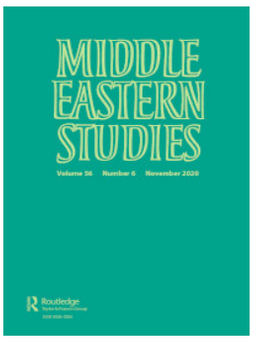

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# Where faith meets modernity: cemevi and local Alevi politics

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As a distinct religious and cultural group, the Alevis constitute the second largest population in Turkey after the Sunni majority. Estimates of their population, which range from five to twenty per cent, are controversial given the unavailability of reliable demographic data.[1] They are one of the oldest groups of inhabitants in the Middle East and the Balkans, but also one of the most discriminated against. Yet, compared to others, the history of the Alevis is understudied due not only to political and religious reasons, but also to the dispersion of the Alevi population and to the lack of a nationwide political organization of their own. This holds true for the state of scholarship on contemporary issues related to the Alevis as well despite the rising interest in identity politics over the last three decades.[2] Like other ethnic and religious identities, the Alevi identity is in flux and has been subject to radical transformations because of the extraordinary social and political changes Turkey has undergone in recent decades.

In this article, we intend to shed light on how historical tradition and modern local dynamics have shaped Alevi identity in Istanbul's Gazi neighborhood by focusing on three cemevis, which are centers of religious ritual and cultural gathering for Alevis. Generally known as Gazi, the neighborhood is considered one of the most politically turbulent with an overwhelmingly Alevi population. This field study, which focuses on the construction and historical development of three competing cemevis, each of which claim to represent the whole Alevi community, presents how political actors in the neighborhood make use of the Alevi identity to pursue their own vested interests. By so doing, we aim to acknowledge and underline two phenomena: the dialectical tension between faith and modernity as well as the fragmented nature of the Alevi identity. The latter task is crucial since most recent studies concerning Alevis have focused on their so-called 'awakening' or 'discovery' of their identity. We look at the other side of the coin as well, namely the intense fragmentation of the identity that has also been under way in recent decades. By so doing, we hope to contribute to the literature on contemporary Alevi identity and politics.

The genesis of the term Alevi and the lineage of today's Alevis are difficult to determine. According to Irene Melikoff, it was with Hacı Bektaş that the history of the Alevis starts in the aftermath of the Mongol invasions. His followers founded the Bektashi Order which was characterized by syncretic ideas and practices influenced by pre-Islamic Turkic cosmology together with an emphasis on Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of prophet Muhammed. The Bektashi Order thrived mostly in towns and cities, yet its message also reached nomadic and semi-nomadic immigrant Turkic communities who would much later be called Kızılbaş (redheads) as the influence of the Safavids spread into Anatolia. However, the term Alevi gradually replaced the term Kızılbaş starting in the mid-nineteenth century.[3] It was sixteenth-century developments that had a lasting impact on the cultural evolution and collective consciousness of the Alevis. As they were caught between the Ottomans and Safavids, feelings of alienation and fears over survival

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led them to disperse and settle in places beyond the state's reach.[4] This dispersed nature of Alevi settlement isolated from each other paved the way for different social and cultural evolutionary trajectories that in turn led increasingly to diverse social and cultural practices.[5]

As the time of the modernization and centralization of the state arrived in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Alevis were subject to radical social and political developments, some of which were traumatic. The abolition of the Janissary corps, the assimilation during the Tanzimat era, the impact of Hamidian era pan-Islamic policies, the turmoil in the aftermath of the Young Turk Revolution, the participation in the National Struggle (1919–1922) and the homogenization of the Republican policies all had an impact on the Alevi consciousness. With the coming of the new secular Turkish Republic in 1923, on the one hand the Alevis once again became the target of assimilation as citizens of the new nation state[6] while some Kemalists argued that the historical core of Turkishness could be traced to the Alevi tradition on the other.[7] However, many Alevis and Bektashis were just disenchanted by the abolition of dervish lodges in 1925 which also included those of the Alevis. In this respect, some Alevis perceived the homogenization imposed by Republican policies as a new threat to their identity.[8]

A massive social transformation of Alevis in Turkey took place from the 1960s onwards when the country experienced a spectacular wave of migration into cities. The urbanization of the Alevis put an end to their centuries-old rural, nomadic lifestyle and culture in various geographies. On one hand, living in dispersed settlements had paved the way for the development of distinct social and cultural characteristics from others sharing the same religious and ethnic lineage. On the other, the nomadic lifestyle that some had pursued for centuries led to a remarkable capacity to adapt to changing historical conditions and to articulate the cultural characteristics of various geographies.[9] Both of these factors deepened the already syncretic, heterodox Alevi worldview.[10] In this sense, urbanization has had a deep impact not only on the organization of the Alevis, but also on how they consolidated their identity in this new social setting. However, this social turmoil also laid the foundation for new political traumas in the late 1970s when fascist militants carried out pogroms, massacring hundreds in Anatolian cities. As political tensions intensified nationwide along the ideological axis of left and right, Alevi youth actively took part in Turkey's emerging socialist movements, most of which were inspired by Marxism.[11]

The 1990s were particularly important in the modern history of Alevis who once again experienced persecution in the hands of Sunni extremists. Especially significant in this respect was the Sivas massacre of 1993 which, in turn, ushered in a new era of political consciousness for Alevis.[12] This paved the way for the Alevi 'awakening' of the 1990s[13] that resulted in a massive explosion of Alevi publications, television, and radio channels as well as a remarkable increase in the number of Alevi organizations of different orientations in Turkey as well as in Europe, where a considerable number of Alevis had settled starting in the early 1960s.

