyonu lacked, took the lead in organizing a central demonstration in Cologne which drew a crowd of more than 60,000 Alevis from all over Germany and neighbouring countries. Impressed by this overwhelming and unexpected response, Alevi Cemaatlari and Alevi Culture Centers formed together the Avrupa Aleviler Birlikleri Federasyonu (AABF, Federation of Alevi Communities in Europe), which in the subsequent years was clearly dominated by the more politically oriented Culture Centers. And, like the Alevi Culture Center in Hamburg, which until today plays an important role in the Federation, it was characterized by frequent political factionalism.

After Sivas so many local Alevi organizations were founded that membership in the AABF rose within about a year to more than hundred local associations, based not only in German towns and cities but also in surrounding countries like the Netherlands, Austria, France and Switzerland. Today, after a reorganization in which the European Federation was separated into national umbrella organizations, the Federation of Alevi German Communities (Almanya Alevi Birlikleri Federasyonu, still abbreviated AABF) alone has 89 membership organizations. All in all, there are about 12,000 Alevis organized in local associations which are the members of the AABF.

However, the AABF is not the only Alevi umbrella organization in Germany. The second largest association, called FEK (Federasyona Elewiyen Kurdistan, Federation of the Alevis of Kurdistan), organizes local groups of Kurdish Alevis. It has 22 local membership organizations and amounts to about 2000 people. Further, a few local communities in Germany are closely related to a Turkish Alevi organization called CEM Vakfi.<sup>6</sup> Finally, there are an unknown number of local organizations that are not affiliated with any of the umbrella organizations. However, 21 of these independent organizations co-operate with the AABF and are on the verge of becoming full members. These 21 organizations have a combined membership of about 2,400 people. Each of these different categories of organizations is represented by local associations in Hamburg.

Allowing for a wide margin of independent Alevi organizations it is safe to conclude that less than

20,000 Alevi in Germany are formally members of an Alevi organization. Concluding hypothetically that via every formal membership a nuclear family of four persons is related to an Alevi organization, we arrive at a number of about 80,000 Alevi in Germany that are closely related to an Alevi organization.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, there is also no reliable figure of the total Alevi population in Germany. The AABF has issued estimations varying between 500,000 and 700,000. Taking the intermediate figure I calculate that about 13% of Alevi in Germany are closely related to an Alevi organization. For the city of Hamburg and its environs the same calculation gives a degree of organization of approximately 20%.<sup>8</sup> The higher percentage in Hamburg is perhaps a consequence of the fact that the history of organization has started here and that it has reached a higher degree of differentiation.<sup>9</sup>

### **Alevi organizations: activities and agents**

After sketching the quite complex history of the formation of Alevi organizations I will briefly describe what these organizations actually do. There is a quite limited canon of activities which are included in the programmes of the great majority of Alevi organizations in Hamburg. A part of these activities was already part of the Alevi Culture Week of 1989. This week had included a *cem*-ceremony, a concert staging a range of famous Alevi singers and *saz*-players from Turkey, and a number of discussions of different topics related to religious, social or political aspects of Alevi. The first kind of activity undertaken by Alevi organizations is the performance of religious ceremonies of which *cem* is the most important.<sup>10</sup> Also the gatherings at festivals in the cycle of the year like A<sup>u</sup>re or H<sup>ı</sup>z<sup>ı</sup>r Orucu belong to this type of activities. The second category includes cultural events, most importantly concerts with the Turkish long-neck lute, the *saz*, and Alevi songs (both folk songs and songs with a religious significance). On special events stars like Arif Sađ , Musa Erođđlu or Yavuz Top are brought from Turkey but there are also lesser events in which mostly local musicians perform. This kind of concerts in which a singer/*saz*-player performs solo or is accompanied by one to three other musicians is the most frequent and significant kind cultural performance. Much less frequent are performances of drama. The third category of activities are panel discussions on certain topics. Very often the topic of such discussions is not very much specified but refers rather to the significance of Alevism in general<sup>11</sup> but sometimes also specific questions like citizenship or religious instruction in Germany are addressed. For the general, unspecified discussions Alevi intellectuals from Turkey are frequently invited as speakers whereas the other kind of discussion is often filled with German (non-Alevi) speakers like local politicians or representatives of the authorities. The fourth kind of events are commemorations of ‘massacres’ against Alevi. Such events, most frequently commemorating Sivas, combine elements of the first three categories. Usually there are discussions or other oral presentations and musical performances, but sometimes also religious elements like prayers. An aspect of commemoration is generally found also in the first three types of events because they are usually started with a minute of silence and remembrance of the victims of

