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Aleviness, Music, and Hospitality

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ABSTRACT

The paper examines urban Alevi traditional culture in Turkey as a possible example of an ethics of hospitality, drawing mainly from Alevi teachings and musical heritage. Through an examination of the lyrics of selected Alevi sacred songs the author presents various accounts of hospitality that are integral to Aleviness.

Keywords: Aleviness, Alevi Music, Hospitality, *nefes*, *deyiş*

IZVLEČEK

Članek proučuje urbano kulturo tradicije Alevijev v Turčiji kot primer možnosti etike gostoljubja, pri čemer se naslanja predvsem na alevijske nauke in glasbeno dediščino. Z analizo besedil izbranih alevijskih mističnih pesmi avtorica predstavi različne primere gostoljubja, ki so vtakani v alevijstvo.

Ključne besede: alevijstvo, alevijska glasba, gostoljubje, *nefes*, *deyiş*

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Researching Hospitality as Ethics

The present case example of the place of hospitality in Alevi expressive culture is part of a larger research project that aims to explore the ethics of hospitality; that is, an ethics that can be founded on aspects of hospitality, such as acceptance, welcoming, and guest-host relations, where guests can be strangers, foreigners, or others. This study is grounded in the fields of philosophy and anthropology as the starting base, but its overarching transdisciplinary orientation also draws from religious studies and ethnomusicology, which function as strong pillars, and other disciplines such as musicology and ethnography, for example. The theoretical focus was inspired by philosophers such as Jacques Derrida, and his aporetic notion of hospitality, being possible only as *the* impossible, on the one hand, and his understanding of hospitality as ethics *per se*, on the other. His thought directed the research towards openness, “being-with,” and saying “yes” to the unknown.¹ The philosophic thought of Emmanuel Levinas also contributed to the unfolding of the research with his approach to understanding the primacy of welcoming the other and one’s individual responsibility in every face-to-face encounter.² Equally important are recent anthropological accounts acknowledging that hospitality historically has not been a focus of study and that ethnography, as a foundational part of anthropological methodology, is intrinsically linked to hospitality and experienced in every encounter during the fieldwork process (Candea and da Col 2012).

My choice to explore the Alevis of Turkey and their religious, musical, and cultural traditions as a case study for investigating the notion of an ethics of hospitality was inspired by my personal experience of being welcomed by the Alevi community in Istanbul while conducting research on Alevi musical heritage in the spring of 2009. Because the Alevis were so accommodating and welcoming in assisting me with my investigative goals, I decided to refocus my attention on the elements that expose Aleviness³ as a tradition that fosters the ethics of hospitality.

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- 1 Derrida’s account of hospitality is presented in my article “Asylum as Hospitality: Relistening to Derrida” (Bjelica 2018a) to which I direct the reader if they are interested in Derrida’s understanding of hospitality and its ethics. More detailed accounts can be found in his works such as *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas* (Derrida 1999) or *Of Hospitality* (Derrida 2000) and others.
 - 2 For Levinas’s account of hospitality and ethics, see especially *Totality and Infinity* (Levinas 1979) and *Otherwise than Being* (Levinas 1994).
 - 3 The Turkish umbrella term for Alevi religion or tradition is *Alevilik*, which in English publications is often translated as “Alevism.” However, since the ending ‘-lik’ in the Turkish language indicates a relation to the core noun, the term will be translated here as “Aleviness.” Further, the term *Alevilik* is inclusive of Alevi doctrines and ideologies of faith, cultural tradition, ethics, worldview, and way of life. Although the term Aleviness is not widely used, it can be found in some publications in the field of Alevi studies (Massicard 2016; Yocum 2005, 584). This research, being also grounded in ethnographic fieldwork, allowed me to converse with individuals who consider themselves to be Alevis but do not necessarily accept Alevism as their faith. As Markussen (2010, 7) explains: “Considering oneself Alevi may include a sense of Aleviness that defines personal and collective

While investigating the tradition of the Turkish Alevi, especially during my fieldwork research,⁴ I had the opportunity to explore Alevi identity formation and self-identification (Bjelica 2017, 2020b), the social and interpersonal aspects of Alevi music, Alevi's espousal of social justice (Bjelica 2018b), their propensity to engage in interfaith dialogue, their ability to listen ethically (Bjelica 2020a), and the embodiment of the culture of breath in their rituals (Bjelica 2021), among others. In the present article I draw partly from these themes but center the analysis on Alevi hospitality as one of the pillars of Alevi ethics which is also ever-present in Alevi music and ritual practices. When referring to music in this paper I am using the concept holistically, as inclusive of traditionally sung poetry in the vernacular, usually accompanied by the long-necked folk lute, called *saz* or *bağlama*, and sometimes with sacred movements, such as "turning" (*semah dönme*).

Encountering Aleviness

The Alevi, the largest religious minority in Turkey, are recognized by the Turkish government only as a cultural group that with their heritage represents a specific part of "Turkishness."⁵ The publicly recognized cultural aspect of Alevi heritage and way of life, however, is only part of the religious minority's identity, which is rooted in oral tradition, and is not fixed or unified, as the political realm would indicate. The lack of a unified presence of elements of Aleviness today can be revealed in the pronounced diversity of

identities in terms of one or several aspects of *Alevilik*, but it does not necessarily mean embracing Alevism as a system of beliefs and practices." Rather than excluding the doctrines of Alevism, my research tries to investigate Aleviness as an experience of cohabitation, encounters, and hospitality.

