

Sweeping the Meydan: Home and Religious Ceremony Amongst the Alevis

Angela Andersen et Can Gündüz

Approaching Home: New Perspectives on the Domestic Interior
Vers la maison : nouvelles perspectives sur l'intérieur domestique
Volume 45, numéro 2, 2020

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1073938ar>
DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1073938ar>

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Éditeur(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (imprimé)
1918-4778 (numérique)

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Citer cet article

Andersen, A. & Gündüz, C. (2020). Sweeping the Meydan: Home and Religious Ceremony Amongst the Alevis. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 45(2), 47–63. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1073938ar>

Résumé de l'article

Les alévis de Turquie parlent de la tradition qui consiste à organiser des *cems*, cérémonies en congrégation, dans les maisons des guides spirituels héréditaires et d'autres membres de la communauté. L'alévisme, qui regroupe les pratiques des lignées spirituelles kurdes et turcophones d'Asie occidentale issues de la famille du prophète Mahomet, est historiquement suivi sans l'utilisation des bâtiments de la mosquée, au contraire de leurs voisins musulmans sunnites. Dans cet article, nous combinons l'analyse architecturale avec des histoires orales recueillies auprès d'alévis pratiquants pour examiner les maisons alévis utilisées pour la cérémonie. Les pièces et les arrangements domestiques décrits par nos interviewés sont des études de cas dans le cadre d'un examen plus large de la vie religieuse et du comportement au sein du foyer et soulignent l'expérience de communautés spirituelles marginalisées dans les contextes rural et urbain. Notre recherche originale sur ce sujet élargit les définitions de l'architecture islamique, intègre la culture matérielle domestique dans l'histoire des sites liturgiques et érode la distinction présumée entre les contextes religieux et domestique.

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Angela Andersen is an architectural historian and museum professional. She is a fellow at the Centre for Studies in Religion and Society at the University of Victoria.
—ala@uvic.ca

Can Gündüz is an architect and sociologist. He is an instructor in the Department of Architecture at Izmir Institute of Technology in Turkey.
—cangunduz@iyte.edu.tr.

Introduction

The enclosed, protected environment of the dwelling lends itself to the enactment of religious and spiritual practices. This makes the domestic interior one of the most significant and widespread of all religious architectural settings across the globe. Yet, the spaces of domestic devotional practices themselves, often temporarily transformed for religious uses and shared with the tasks and habits of everyday life, are little understood as examples of religious architecture. Our study, therefore, looks to the congregational use of homes in the Alevi traditions of Turkey as a specific example of this tradition. We conduct site studies and assemble oral histories, which are sources essential to the examination of domestic religious sites as places of ongoing, congregational religious and spiritual praxis.

Religious activities undertaken by individuals and small groups including prayer, meditation, recitation, study, and the preparation of offerings regularly take place in houses, apartments, and their surrounds. Traditions such as mourning, giving thanks, preparing and sharing food, and acknowledging the beginning and end of each day hold religious resonances that are intrinsically linked to the spaces of the home in many belief systems. The design and construction of houses may accommodate niches for ancestor portraits or deity statues, or separate rooms for ritual bathing or daily *puja*. Structural accommodations for religious activities are less common than impermanent, need-based adaptations of the dwelling through furnishings and objects. The largely ephemeral and moveable nature of domestic praxis make religious activities in the home challenging to examine through an architectural lens.

The congregational use of the home for assembly, ritual, and ceremony is another aspect of the praxis of historical and contemporary communities. Domestic arrangements of spiritual pursuits often reflect common religious practices within the wider community. Thus, the devotional acts and objects found within the dwelling, assumed to be “private” in nature, are often closely linked to public practices.¹ Groups choose the home space to meet and worship in order to cultivate the auspicious impact rituals, prayers, and offerings have upon the house and family. Many religious communities, ancient and contemporary, have modelled their places of worship and pilgrimage after domestic architectural forms, creating the proverbial “house” of worship. For example, the Christian Society of Friends, also known as Quakers, have long constructed meeting places in the local residential idiom.²

The use of the home for worship also expresses the needs of nascent, sectarian, displaced, or even secretive customs or doctrines that require the sanctuary of the home as a transitional site before the community can move to safer or more permanent worship spaces. Whether the home is located within the village or urban fabric, what happens in the domestic interior is often beyond the direct social control of rulers, the state, and the dominant religious hierarchy. This allows the home to function as a literal sanctuary: it is a safe alternative when public worship is restricted, is a punishable offense, or when laws limit the construction of other appropriate sites for worship and ceremony.³

Domestic architecture plays an important role in the ways members of many faith communities practice their beliefs, so it is curious to encounter a dearth of studies that specifically examine the subject of dwelling spaces in their guise as settings for religious practice and ritual from an architectural perspective. The home as a transitional setting for enacting religion is also overlooked. For example, researchers point out that prayer in the home, what they refer to as “domestic religion,” is not an aspect of the broader literature on Muslim immigrant societies.⁴ Anthropologists and sociologists have long engaged the subjects of home and family traditions, which are often defined by domestic links. But such studies are not typically bound by either religious or architectural parameters.⁵