## The cemevis as social and ritual places

A cemevi (literally *Cem* house) is a place of worship and social gathering for Alevis in which the act of *cem*, sometimes defined as a divine ritual and sometimes as a community gathering, is performed and presided over by holy men (*dede*). It is the modern, urban embodiment of Alevi public space.[14] Indeed, there is a continuing debate about whether a specific ritual like *cem* or a divine space like the cemevi are even in consonance with the logic of Alevi tradition. Whereas many scholars argue that the Alevi tradition does not necessitate a divine place,[15] arguing that worship can be performed anywhere and at any time, many leading members of the community such as *dedes* and the heads of Alevi associations and cemevis argue against this interpretation.[16] Although one cannot reach a definite verdict about the nature of the *cem* and cemevi given the availability of only a few written sources for verification,[17] the contemporary daily

necessities for practices, rituals, and intercommunication remain. Especially important among those are holding funerals,[18] distributing *lokma*,[19] and making sacrifices[20] as we came across during our fieldwork.[21] More importantly, cemevis now fulfill an essential function for the formation and consolidation of modern Alevi identity. They serve as public places for group cohesion and collective solidarity for Alevis.[22]

Understandably, the social and cultural meaning of cemevis for modern urban life is remarkably different from that for pre-modern, rural life. In the urban landscape of modernity, social, political, and cultural survival depends foremost on existence and visibility in public space.[23] For centuries, however, Alevis in rural areas barely even needed a designated place for their rituals. In small villages, any house large enough sufficed.[24] It was only with the urbanization of the Alevi population that the necessity of a formal, public space to perform religious and social activities emerged. In a sense, the cemevi is a modern, new phenomenon[25] that emerged as the embodiment[26] of a distinct, urban Alevi identity[27] in the face of the growing Sunni-based Islamic politics of the 1990s.

Cemevis recall the concept of 'free spaces' in the social movement literature. Sara Evans and Harry Boyte call 'free spaces' the places where 'people are able to learn a new self-respect, a deeper and more assertive group identity, public skills, and values of cooperation and civic virtue. But simply, free spaces are settings between private lives and large scale institutions where ordinary citizens can act with dignity, independence and vision.'[28] 'Free spaces', as defined by Francesca Polletta, are where the Alevis enjoy group solidarity, social interaction, network opportunities, and religious performances outside the hegemony of the Sunni cultural, political, and social realms.[29]

Despite their claim to unify the community and elevate Alevi identity, the cemevis also reflect the fragmentation among urban Alevi communities. To see the extent of this fragmentation, we conducted a field survey and focused on all three cemevis in the Gazi neighborhood:[30] the Gazi Cemevi, the Gazi Şehitleri Cemevi, and the Sultangazi Pirsultan Gazi Cemevi. We interviewed founders and administrators to ascertain the historical evolution of these cemevis. How were they founded and what problems do they face? How do they perceive themselves and their rivals? What strategies have they developed to increase their sphere of influence in the neighborhood? What are their specific, unique characteristics? We also carried out interviews with twenty-five residents, some of whom were regular contributors to a specific cemevi, to understand how typical residents in the neighborhood make sense of their belonging to a cemevi.

## Why Gazi? A brief history of the neighborhood

There are many reasons the Gazi neighborhood was chosen for this study. First, around seventy per cent of the Gazi population consists of Alevis.[31] Secondly, the neighborhood has experienced massive waves of immigration that enable an assessment of the impact of urban dynamics on the making of Alevi identity as experienced by different generational cohorts. Thirdly, the neighborhood has three competing cemevis that make it possible for us to assess different local and political dynamics.[32] That all three operate in the same area also allow us to compare and contrast the fragmentation of identity by keeping the variable of location constant for our analyses. And finally, the neighborhood is a famous stronghold for socialist movements that historically have had a deep impact on the political mobilization of the Gazi community.

