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CEM EVI – REWRITING TRADITION*

The way of arranging and using a certain space may say a lot about the group who organized it. It is a common truth, and it is also true in the case of *cem evi* – the place of religious and social ceremonies of Alevis, who are a heterogenic group whose descendants appeared in Anatolia as part of the wave of Turkish peoples. Their tradition was created in a kind of syncretic system as both the social and the religious field and it consists of elements of the pre-Islamic Turkish culture, Zoroastrianism, Sunni and Shea Islam (including different Sufi movements), Christianity and even Judaism¹.

Alevis' history is filled with dramatic experiences. Since at least the 13th century many revolts against the Seljuks and the Ottomans had taken place. And particularly tragic character had the repressions which followed lost uprisings – resettlements and massacres. All of them exerted strong influence upon Alevis' moral system of values as well as their everyday lives including the way of performing their religious ceremonies². Basic procedures for defending Alevi societies were keeping them secret and hiding. One of the effects of this hiding was a complete lack of a permanent place of religious ceremonies as we know it in the case of other great religions of the region (Judaism, Christianity, Islam). But nowadays such a place exists. It is called *cem evi*, which can be translated as 'house of service' or 'house of gathering, house of assembly'. There is no simple and correct translation as *cem evi* fulfils many cultural functions, hence in this paper I will use the Turkish term 'cem evi'.

Cem was an annual ceremony, consisting of very important religious rituals, preceded by a meeting during which decisions concerning social and economic problems of the group were taken. It lasted several days, and the main ceremony took at least a few hours³. Today *cem*s are arranged by small society on the occasion of joining to the group of initiated members. They still maintain their secret character. Most of the *cem* ceremonies called education *cem*s (Tur. *eğitim cem*i) are almost publicly available and they are held more often than once a year, sometimes every week, on Thursday. This situation creates a need of permanent places where these ceremonies could be held.

In the past, even about fifty years ago, in the mountains and countryside, in villages inhabited by Alevi communities, there was no *cem evi*. Secret gatherings and meetings were held in specially arranged rooms. It could be a cowshed, sheepshed, stable, barn or the largest room in one of the largest houses in the village. In everyday life all these rooms performed their mundane functions in the profanum space and time. Only during ceremonies they became places for sacrum. Today, when Alevism is much more present in the open and public space, we have permanent *cem evi*s. This state of permanence should be understood as immobility of real estate rather than as non-material stability⁴. The fundamental rule of Turkish religious policy is "one nation-one religion" and "Turk means Sunni". These kinds of opinions do not create warm climate for Alevi communities. Most authorities can hardly accept existence of the group as something different than Sunnism. Very often Alevism is considered as deformed Sunnism. In consequence authorities claim that there is no need for any special space or place

* The text is based on the research conducted by the author in Turkey, Germany and Poland in 2005–2013.

for Alevi religious ceremonies. So Alevis face many problems when they try to build *cem evi* or even try to create it in the existing space. If any group wants to build *cem evi*, usually it should be part of some larger complex of Culture Center of Hacı Bektaş Veli, Pir Sultan Abdal or some Society of Villages of X River Valley, etc. Then the permission is not given for the investment being a prayer house or kind of temple, but for a cultural center. Investment of 'cultural center' type is very complicated as well as rather costly. So very often various societies and foundations rent some apartments, basements or office spaces for *cem evi* next to which there is a place for the office of the organization. And of course in these rented flats space for *cem evi* must be adopted from the beginning taking into consideration the original space of the place. We may say that nowadays *cem evi*s are always constructed from the basics and very often *ad hoc* according to the present situation and space of the place one has at disposal. The form of *cem evi* explains its functions and the presented ideology of the group.

In a cultural complex one may find some offices and libraries, conference halls, halls for *semah*⁵ groups repetition or for *saz*⁶ musicians, sometimes also guest rooms and even kinds of club halls where people can meet, drink some tea and talk about their usual everyday problems. *Cem evi* needs space not only for prayers, but because of the form and course of the ceremony, also a place where sacrificial animals may be killed and their meat may be prepared to be shared during the ceremony. Besides meat ceremonial food includes also other things given by the participants of the ritual. So in reality *cem evi* is not only a place where one says prayers. For the purpose of this text however, I will concentrate on this strictly ceremonial space.

I will try to describe the space of three *cem evi*s, in Eskişehir, in Erzincan and in Ankara in Tuzlucaıyır district. In all of them *cem*s took place in the past or still take place today.