The Alevi Muslim minority in Turkey assembles for ceremonies known as *cems*.⁶ While many Alevis have moved to urban areas since the mid-twentieth-century, and their traditional, seasonal calendar of gatherings and practices has been replaced by weekly assemblies in Alevi “cultural centres,” Alevi use of domestic interiors as congregational ceremonial architecture stands as a case study for the exploration of religious life and comportment within the home. Our article will approach domestic architecture in Alevi communities and its relationship to Alevi ceremony to introduce the connection between home space and religious space. We will provide a brief discussion of domestic architecture in Islam, Turkey, and Alevi ceremonial life, look to the home’s role in the protection of a marginalized spiritual community, address Alevi ritualization of cleaning, food preparations and other domestic labours and the enactment of familial relationships within the domestic ceremonial setting, and explore the meaning of communal ceremonies for home owners.

Alevi design intentions for their domestic *cem* spaces have not been a matter of public discourse. Our examination relies upon the experiences and memories of Alevis who recall the *cems* held at home, often while they were children living in rural areas in the middle decades of the twentieth century, in a time before their families relocated from villages to larger urban centres in Turkey. During interviews that took place between 2010 and 2019, Alevis originating from the provinces of Istanbul, Izmir, Sivas, Tokat, Erzincan, Malatya, Diyarbakir, Ardahan, and Dersim (Tunceli) spoke with us about the relationship between the house/home (*ev*) and Alevi ceremony, both in passing (as part of discussions surrounding *cem* architecture), and at length (as the result of thematic interviews).⁷ Sometimes their comments about houses compare what was with what is: increasing Alevi urbanization means *cems* are less likely to take place among the households of their traditional spiritual lineages (*ocaks*). Passing mentions of *cems* at home also indicate that this use of domestic space

1. See Maya Corry, Marco Faini, and Alessia Meneghin, “Introduction,” in *Domestic Devotions in Early Modern Italy*, ed. Maya Corry, Marco Faini, and Alessia Meneghin (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 1–24.

2. Catherine C. Lavoie, “Reunited, Rebuilt, Enlarged, or Rehabilitated: Deciphering Friends’ Complex Attitudes toward Their Meeting Houses,” *Buildings and Landscapes: Journal of the Vernacular Architecture Forum* 19, no. 2 (2012): 20–52.

3. See Dotan Arad, “When the Home Becomes a Shrine: Public Prayers in Private Houses Among the Ottoman Jews,” in *Domestic Devotions in the Early Modern World*, ed. Marco Faini and Alessia Meneghin (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 55–68.

4. Shampa Mazumdar and Sanjoy Mazumdar, “The Articulation of Religion in Domestic Space: Rituals in the Immigrant Muslim Home,” *Journal of Ritual Studies* 18, no. 2 (2004): 74–85.

5. See, for example, Loren D. Marks and David C. Dollahite, “Don’t forget home’: the importance of sacred ritual in families,” in *Understanding Religious Ritual: Theoretical Approaches and Innovations*, ed. John P. Hoffmann (Routledge: New York, 2012), 186–203.

6. Some *cems* commemorate saints, initiate young adults, or occur when mendicant *Dedes* arrive. See Mehmet Yaman, *Alevilikte Cem* (Istanbul: Ufuk Matbaacılık, 1998). The shape of the liturgy followed in some modern *cemevis* is described in Martin Sökefeld, *Struggling for Recognition: The Alevi Movement in Germany and in Transnational Space* (New York; Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2008), 146–152.

7. Our deep thanks to the many Alevis, both named and unnamed, who gave their time and shared their memories, to Günkut Akin for sharing his images, to Mehmet Ersal for arranging the Hasan and Necla Ateş meeting, and to Müslüm Güzel for arranging the Gazi Kara interview.

was unremarkable in certain regions and at specific points in history, and can therefore be understood as a common facet of Alevi lived experience. Nonetheless, eliciting descriptions of domestic *cem* spaces required prompting: explaining a house is a difficult task if one has never considered “home” in its architectural rather than its emotional and familial sense.