violence against Alevis. The fifth kind of activity are courses in music and dance especially offered to the youth. Of primary importance are courses on playing *saz*, but also dancing courses, both secular ('folklore') and ritual (*semah*). The final kind of activity is the general meeting of the members which is prescribed by German rules of organization. Here, the committee has to account for its activities and a new committee is elected. Although legally prescribed, these general meetings have become an important part of the cultural repertory of Alevi organizations. Most organizations have the electory meeting once a year although the law also permits longer periods of office. These meetings offer an opportunity to discuss the general state affairs in the respective organization and, very importantly, to register disagreement with the acting committee.

These types of activities differ sharply in their frequency, their scale and the kinds of participants they draw. *Cem* is normally celebrated once a year and draws, in the case of a larger organization, up to 400 people. Other religious events like *ashure* are celebrated on a much smaller scale, normally not more (and frequently less) than hundred people attend. Discussions are organized more frequently than religious events, but they draw fewer people than a *cem*. If there are about hundred persons the event is already very successful. The largest audience, far exceeding membership in Alevi organizations, is drawn by cultural events that stage famous artists from Turkey.<sup>12</sup> All these events are to a certain extent exceptional because they take place once or a few times every year. Most significant in terms of regular, continuous practice are the *saz* and dance courses offered by the organizations. They are mostly attended by younger Alevis, ranging from children at primary school age to young adults in their late twenties. A course takes place once a week, mostly on Saturday or Sunday, and is attended by five to twenty students, among them often also a few Turkish Sunnis and even Germans. Because attendance is high, most organizations offer several courses, catering also for different levels of skill.

Within these kinds of activities we can distinguish different types of agents by the scope of their actions, ranging from the mass of ordinary membership and children participating in courses to a few outstanding and highly visible individuals. Starting on the top, there are persons of high transnational significance among Alevis. The most important individual on this level is probably the singer and *saz*-player Arif Sag who had also been member of parliament in Turkey. He is generally made responsible for the renewed interest in Alevi songs and has become an idol especially for those young Alevis who themselves learn and play the *saz*. Since early 1989, Arif Sag has been closely related to the new formation of Alevism in Germany. Visiting Turkish communities in Germany in consequence of his position as a member of parliament, he attended one of the very first meetings of the Alevi Kültür Gurubu and was also part of the programme of the Alevi Culture Week. Several times a year he comes to perform in Germany and his participation in a concert guarantees a full house. Beside Arif Sag there are other transnational artists of more or less prominence. But there are also well-known

Alevi intellectuals and writers from Turkey who regularly come to Germany to participate in panels. As an example I will only mention Lütü Kaleli who is well known not only for his many books and papers on Alevism but also for having survived the arson of Sivas. To date there is no artist or intellectual of similar standing originating from Germany or other European countries. Such agents can be qualified as the transnational Alevi elite<sup>13</sup>. In this category I also include the highest functionaries of Alevi organizations and foundations like Ali Dogan, chairman of the Hacı Bektashi Veli Anadolu Kültür Vakfı in Ankara and of the Alevi-Bektashi Temsilciler Meclisi, a transnational umbrella organization of Alevi associations, İzzettin Dogan, president of CEM Vakfı, Istanbul, and Turgut Öker, chairman of the AABF in Germany. Such persons are almost constantly on the road to address Alevi audiences in both Turkey and Germany or to represent Alevis in dealings with government agencies or non-governmental bodies.

Below this transnational elite we find people of translocal significance without or with much reduced transnational presence. There are the other functionaries of the umbrella organizations, a number of widely known persons of local organizations, but also some *dedes*, both from Turkey and from Germany, who are invited by Alevi organizations to conduct *cem*.

At the next level we can distinguish local leaders, i.e. the persons at the core of local Alevi organizations. Included here are individuals who are elected to the committees of the organizations, those who over a period of time actively take part in the fate of the organizations and who participate in local debates.