In Eskişehir, *cem* was arranged in the living room (Tur. *salon*) of a private apartment where a typical family lived. It was arranged just for a one-time and a very particular ritual. In Erzincan, the huge *cem* hall is part of a much larger complex of the Erzincan Province Department of Anatolian Cultural Foundation of Hacı Bektash Veli (Tur. *Hacı Bektaş Veli Anadolu Kültür Vakfı Erzincan Şubesi*). This investment was created from the beginning to perform its religious and social functions. In Ankara, in Tuzlucaıyır, the space in which *cem*s are held was arranged in the basement of a residential building, just in a simple block of flats. Those who prepared this space to arrange *cem*s in it, had to take into consideration the architect's sketch of the building, for example stud walls.

The simplest is the space of the living room. Actually it is very difficult to recognize in it a space prepared for religious ceremonies, or even just for simple prayers. A standard living room of a standard Turkish family was adapted for special needs. All furniture from the middle of the room was removed. That by the walls as well as all decorations on the walls were left. These were some handicrafts made by the lady of the house or some family photographs. No new elements were added, so looking only at the room no one was able to guess that in a short time some religious ceremony would be taking place inside. Except for the time of the ceremony, when in this space a very particular event was going on, there was no sign of its unique or sacral character.

Erzincan is a completely different venture. Plan of all the investment was created from the basics, which gave its organizers a great opportunity to implement their ideological programme just as they had wanted. *Cem* hall takes a huge more-less circular space. On the edge of the ring, opposite to the doors there is place for the leaders conducting all ceremonies. Inside this ring there is another one, adjoining to the first, where participants who play special roles during the ceremony are seated. They are called masters of twelve duties (Tur. *on iki hizmet sahipleri*). Images of twelve imams, Hacı Bektash Veli and Mustafa Kemal Atatürk are on the wall behind the leaders. Other walls are decorated with religious pictures presenting the twelve imams in different compositions. In front of the leaders three lamps in a shape of candles are put. They are lit during the ritual. They are the central point of the whole space because every participant of the *cem* ceremony can see them all the time. The space, except for the circular divisions, does not show any other divisions. All people gathered in this space

must sit in a circle, and everyone looks into each other's face. This arrangement determines that regardless of age or sex one must see every other person in the room.

In Ankara, in Tuzlucaýır district, *cem evi* is performed in a dwelling house basement. The place was adopted particularly for the needs of *cem evi*. All partition walls were pulled down, but all studding elements had to remain. That determined the division of the space in two main parts. The first one is very similar to the *cem evi* in Erzincan. There is a selected space for religious leaders who conduct the ceremony. All the others sit in a circle around the central space where main rituals take place. Behind and slightly above the leaders, on the walls, images of Atatürk, Haji Bektash Veli and twelve imams are hanged. Next to them there is also Turkish flag. And at this point similarity ends. Next to this main or central space there is another one. More or less of the same size but separated from the "central" room by two columns of studding elements of the building. Between these columns some seats with pillows were put and arranged so that they form something of a little wall, about 50 cm high. The pillow wall separates the two rooms moving the second one out of the central circle.

What do these three places say about Alevism? In Eskişehir – nothing at all, as no one is able to recognize the space as being used by Alevi community. In Erzincan we have got messages about patriotism, sentiments to Haji Bektash Veli and twelve imams what can point at some Shiism influences, equality of the participants of the ceremony. In Tuzlucaýır we have got information about patriotism and certain categorization of participants, division into the group from the central circle and those from outside of the circle.

What one really needs to read these three texts. Though it is not a spoken language, it is a language after all. According to Bronislaw Malinowski's language theory, language is not only a verbal act but also an action itself, so in order to give those spaces a voice we have to see them in action, during the celebration.

In Eskişehir we may see perfect equality of the participants of the ceremony. Women and men sit together in a circle facing each other. They are different of age, economic situation and they all take part in the ceremony. What is common to them is that all of them passed the same level of initiation. During the ritual everyone knows one's place and how to behave.

In Erzincan we may see again equality of the community with two little exceptions. The first is the division into female and male halves of the circle, the second is the division of the place for those who play particular roles during the ceremony in the centre of the circle and for the rest of participants. But all gathered people again sit in the circle, sometimes in several concentric circles, looking at each other (praying to each other).

In Tuzlucaýır, in Ankara, patriotism is emphasised very strongly, but along with that categorization of participants as well. There are participants from the main circle and participants from the marginal room. In the central room men sit, on the side women sit. By looking at the way they are seated it becomes clear that ladies are out of the circle of their community, and in the ceremonies and rituals they may take part from the geographic position of spectators.