Experiences of architecture are challenging to parse in any context, and are complicated with layers of memory. Sensory notes, such as music, feelings of safety or excitement, and the smell and taste of food often intermingle with recollections of religious settings. We have made a conscious effort to resist any insistent interpretation of the tradition of Alevi *cem*s in domestic settings, as that is not the experience of all Alevis. Nor do we intend to typologize Anatolian domestic *cem* spaces, or suggest a monolithic Alevi praxis. While anecdotes suggest that the use of houses for *cem*s was common, our architectural and oral history evidence only dates back some 100 years. Indeed, some Alevis recall *cem*s in caves and in the village centre, in addition to *cem*s in homes, in *cemevis* (lit. “houses of the *cem* ceremony”) and in the purpose-built Alevi centres which began to appear in the 1990s in Turkish cities.⁸ The responses of our interview subjects provide insight into their personal experiences and memories of *cem*s in the home. We have taken this as the basis for our case study, in the interest of exploring the transitional qualities of home space as space for work, worship, and the experience of the everyday. The exploration of religious and ceremonial architecture need not be limited to typological analyses of structure and decorative programme and will benefit from questions about how spaces are understood, prioritized, and utilized by their use communities.

Alevism

Alevism is a term used to encompass heterogeneous Kurdish and Turkish-speaking lineages headed by hereditary spiritual guides, known as *Dedes*; Alevis are linked to their guides through student-teacher relationships. Other distinct identities are included under the label of Alevism: the Woodcutters (*Tahtacı*s) are associated with the traditional occupation of their community.⁹ Alevis are sometimes conflated with the Shi’i branch of Islam due to their particular focus upon the figure of Ali ibn Abi Talib (d. 661, son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, d. 632), and the descendants of the Prophet’s family line (*seyids*; also, *seyyids*), which includes the Alevi *Dedes*. However, Alevis are not accepted by mainstream Sunni or “Twelver” (*Ithna Ashariyya*) Shi’ism, both practiced in the regions in which Alevism developed and spread.¹⁰ Alevi thought and praxis is often connected to that of Sufi poet-saints from the eleventh, thirteenth, and sixteenth centuries.¹¹

In the twenty-first century, Alevis live in Turkey and its surrounding states, the Balkans, and around the globe. Some Alevis have aligned themselves with leftist political movements or community service campaigns and may or may not assemble for the various *cem*s. *Cem* ceremonies do not require a specific type of building or space (although such purpose-built *cemevis* have been constructed); Alevi teachings instead emphasize the assembly of participants, their mutual agreement at the commencement of the *cem* (*rızalık*), and the presence of a *Dede* and a ceremonial hymnist (*zakir*) to guide the liturgy within a suitably safe room or structure that is able to hold all those in attendance.

8. Angela Andersen, “*Cemevleri: An Examination of the Historical Roots and Contemporary Meanings of Alevi Architecture and Iconography*,” PhD diss., The Ohio State University, 2015.

9. Alevis also identify themselves in association with tribes and clans, such as the *Çepnis*. Belief systems adjacent to Alevism, such as the *Ahl-i Haqq of Iraq*, are also sometimes included under the Alevi umbrella. See, Markus Dressler, “Alevis,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam – Three*, ed. Kate Fleet et al. (2008), http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_ei3_COM_0167.

10. Markus Dressler, *Writing Religion: The Making of Turkish Alevi Islam* (Oxford: New York, 2013); David Shankland, “Are the Alevis Shi’ite?” in *Shi’i Islam and Identity: Religion, Politics and Change in the Global Muslim Community*, ed. Lloyd Ridgeon (London: New York, 2012), 210–228.

11. See, Mehmed Fuad Köprülü, *Early Mystics in Turkish Literature*, trans. and ed. Gary Leiser and Robert Dankoff (London and New York: Routledge, 2006).

12. See Andersen, *Cemevleri*.

13. See, Ayfer Karakaya-Stump, "The Forgotten Dervishes: The Bektashi Convents in Iraq and Their Kizilbash Clients," *International Journal of Turkish Studies* 16 (2010): 1–24; Zeynep Yürekli, *Architecture and Hagiography in the Ottoman Empire: The Politics of Bektashi Shrines in the Classical Age* (Birmingham: Ashgate Variorum, 2012).

14. A thirteenth century Sufi site has been discussed in relation to early Alevi practice. See İsmail Kaygusuz, *Onar Dede Mezarlığı ve Adı Bilinmeyen Bir Türk Kolonizatoru Şeyh Hasan Öner* (İstanbul: Arkeoloji ve Sanat Yayınları, 1983).

15. Günkut Akin encountered a historic house *cemevi* during his doctoral fieldwork in 1980, but upon his return a few years later, it had been razed. Günkut Akin, interview with Angela Andersen, Istanbul, Turkey, November 5, 2010. All interviews translated from Turkish by the interviewing author. See also Günkut Akin, "Doğu Ve Güneydoğu Anadolu'daki Tarihsel Ev Tiplerinde Anlam," PhD diss., İstanbul Teknik Üniversitesi, 1985.

16. Angela Andersen, "He who is the wondrous green dome is Ali: The Relationship Between Narratives of the Prophet Muhammad's Ascension and the Communal Religious Architecture of The Alevi," in *Saintly Spheres and Islamic Landscapes*, ed. Daphna Ephrat, Sara Ethel Wolper, and Paulo G. Pinto (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming).