Gazi is truly a unique neighborhood in the Istanbul metropolitan area.[33] As soon as one enters the neighborhood, a sense of distinctness with its human relations, political atmosphere, police presence, and visible radical left-wing politics becomes apparent despite the fact that radicalism seems to have declined from the beginning to the end of our research in 2019. Rather in the last few years, legal opposition parties seem to have strengthened their power. Although the history of the settlement of the neighborhood reflects similar patterns of internal migration

witnessed in many other Istanbul districts, whereby kinship relations as well as chain migration of fellow townsmen shaped the history of the settlement, Gazi is unique, as will be discussed in this article.[34]

The neighborhood was first settled by Bulgarian Muslim immigrants in the 1950s[35] followed by a massive immigration wave from within Anatolia in the 1960s and 1970s. In these decades, Alevis, overwhelmingly from central Anatolia, settled in the neighborhood replacing the Bulgarian émigrés who left for different places. Time and again, the neighborhood was officially affiliated with different districts of Istanbul and today it is the combination of four districts[36] together with the Esentepe neighborhood. Yet, in the eyes of its inhabitants and in the imagination of the general public, the entire area is simply known as 'Gazi',[37] a title used for the founder of the Turkish Republic Kemal Atatürk for whom the area was initially reserved as a farm. In the 1980s, the area was further transformed when the residents acquired deeds for their properties. The immigration flow continued well into the 1990s, mainly from Kurdish-populated cities of Southeastern Turkey who were allegedly adherents of the Shafi¸i school of Islam.[38] In recent years, they have been followed by Syrian immigrants of mostly Kurdish origin who, according the headman of the neighborhood, introduced locals to the existence of diverse Alevis with distinct cultures.

By focusing on the evolutionary dynamics of the cemevis in the neighborhood, we intend to answer the following questions: how do Alevi identity and the local social dynamics of Gazi interplay with one another? How is the historical legacy of the Alevi experience envisioned and incorporated into the narratives of the competing cemevi circles in the neighborhood? What survival strategies have the Alevis developed in recent decades in the face of growing, state-sponsored Sunni Islam? How do traumatic past experiences such as the Sivas massacre of 1993 and the infamous Gazi events of 1995 shape everyday politics and the social psychology in the neighborhood?[39] How do the social and geographic backgrounds of Gazi residents shape the ways in which they participate in day-to-day politics, especially with respect to their relations to the cemevis? What are the contested visions of Alevi identity, if any, imposed by different cemevis? What is the role of the radical socialist groups with regard to the cemevis? How is the everyday presence of the state felt by the inhabitants?

In our search for answers to these questions, we use a field survey compiled in in-depth interviews with twenty-five people from the neighborhood including cemevi administrators and the *muhtar* (local headman). It was deemed particularly important to conduct interviews with people who took part in the foundation processes of the cemevis. We benefitted from purposive and snowball sampling to increase the number of interviewees, and the duration of their presence in the neighborhood as well as their professions, places of origin, genders, ages, and affiliation with socialist groups were noted. We conducted the interviews in the cemevis and in the office of the headman. We also carried out group interviews in several cafes. Needless to say, the method of participant observation offered a good sense of the cultural and political atmosphere of the neighborhood.

The majority of our interviews took place in 2014 and 2015. This gave us the chance to observe the social and cultural panorama of the neighborhood at the time while establishing a reference point with which we had the chance to compare and contrast developments as they related to the cemevis. However, time and again we continued to visit the neighborhood and took note of recent changes as they pertained to the arguments of this paper. More importantly, however, in late 2019 we revisited the neighborhood several times in order to make a few, but selective interviews. Our aim was to observe the social changes in the neighborhood in the last five years with a particular eye on the evolution of the three cemevis. We assess these changes especially in the epilogue to this article.

The people now living in Gazi have also been influenced by collective historical memories dating back centuries. In this sense, the formation of Alevi identity, just as with other identities, is rooted in and determined by a selective repertoire of its historical legacy.[40] Since historical

imagination shapes collective consciousness and group psychology, a brief history of the Alevis is pertinent, though an exact account is difficult. As Elise Massicard argues, the Alevi is a concept that is hard to understand and the boundaries of which are difficult to establish.[41] Likewise, Yalçınkaya points out the conceptual heterodoxy with special emphasis on its syncretic character.[42] It is perhaps more practical and convenient to regard it as an umbrella concept, as Martin van Bruinessen suggests.[43]

## The Gazi Cemevi

The first and most significant cemevi, which in 2003 was officially named Gazi Eğitim ve Kültür Vakfı, was originally established in 1993. It is closely related to Cem Vakfı with which the cemevi was affiliated at the time of its foundation and officially Cem Vakfı is the heir of the Cemevi in case of a closure of the Cemevi.[44] However, people in the neighborhood and elsewhere simply call it the Gazi Cemevi, which implies its embrace of the whole neighborhood and community. Indeed, the Gazi Cemevi is one of the most famous and influential mainstream cemevis and has played a crucial, historical role in representing Alevi identity in the urban setting over the last three decades. It is one of the most salient symbolic institutions nationwide among Alevis. In this sense, its charisma extends beyond the borders of Gazi, yet the local cultural and political character of the neighborhood heavily determine its institutional stature.