- 4 The extensive part of the fieldwork research on Alevi hospitality was carried out in urban areas of Istanbul in the spring of 2015. More details about it will be presented further along in the article.
- 5 In the available literature and sources after the year 2000, it was observed that recent discussions of the Alevi were largely devoted to the political and social situation in Turkey – especially in connection with the fact that the Alevi are still not recognized by the Turkish government as a separate religious community in their own country. In spite of the process termed "Alevi revival" (an extensive emergence of the Alevi in public and media, especially since the 1990s; a movement focusing on empowerment through networking, increased visibility and organizational activities) and the recognition of their existence and way of life, the Turkish government does not treat them as a separate religious community, but merely as an integral part of "Turkish nationality," a part of Turkish cultural heritage (Dinçer 2000; Poyraz 2005; Tambar 2010). The Alevi identity-based claims were officially considered by the governing Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi – AKP) with the initiative launched in 2007 and termed "Alevi opening" (*Alevi açılımı*), aiming "to reconcile the Turkish state and the marginalized segments of Turkish society" (Köse 2010, 5). The most serious engagement by the AKP happened in 2009 when seven workshops on Alevi issues were organized, unfortunately without significant consultation with Alevi groups; and, moreover, the workshops were still closely controlled by the government. These workshops contributed to a systematization of the Alevi demands, such as benefitting on an equal basis from state resources, equal citizenship rights, religious freedom, but unfortunately resulted in no major change of the political and social position of the Alevi in Turkey (Borovalı and Boyraz 2010).

Alevi worship practices (*ibadet*) and the variety of adaptations of their rituals to the contemporary world that differ from regional practices (Bjelica 2017; Dressler 2013; Shankland 2003b). Ethnic diversity within the broader community does not impede the ability of Alevis to coexist as a community from the perspective of world view, philosophy, and the ethical standpoint that promotes the equality between all human (and other) beings, who should coexist as brothers and sisters (Hanoğlu 2017; Issa 2017b). This was often expressed also by the religious guides (*dedeler*, pl., *dede*, sing.) who provided guidance (*öğüt*) during the Alevi rituals. One of the ritual leaders, *dede* Hünkâr Uğurlu, emphasized the importance of respect towards everyone with the exception of those who do harm: “I am respectful towards all humans. But until when do I feel respect? If you harm people... If you harm nature or animals, we will not feel respect for [you if you are] such a person”⁶ (Uğurlu 2015). Doing harm to any living being is not acceptable for the Alevi “path” (*yol*); therefore, it is not worthy of the respect that would otherwise be granted to all people, all living beings.⁷

It is difficult to construct a homogeneous account of the expressive culture of Turkish Alevis because of regional differences related to the culture’s oral transmission.⁸ The politicization of Alevi identity, which was unfolding and developing throughout the twentieth century, produced many different views and definitions of Alevis. Thus, it is difficult to define Aleviness exclusively as a unified belief system, despite the existence of core beliefs that are shared by all communities, be they urban or rural-based. As Alevi teachings, culture, and expressive practices have been passed down over time, changes have occurred. Alevi beliefs often turn out to be complex and multidimensional, requiring further attention to properly understand them. That is why only a few aspects of this issue will be presented in this paper, those that are important for the study of the ethics of hospitality present in Aleviness.

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- 6 Translated by the author from the audio transcription of an introductory talk at an Alevi communal gathering (*cem*): “Bütün insanları saygı duyuyorum. Ama ne zamana kadar saygı duyuyorum? Eğer zarar veriyorsan insanlara... Doğaya, hayvanlara zarar veriyorsa, o insana saygı duymayacağız.”
- 7 The Alevi community is also supportive of environmental and animal ethics. After his claim about granting respect to all living beings, Hünkâr *dede* told the story of another *dede* who denied entry into a place of worship to a believer who kicked a dog lying at the entrance. The *dede* instructed him to return to the dog and apologize, as this is the only way believers are capable of true prayer and worship – if they show respect to all living beings, which requires love and compassion (Uğurlu 2015).
- 8 The differences are evident not only through the Alevi ritual praxis, but also in the different names of their communities, such as *Bektashi*, *Çepni*, *Kızılbaş*, *Tabtacı*, that in the 20th Century were unified under the term Alevi (Dressler 2013). One main differentiation regards ethnicity in that some Alevis are Turkish, others Kurdish. More about the Kurdish Alevis can be found in Martin van Bruinessen’s research (1996; Cetin et al. 2020). This topic exceeds the scope of this article, but I dedicated more attention to it in my other writings (Bjelica 2017, 2018b, 2020).

According to some definitions, which usually reflect political connotations, as was evident in the available literature, Alevism occurs in non-orthodox Islamic religious communities which draw from Shi'i and Sufi Islamic beliefs. Alevism can even be seen as a belief system that predates Islam, supposedly having been formed in Anatolia and Mesopotamia before Islam's appearance in the seventh century (Hanoğlu 2017, 13–14; Issa 2017b, 1). The connection with Islam comes from the worship of Imam 'Ali,⁹ the Prophet Muhammed's Family (*Ehlibeyt*) and the Twelve Imams (*Oniki Imamlar*) (Hanoğlu 2017, 17); this focus in worship is the foundation of Alevi practices, and therefore cannot be overlooked. Some Alevis, nevertheless, deny affiliation with Shi'i Islam while still upholding the almightiness of Imam 'Ali, as was the case with *dede Hünkâr Uğurlu*, the leader of the Esentepe Alevi community. During my field research, I attended his talk¹⁰ on the morality and righteousness of Alevi life, when he also emphasized that “we are neither Sunni nor Shi'i!” (Uğurlu 2015). By contrast, some sources claim that some Alevis feel their religion to be the “true” Islam (Şener 2009, 19). In many cases, Alevis in Turkey identify themselves as separate from the majority Sunni population, as stated by anthropologist David Shanklad (2003a, 20): “they maintain that belief in the Sunni God is based on fear, but that the Alevi base their faith in love, a love which is within all people and that can be found within them.” This statement contrasts the image of an authoritarian and patriarchal God in Sunni Islam with that of a loving and understanding God in Alevi belief, which can be reached through sincere faith and esoteric rituals.