Space in Eskişehir arranged for one time needs, but the text was written by participants of the ceremony and the way they behave in it. Spaces of Erzincan and Tuzlucaýır both teach tradition but put themselves in opposition to the general ethical norms of the outside world. In Erzincan competent participants are distinguished according to their functions – masters of twelve duties. They usually know all prayers, all rituals, and they take part in the most sacrificial parts of the ritual. There is no such distinction in Tuzlucaýır. But here division into male and female sector is very strict. Such division is very strange to Alevi traditions. Especially during rituals there are no men-women but only souls (Tur. *can*, *canlar*), without sex and even gender. Thus when creating space no one should be privileged to sit in the centre of sacrum where others are in a position closer to the profanum, separated from the community. Division into male-female space can be noticed also in Erzincan, except for the central circle where men and women sit side by side. But here souls of both sexes sit in the same position with reference to the center as well as to the leaders or candles. And the right or left side is not distinguished with regard to quality. In Erzincan we may rather talk about two halves of

an apple than about separation. In Tuzlucaýır this separation was forced by the space which was found in the basement, though it is also much more acceptable by the external, Sunni world rules. It must be said however, that the newly constructed *cem evi*s are more similar to the Erzincan solution. Here, according to local traditions male and female souls may sit in two halves of the circle or alternately man-woman-man-woman.

It is a very direct piece of information about Alevis' social system and the place and role in the society of a man and a woman. Comparison between these three situations shows also the most important and the firmest elements of religious and social programme of Alevism. It shows also points in which there may be reached some kind of a compromise, even if only temporarily. However, it seems as if the space and its arrangement were of almost no importance. In basic situations all programmes were presented by people and the way they acted during the prayers. Everything else, in the case of Erzincan or Tuzlucaýır, was added as well a *signum temporis*, as the sign of instantly changing time. Not everything must be changed and even in the most difficult situation not everything may be changed. The most important elements must remain. Sometimes the most up-to-date must be allowed as well. Whatever was added or taken, it was important for the local or general community of Alevis.

The structure and function of *cem evi* may be considered as a certain semiotic construction like "writing culture". However, in the case of *cem evi* it is a very old and at the same time a very new construction. As a place of religious ceremonies *cem evi* has been known for generations. But it has been possible to arrange it *ad hoc*, when and where it was needed, every time from the very beginning. Permanent *cem evi*s are relatively new, and their arrangements depend on many conditions – type of space, social situation, programme and ideology of the group leaders. So if *cem evi* may be a text, then every next *cem evi* will be both writing the new and re-writing the old text with necessary changes and additions.

I hope the text of *cem evi* and the problem which have been presented here is an encouragement to take a closer interest in nonverbal texts of culture. Most scholars who research Turkish culture work on the language or literature. The language they research is taken in a very traditional way. But the language expressed with sounds or signs written, for example on paper, is not the only way of researching-analysing a given culture. Treat this voice and this way of reading certain elements of Turkish culture as a kind of experiment. This is not a postulation that we may do anthropological research without the basic tool which is the knowledge of the local group's language. I am convinced that it is a condition *sine qua non* of every anthropological research and analysis. But I am also convinced that language in its traditional meaning is not the only way the culture text may be written. Ignoring these other "languages" we expose ourselves to a risk of working with the use of defective methods. We must know the language, but we also have to know these noncolloquial languages. Because we may say of course "afiyet olsun" or "helal olsun" when we finish our supper, but this is not the beginning and even not the end. The language of culture starts from the moment we set the table or "sofrayı hazırlıyoruz" (not "masayı"), how we sit at the table – *sofra/masa* (?) – and the way we eat, or maybe drink a soup.

¹ Irene Melikoff, Bektashi/Kızılbaş: Historical Bipartition and Its Consequences, [in:] T. Olsson, E. Özdalga, C. Raudvere, Catharina, (eds.), *Alevi Identity. Cultural, Religious and Social Perspectives. Papers Read at a Conference Held at the Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul, November 25–27, 1996, Istanbul 2003*, pp. 2–3; Irene Melikoff, *Kırklar'ın Cemi'nde*, İstanbul 2007, pp. 29–31; Ali Yaman, *Alevilik ve Kızılbaşlık Tarihi*, İstanbul 2007, pp. 71–81.

² Krisztina Kehl-Bodrogi, *Kızılbaşlar/Aleviler*, İstanbul 2012, pp. 38–40; Ali Yaman, *Alevilik ve Kızılbaşlık Tarihi*, İstanbul 2007, pp. 81–153.

³ See: Esat Korkmaz, *Ansiklopedik Alevilik-Bektaşilik Sözlüğü*, İstanbul 2003, "cem", pp. 91–100.

⁴ Ali Yaman, *Alevilik ve Kızılbaşlık Tarihi*, İstanbul 2007, pp. 148–158.

⁵ *Semah* – ceremonial whirling dance performed during *cem* ceremonies.

⁶ *Saz* – traditional stringed musical instrument.