Just like the neighborhood itself, the Gazi Cemevi was built de facto by the community. Unsurprisingly, the idea to build a cemevi in Gazi gained momentum in 1993, the year of an infamous massacre of Alevis in Sivas. Although the idea had already been circulating in elite circles in the neighborhood, this event radically changed the mood and sensitivity of neighborhood residents to their Alevi identity, as one 52-year-old man from Gazi points out:

> There was no organized movement of Alevis before '93. Alevi identity or Alevism had no meaning for people even if they were Alevi. But after '93, people discovered their own Alevi identity and began to realize who the Alevis were. The reason it is called '93 here is of course the Sivas Massacre. This event mobilized people to defend their rights, to represent their identity, to stand against danger and segregation. To oppose these pressures and threats, the cemevis were formed for the representation of their identities. Gazi Cemevi is one of them.[45]

What is more, while the construction process was under way, the 1995 Gazi riots took place: they started with the random shooting of several cafes in the neighborhood, which resulted in the killing of an elderly man. In reaction to this provocative event, tens of thousands protested, but the police brutally suppressed the masses eventually resulting in the deaths of seventeen people, many from the neighborhood.[46] That so many Alevi people, the majority from Gazi, were killed by the police during these events intensified the incentive for the community to complete the construction of the cemevi, which they now saw as a necessity.[47]

The Gazi Cemevi was established with the help of tens of thousands who either participated directly in the construction or contributed financially. One 55-year-old man interviewed vividly recalled the day they first began to construct the cemevi with excitement:

> We were so happy when we heard that a cemevi would be constructed in the neighborhood. We hugged each other and cried. We were sacrificing animals and performed the *Semah* before construction began. We brought whatever we had at home: carpets, rugs, pots, and pans.[48]

Soon after its establishment, the cemevi immediately became a central location around which political protests took place. Radical left-wing militants, ordinary residents, and the police often confronted each other in the proximity of the cemevi. Indeed, 'defending' the cemevi from the police was always a major concern:

> Gazi Cemevi means something for this neighborhood. It was the [community's] first initiative and the [residents of the] neighborhood felt that they had their own place. In the beginning, a crowd of fifteen

> thousand strong showed up but when people said that the cemevi could be destroyed, then suddenly approximately fifty thousand gathered in front of the construction site in order to protect it.[49]

The Alevi majority in the neighborhood sought a 'free space' of their own which needed to be independent not only of the state, but also of radical socialist groups which traditionally had a strong presence in Gazi, especially among the youth. In fact, from the outset, relations between the Gazi Cemevi and those political groups was always uneasy.[50] Although socialist groups played an important role in organizing the community, contributing considerably to the people's capacity for political mobilization, ethnic and religious sensitivities remained as many developed a sensibility toward their Alevi backgrounds. As one retired worker we interviewed strikingly summarizes:

> I fought in a socialist organization for years. I was a worker. I was poor. I wanted a better life. But I was also an Alevi. It was only when a family elder died and we had to wash him in the backyard of our own house that we realized that this was also a necessity. Then we fought for the cemevi. It was as necessary as asking for bread. We learned to fight in socialist organizations. We knew what to do to build, protect, and defend the cemevi.[51]

On the other hand, one of the religious leaders of the cemevi, Mehmet Dede, depicts the tension between leftist political actors and Alevi identity during the Gazi events of 1995:

> We warned them against the provocations of the police in the neighborhood. We tried to keep them (the members of the leftist organizations) calm and away from the street because they could be easily killed when they reacted. The police were searching for an excuse to justify their brutal attempts at Gazi. However, they did not listen to us.[52]

Examining the relationship between leftist political activism and Alevi identity in the Gazi neighborhood shows how the established leftist politics in the neighborhood has shaped and developed the organizational capabilities of Alevi organizations. Their political experience was often assimilated by others, but the leftwing politics also blurred the role and impact of the Alevi identity. In all these, the Gazi Cemevi was usually at the center of this tension from the beginning because of its symbolic meaning in the neighborhood.

Beyond its symbolic meaning, the Gazi Cemevi, located at the center of the neighborhood, fulfills many social functions. It consists of six floors and has a large rear court where funeral ceremonies take place. One floor is reserved for the *cem* practices and one for dining and an infirmary; the others are used for social purposes including relatively cheap courses in English, math, and painting as well as playing the guitar, piano, and the saz, a stringed musical instrument widely played in Turkey.

Despite the charisma and high profile of the Gazi Cemevi, it was nonetheless subject to much criticism. In many interviews, some accused it of pursuing a sectarian administrative policy: the deliberately exclusive membership determined by the governing board of the cemevi consolidates the existing administration. As a middle-aged woman resident of the neighborhood noted:

> Elections are held in the cemevi to choose the administration every three years, but we do not know who will vote. The candidates decide who can be a member and use their votes. There are sometimes two or three opposition members on the administrative board, but their power to change things is limited. Membership is determined by the administration and mostly they select their own relatives and acquaintances because they know that they will vote for them.[53]

There were other criticisms as well. Some interviewees criticized the Gazi Cemevi administration because it is dominated almost exclusively by the townsmen of the city of Sivas.[54] Others perceive the cemevi as a political tool to dismantle the putative unity of the Alevis and the Kurds, emphasizing that the Alevis do not need an assembly place such as a cemevi.[55] Yet others attack it for its passive attitude toward the so-called remembrance day for the 1995 Gazi events and for its participation in Muharrem ceremonies because they were organized by the state.[56] As will be seen in claims by the other two cemevis, many of the critiques and lines of demarcation result

from day-to-day political struggles as well as personal disputes, yet all are portrayed as differing interpretations of Alevi history and identity.