17. Irène Mélikoff, "La cérémonie du ayn-i djem (Anatolie centrale)," in *Bektachiyya: Études sur l'ordre mystique des Bektachis et les groupes relevant de Hacîji Bektach*, eds. Alexandre Popovic and Gilles Veinstein (Istanbul: Isis, 1995), 65–68.

18. The earliest body of archaeological evidence for mosques dates largely to the eighth century, with only a few potential late seventh-century examples; this makes the comparison somewhat opaque. See Jeremy Johns, "The 'House of the Prophet' and the Concept of the Mosque," in *Bayt Al-Maqdis: Jerusalem and Early Islam*, *Oxford Studies in Islamic Art* 9.2, ed. Jeremy Johns (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999): 59–112.

19. Robert Hillenbrand, *Islamic Architecture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 33.

20. Scholars have examined the dwellings of Muslim families by emphasizing not only segregated spaces but also regional cultural traditions and forms and cosmological significance. This work sometimes assumes universal ap-

Typically, an open space (*meydan*) is left in the midst of the assembled Alevi for the performance of certain aspects of the liturgy. While Alevi links to the heritage, ideas, and people from Islamic history are evident, Alevi historically refrained from holding their own prayers and *cems* in mosques, as their Sunni Muslim neighbours did. Instead, intimate *cems* took place in the homes of Dedes and other members of the community, with men and women joining the ceremonies together.¹²

It is clear that some Alevi lineages participated in a broad geography of pilgrimage sites and Sufi lodges, such as those of the Bektashi order.¹³ However, domestic settings, including the homes of spiritual guides, have likely been used to hold the *cem* since the emergence of Alevism. The question of a heritage of purpose-built *cem* halls requires further investigation.¹⁴ Historic homes once used for the *cem* survive as part of the architectural record, but they are not preserved or noted as such.¹⁵ *Cem* settings do not require specific architectural features, and the temporary conversion of the domestic interior for Alevi congregational use tends not to leave physical traces once the ceremony has concluded.

During *cems*, didactic and memorializing stories are told of important people and events, including the journey of the Prophet Muhammad through the celestial levels to the presence of god (*miraj*, Arabic for ladder). In Alevi communities, the story is sung as verse (*miraçlama*), and is typically distilled down to an episode during which Muhammad encounters a meal, known as the Banquet of the Forty, at which saints, prophets, spiritual exemplars, and their mothers are anachronistically assembled. In the verses, the banquet is held beneath a dome, or at an unnamed site visited by Muhammad; a crucial part of the episode involves Muhammad knocking at the door and joining the assembled within.¹⁶ A domestic setting, albeit on a spiritual plane, may be deduced. Irène Mélikoff calls the Banquet of the Forty the "primordial *cem*."¹⁷ With this in mind, the house may be considered the primeval *cemevi*.

The House in Islam, The House in Turkey, The House as a Setting for the Alevi Cem

Traditions of the early seventh-century domestic life of the Prophet Muhammad and his family in the Arabian city of Medina position his house as one of the earliest sites of Muslim congregation.¹⁸ Some of the widely available collected sayings and deeds of the Prophet (*hadith*) describe the use of his home as a place of welcome, rest, and prayer, and list its features, such as patterned fabrics. The courtyard is commonly presented in the idiom of rural domestic architecture of the region, with a courtyard surrounded by small rooms and shaded by palm trees.¹⁹ It was a site of learning, meetings, discussion, and governance, as well as becoming a significant site of prayer.

Muslim families around the world use their homes for religious activities, from ablutions and prayers to the study and recitation of religious texts. The scholarship on houses in Islamic communities often focuses on the juridical prescriptions and social expectations for spheres of interaction, from the exclusion of men, women, family, and strangers from each others' spaces, to issues of obligatory hospitality and visual and auditory privacy.²⁰ The designs of both rural and urban housing units from all social classes at various periods in history and across geography are impacted by related socio-anthropological factors.

Figure 1. Traditional house, Şirince Village, Selçuk, Izmir. Photo: Can Gündüz, Izmir.



Traditional domestic architecture in Turkey includes housing types occupied indiscriminately by Christian, Jewish, and minority practice families, as well as Muslims. There is great variety amongst domestic forms, which tend to be constructed from locally available building materials such as mud brick,

wooden lath with mud or plaster, timbers with brick infill, logs, stone, and, now, cinder blocks.²¹ | **fig. 1** | Several generations of a family may live together in one house, adapting the rooms according to need—Sunni Muslim families may pray daily, or space may be devoted to hand crafts, or to preserving produce. The size of the large, common living room, which itself may form a complete unit of family life—a “house within a house”—is determined by the span of available ceiling timbers.²² Surrounding rooms allow for some privacy, so guests may visit without entering the family spaces, or men and women may gather in separate areas.²³ Cupboards, storage closets, trunks, and other pieces of furniture are used to adapt domestic interiors for the daily needs of cooking and sleeping, or during gatherings.

