

Conference: Text and Cultural Heritage. Alevi-related Sources between Philological Research and Theological Canonization.
Heidelberg: University of Heidelberg, 28–29 November 2014

The **international workshop** was organized by the research project “**Negotiating Alevi Cultural Heritage**” at the **Institute of Near- and Middle East Studies, University of Heidelberg / Field of Focus 3 “Cultural Dynamics in Globalized Worlds”, Funding line: “Cultural Heritage and History”**. The workshop was conducted in cooperation with the **Heidelberg Center for Cultural Heritage (HCCH)**.

Both project and workshop addressed processes of standardization and canonization of rituals and texts within Alevi communities in Germany and Turkey: Ever since Alevi organizations in both countries had begun to open their hitherto concealed traditions to a growing public from the late 1980s onwards, questions have gained momentum regarding the representation of *Alevilik* via its central characteristics and common denominators, such as the *cem* ritual for example. In these contexts, various researchers have observed processes of standardization of religious practice (Motika/Langer 2005; Dinçer 2003) as well as other endeavors which aim at canonization—for example a work containing canonical hymns to be sung at the rituals issued by the *CEM Vakfı*. Moreover, in the 1990s a considerable number of Alevi private researchers and scholars started collecting and editing texts from an (assumed) Alevi context for identity formation. These processes of canonization and standardization as well as the (re)discovery of religiosity by Alevis culminate, for the moment, in approaches that aim at establishing “Alevism” as a confessional theological and educational academic discipline in Germany. In the field of historical research, the accelerating visibility of Alevism also brought up questions concerning possible sources for its historiography.

Taking these issues—to a considerable extent raised by previous research on Alevism in Heidelberg—as a point of departure, the workshop addressed the interdependencies as well as conflicts regarding the discussions of an Alevi Cultural Heritage between historical-philological research and normative approaches such as theological ones. “Text” and “Cultural Heritage” are thus to be taken as metaphors for these two different epistemological approaches to history and historiography, to its sources and resources: Whereas philological-historical approaches in this context would try to understand categories such as “text” or “history” as inherently subject to social dynamics and negotiations full of power, normative approaches would use these signifiers as resources in the construction of collective identities. Thus, the first session of the workshop called “**Defining an Alevi Canon and Heritage**”, started with disputatious discussions on the topic of possible textual (in a narrower sense) canons of Alevi belief and Alevi history. Rıza **Yıldırım** raised the question whether it was possible, and if so, how, to define a text as ‘Alevi’. With an example from the *Alevi-Bektaşî Klasikleri*-Series, which is issued by the *Diyanet*, it was discussed to what extent such text may constitute, a specific ‘Alevi’ canon of texts. Whereas Yıldırım was sceptical about this project, Doğan **Kaplan** maintained in his presentation that the aforementioned *Alevi-Bektaşî Klasikleri*-Series could be considered as representative for Alevism, even though it was the *Diyanet* publishing these texts. As it were Alevi *dedes* who chose the texts to be published in the series, it would be—normatively speaking—a legitimate (re)source for representing Alevism.

Mark **Soileau**'s presentation added the 'Bektaşî-factor' to these issues: Although both traditions (Alevi and Bektaşî) must be distinguished from one another in socio-geographical terms, a common denominator between them was, according to Soileau, a shared mythological world: the hagiographies of Anatolian saints, though reflecting a folk-dervish-Bektashi tradition are also considered as an Alevi tradition by many Alevi and as such capable of contributing to an Alevi Cultural Heritage as a textual resource.

The discussion was challenged by a comment, that any such endeavour to define an Alevi textual canon would inevitably subscribe to a hegemonic notion of religion. An inner-Alevi discussion should rather approach such questions with a wide textual understanding that would include oral tradition and other cultural assets characteristic for Alevi.

The fundamentally different status of the written word in Alevi communities was further illuminated by David **Shankland**: In the panel called "**Oral Culture and Text**" he argued that the way of leading life in scripture-based as compared to non-scripture-based religious communities, that is for example in Sunni vs. Alevi villages, is organized differently and thus implicitly underlined an approach to an Alevi Heritage not based on texts in the narrower sense, because custom constitutes a primary characteristic of Alevi socio-religious interaction. Ulaş **Özdemir**'s contribution marked the beginning of yet another session headed "**Standardization and Diversity beyond the Written Word**". In analogy to Yıldırım's presentation, Özdemir asked what criteria would contribute to a notion of music being characterized as Alevi? Oftentimes, as he argued, any music sung by Alevi is categorized as Alevi music, but what kind of melody, text, or person may be characterized as such? Being himself an active musician, he refuses to subscribe to such a categorization.