In the follow-up visit to the Gazi in 2019, we witnessed remarkable changes in the Gazi cemevi. For one, the administration of the last six years eventually changed in 2016. The former head of the cemevi was a *dede* who had occasionally problematic relations with the local residents and with other cemevis whereas the newly elected cemevi director in 2016 is a former head of the Gaziosmanpaşa district of the main opposition People's Republican Party. In a sense, this change was a telltale sign of a generational shift reflecting itself as a change from a theological toward a more secular standpoint. With the new administration, several innovative projects and approaches have been conducted such as the establishment of a board of *dedes* which took as its mission to contribute to the supply of *dedes* where necessary in the rest of Turkey. Besides, the new administration had many close and constructive relations with other cemevis.

## The Gazi Şehitleri Cemevi

Another of the neighborhood's cemevis, which challenges the former, is the Gazi Şehitleri Cemevi (Gazi Martyrs Cemevi) founded in 2009 as a branch of the Pir Sultan Abdal Kültür Derneği. At the time of our survey in 2014, the cemevi had little in the way of a physical presence; there was only a one-room tent where Cem rituals as well as social activities took place. The head of the cemevi claimed that enough donations had already been collected and that construction would soon be under way. Even five years later not much had changed in this respect when we revisited the cemevi in 2019. When interviewed in 2014, the head of the cemevi informed us that the issue for a cemevi was not the existence of a proper building but the cultivation of the consciousness of the need to perform the *cem* rituals, which could for the time being take place in a tent. He further argued that the 'main goal is to perpetuate the essence of Alevi belief and to help people find themselves in the cemevi'.[57] Given the lack of a material presence, the strength of ideological and cultural discourses were employed to overcome the problem.

It was important to determine how the people who organized around this cemevi viewed the former, the Gazi Cemevi. The head of the latter made it clear that the Gazi Cemevi, though prestigious and significant, was not deeply-rooted in the historical tradition of the neighborhood. It was a mainstream institution, so to speak, whereas the Gazi Şehitleri Cemevi was claimed to be a real product of the struggles in the neighborhood to secure its political survival and the persistence of Alevi identity. The head of the cemevi and others in its circle emphasized that the most important task was to articulate the local and historical dynamics of the Gazi neighborhood with Alevi identity. This task, unsurprisingly, was assumed to be fulfilled by themselves.

As its name suggests, the people killed during the bloody events in 1995 were considered martyrs. The head of the cemevi pointed out that the cemevi was an embodiment of the memories of the people who resisted the state during those events:

> We named our cemevi Gazi Şehitleri because we wanted to represent the neighborhood and also give them a sense of belonging. This name will remind everybody of the neighborhood's culture of resistance and how it responds to oppression. So this cemevi is indeed a memorial to remind people of those who were killed and who sacrificed themselves for their beliefs.[58]

While the Gazi Cemevi is organized around a broader historical and theological imagination of Alevi identity, this one overwhelmingly relies on the memory of the social and political struggles in the recent history of the neighborhood. To mobilize its supporters and to present its distinctiveness, the supporters of the Gazi Şehitleri Cemevi use a legacy of social and political protest born out of the Gazi experience. It is a sort of nativism, evident in the following remark:

> We have built a life and an identity here. We belong to this neighborhood. The municipal and state authorities call us invaders. But in a place that is ours, that is our neighborhood, we are building a cemevi

> for our own needs again … Obviously, Gazi is a different place. There's an identity here that creates a sense of belonging, and this was achieved by the people here. They created this cemevi for this identity and belonging. There's a memory here, and it makes people feel like they belong here.[59]

The discourse of martyrdom and sacrifice is one of the most important upon which the cemevi administration capitalizes. From the legendary İmam Hussein of the seventh century to the Gazi events of 1995 and even to Berkin Elvan, a 15-year-old Alevi boy shot dead by police during the 2013 Gezi Park uprisings in Istanbul, the emphasis on martyrdom and sacrifice is clear.[60] In this respect, a young man from this cemevi accused the Gazi Cemevi of bowing down to the state and right-wing establishment parties as well as of operating inside a 'corrupt system' in conflict with Alevi beliefs. To connect the traditional Alevi saying with his anti-establishment political agenda, the head of the Cemevi quoted Pir Sultan Abdal, an eminent Alevi poet of the sixteenth century: 'The right wheel cannot operate in a bad order' (*Bozuk düzende sağlam çark olmaz*). In brief, the cemevi has been attempting to incorporate Alevi belief, the contemporary local dynamics of the neighborhood, historical narratives of resistance, and a socialist, anti-establishment discourse.