Then there is the largest category of ‘consumers’ of Alevism, persons, who may or may not be members of an organization, who attend more or less regularly the events organized by the associations, but also all the participants of the courses offered.

This distinction of four categories of agents is of course a heuristic device. Within each category agents perform diverse kinds of activities and participate with differential intensity in the affairs of the ‘Alevi community’. It is most important to emphasise that, within each of these layers we find a great degree of difference and competition, relating to concepts and visions of Alevism, political commitments, personal relationships and strategic considerations. Networks of alliance and support run across the different layers and connect certain local agents with agents on higher levels.

Outside of these categories there are those individuals who for diverse reasons remain aloof from all Alevi activities and who are the great majority of all the people categorized as Alevis. They may do so because they abhor the degree of conflict and competition within the organizations or simply because of disinterest. In spite of their lack of active participation these people may identify as Alevis if only

for the reason that they distinguish themselves from Sunnis.

Actors who participate in the affairs of the organizations also show a great variance in their personal background. There are Alevis of Turkish or Kurdish descent, people coming from different regions of Turkey, members of *ocaks* and ‘ordinary people’, i.e. *talips*. All these differences of belonging, most importantly the difference of being Kurdish or not, may sometimes play a role in factions and alliances but factionalism certainly cannot be reduced to an underlying structure of such affiliation. Although there is one specifically Kurdish Alevi organization in Hamburg, the others cannot be said to be non-Kurdish. The present chairmen of three other organizations are Kurds too and Kurds represent an important part of the membership of every Alevi organization in Hamburg. The difference is rather related to a specific political vision of the Kurdish struggle. Thus, whereas the purely Kurdish Alevi organization is said by others to consist of members or sympathizers of the PKK, members of this association frequently charge the other Alevis, whether they are of Kurdish descent or not, with collaboration with the Turkish state. Both charges are grossly overstated and simplifying.

In spite of the diversity of actors in the universe of Alevi organizations, certain general characteristics can be detected. First and most important, at every level of organization the Alevi elite is clearly gendered. There are very few women who play an active and visible role. In spite of all emphasis on the equality of the sexes in the teachings of Alevism, it is mostly the women who prepare the food and the men who deliver the speeches at Alevi meetings. With the exception of two organizations (and only two periods of office within these organizations), the associations in Hamburg have always been chaired by men. The gender bias also applies to the umbrella organizations. In Hamburg, there are also female members in the committees of most of the organizations but they are generally seen as representatives of the women. Male members, however, are not considered representatives of the male membership, they are just the representatives of their association, or, simply, of Alevis. This imbalance of gender does not only apply to the functionaries but to membership in general. Also among the audience of discussions or other events women are mostly outweighed by men.

Secondly, education seems to be of increasing importance. The older generation of ‘guest workers’ who had come to Germany mostly with a generally lower level of education and who had made their living as unskilled or semi-skilled workers occupies the seats in the organizations’ committees less and less. Especially at the level of umbrella organizations persons with higher or even university education prevail.

### **Creating community**

All the different kinds of agents (and non-agents) with their very differential investments in Alevism and their diverse background are said to form the Alevi community (*Alevi toplumu*).<sup>14</sup> Thus, when the AABF demands Alevi religious instruction for Alevi children in German schools, this demand is not issued in the name of just those children who in one way or another are connected with the membership organizations of the AABF. It is also not limited to those Alevis who somehow actively participate in the affairs of Alevism (and among whom we find very diverse ideas about Alevi religious instruction). This and similar demands presuppose an Alevi community in which everybody is included who, mainly by the criterion of descent, may be categorized as Alevi. Accordingly, the AABF claims to speak for 500,000 or 700,000 Alevis in Germany, that is, ‘the’ Alevi community, and not only for its 12,000 members.

Comparing Alevis in Germany today with Alevis in Germany twenty years ago, the difference is striking. Earlier there were only a few initiatives to organize Alevis formally, but not explicitly in the name of Alevism. Instead, Alevis lived dispersed among Germans and Sunni Turkish migrants, lacking points of identification as Alevis and as a community. There were of course people that could be categorized as Alevis and that categorized themselves accordingly, but there was no Alevi community ‘for itself’, to employ that Marxist expression, characterized by an explicit *communal* self-consciousness. Not only self-identification lacked, but as a consequence recognition as Alevis by others, most importantly by institutions of German society, was non-existent. To say that the Alevi community did not exist in Germany at that time would certainly provoke protest from most Alevis, most importantly from those actively engaged in the associations. This protest testifies for the power of collective figures of speech, of ‘community talk,’ which supposes historical continuity and boundedness and at the same time obscures the condition of difference that so clearly marks that ‘community’. Still, nobody denies that the condition of that community has been deeply transformed. What has happened in this transformation and who had brought it about?