The purpose of this article, therefore, is not to define Alevi religion or culture, but rather to provide insights into some aspects of the belief system that promote and solidify an ethics of hospitality. Despite great diversity in Alevi beliefs and rituals, Tözün Issa (2017a, 3), the editor of a recent publication dealing mainly with Alevis in the European diaspora, concluded that certain philosophical principles are shared by all Alevis. One principle, for example, that encourages hospitable encounters is the Alevi perception of humanity (*insanlık*) and humanitarianism as a pillar of their worldview. This central virtue is connected to the mystical “path” (*yol*) towards perfection that is accomplished through many stages in achieving ultimate union with the Divine and thus becoming the perfect or “complete” human (*insan-ı kamil*). The Alevis interpret the image of a perfect human experientially, as everyone is supposed to have control over their self-centered or selfish tendencies, to treat all people equally and to serve the needs and interests of others. This is another important aspect of the Alevi code of conduct, expressed in the simple maxim: “To be master of one's own hand, tongue,

9 Imam 'Ali, fully named 'Ali ibn Abi Tālib, was the Prophet Muhammed's nephew and son-in-law.

10 This talk, held at one of the community gatherings I attended, was an introduction to the ritual (*cem*).

and loin.” (“Eline, diline, beline sahip olmak.”) With this ethical saying, the Alevis constantly remind themselves that they, themselves, have the power to refrain from theft, lies, and adultery. This includes avoiding any kind of violence, and therefore it is a call for ethical gestures in their daily lives and on the mystical path they set forth on. This path is accepted by every individual initiated into Alevi faith (Soileau 2019, 6), including the sacrifices it might require. Yet the pervasive Alevi epithet is “Yol birdir, sürek binbir!,” meaning “The path is one, the routes many!” (Hanođlu 2017, 19), indicating a possibility for the individual to choose their own path in accordance with Alevi teachings. The inference here is that tolerance is required when one is faced with someone else’s path and accepting or not accepting it. This expression intersects with the belief that one should approach others as a soulmate or *can* (pron. jan), and as a reflection of unity with the Divine on earth, also referred to as Oneness of Being (*vahdet-i vücut*). The Alevi elders, during the communities’ regular gatherings, often talked about the Alevi path, most often acknowledging its difficulty and complexity, but at the same time they described it as the right one, as it is a path of goodness and cohabitation. One of the elders, Aşur Nergis *dede*, explained: “This path is the right path. This path is the path of love. This path is the path of sharing. This path is a path of beauty, the beauty of everything. [...] Our path [...] lessens the pain when it is shared and increases shared love”¹¹ (Nergis 2015b). Here, a parallel to Derrida’s thought can be established: the philosopher understands the binding aspect of religiosity as a gathering, which is primarily a gathering within oneself. Following Levinas, Derrida (1999, 28) understands gathering in oneself as the first condition for a welcome and thus also a precondition for unfolding gathering in a religious community. Another fundamental principle in the Alevi code of behavior is the maxim “to look at seventy-two nations with the same gaze” (“Yetmiş iki millete bir gözle bakmak”),¹² which illustrates Alevi aspirations to equality and non-discrimination; this therefore alludes to a possibility of a gathering also outside their original communities (Kılıç 2015b).

These principles, encouraging ethical conduct, clearly promote tolerance and acceptance, not only among the members of Alevi communities, but also toward foreigners, strangers, and others. The Alevis are therefore open to welcoming the unknown and believe in a loving God that might be disguised in many forms. Thus, Aleviness allows for hospitable encounters to happen. It is possible that understanding Aleviness as a tradition of hospitality or

11 Translated by the author from the audio transcription of a talk at an Alevi gathering (*cem*): “Bu yolu doğru bir yolu. Bu yol sevgi yolu. Bu yol paylaşım yolu. Bu yol güzellik yolu, güzelliđine her şey yolu. [...] Bizim yolumuz [...] acılar paylaştıkça azalır, sevgiler paylaştıkça çođalır.”

12 As a diverse region, Anatolia is known as the land of the “seventy-two peoples” (Hanođlu 2017, 18).

humanitarianism can be revealed through the combination of the aforementioned principles, and the discussion of Alevi music, culture, and rituals will contribute to further revealing this hypothesis.

Experiencing Hospitality among the Turkish Alevis

During my fieldwork in Istanbul, carried out mainly in the spring of 2015, I came to understand that hospitality is one of the main characteristics of Turkish culture in general. Because of this longstanding traditional stance, Turks are deeply aware of the many needs of their guests. Interestingly, the Turkish words for hospitality, *misafirperverlik* and *konukseverlik*, are far less frequently used in colloquial language than the more common words in use to denote a guest, *misafir* and *mihman*, and greetings to welcome a guest, such as *hoşgeldin* or *hoşgeldiniz* (sing. and pl. forms for “welcome,” respectively). This unbalanced word usage coincides with the Turkish inclination or preference to experience hospitality, to welcome guests with concrete shared gestures, instead of wasting words on concepts or definitions of hospitality as a term, noun, or idea.

“In Turkey, hospitality is a national virtue” (Delaney 1991, xi). Such a statement is a typical description of Turkey, and the Turks themselves also agree that they are a very hospitable nation. Nonetheless, the literature on hospitality in Turkey is meager, so there was no study found that could add perspective to the present inquiry. Another account to consider in researching hospitality is the effect of its tradition on the experience itself – the welcome, offered merely as a result of a custom might be experienced as less hospitable as the one offered sincerely, out of affection and fondness towards another (human) being. Therefore, while conducting research, a researcher should also keep in mind the need to take a step back, distance oneself in order to understand whether hospitable gestures are sincere and therefore might represent a possible foundation for an ethics of hospitality. My research with Alevis in Istanbul revealed their hospitality to be genuine, multi-layered, and always applied at several levels: their attention towards others included listening, considering each other’s and guests’ wishes, preparing space for visitors and newcomers, and accepting the beliefs of people who think differently.