Alevi village homes do not differ greatly from those of their neighbours in terms of materials, organization, furniture, and the multipurpose nature of the rooms. Rather, it is the presence of the ceremonial *cem* assembly itself that is the distinguishing characteristic. Günkut Akın notes the Alevi use of a domestic lantern roof based on corbelled timbers (*kırlangıç kubbe* or *tüteklikli örtü*), such as that seen in the *cemevi*-house in Yahyalı, Sivas.²⁴ | **fig. 2** | This vaulting system creates large rooms that can accommodate *cem* gatherings within the house, but it is not distinct from other Anatolian and central Asian ceiling designs that would make it seem uniquely Alevi, or religious in nature.²⁵

Alevi use of the home as the setting for religious assembly caught the attention of travellers and geographers visiting Alevi regions in the early twentieth century. In 1914, L. Molyneux-Steel noted the use of domestic spaces, specifically the homes of the Dedes, whom he called “Seids” (ie *seyids*), for Alevi religious assembly in Dersim (Tunceli), in eastern Turkey. He refers to the Alevis by the name “Kezelbash” (Kizilbash, meaning “red head,” after their red caps), and to the mingling of men and women during the ceremony:

They have neither church nor mosque, nor do they perform the “Namaz” (ritual prayer). But in the morning, commencing with prostrations before the sun, they invoke the aid of Ali. Public devotions are performed also in the houses of the Seids, where both men and women are received, provided they be true Kezelbash.²⁶

Stephen Van Rensselaer Trowbridge’s interview with an Alevi Dede, published in 1921, demonstrated his curiosity about the house *cemevi*. Trowbridge asked the man, “Do you have places of congregation corresponding to mosques and churches?”²⁷ The Dede replied:

We have no such buildings, but groups of believers meet for worship regularly in private homes. God is more holy than the temple. He lives in the inner life of man. It is better to send to persons in need the moneys that would go for mortar and stone.²⁸

proaches to Islamic law and right practice in the home, an approach that can be further parsed with material culture and architectural study. For further reading, see Pierre Bourdieu, “The Berber House or the World Reversed,” *Information (International Social Science Council)* 9 (1970): 151–170; Linda Donley-Reid, “A Structuring Structure: The Swahili House,” in *Domestic Architecture and the Use of Space*, ed. Susan Kent (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 114–126; Elizabeth Fentress, “The House of the Prophet: North African Islamic Housing,” *Archeologia Medievale* 14 (1987): 47–69; Kıvanç Kılıç and Mohammad Gharipour, eds., *Social Housing in the Middle East: Architecture, Urban Development, and Transnational Modernity* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2019).

21. See Doğan Kuban, *The Turkish Hayat House* (Istanbul: Muhittin Salih Eren, 1995); Metin Sözen and Cengiz Erüzün, *Anatolian Vernacular Houses* (Istanbul: Emlak Bankası, 1996).

22. Hülya Yürekli and Ferhan Yürekli, *Türk Evi: Gözlemler-Yorumlar/*



Figure 2. Yahyalı Köyü *cemevi* interior, Yahyalı, Sivas, as it appeared in September, 1980. Photo: Günkut Akin, Sivas.

During his childhood in Dersim in the mid twentieth century, Hüseyin Taştekin participated in village *cem* ceremonies which could last for several nights. He remembers that he:

joined the *cem* of Düzgün Baba. In our village, certain people had certain large rooms [in their houses]. The *cem* was held in those large rooms. The Dede came, the Pir came. In that home, villagers and neighbours gathered, and here worship was held.²⁹

Hasan Özdamar of the central Turkish province of Sivas likewise noted that, “In the old days, *cem*s were held in the villages. In the villages, they were held in the broadest houses.” He added, “The villagers knew each other. Everyone was acquainted with each other.”³⁰

For many generations, the home was also part of an agricultural way of life that was consistently integrated into the religious requirements for Alevi communities. The congregational *cem*s, for example the Görgü *cem*s during which young adults were initiated and conflicts within the community were arbitrated, were typically held during the winter months in the traditional Alevi calendar. This is in contrast to the weekly *cem*s that take place in many modern, urban *cem*evis, following the largescale migration of Alevis into urban centres between the 1940s and the present. Dede travelled to their followers during the winter months, the season with the least agricultural responsibilities. Rıza Eroğlu recalls that *cem*s took place, “only in winter, from the tenth or eleventh months until March, or according to the person, when the time for ceremonies ended. After the winter was over men went to look after their equipment, their fields, their animals.”³¹ But when winter came, and the people were in their homes, the *cem* could take place by the warmth of the fire.