As a matter of fact, what distinguished the Gazi Şehitleri Cemevi is its militant political activism underpinned by a Marxist ideology. Indeed, it was directly supported by the so-called 'People's Assembly'[61] including its subdivisions 'People's Teachers,' who taught free courses to the Gazi youth, and the 'People's Architects and Engineers' who were conducting the construction of the cemevi. Apparently, the cemevi should be seen as part and parcel of a socialistic political vision of the Marxist organization the political power of which was salient and influential in the neighborhood. But the interesting point is the fact that even the Marxists in the neighborhood had to come to terms with the reality of the power of Alevi identity.

Revisiting the neighborhood five year later, we found this cemevi still politically active despite the fact that the political change was remarkably unfavorable for them as will be discussed below. As the other two cemevis have some kind of a rapprochement, it continued to pursue its independent political agenda.

## The Sultangazi Pir Sultan Abdal Cemevi

The construction of the third cemevi in the neighborhood, established in 2009, was similar to that of the other two. Initially, the venture to build this cemevi started in the minds of a few people and rapidly gained massive support as the construction process unfolded.[62] The founders demanded a space from the municipality in vain and eventually gave up waiting on municipal authorities who postponed a response to their request.[63] Like the others, it was established without the permission of the state authorities and was massively supported by the residents of Gazi neighborhood during its construction.[64] Like the Gazi Şehitleri Cemevi, it started modestly as a small room.[65] Likewise, it also experienced difficulties surviving. Even today, on the pretext of its unlawful construction and environmental problems that the building allegedly creates, litigation in the courts continues. Last but not least, it too was founded, like the Gazi Şehitleri Cemevi, by people with either a socialist background or still pursuing a socialist political agenda, though those in the circle of the Sultangazi Pir Sultan Abdal Cemevi circle were not in effect politically motivated.

This cemevi was founded by local residents of Gazi who thought that despite the existence of two cemevis, the need for social and religious services that a cemevi offers are still growing. When a leading figure of the cemevi was asked why another was necessary, the first reason he presented was the insufficiency of practical, day-to-day necessities such as the fact that there were too many funeral ceremonies to be handled by the existing cemevis.[66] Yet the founders also had in mind to create an alternative cemevi established from below as opposed to an enterprise established from above by elites or political activists. The head and the supporters of the

cemevi time and again underlined the genuinely local aspect of their venture. Unlike the others, they claimed that one aspect of its uniqueness was its independence (at the time of its establishment) from both political and mainstream Alevi organizations, although in 2015 the Cemevi became part of the Alevi Kültür Dernekleri (Alevi Cultural Associations).

Interestingly, they also criticized the Gazi Cemevi on the basis of its domination by immigrants from the region of Sivas,[67] the same critique made by supporters of the Gazi Şehitleri Cemevi. They added that those from the regions of Tokat, Amasya, and Ardahan have preferred their cemevi,[68] a point confirmed by those in the circle of the Gazi Şehitleri Cemevi.[69] Interviews in the neighborhood led us increasingly to believe that what was at stake was sometimes neither Alevi identity nor ideology and theology, but rather a concern for different forms of identity, often times related to where one originates.

When we went back to the neighborhood five years later in 2019, we found that not much has changed with regard to this cemevi. However, our interview with the head of the cemevi made it clear that they now want to develop more charity works such as opening a place for older people to live in, a daycare center for kids and a shelter for women in need of protection. Rather than simply fulfilling a mission of the cemevi, such activities were related to the concerns of the head of the cemevi as he could gain popularity which in turn could help him secure a seat in the parliament. In this sense, one can understand how local political dynamics and Alevi civil society can indirectly play a formative role for individuals who have ambitions for national politics.[70] A conversation between two heads of the cemevi that the head of Gazi Cemevi mentioned during our interview was so interesting in this respect. One of them urged the other saying that 'hopefully the lawsuit will continue until the elections, you should pray for that, otherwise they will not appoint you as a candidate'.[71]

## Epilogue: Five years on

Our discussion of the three competing Cemevis in Gazi has brought forward the story of urbanization, a deep sociological wave in which dramatic political events of the 1990s acted as a catalyst for the modern rise and visibility of Alevi identity. For centuries, Alevi identity – both nomadic and rural – has been a cultural product of the countryside. Prior to urbanization, this identity was even more heterogeneous, embracing diverse, dispersed groups. The concentration of the Alevi population in cities combined with the threat of the rising politicization of Sunni Islam in recent decades paved the way for Alevis to end an age-old state of political and geographical invisibility. Now in the urban setting, social and cultural existence requires that Alevi identity be visible. In this respect, the cemevi is yet another ingenious adaptation of the Alevis to modern times. The cemevis that comprise our case studies fulfill essential social and communal functions and it appears they will continue to do so in coming decades. They are the 'free spaces' created by the Alevis for public visibility, social cohesion, community affairs and religious rituals.