Most of my fieldwork related to research on hospitality in Istanbul in 2015 was conducted through involvement in some specific activities of two religious-cultural associations, the Gaziosmanpaşa Hoca Ahmet Yesevi Cem Evi Inanç ve Kültür Derneği¹³ and the Hz. Ali Cem Evi Inanç ve Kültür Derneği (in the district of Esentepe). Members of these associations gather in what is referred

13 In 2014, this Alevi cultural and religious association was formed in order to ensure its status as a legal entity and the basic means for financial and material activities (Nergis 2015a). As already mentioned, the Alevis are not recognized as a religious community, thus they can only obtain state funds as conservators of Turkish cultural heritage.

to as a *cemevi*,¹⁴ meaning a space of assembly or worship where religious rituals, *cemler* (pl. of *cem*), occur. Members of both communities¹⁵ gather on Thursdays to participate in *cemler* where young people are encouraged to attend so that they can be introduced to and learn traditional Alevi religious practices. In addition to Thursday gatherings, the community organizes and participates in other events, particularly on special occasions that are celebrated to reminisce, preserve, and recreate their traditions.

These gatherings, *cemler*, are usually led by the hereditary spiritual guides of the community, the *dedeler*.¹⁶ The *dede* usually arrives ahead of the worshippers, who then greet him by bowing, indicating a kissing of his hand, or actually kissing his hand or kissing of the floor in front of him.¹⁷ *Dedeler* are usually descendants of the lineages (*ocaklar*, pl. of *ocak*)¹⁸ tracing back to the Twelve Shi'i Imams, which, according to their specific cosmologies, place them closer to God. Similarly, female elders are attributed great importance, but they are less apparent as leaders of *cemler*. The female descendant of the sacred lineages is referred to as *ana* or *bacı* and is respected by the communities as equally as the *dede*. In everyday life, however, the *dede* has the visible and leading role in the community.¹⁹ The characteristics of a wise and therefore respected *dede* are quite specific. He must have a modest character, use his words cautiously, be honest in relations with others, master his abilities, skillfully mediate between

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- 14 A *cemevi* (a literal translation would be “the house of *cem*,” or “the home of *cem*”), a house or space where the *cem* (religious ritual) takes place is very important for the modern social organization of the Alevis, since a *cemevi* is not only a place of ritual and worship, but also represents the center of the community (Hanoğlu 2017, 22). A *cemevi* can be any place comfortable and hospitable enough to host the complete Alevi community. For an in-depth account of *cemler* and *cemeviler* see Irene Markoff's (2018) article on Alevi-Bektashi ritual space.
- 15 The Ahmet Yesevi Alevi community, situated in the Gaziosmanpaşa district of Istanbul gathers in a single-room space located on the first floor of a commercial building. The Hz. Ali Alevi community from the Esetepe district meet in a simple ground-floor room in a residential apartment complex.
- 16 David Shankland (2003b, 104–111) offers an in-depth insight into the role of *dedeler* as part of his ethnographic research illustrating differences among regional Alevi communities.
- 17 These gestures of respect toward *dedeler* were common in most of the *cemler*. When the *dede* was late, worshippers stood up upon his arrival as a sign of respect.
- 18 In Turkish the word stands for “family,” but can also mean a fireplace, stove, household, family, meeting place, gathering, meeting, or center (Yaman 2011).
- 19 During “careful” conversations with some members of the community, I encountered rather ambiguous reactions when facing questions about prevalent male visibility. Interlocutors explained that *analar* (pl. of *ana*) had taken leading roles in the past, and that women are now assuming the roles of musicians (*zakirler*, pl. of *zakir*) at the *cemler*. One of the opinions encountered was that women could certainly take the leading roles, but they do not want to (Kılıç 2015a). It was also interesting to hear an opinion during an informal dialogue that in the past, the role of spiritual leaders might have been taken over by men because women were preoccupied with caring for their families, which men were not capable of. I have touched upon the issue of gender equality in my recent paper about the Alevi culture of breath (Bjelica 2021), but it is still an important and subtle theme to be developed further.

groups and individuals, master the Alevi rituals and interpret them rationally, and, finally, be hospitable (Shankland 2003b, 104–105). An ethnographic study in Thrace among Alevi-related Bektashi communities²⁰ (Sipos and Csáki 2009) revealed examples of the hospitality of one Bektashi *baba* (elder, equivalent to the Alevi *dede*); the researchers observe him

calmly put up a prisoner released that very day for the night in his own house, then take him to the bus terminal the next morning and buy him a ticket to home. He welcomes and puts up Christians as well, gives his last blanket to orphaned Roma children, gives a large sum in advance to Gypsy musicians and is certain that however long he has to wait, the musicians will come as they promised. He is exemplary in rejecting prejudice and truly respecting people. (Sipos and Csáki 2009, 37)

The *dede* or *baba* is a role model of ethical conduct which includes the essential characteristics of hospitality. This is related to Levinas' understanding of ethics as a primary welcome, essential responsibility for the other. In this sense, it is possible to explain the non-reciprocity of responsibility primarily from the point of view of Levinas' ethics: in order for a subject to act ethically, they cannot count on responsibility, the ethics of others, but must take responsibility upon themselves. *Dedeler* as role models take on such responsibilities themselves, which was evident in my experience participating in Alevi *cemler*. During field research, it was not possible to confine myself to observing only the gestures and dynamics of hospitality that the members of the community practiced with each other and with the external visitors. Rather, the most notable hospitality was that which they showed me – a young female researcher, ethnographer, and photographer from Europe whose interest in Alevi beliefs and culture would result in the dissemination of the results of her scholarly investigation through presentations at home and abroad. The participant observation research was made possible especially because the *dedeler* of both communities, Aşur Nergis and Hünkâr Uğurlu, welcomed me warmly to each *cem* I attended. Especially hospitable was Aşur *dede*, who showed a great degree of interest in my research, and also in my personal beliefs, which he did not dispute, despite their difference from Alevi beliefs.²¹ He invited me to sit in privileged spaces and to take part in moments of the *cem*, even though I was not accustomed to the ritual process. While participating at the *cemler*, I was always welcomed by the leader (*dede*), the musician (*zakir*) or other representatives of the community. I would sit in places close to the *dede*, so I would be able to observe the event in more detail, which was very helpful, as I

20 Despite some specific differences among these communities, the Alevis and Bektashis share many beliefs and customs (Markoff 2018; Soileau 2021, 115–117).

