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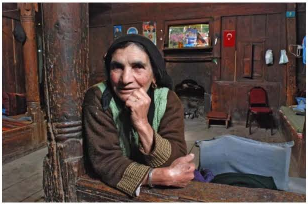
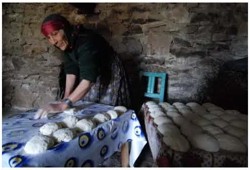
Turkey's Alevi Community

By Edge of Humanity Magazine, March 12, 2017



A society that advocates secularism and the Republic
Alevis is a community that defends the Republic and contemporary life.
You can see a photo of Ataturk who is the founder of Turkish Republic
and Turkish flag in every house

Documentary Photographer Aydin Cetinbostanoglu is the Edge of Humanity Magazine contributor of this social documentary photography. From his project 'Alevi Society'. **To see Aydin's gallery of projects click on any image.**



Those living in the Northeastern Anatolian Plateau deal with animal husbandry. Because they are far from settlements, they make many needs themselves. In the photo, a woman prepares to cook bread at home.

The fruit of the Daphne is collected every year in November and December and the oil is obtained by the traditional method. For this, the Daphne fruit is boiled for a long time in a very low heat and, mixed and hand tightening. Olive oil obtained in the region is mixed with Daphne oil to make soap. A family that produce Daphne oil in the photo.

Wheat pilaff is being prepared in the kitchen, to be distributed after the Cem ceremony. Materials of the food are donated by members of the community. After the ceremony, it is eaten together.

Anatolian Cultures / Alevi's and Their "Cem" Rituals

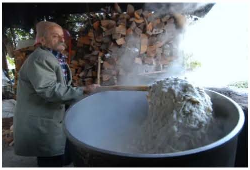
Secular and a Society Connected to the Republic

The Alevi are a religious, sub-ethnic and cultural community in Turkey, numbering in the tens of millions. Alevism is generally considered a sect of Shi'a Islam. However, Alevi worship takes place in assembly houses (cem house) rather than mosques. The ceremony, âyîn-i cem or simply cem, features music and dance (semah) which symbolize the main planets around the Sun (by man and woman turning in circles) and the putting off of one's self and uniting with God. In Alevism, men and women are regarded as equals, and pray side by side. Unlike most other Muslim practices, Alevi rituals are conducted mostly in Turkish.

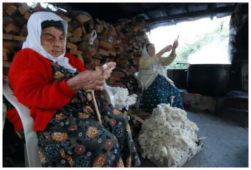
Alevi and Kurdish identities unite in Southeast Anatolia. The mother tongue is Kurdish but they do their ceremonies in Cem house like Turkmen Alevis. There is no difference in philosophical sense other than ethnic identity. The animal husbandry of the Turkmen Alevis has left their place to agriculture in that society. Their most important tasks in summer are tobacconist. Like the family in the photo

Key Alevi characteristics include:

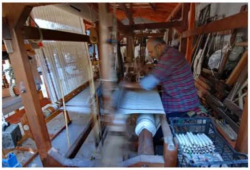
- Love and respect for all people ("The important thing is not religion, but being a human being")
- Tolerance towards other religions and ethnic groups ("If you hurt another person, the ritual prayers you have done are counted as worthless")
- Respect for working people ("The greatest act of worship is to work")



Silk is an important ongoing economic activity in Antakya today. In the Harbiye district where Alevis live intensively, silk cocoons are boiled in traditional methods and is made into threads to touch.



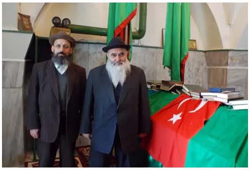
The boiled silk is made into yarn by Alevi women by traditional methods. Women make money from this business.



Silk is painted in different colors with vegetable organic dyes and is made into fabric by touching the hand on wooden benches. It is an important source of income for the region.

Some consider Alevism a sect of specifically Twelver Shi'a Islam, since Alevis accept Twelver Shi'i beliefs about Ali and the Twelve Imams. Alevism is also closely related to the Bektashi Sufi lineage, in the sense that both venerate Hajji Bektash Wali, a saint of the 13th century. Many Alevis refer to an "Alevi-Bektashi" tradition, but this identity is not universally accepted, nor is the combined name used by non-Turkish Bektashis.

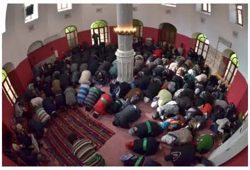
In addition to its religious aspect, Alevism is also closely associated with Anatolian folk culture.
Modern Alevi theology has been profoundly influenced by humanism and universalism. The 1990s brought a new emphasis on Alevism as a cultural identity. Alevi communities today generally support secularism after the Kemalist model.



Arab Alevis usually live in Antakya. There are no Cem house cultures like Turkmen and Kurd Alevis. Instead they worship their tombs. Like all Alevis, they are secular and republican. They advocate human-centered Alevi thinking.The most important differences are believing in reincarnation. That is why this belief is closer to Buddhism. The community is often led by sheikhs, wearing felt hat. In the photo, the sheikh and his son posing in the tomb.

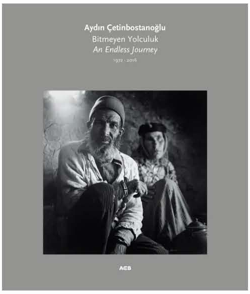
The sheikh, have a prestigious place among the community for many years, with his children in the last days of his life.

An Alevi family portrait photo in a traditional wooden house.



A moment from the Cem ritual. Dede (means Grandfather) of Jem's house conducts the ceremony verbally, and the congregation worships faces towards him. During the ceremony, a musician on the right side of Dede sings that reflects the Alevism philosophy with a traditional instrument. Male and female members take part in the ceremony together.

See also:



"The Endless Journey 1972-2016"

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