Martin **Greve**'s presentation followed Özdemir's and illustrated some of the thoughts brought to the scene before: In his talk on *Religious Music in Dersim between Standardization and Regional Reconstruction* he maintained that although Alevi ritual practice and music played therein may be more and more standardized, a younger generation of musicians, such as Metin and Kemal Kahraman, for example, try to develop a style of music that focuses more on historical reconstructions of melody and text. Thus, examples from these musicians show to what extent socio-economic transformations and processes of standardization within Alevism may be challenged when such a form of music – which in the context of Dersim where Alevism constitutes a majority identity is not named as specifically Alevi – is detached from ritual practice.

Béatrice **Hendrich** analyzed in her talk a paradigmatic change from performative to material culture within the processes of standardization of ritual practice and struggles for recognition: The *cem* ritual, she argued, is inherently performative in its meaning, with the *dede* as the "embodiment of message" creating a sacred space by speech act. Recent claims for *cem evi* as markers of recognition as well as the material existence of them undermine this fundamental performative aspect and emphasize materiality. Thus, this evidence raised yet again the question whether such a 'materialist turn' represents success in an Alevi struggle for recognition, or rather an example for the argument that recognition is only to be achieved by subscribing to hegemonic understandings of religion and the material manifestations thereof in the form of built sacred space.

The last session was dedicated to a wider range of **Alevi related texts and Ottoman historical contexts**: Markus **Dressler** spoke about the changing connotation and perception of the terms Alevi and Alevilik in the 19th and 20th centuries. His historization of the terms Alevi

and Alevilik in Turkish nationalist discourses contributed to the workshop's discussion in emphasizing the contingency of the terms themselves. Any attempt to discuss a history, or a nature of Alevism, he argued, had to be sensitive about the possibly anachronistic assumption, taking a concise Alevi community for granted in times before the nation state.

Possible sources for such an Alevi history and historiography constituted the topic of Johannes **Zimmermann**'s contribution *Finding Only Half the Needle: Alevi Presences in Late-Ottoman Sources – Glimpses at Health Reports, Provincial Newspapers and (Semi-)private Letters*. He argued for broadening the archive of ottoman texts related to Alevi history: Whereas texts from the central administration and from contexts of *Kızılbaş* persecution were widely known and published by Alevi *araştırmacı yazars*, later provincial material has yet been largely understudied with a focus on Alevi presences. The examples given in his presentation provided insight in the perception of local actors, such as doctors, and their observations on local customs—detached from an immediate imperial narrative on religious deviance.

Benjamin **Weineck**'s talk took a similar line: His presentation about a group of people from an Alevi context handing in a petition to the imperial divan in the late 18th century showed to what extent these parts of the population were interacting with Ottoman authorities without their religious identities being a central element in this interaction. He took Yıldırım's considerations concerning the "Aleviness" of texts into account and discussed methodological problems of Alevi's intelligibility in Ottoman texts, when they are not explicitly named as religiously deviant or political subversive as *Kızılbaş*.

Most of the papers presented—though widely differing in both methodology and disciplinary background—surrounded questions of standardization and canonization and asked, who does or who may define such canons and for what purposes or to what ends a certain canon or a specific standard could be accepted as such. Likewise, the presentations as a whole brought together multiple possible fields of inquiry and sources for studying Alevi history and identity. The various approaches also depicted the variety of epistemologies related to the question of text as 'source' for an Alevi historiography and as 'resource' for identity issues and theology. One important aspect in the overall discussion was also the question, whether processes of standardization—be it in contexts of text, rituals, architecture and others—are necessarily linked with accommodation to hegemonic norms and ideas about religion, religious practice or sacred texts. This very *locus*, at which hegemonic definition and self-standardization meet, was also the point at which the project this workshop was related to located the negotiation of Alevi Heritage.