21 During an informal conversation before a *cem* I attended, Aşur *dede* asked me if I believe in the existence of God. I responded that I was not really sure about it, and he replied that we all have our own path, including me, referring to the *yol*, path of affection that all Alevis embrace.

was able to record with audio and video, and also photograph everything that was happening around me. Moreover, I was regularly approached by several members of the community, asking me if I needed anything, inviting me to sit closer, offering me additional pillows to sit more comfortably – it seemed that they all cared about me feeling at ease among them, despite my being a stranger. Such gestures acclaiming the guest are not rare in a *cem*. Irene Markoff (2018, 101), when describing a *cem* she attended, refers to “a *nefes* sung in my honor as the guest (*mihman*) who had come from afar to honor the saint and the community.”

Cem is an event that can be interpreted as a welcoming place, where guests and others are welcomed and accepted. Music plays a central role by creating an environment that provides a hospitable space for Alevi community members and their guests.

***Cem*: A Musical Welcome**

The basic name of the Alevi ritual is *cem*, which denominates a gathering, integration, even a group or a community. This is the fundamental spiritual religious practice of the Alevis; that is, a regular gathering during which males and females engage through the form of spiritual events in communal worship. Moreover, in the urban context of a big city such as Istanbul, these gatherings are an opportunity for members of Alevi communities to socialize and get to know each other,²² thus establishing mutual relations that enable them to enjoy everyday coexistence. “Most of the Alevi rituals are communal because the rituals mainly aim to foster unity and love within the society” (Hanoğlu 2017, 21). During these rituals, they become acquainted with their faith and with the history of their traditions. At the same time, these rituals present a fundamental starting point for the formation of Alevi ethics. Namely, this is the framework for the teachings about compassion, fraternity, tolerance, and other virtues and moral guidelines that the Alevis are encouraged to develop and adopt. *Cemler* represent the central space for the establishment of inter-subjective and social ties, and thus the fundamental and potential source of enabling mutual hospitality. At the same time, the rituals offer an opportunity for the members of the community to examine any potential resentments between individuals or to discipline any potentially harmful or violent acts (*düşkünlük*). The entire community can learn in this way and aim towards an appropriate application of Alevi ethics. When researching the changes in performing a *cem* in the urban environment, Fahriye Dinçer (2000, 34) noticed the following

22 I am indebted to the anonymous reviewer who pointed out that rituals in urban and rural contexts can differ greatly due to the fact that in the rural context the communities are smaller and more connected or unified, while in urban contexts the members might be living far away from each other and therefore the *cem* provides an additional opportunity to spend time together, as was evident in my experience, when observing the culture of the two Alevi communities in Istanbul.

important aspect: “The *cem*s could be conceived as the public gathering of the Alevi masses who have not been able to express themselves and their identities within the framework of the prevailing social order, and have come to live outside that order.”

In reflecting on the *cem* it is possible to say that music plays a central role in the establishment of a community space of coexistence, hospitable mutual acceptance of the faithful, and the spreading of wisdom and established guidelines and rules (*erkan*) regarding behavior and relationships in everyday life. Although the *cem* is led by the *dede*, the significance of the *zakir*, the instrumentalist and singer at the *cem*, also referred to as *aşık*²³ or *ozan*, is of great importance. I noticed that the participants of the *cem* accorded him the same respect they did to the *dede* (cf. also Dinçer 2000, 37–38). This is important to note because the *zakir*, in cooperation with the *dede*, creates a specific atmosphere in the *cem* with his selection²⁴ of music and lyrics that convey particular religious stories about Alevi saints or other specific messages about the Alevi *yol*. The *zakir* contributes significantly to the creation of a suitable mood for the *cem* by selecting a repertoire of which the lyrics or melodies are well known to the members, thus making the group more receptive to the music. Because of this, the participants are able to somehow join in performing the pre-established sacred songs, accompanying the *zakir* with their own, more open interpretations and individual feelings.

Music, as the central activity of the Alevi ritual, is the basic vehicle for spreading and reinforcing beliefs and wisdom for everyday community life. More specifically, the mystical poetry of dervish lodge poets and sometimes more contemporary Alevi minstrels is sung to the accompaniment of the sacred plucked folk lute, the *bağlama* or *saz*, performed by the *zakir*. The instrument has been referred to by some Alevis as the *telli Kuran* (stringed Koran), as it replaces scriptural sources found in other faiths.²⁵ It is through music that the Alevis welcome and express acceptance of the participants in the *cem*. Through

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- 23 The term *aşık* refers to the wandering bards of Anatolia who traditionally performed folk music in the rural context. Through their sung poetry they spread messages of humanity, love, hospitality, brotherhood, and similar themes, as will be emphasized further in this study. The term *aşık* means “the lover” or, more appropriately, “the one who is in love.” The importance of the bards for Alevi culture can be appreciated, for example, from the Alevi saying “Kuran’ın özü, aşığın sözü,” which means “the essence of the Koran is the word of the *aşık*.” This also coincides with the Alevi belief that wisdom is not “hidden in the Book,” but mainly in people themselves and in their everyday stories (Neyzi 2002, 102).
- 24 The performed repertoire usually corresponds to the specific segment of the ritual, so the choice is far from being random, but the *zakir*’s selection of the music nonetheless influences the soundscape of the ritual space.
- 25 This instrument symbolically represents Imam ‘Ali. The neck of the *bağlama* can also represent Imam ‘Ali’s sword, *Zülfikar*, while the twelve frets, appearing in some versions of the instrument, represent the twelve Imams (Ayışit Onatça 2007, 56). The *bağlama* is also a central symbol for the oral tradition of the whole Alevi population (Hanoğlu 2017, 25, n41).

evidence of the lyrics of their songs, which reinforce ideas of love, affection, friendship, solidarity, and humanity, it is possible to say that Alevi music creates an environment of integrated hospitality.