Beginning in 1989, a new discursive space was opened in which Alevis could identify as Alevis. This discourse was quickly supplemented by a social formation of institutions which continued to produce and considerably extended this discourse. Further, these institutions developed a repertoire of non-discursive practices like cultural performances and rituals in which Alevis could participate and, again, by participation, identify as Alevis. Thereby a process was set in motion through which more and more Alevis could relate themselves to the ‘Alevi community’ and through which this community became visible and manifest in society to an unprecedented degree.

Without these institutions, both local and translocal organizations, offering the diverse agents a continuing frame of action, this could not have been achieved. Again, however, community talk obscures the decisive role of institutions and agents in the formation of an Alevi community. It has no

regard for the distinction of those Alevi active within the orbit the institutions and those clearly remaining aloof. Although styles and strategies of organization are frequently debated within Alevi organizations, this debate always presupposes the independent, foregoing existence of that community. The Alevi community is never represented as a social formation which is actively produced and reproduced by agents and institutions via discursively disseminated imagination.

A very important field of discourse which produces and reproduces the imagination of a historically continuous Alevi community is victim discourse. This discourse which in retrospection takes Sivas as a paradigmatic case, draws a continuity from Kerbela, where the Imam Hüseyin and his followers were killed by the soldiers of Yezid, via the persecution of Kizilbash under Sultan Selim Yavuz, the massacres of the late 1970s in Maras etc. to Sivas in 1993, and more recently Gazi Mahallesi in 1995.<sup>15</sup> This discourse supposes that Alevi are always the victims whereas Sunnis, respectively the Sunni state, are the perpetrators of violence. It is said, then, that Alevi always stand on the side of the oppressed, fighting for equal rights and freedom, ready even to sacrifice their lives for humanist values. I am not denying that Alevi were indeed victims and suffered greatly in these events, but it is important to note that for the purpose of community building this discourse operates with significant omissions and implications. For example, the fact that the Bektashi order for several centuries collaborated with the Ottoman regime by providing spiritual guidance to the Jannissary corps and thereby supporting one of the pillars of Ottoman power is never mentioned in this discourse. Also the inclusion of the violence of the late 1970s in the continuum of victimization requires a considerable reinterpretation of these events because they occurred within the framework of political polarization. The political divide between right and left indeed paralleled to a great extent the divide between Sunnis and Alevi, and the leftist activists were frequently abused as Kizilbash (i.e., by implication, non-believers) by their right-wing, Sunni opponents. But at that time the violent incidents were mostly not framed within the Alevi - Sunni opposition by the leftist activists themselves. They did not act as Alevi but as revolutionaries and Marxists who explicitly rejected Alevism as an outdated or even reactionary ideology. Also the kind of violence occurring in Maras in 1978 differed significantly from the arson committed in Sivas in 1993 because the victims of Sivas had no chance to defend themselves whereas the incidents in Maras had the character of a street fight between right and left. Maras was preceded by a series of politically motivated assassinations which not in every case were committed by right wing Sunnis. Here, Alevi were certainly not only victims.

The victim discourse clearly serves the goal of establishing community. It offers a field of identification and clear line of distinction, homogenizing both those who are included by that boundary, the Alevi, and those who are excluded, the Sunnis. They appear as perpetrators of violence, as Islamists, reactionaries and even fascists. Of course, Alevi are frequently quick to add that certainly not every Sunni is a fascist, but the necessity of this supplement only points to the

homogenizing power of the discourse. This discourse is put into communal practice in reunions of commemoration of Alevi ‘martyrs’ (*shehit*) which are organized by the Alevi associations every year at the beginning of July, i.e. around the anniversary of Sivas.