Zeki Kaya, a resident of the Princes’ Islands off the coast of Istanbul, described the domestic setting for the *cem* following Alevi settlement on the islands after the 1940s. He noted that, “generally, on the Islands, our worship, it was held in homes. But we did it in secret, of course. It was not open to everyone.”³² This role for the house as a demarcation between the initiated and the uninitiated, those on the inside and those held outside, is a significant one. Hasan Ateş, a Tahtacı Alevi from Izmir, recalls *cem*s held when he was a child in the mid-1950s. Children were permitted to attend ceremonies when a sacrifice was made (*kurbanlık*), which typically took place on a Friday night. But before he came of age, he was not let into the “innermost *cem*” (*iç cem*), held on Thursdays in his community.

A man has to have given the vow for entering the path (*ikrar*), has to have a spiritual sibling (*musahip*), has to be married, should have no deficiencies on the path, and should be totally neat and clean in order to be able to participate in a *cem*, which is still the practice of our community today.³³

Hasan’s wife Necla also recalled the innermost *cem* as highly secretive.

The *cem*s on Thursday, during my childhood, were a mystery to me. We would see our parents returning from the *cem*s in such a good mood, we would be all ears for what they would say about what was happening in there, but they would never say anything about the innermost *cem*. I would especially ask my mother about it, to no avail. “Mother, is there something there?” She would reply “You will see it for yourself, when you go in.”³⁴

The Turkish House: A Concise Re-evaluation (Istanbul: Yapı-Endüstri Merkezi, 2005), 16.

23. Önder Küçükerman, *Türk evi: kendi mekâninin arayışı içinde* (Turkish house: in search of spatial identity), (Istanbul: Turkish Touring and Automobile Association, 1988).

24. Günkut Akin, “Two Historical House Types from the Traditional Architecture of Eastern and Southeastern Anatolia: Houses with Corbeled Domes and Lantern Roofs,” in *Housing and Settlement in Anatolia: A Historical Perspective* ed. Yıldız Sey (Ekonomik ve Toplumsal Tarih Vakfı, Turkey, 1996), 248–256.

25. See, Günkut Akin, “Later-nendeckenhäuser in Ostanatolien,” *Architectura: Zeitschrift für Geschichte der Architektur/Journal of the History of Architecture* 19 (1989): 1–19.

26. L. Molyneux-Steel, “A Journey in Dersim,” *The Geographical Journal* 44 (July 1914): 66. He continues with a note that, “The Kezelbash have no religious feasts, but on Fridays they meet for prayer in the houses of the Seids.”

27. Stephen Van Rensselaer Trowbridge, “The Alevis,” *The Muslim World* 11 (1921): 261.

28. Ibid.

29. Hüseyin Taştekin, interview with Angela Andersen, Istanbul, Turkey, March 27, 2014.

30. Hasan Özdamar, interview with Angela Andersen, Divriği, Turkey, May 14, 2010.

31. Rıza Eroğlu, interview with Angela Andersen, Istanbul, Turkey, March 14, 2014.

32. Zeki Kaya, interview with Angela Andersen, Princes’ Islands, Turkey, March 17, 2014.

33. Hasan Ateş, interview with Can Gündüz, Izmir, Turkey, June 20, 2019.

34. Necla Ateş, interview with Can Gündüz, Izmir, Turkey, June 20, 2019.

During his childhood in Tokat in the 1960s, Dede Gazi Kara participated in village *cem* ceremonies in his family's home, constructed when Gazi was nine years old.³⁵ Eleven or twelve households, mostly extended family, would assemble for *cem*s in the "big house" (*büyük ev*), the large, multi-purpose living room of the house.

In my childhood, I remember very well, my father and I carried stones—we had just built our house, and it was made of wood atop stone. The master builder came and made our house and it had such very beautiful architectural features, it made me cry. We had a room there, and a pear tree; the branches of the pear tree would almost come through the window. Furthermore, the master builder had done such lovely work that he had made a pattern from the wood in the ceiling.³⁶

The two-storey house was oriented to catch the light of the sun and was constructed with a masonry basement intended for animals and a timber-framed living area with ornamented ceilings above. When asked if a master builder would understand how to create a home that could accommodate the *cem*, Gazi replied that, "the master builder knows. Everyone knows, when the time comes to build the house."³⁷ The design is in fact typical of the Black Sea region, and Gazi noted that, "if the conditions are appropriate the *cem* can be held in anyone's home," implying that many houses might serve as the setting for the *cem*.

In order to provide spatial information about the house according to his own recollections of his childhood home and its furnishings, Gazi prepared two sketches. He verbally described the important features as he drew the overall layout of the residential upper floor. | **fig. 3** | He also prepared a detailed sketch for the interior layout of the *büyük ev*, the room in which the *cem*s took place. | **fig. 4** | According to Gazi's virtual tour, stairs led directly to the upper, residential floor, since the stone masonry walls of the basement were partially below ground. Standing in the doorway (see fig. 3, 1), on the right hand side lay the food storage room (*ambar odası*) (2) and the bathroom (3). On the left hand side lay a small kitchenette with a simple counter and sink for washing the dishes (4). A corridor (5) provided access to two bedrooms on the left (6, 7), to a larger room on the right (8), and to the terrace garden (*yazlık*) outside at the far back end of the building (9).