For centuries in Anatolia, sung poetry, mostly preserved in oral tradition, has been authored and performed by well-known or anonymous travelling Anatolian bards known as *aşıklar* (pl. of *aşık*).²⁶ In their mystical songs, called *deyiş* or *nefes* (Alevi or Bektashi terms, respectively), they not only refer to elements of Islamic mysticism, Alevi belief system and morals, but also convey messages about friendship, peace, affection, tolerance, hospitality, love, destiny. Some songs may also take the form of advice or satire (Duygulu 1997, 61ff).²⁷ These themes provide a deeper understanding of the beliefs and lifestyle of Alevis. That multiple themes appear in the sung poetry of the *cem* confirms that Alevis put great emphasis on the meaning of life while they live it, teaching goodness, fairness, and solidarity. The expression of compassion, fraternity, philanthropy, and affection in the Alevi songs has a great influence on the lives of community members. The presence of these messages in their mystical songs, messages of almost universal value and ethical significance, enable the ability to reach a wider range of listeners and believers, spreading beyond Alevi communities. In addition, most of these songs “contain clearly understandable, generally valid advice. They are gladly sung irrespective of the occasions, e.g., grannies sing them to their grandchildren and thus they are passed down from one generation to the other” (Sipos and Csáki 2009, 60).

An insight into the anthology of the Bektashi *nefesler* (pl. of *nefes*), presented as part of a 1990s ethnographic study in the region of the Turkish province of Thrace by János Sipos and Éva Csáki (2009, 109–610), revealed that some *nefesler* speak directly about hospitality. Their lyrics emphasize its importance and highlight the privileged position of the guest in every Alevi community. The following *nefes*, *Yine mihman geldi* (*A Guest Has Arrived Again*) explicitly welcomes guests, who are always accepted by the Alevi hosts with pleasure and delight, as brothers and sisters:

A guest has arrived, my heart's rejoicing.
Ref: Guests, you're welcome,
 Brethren, you're welcome!

26 The *aşıklar* of Anatolia are followers of Alevism or Sunni Islam, but they all recite epics as well as perform their own sung poetry accompanied by the *bağlama*.

27 Based on the analysis of the content of the representative lyrics of the songs, Duygulu (1997, 61–152) classified the songs into three groups. The first covers the compositions with religious, mystical or philosophical content, the second includes didactic and lyrical songs, while the third comprises songs with diverse or mixed content. In the further definition of the second group, there are six themes, one of which is hospitality.

No guest comes to a sad home,
He may shout and scream, his misery will never end,
He's invited all over, but won't go anywhere. *Ref.*

The guest even opens the inner door,
The guest is the rose of the master,
God's guest, my saint, Ali. *Ref.*

Be gracious, come to see us again,
Not only the big or the small, but all of us,
Food doesn't matter, let our eyes laugh. *Ref.*

(Sipos and Csáki 2009, 522)²⁸

After a direct welcome to the guests in the chorus, the verses of the *nefes* welcoming the *mihman* above all divulge the conditions that would foster their coming. For a guest to visit the house, the latter must be bright; that is, happy, positively oriented, and must represent the good-natured environment that will welcome the guests. The guests, regardless of their need to be hosted, and no matter how much any house or any host would desire the visit, will not pay a visit if the circumstances do not enable hospitality to emerge. Furthermore, in the third verse the song indicates that the guest is the one who has locked the door to the interior (“Misafirdir iç kapının kilidi”); that is, the interior of the Alevi spiritual path (*yol*) developed and cultivated by the members of the community. Since the guest has locked the door, only the guest can unlock it. Alevi hosts see the guest as a rose – someone valuable and beautiful but at the same time fragile and in need of care. In mentioning the divine guest, Ali himself, the *nefes* presents the possibility that each guest could be God, and because of this potential, according to Alevi belief, the guest always represents something divine, a presence of God.²⁹ The song ends with an invitation for a gracious visit by all members of the community, irrespective of their mutual differences, since it is important they make each other happy no matter what and how much they can share.

It seems that the lyrics of the song *Yine mihman geldi (A Guest Has Arrived Again)* suggest some sort of turning point in the perception of hospitality, which is usually conditioned by the nature or appropriateness of the guest:

28 This is the translation provided by the authors of the research upon the following original text in Turkish language: “Yine mihman geldi, gönlüm şaz oldu. / *Ref.* Mihmanlar siz bize hoşça geldiniz, / Kardeşler siz bize sefa geldiniz. // Kara olan eve misafir gelmez, / Bağırsa, çağırsa eksigi bitmez. / Her yere çağrılır bir yere gitmez. *Ref.* // Misafirdir iç kapının kilidi, / Misafirdir, sahibinin gülüdür / Tanrı misafiri pirim Ali'dir. *Ref.* // Kerem hümmet eyle gene gel bize, / Büyük küçük deme cümlemiz bile, / Yavan yahşi deme yüzümüz güle. *Ref.*”

29 Again, I am indebted to the anonymous reviewer who pointed out that this is due to the Alevi belief in the Oneness of Being (*vahdet-i vücüt*), as promoted by Ibn Arabi and alluding to the unity of the human being with God.