Both the new discourse (of which victim discourse is a significant element) and the institutionalization of Alevism did not arise out of nothing. As mentioned before, the discourse on Alevism in Germany was prepared by a general discourse on cultural identity which grew in the second half of the 1980s and for which the discourse on Kurdish identity offered a specific example. The form of institutionalization in Germany, differing sharply from the traditional organization of Alevism in more loose networks, was moulded by the very popular German legal form of organization in ‘Vereine’. That is, both discourse and institutions are socially, culturally and politically embedded in and related to other, surrounding discourses and styles of institutionalization.

### **Community in Diaspora**

Although with their long history of *taqiya* Alevis present a peculiar case, their instruments and strategies of creating community via discourse and institutions is not different from many other communities, whether they are categorized as ethnic groups, migrant communities or something else. In this paragraph the question is addressed which conditions qualifies Alevis in Hamburg, or generally in Germany, as a diaspora community as distinct from these other kinds of communities.

The distinctive characteristic marking the Alevi community as diaspora is the ongoing transnational dimension of its discourse and practice. That is, Alevi politics of identity in the diaspora is clearly inscribed into a transnational political field. It is always related to developments in Turkey. This is most obvious in the case of the aforementioned events of violence against Alevis. Thus, Alevis started to organize separately in the Yurtseverler Birliđi after the violence at Maras, and the movement of explicit Alevi self-organization gained its highest momentum after the arson of Sivas. Accordingly, the transnational discursive dimension is most visible in Alevi victim discourse. However, transnationally related discourse in the Alevi diaspora is not only reactive. At the same time as the first public activities of the Alevi Culture Group, an intense debate on Alevism started in the Turkish press. An ‘Alevi declaration’ (Alevi bildirgesi), which the Alevi Culture Group issued during the Alevi Culture Week, had before publication been discussed with intellectuals in Turkey and made an important impact there, providing the impetus for a similar declaration in Turkey. Within Alevi discourse Alevism is represented basically as an unity undivided by state boundaries, no matter whether particular Alevis live in Turkey or abroad.<sup>16</sup>

At the institutional level, this discourse is sustained by a transnational social practice of functionaries,

artists and intellectuals. The frequent travels of musicians and writers have been mentioned, but there are many more forms of this transnational practice. For example, the parliamentary elections of spring 1999 in Turkey were run by two functionaries of the AABF from Germany, who became candidates on tickets of a newly founded Alevi party, the Barış Partisi. Or, when a new law against *tarikât* (i.e., non-orthodox religious orders, a category which legally includes Alevism) was discussed in the Turkish parliament in summer 1998, the AABF sent a delegation from Germany to protest in a number of Turkish cities.

However, this transnational dimension at the institutional level is not supplemented by a thorough dimension of transnational social practice at the level of 'ordinary' individuals that would qualify Alevis in Germany as a community of transmigrants (Glick Schiller et al. 1992). In contrast with communities of transmigrants which are constantly on the move, most Alevis in Germany lead a quite sedentary life. The majority of those Alevis who had personally migrated from Turkey have at least implicitly given up ideas of return, most importantly because their children are firmly settled in German society. Of course, many families are now distributed within two or more countries. Alevis in Germany continue to relate to Turkey, to visit the country and to receive visitors from there. Some have made investments there, most importantly in real estate. But many houses built or bought by German Alevis in Turkey are occupied only during a few weeks of holidays every year. The 'center of life' ('Lebensmittelpunkt'), to use an expression which has gained currency in German bureaucratic discourse on migration, of the majority is clearly anchored in Germany. And the extent of transnational relationships which is practised by Alevis in holidays and visits to relatives in Turkey has nothing to do with Alevism, it does not distinguish Alevis from other migrants from Turkey in Germany.

### **Armenians and Alevis: diasporas compared**

Comparing the cases of Armenians and Alevis in diaspora, the major differences between them becomes immediately obvious. First, there is the difference of time and history. Whereas the Armenian diaspora looks back to a long history in which it experienced several decisive transformations, the Alevi diaspora in its present form in Germany is barely ten years old. Although both Armenians and Alevis share a considerable part of their history in a common political and societal context, the Ottoman Empire, and even, at least in some respects, 'the other' against that their respective identity is and was projected (again the Ottomans, the Sunni/Muslim Turks), their position within that context was very different. Armenians were recognized as a separate *millet* in the Ottoman Empire with the Armenian church as representative. Alevis, in contrast lacked such recognition. Their position as heterodox and marginal category of people resulted in the strategy of *taqiya*, the dissimulation of difference, and prevented the development of visible institutions. The greatly

differing degree of institutional differentiation of both groups in diaspora - Armenians running parties, kindergardens and schools, Alevis having just their associations with a quite limited impact on the lives of their members - is most probably not only a result of the differential time span of development but already of these very different conditions before migration. Finally, although Armenians and Alevis share at least partly a geographical origin, their relations toward a homeland - and the projected homeland itself - are very different.