The recent emergence of cemevis in Turkey made Alevi identity more public than ever and naturally compelled the state and municipal authorities to tackle social, cultural, and political problems surfacing in the urban public realm. Yet state authorities even now do not officially recognize cemevis as religious places despite the fact that the Supreme Court officially recognized the cemevis as public places for worship.[72] In so doing, they continue to discriminate against a considerable population of Turkey on the basis of religion. The Directorate of Religious Affairs, a state institution with ample revenues from taxes collected from all of the population, including Alevis, has refused to accept cemevis as places of worship. This institution believes it has the authority and privilege to decide how religion should be practiced, a belief widely questioned among the secular segments of the Turkish society.[73] In fact, on the basis of this

institution's refusal to accept the religious freedom of Alevis in practice, the Turkish state is undermining the fundamental principle of the separation of state and religion.

Despite all these shortcomings, there are also remarkable new developments in the neighborhood as we observed when we went back there five years later. Interestingly, the power of the cemevis notably increased since they have been increasingly playing an intermediary role between the residents and the state institutions. This may be due to the decline of street demonstrations either because of the strengthening of the police presence or the changing political mood of the Gazi residents. Whatever the reason, the cemevis and their representatives are now more in contact with various state institutions, especially with municipalities to solve the local problems of the neighborhood. The state agencies such as district prefecture, local branches of the Ministry of Education and even the police department began to communicate with the cemevis as they see such a cooperation as functional to reach the Gazi residents in case of necessity.

Our case study in Gazi makes it clear that Alevi identity is itself a contested, fragmented space. There are many reasons beneath this fragmentation. For one, the cemevi issue discussed above was from the outset related to the problems of urban life – meaning that solutions could only be attained by improvisation and trial-and-error, just like the situation when they first came to the cities. But this also means new and novel means of social and cultural interaction that require the use of different, diverse viewpoints yet eventually contribute to more fragmentation.

The competing, vested interests of diverse local actors also generate fragmentation. For one, communal bonds are often based on belonging to the same city of origin, and many of the differences in the cemevis in the neighborhood were in fact determined by such communal bonds. Likewise, a generational gap in modern Alevi society also contributes to the fragmented nature of Alevi identity. Younger generations are not simply impressed by traditional *dedes* who, in rural settings, easily furnish cosmic interpretations together with a system of values. It is difficult to accomplish this same mission in cities characterized by rapidly evolving social, political, and technological systems. In our field study in the neighborhood, we witnessed many instances of challenges to the social status of the older generations including the *dedes*. As a matter of fact, when we visited the neighborhood five years later, we found this generational gap still as a perennial fact. As pointed out by the head of the Sultangazi Pir Sultan Abdal cemevi, they were reluctant to include the youth in cemevi administration fearing that they could promote a radical left-wing political agenda.

The Gazi neighborhood is known for powerful socialist organizations whose legacy of resistance against state authority must be taken into account to understand the political and cultural atmosphere. Perhaps the cultural and religious discrimination against Alevis resonates with the overall anti-establishment discourse of these organizations, which have considerably influenced Alevi youth. During our research, we witnessed their involvement in the issues of the cemevis. Yet their relations with the Alevi community in general and the cemevis in particular are often uneasy. Although these organizations rely on and inspire a worldview based on social class, they time and again had to come to terms with Alevi identity, which serves as an overarching cultural and political framework. Moreover, what we observed five years later was also quite striking: there was a remarkable decline of the power of the socialist organizations in the neighborhood and the Gazi residents were increasingly more inclined to the legal opposition parties such as the CHP (People's Republican Party) and the HDP (the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party).

Our research on the cemevis in Gazi reveals the fluidity of Alevi identity in the face of rapidly changing social and political dynamics, both local and national. Its fragmented nature is not an aberration, but an indispensable outcome of the ways in which Alevis adapt themselves to a changing world. Likewise, issues revolving around Alevi identity should often be interpreted as the politics of power. What sometimes seem to be religious, identity-related issues may well be personal disputes, region-based communal interests, and means of enhancing social and cultural capital.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Notes