Alevi hosts would always unconditionally accept their guests, but in order to be able to do this, they must meet certain conditions – the hosts are those who must have a sufficiently pure heart, possess enough goodness, a sufficiently open soul to be visited by the guests. This brings us to Derrida's aporetic understanding of hospitality: if conditioned by laws or restrictions, hospitality cannot be "true" hospitality, i.e., one that could justify the ethics of human action. Ethics of hospitality could be based solely on an absolute, unconditional hospitality represented by the everlasting "yes" to everyone at every meeting. This kind of hospitality, however, is virtually impossible, as the danger of unconditional acceptance of the enemy is always implicit (Derrida 2000).

This unconditional law of hospitality, if such a thing is thinkable, would then be a law without imperative, without order and without duty. A law without law, in short. For if I practice hospitality "out of duty" (and not only "in conforming with duty"), this hospitality of paying up is no longer an absolute hospitality, it is no longer graciously offered beyond debt and economy, offered to the other, a hospitality invented for the singularity of the new arrival, of the unexpected visitor (Derrida 2000b, 81, 83). It is possible to conclude that Alevi paradigmatic hospitality is enabled precisely by the desire for the host to take care of the other as a part of the journey to achieve the ideal of a "complete human" (*insan-ı kamil*).

Furthermore, the lyrics of the various collected *nefesler* for the purposes of the study of Sipos and Csáki (2009, 480, 529, 538, 572, 600, 602, 604) illustrate that the people who visit and are always welcome know the mystery of God's righteousness – they are arriving at the love fair, as a message written in light; that guests open wide sacred spaces, purify and fill with joy the hosts' home, while the hosts sacrifice their own souls; that guests are holy people to whom one should show that they are good hosts, and that one should accept anyone as a brother or a sister; that there are no instances of conceit disappear when guests arrive and that winter turns into spring; that guests illuminate homes; that the company of the guests and attention towards them is interpreted as pleasure and love. One particular *nefes* explicitly states that the believers are also very grateful for any hospitality offered to them by a particular community, since they are recognized as equal, and able to worship and pray freely (Sipos and Csáki 2009, 528). Similarly, the lyrics of some *nefesler* state that the members of a community are "all one soul" and as such are "guests in this house," where the house is thought to be the entire (God's) world (Sipos and Csáki 2009, 553–555).

The foregoing interpretation of the selected *nefesler's* lyrics offers evidence that the Alevis do not see meeting a guest, an unknown foreigner, as a danger, but rather as a chance to approach the divine, following the principle of *insan-ı kamil* ("complete human"). Through regular prayer, the Alevis thus establish a relationship with infinity, with the unknown, to which they constantly turn,

despite the uncertainty of the latter. Thus, it can be said that when meeting a stranger, an unknown newcomer, they do not look on them as a danger, but above all as an opportunity to become divine – namely, it is divine to love a stranger. It is in this respect that the foundations of Alevi hospitality can be discerned also in terms of Derrida's unconditional hospitality and Levinas' responsible welcome to the other. It is precisely in this regard that the foundations of Alevi hospitality can be identified. Aleviness does not consider hospitality only in terms of being part of Alevi philosophy about living in unity, the acceptance of other, or general mutual affection; rather, the believers address hospitality directly, sometimes as the central theme expressed in the lyrics of sung poetry as well.

What is encouraging for identifying hospitality and hospitable intersubjective relationships is that they are not merely present in Alevi poetry, but also reflected in musical forms and elements integral to the *cem*. These too provide a lens to understand different ways of establishing hospitable intersubjective spaces, spaces, where members of the Alevi communities can meet as its equal subjects, as *canlar* (souls) in sharing.

Among the Alevi musical genres, one is called *karşılama*, which in Turkish translates as a meeting, reception, and greeting. This term also refers to a secular folk dance where the dancers face one another³⁰ when performing. It is performed when welcoming or receiving guests and particularly when a new resident is admitted to a new home, usually a bride (Sipos and Csáki 2009, 620). This gesture of individuals facing one another reminds one of Levinas' ethics, where encountering "the face of the other" is always accompanied by acceptance and welcome. A special musical form and sacred movement form carried out in the *cem* is *semah*,³¹ which includes turning or moving in circular formation along with musical accompaniment and singing (Ayışit Onatça 2007, 47–55). The initial of the three parts of the *semah*, characteristically its slow section, is called *ağırlama*, a term which can be interpreted as a welcome, since this is the moment when participants in the sacred movement meet at the center (*meydan*) and start turning or circling together (Ayışit Onatça 2007, 70).

Alevi faith emphasizes the importance of mutual hospitality not only in its beliefs, but also in its music, passing this message on to the community for daily life. Spreading messages through music has the potential to influence the formation of relationships and views of any community. Alevi music calls for affection, friendship, love, solidarity, and humanity, and enables the feelings of welcoming acceptance.

30 The word *karşı* means facing something or being across from.

31 Due to the spirituality and sanctity of this movement, which would be described as a dance by any external observer, the Alevis avoid using such a description, since the *semah* is anything but an ordinary social dance, which is why a common description of this custom is "turning," or sacred movement, referred to as *ibadet*.

Aleviness as a Possible Ethics of Hospitality

Through my observations and participation in two Alevi community associations, I determined that hospitality was deeply embedded in Alevi behavior, mutual relations, and, simply, their whole beings. Alevis themselves, however, do not conceptualize a discrete notion of hospitality, thus it is difficult to determine why it is so pervasive. Nonetheless, the observed aspects of welcoming gestures along with the principle of acceptance (*rızalık*) have been shown to be firmly embedded in the beliefs and practices of Alevi communities, and strongly influence their social order. These elements offer a fitting basis for the establishment of gestures of hospitality. The described religious, philosophical, and social circumstances seem to foster and encourage the development of ethical gestures, called upon by philosophers as Levinas and Derrida, such as responsibility, welcoming, affirmation, and acceptance. Derrida's exposure of the religious as a relationship without a relationship – the believer does not know the being they believe in, and therefore they cannot define their relationship – adds to the possibility for Alevis to establish a relationship with foreigners, strangers, without certainty. Any relationship with God is uncertain, a non-relationship (Derrida 1999, 29).