Considering the purpose of our paper and returning to our introductory questions, a comparison of both diasporic communities seems to be useful precisely because of these clear differences. For in spite of all differences a number of common conditions become obvious: First and foremost, behind the homogenizing talk of 'the community' which is employed by Armenians and Alevis themselves and which so frequently is reproduced by outside observers we find at the level of social structure a highly differentiated social formation of institutions and agents committed to these institutions to very differing degrees. In both cases these differential commitments range from the disengagement and indifference of individuals who are nevertheless counted as members of the community by its institutions to the activities of a small and highly engaged elite of functionaries or intellectuals devoting a great deal of their time and social investments to the affairs of the community. The self-image of 'community' covers the condition of difference and also the factionalism which so clearly mark the community: differences of gender, of political orientation, educational level, class, personal orientation, but also descent and geographical origin. Although the significance of these differences is generally obscured by community discourse which mostly prefers to celebrate unity, all of them contribute to the respective specific social formation in diaspora.

In both cases, institutions are the backbones of the diaspora community. It is via institutions that a discourse is produced and disseminated which recreates the image of community, for instance by constantly referring to its others. For both Alevis and Armenians, victim discourse plays a central role in this respect. Beside discourses of identity, institutions uphold different kinds of practices in which individuals can participate and thereby express and enhance their identification with the community. The function of institutions for the reproduction of community is especially obvious in the case of Armenians who operate educational institutions like kindergardens and schools. But on a lesser scale we can discover this also in Alevi institutions that for instance with their *saz* courses secure the continuity of practices which are identified as highly valued elements of Alevi culture.

Through institutions individuals get the opportunity to identify more deeply with the community - beyond mere community talk. But again, the level of this identification differs sharply and ranges from mere consumption of events to active participation in the reproduction and transformation of these institutions.

## **Conclusion: Institutions and agents in diaspora**

Diasporas do not consist of consciousness and imagination only. We propose that the conceptualization of diaspora - similar to the conceptualization of other kinds of identity groups - should put equal emphasis on the institutions and agents that produce the kind of consciousness in question. In order to facilitate this focus on institutions, it is most important to distinguish thoroughly between the concept of 'community' as produced and disseminated by the communities in question; that is, 'community' as a discursive formation or cultural construct, and 'community' as an aggregate of social relationships and positions, i.e. community as a social formation. Both meanings of 'community' must not be conflated although the vocabulary of the social and cultural sciences makes this distinction sometimes difficult because we lack convenient short hand terms that would make the difference self-evident. However, just like in the study of other kinds of identity groups we have to be careful not to reproduce the community talk or 'group realism' of our subjects of research (Sökefeld 1998, cf. Handler 1985).

Putting a focus on institutions and the differential investment of individuals also allows us to be more precise about the transnational character of diaspora communities. On the basis of our findings about Armenians in Greece and Alevis in Germany it seems much too inexact simply to call diasporas 'transnational communities'. At least we have to specify precisely what we mean by that term. Alevis and Armenians certainly relate to a *transnational discursive space* in which events, symbols, places, etc. anchored in another, distant physical space are important elements. However, the extent to which individuals of both communities participate in a *transnational social space*, extending actual social relations across borders, again varies greatly. In both cases it is mostly an elite occupying important positions in the orbit of institutions that indeed leads a life of significant presence in more than one nationally defined space. Alevis and Armenians overwhelmingly live a settled life their respective countries of residence, they are certainly not transmigrants. Further, we suppose not all kinds of transnational relations entertained by actors should be subsumed under the label of the respective community. For example, when Alevis travel to Turkey to visit their relatives or to pass their holidays there, this does not necessarily have something to do with their being Alevi. Actors entertain multiplicities of positions and identifications (Sökefeld 1999b) and they should not indiscriminately be reduced to one label of identity. In order to be precise about the degree of transnationalism in a specific community we have to specify in what contexts and respects actors actually entertain transnational relationships.