Gazi explained the arrangement of the permanent domestic furniture around which *cem* participants, represented by the dots (see fig. 4), assembled. Directly across from the entrance (1) to the *büyük ev*, the hearth (2) and its chimney protruded from the middle of the wall into the living area and were flanked by cupboards to either side (3). To the right of the entrance, along the length of the wall, were deep shelves supported on wooden posts (*yüklük*, *tereklik*) (4) which were used for the daily storage of bedding and pillows. With a cheerful note in his voice, Gazi recounted how, as children, they "used to climb on top of these shelves and watch the *cem* ceremony, lying comfortably on woolen linens."³⁸ This youthful memory makes an association between the *cem* in the domestic setting and feelings of coziness, playfulness, and wonder. He and the other children were free to enter the *cem*, and to behave as if they were "at home" during the ceremony.

Spacious raised wooden platform seating (5) ran along the length of the wall. Women would sit cross-legged three rows deep on this platform, as during *cem* worship, the room was very crowded. Others sat on cushions and "it

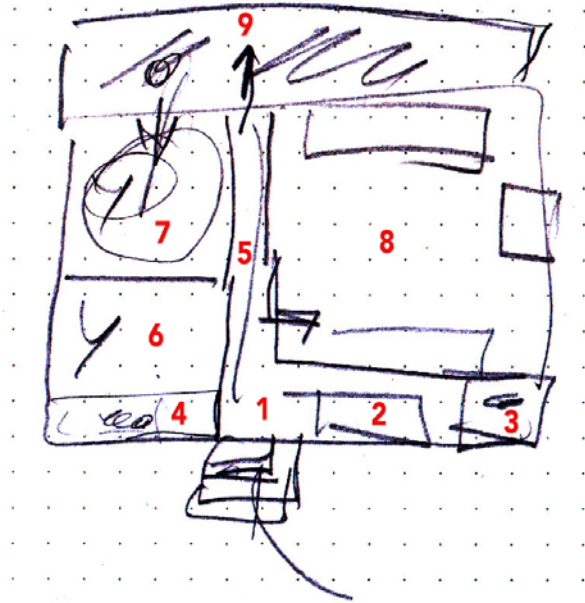
35. Dede Gazi Kara (65) is a retired English teacher and the author of a modern Alevi ritual handbook, *Altın Kitap Alevilik* (İzmir: Kanyılmaz Matbaası, 2009). His father was also a Dede.

36. Gazi Kara, interview with Can Gündüz, İzmir, Turkey, February 7, 2019.

37. *Ibid.*

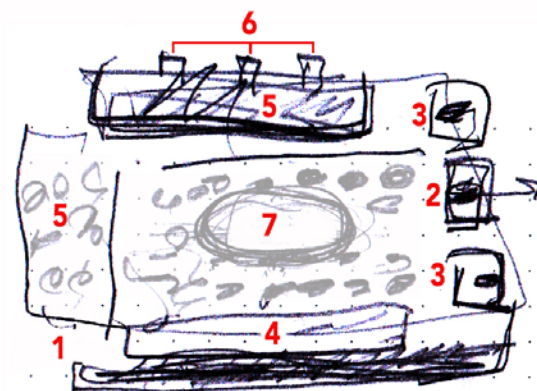
38. *Ibid.*

Figure 3. Plan of the layout of the Kara Family House, Tokat, as remembered by Gazi Kara. Sketch: Gazi Kara, Izmir.



- 1 Doorway
- 2 Food Storage (*Ambar Odası*)
- 3 Bathroom & Toilet
- 4 Kitchenette
- 5 Corridor
- 6 Bedroom
- 7 Bedroom
- 8 Larger Room (*Büyük Ev*)
- 9 Terrace Garden (*Yazlık*)

Figure 4. Plan of the “Big House” main room of the Kara Family House, Tokat: used for cem ceremonies, as remembered by Gazi Kara. Sketch: Gazi Kara, Izmir.



- 1 Entrance
- 2 Hearth (*Ocak*)
- 3 Cupboard
- 4 Shelves (*Yüklük, Tereklik*)
- 5 Platform Seating (*Çıkma*)
- 6 Windows
- 7 Central Ceremonial Space (*Meydan*)

was absolutely necessary to sit on the floor. They tried to sit down, to the point that I didn't notice anyone standing."³⁹ The row of windows (6) on the wall across from these shelves allowed daylight into the *büyük ev*.