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52. Mehmet Dede, interviewed by the authors, not recorded, Gazi Mahallesi, Istanbul, Turkey, 5 October 2019.
53. H.Ş. interviewed by the authors, not recorded, Gazi Mahallesi, Istanbul, Turkey, 10 April 2015. As we later visited the neighborhood, we saw that eventually there were considerable changes in the administration of the Cemevi.
54. H.Ç. interviewed by the authors, not recorded, Gazi Mahallesi, Istanbul, Turkey, 7 December 2014.
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58. G.F. interviewed by the authors, not recorded, Gazi Mahallesi, Istanbul, Turkey, 30 November 2014.
59. G.F. interviewed by the authors, not recorded, Gazi Mahallesi, Istanbul, Turkey, 30 November 2014.
60. M.K. interviewed by the authors, not recorded, Gazi Mahallesi, Istanbul, Turkey, 9 March 2015.
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64. E.S. interviewed by the authors, not recorded, Gazi Mahallesi, Istanbul, Turkey, 10 February 2015; Z.B. interviewed by the authors, not recorded, Gazi Mahallesi, Istanbul, Turkey, 10 February 2015.
65. F.Ç. interviewed by the authors, not recorded, Gazi Mahallesi, Istanbul, Turkey, 10 February 2015.
66. H.Ç. interviewed by the authors, not recorded, Gazi Mahallesi, Istanbul, Turkey, 7 December 2014.
67. F.Ç. interviewed by the authors, not recorded, Gazi Mahallesi, Istanbul, Turkey, 10 February 2015.
68. F.Ç. interviewed by the authors, not recorded, Gazi Mahallesi, Istanbul, Turkey, 10 February 2015.
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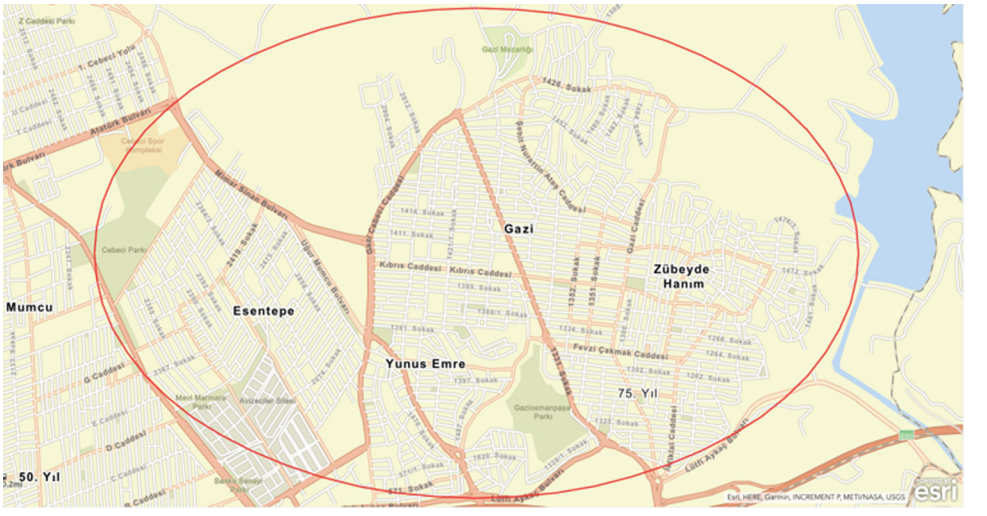
## Appendix 1

| Establishment Date | Name |
|---|---|
| 1993 | Gazi Eğitim ve Kültür Vakfı |
| 2009 | Pir Sultan Abdal Gazi Şehitleri Cemevi |
| 2009 | Alevi Kültür Dernekleri Sultangazi Pir Sultan Abdal Cemevi |

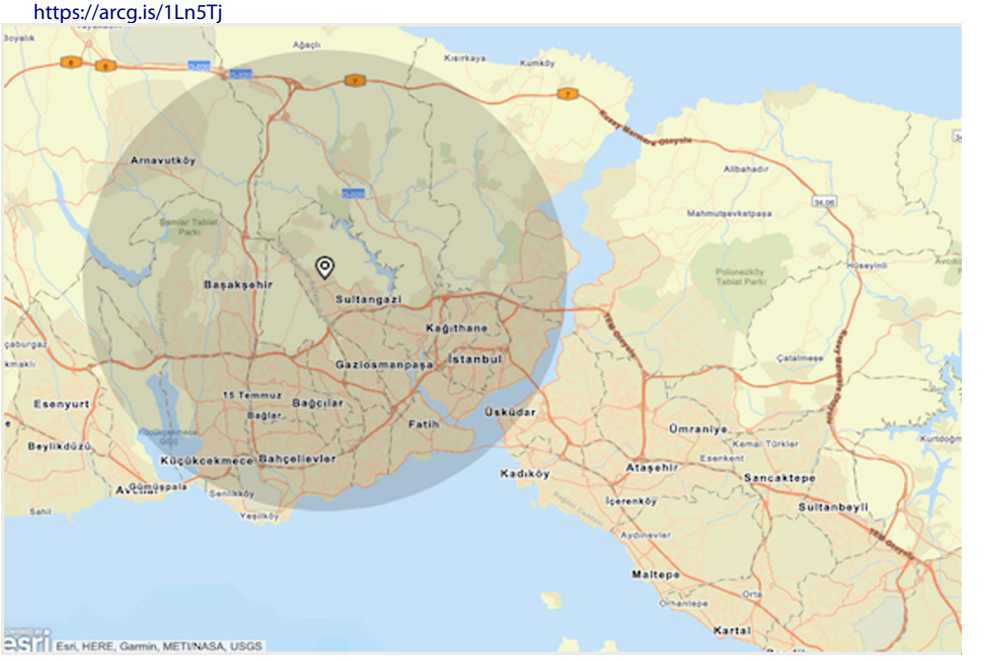
## Appendix 2

Gazi Neighborhood
https://arcg.is/19TTn1



## Appendix 3

The location of Gazi in Istanbul
https://arcg.is/1Ln5Tj




## Appendix 4

Location of Three Cemevis in the Gazi Neighborhood
https://arcg.is/1G1DDD