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<sup>1</sup> The first Mosque of Turkish Sunni immigrants in Hamburg was established already in 1969 (Mihçiyazgan 1990)

<sup>2</sup> According to Sener and Ilknur (1995: 68), the Birlik Partisi was the first ‘serious’ Alevi organization in the Republic of Turkey.

<sup>3</sup> In the years from 1975 to 1978, the average annual growth of the Turkish population in Germany was 3.2 % per year. In 1979 this rate was 7.8% and it culminated in 1980, the year of the coup, in 16.9% (calculated from statistical data provided by the Center for Turkish Studies and the Federal Office for Statistics. Available online: [http://www.uni-essen.de/zft/daten\\_fatkten/statistik/brd/brd03.html](http://www.uni-essen.de/zft/daten_fatkten/statistik/brd/brd03.html), accessed June 20, 2000.)

<sup>4</sup> Alevi continue to emphasise that they are not allowed to gather formally under the label of Alevism in Turkey and that they also did not do so in Germany until the formation of the Alevi Culture Group. Implicit in this emphasis is an assertion of difference from Sunnis because it is implied that Sunnis were always free to organize under the label of Islam. It seems, however, that this was not the case. Blaschke quotes an interlocutor telling that Sunnis were able to organize only under the condition that the word ‘Islam’ did not appear in the names of these organizations. Accordingly Islamic Turks in Berlin formed ‘Culture and Solidarity Associations’ instead of Islamic organizations (Blaschke 1985: 299). Unfortunately it is not clear from Blaschke’s account who had issued that condition.

<sup>5</sup> For the debate about religion in Alevism see Sökefeld 2000.

<sup>6</sup> Although ‘CEM’ in the name of this foundation is of course an allusion to the Alevi ritual, it is officially only an abbreviation of ‘Cumhuriyetçi Eğitim ve Kültür Merkezi’ (Republican Education and Culture Center). Most other Alevi organizations are very critical of the CEM Vakfi. It is being charged with closely collaborating with the Turkish state.

<sup>7</sup> At first sight this calculation may seem unjustified because nuclear families of immigrants from Turkey comprise normally more than four people. However, I think that this error is balanced by the fact that there are many nuclear families in which everyone is individually a member of an Alevi organization.

<sup>8</sup> The eight organizations have a combined membership of about 1000 persons, i.e., calculating again family membership, 4000 individuals are within the close context of the organizations. The organizations give 20,000 as the estimated number of Alevi in Hamburg.

<sup>9</sup> For example Hamburg is to the best of my knowledge the only city in Germany with a special Alevi student’s organization.

<sup>10</sup> On the celebration of *cem* in Hamburg see Sökefeld 2000.

<sup>11</sup> For instance, a discussion organized in October 1999 by the Alevi Culture Center within a series of events commemorating the 10th anniversary of the Alevi Culture Week of 1989 was called ‘Alevism in the 21st century’. Haak Bir had within the program of its ‘First Anatolian Culture Festival’ a discussion titled: ‘Contemporary Alevism and the Perspective toward Alevism in Political Parties’.

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<sup>12</sup> The events organized in October 1999 by the Alevi Culture Center also included a festival which was attended by an audience of approximately 1700 people. Large-scale cultural events are also regularly organized by the AABF. They had a festival in May 2000 taking place in a large hall in Cologne which attracted 18.000 people.

<sup>13</sup> I use the term elite here only with reference to the Alevi community, i.e., the Alevi elite consists of persons playing leading roles within the Alevi community, without regard of their role within encompassing society.

<sup>14</sup> In German language Alevis rarely use the word 'Gemeinschaft' (community) but simply speak about 'die Aleviten' (the Alevis) or just 'Aleviten' (Alevis). The idea of a bounded community is, however, clearly implicated in this ethnonym.

<sup>15</sup> In Istanbul's quarter Gazi several men were assassinated, probably by Islamists, in spring 1995. More people were killed by the police in subsequent demonstrations. For an account of the incidents see Marcus 1996.

<sup>16</sup> See Sökefeld 1999 for an analysis of this discourse in Alevi webpages.