What would faith or devotion be when directed toward a God who would not be able to abandon me? Of whom I would be absolutely certain, assured of his concern? A God who could not but give to me or give himself to me? Who could not not choose me? (Derrida 1999, 104)

With their sympathy and attention to others, and due to tolerance and acceptance, Alevis are examples of hospitable hosts, and thus embody the paradigm of hospitality (*misafirperverlik*). Derrida (1999, 103), following Levinas, presents God as the one who loves the stranger, even without reciprocity. Greeting is intended for infinity, even if the existence of a god is not necessary. It is a desire of God for a stranger, an unknown, a desire beyond being; a greeting calling from the desire for love for a stranger.

An analysis of the hospitality-related theme appearing in the lyrics of selected traditional Alevi songs demonstrated the importance that Alevis attribute to the welcoming of guests, who are believed to deserve hospitality almost unconditionally. Alevi poetry and its accompanying music as an oral tradition also passes down messages of welcome and acceptance. At the same time, it represents a medium, and space, for the expression of both an individual and a collective Alevi specificity, without fear of being rejected because of difference or otherness.

The aim of this paper was not to formulate a definitive analysis explicating Aleviness as a paradigm for an ethics of hospitality. Its purpose was rather to acknowledge that hospitality, as demonstrated in various welcoming rituals

of Alevi communities, is implicitly embedded in Alevi everyday worship praxis, and may indeed represent one of the community's most emblematic features.

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POVZETEK

Alevijstvo, glasba in gostoljubje

Članek predstavlja del obširnejše raziskave o etiki gostoljubja, ki jo je avtorica izvajala v času svojega doktorskega študija, in se osredotoča na študijski primer gostoljubja turških alevijskih skupnosti, ki jih je proučevala v Istanbulu. Izsledki proučevanja temeljijo na avtoričinem osebnem izkustvu, njenem etnografskem terenskem delu in obsežnih raziskavah literature s področja alevijskih študij ter pričajo o strpnosti in odprtosti alevijskih skupnosti do drugosti, drugačnosti, tujosti, do neznanega. Opisani pristop do raznolikosti se kaže skozi gostoljubne prakse, ki jih pripadnice in pripadniki alevijskih skupnosti izkazujejo njim znanim in neznanim gostom in gostjam. Slednjim aleviji in alevijke namenjajo posebno pozornost in jim nudijo brezpogojno pomoč.

Prispevek zagovarja hipotezo, da so turške alevijske skupnosti zaradi svojih religijskih in sekularnih prepričanj, svetovnega nazora in etičnih gest paradigmatični primer snovanja etike gostoljubja, o kateri so pisali pripadniki kontinentalne filozofije, kot sta na primer Emanuel Levinas in Jacques Derrida. Vtkanost gostoljubja v alevijsko življenjsko prakso avtorica predstavi tako na osnovi izsledkov svojega terenskega dela – opazovanja z udeležbo v istanbulskih alevijskih skupnostih –, kot tudi s preučevanjem vloge glasbe v alevijskem ritualu, imenovanem *cem*. Posebna pozornost je pri tem namenjena analizi besedil izbranih alevijskih mističnih pesmi, imenovanih *deyiş* oziroma *nefes*, kjer se omenjajo gostoljubje, odnos do gostov ter njihov pomen za alevijske skupnosti.

Alevijska glasba predstavlja jedro alevijskega obredja. Skozi stoletja se je prenašala ustno in je predstavljala sredstvo ohranjanja alevijske kulture in religije ter njihove identitete. Glasbena izvajalska praksa vključuje mistične in sakralne uglasbene pesmi anatolijskih potujočih pevcev, imenovanih *aşık*, ki so tovrstno glasbo izvajali predvsem na ruralnem področju Anatolije. Peta besedila običajno spremlja izvajanje na turško ljudsko dolgovrato lutnjo, imenovano *saz* oziroma *bağlama*. Na alevijskih obredih se ob glasbi redno pojavlja tudi telesno gibanje, sakralni gibi v obliki vrtenja in kroženja, imenovani *semab*.

Uvid v značilnosti alevijske glasbe ter predvsem v njena besedila ponuja možnost razumevanja alevijske težnje po miroljubnem in empatičnem sobivanju z drugimi religijami kot osrednji del alevijske tradicije, utemeljene na človekoljubju. Študijski primer alevijske etike gostoljubja, predstavljen v tem prispevku na osnovi uvida v alevijsko glasbeno tradicijo, pa predloži možnost razumevanja alevijskih skupnosti kot vzora za vzpostavljanje etike gostoljubja.

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O AVTORICI

MAJA BJELICA (maja.bjelica@zrs-kp.si) je znanstvena sodelavka na Inštitutu za filozofske študije Znanstveno–raziskovalnega središča Koper. Njeno zanimanje za proučevanje turškega alevijstva se je razvilo tekom njene raziskave o alevijski glasbi v Istanbulu, leta 2009. Kasneje je pozornost preusmerila v alevijsko etiko in gostoljubje, ki ju je kot študijski primer vključila v svojo doktorsko disertacijo s področij antropologije in filozofije, z naslovom “Filozofsko–antropološka študija možnosti etike gostoljubja: dih, tišina in poslušanje v prostorih intersubjektivnosti.” Njeno znanstveno–raziskovalno zanimanje zajema etiko gostoljubja, aplikativno etnomuzikologijo, etiko poslušanja, skupnostno glasbo ter transdisciplinarnost.