Domestic Resonances and Symbols in Alevi Ceremony and Lineage Structure

The symbolic role of domestic space for the Alevi *cem* derives from the integration of daily life with core spiritual teachings and practices. There is no process to permanently distinguish the Alevi home space as a religious one, but a choreographed series of ritual acts purify and prepare a room in the house prior to the *cem*, which relies on the presence and participation of the people themselves to activate the *cem* setting. Liturgical objects are typically used during the *cem*, such as the long-necked, stringed instrument (*saz* or *bağlama*), and the skins of sheep or other animals (*posts*) on which the Dede and other key figures sit. The other items—candles, serving dishes, drinking glasses, a broom—have both ceremonial and domestic roles. Like the lyrics of Alevi hymnal verse and teachings, the meaning of such objects is multivalent, and simultaneously prosaic and profound.

Twelve ceremonial service positions (*on iki hizmet*) are undertaken by men and women who are hereditarily appointed or earn their roles. Those in *hizmet* roles protect the ceremony and its participants, as well as precede, begin, facilitate, and end the *cem*.⁴⁰ The serious cultural responsibility of hosting guests in the home is ceremonialized, and delegated to these *hizmet* stations. Each *hizmet* is associated with an Alevi or early Islamic exemplar; the designation of twelve positions numerically reflects the importance of the Twelve Imams.⁴¹ These twelve *hizmet*s also mark out the ceremonial space by guiding and organizing the participants who move in and out of the *cem*evi.

The role of the sweeper (*süpürgeci/feras*) may be filled by more than one person; in some communities the job is shared by “one man, one woman” which, Gazi Kara suggests, “shows the equality of men and women.”⁴² The sweepers bring brooms to the *cem*evi's central, *meydan* area (fig. 4, 7), where the participants will kneel, prostrate, and dance (*semah*). The simple, quotidian task of sweeping, so familiar and so reflective of the rhythms of life in the home, takes on great significance and importance as an essential part of the ceremonial housekeeping. Sweeping symbolizes the clearance of metaphysical impurities and negative energy from the *cem* space. The sweepers both open and close the ceremonial use of the *meydan* with their brooms. A verse from a hymn (*nefes*) recounts this process of preparing the *cem* setting:

Believing Muslims should not be about
The Watcher should be set free to go out
The Sweeper should take up her broom
The Services should find themselves enough room⁴³

In this verse, “Believing Muslims” are outsiders, for example Sunnis who are not initiated, or who may even intend harm to the participants. The Watcher (*bekçi* or *pervane*) called “*pazvan*” (*pasban*) in the poem, sees to the security of the *cem* by refusing entry to unwelcome guests, or warning the ceremonial participants of the approach of danger. Apocryphal tales describe *cem*s that were hastily turned into “village wedding” celebrations to avoid persecution when the Watcher warned of approaching spies, inspectors and soldiers.

39. Ibid.

40. Bakı Güngör, *Cem ve 12 Hizmet* (Istanbul: Hacı Bektaş Veli'ye Gönül Verenler Sosyal Kültürel Eğitim Derneği Yayınları, 2010).

41. The Bektashi *ayin-i cem* ceremony similarly employs twelve service roles. See John Kingsley Birge, *The Bektashi Order of Dervishes* (Hartford: Hartford Seminary Press, 1937), 178–179.

42. G. Kara.

43. Ömer Uluçay, *Alevilikte Cem Nefesleri* (Adana: Gözde Yayınevi, 1996), 21. Translated by A. Andersen.

Figure 5. Hearth (*ocak*), Taçyıldız Family House cemevi, Dağyurdu Köyü, Sivas, 2010. Photo: Angela Andersen, Sivas.



Figure 6. Hearth (*ocak*), Yahyalı Köyü Cemevi, Yahyalı, Sivas, as it appeared in September, 1980. Photo: Günkut Akin, Sivas.



Other *hizmet* roles include the sacrificial butcher/coordinator or ceremonial food/table coordinator (*kurbanacı/lokmacı/sofracı*) who is in charge of slaughtering the sacrificial animal for feasts and special *cem*s, the collection and distribution of food offerings, and a shared meal prepared from the offered food. The cup bearer (*sakacı*) attends to the comfort of the Dede and the *cem* participants by providing drinking water or juice. While some Alevi avoid discussing the consumption of alcohol during the *cem* or have discontinued this liturgical practice, which is prohibited by other Muslim communities, our Tahtacı interview subjects were adamant about the importance of alcohol as an element of the ceremony. Coffee service is also an aspect of some ceremonies in intimate settings, as would be expected of a gathering in the home. Coffee and its trappings are well represented in Alevi and Bektashi culture, including relief carvings of coffee pots, cups, and grinders on graves and tombstones.⁴⁴

Cleaning and food service are not the sole duties of those in *hizmet* roles, but the emphasis on the comfort of the assembled, even if symbolic, is reminiscent of the responsibilities of the host in the domestic setting. When *cem*s are held in the home, the assembled are simultaneously guests of the household and *cem* congregants. So, while it is possible to delve into the hermeneutics of the twelve *hizmet*s, the logistics of hosting requires cups, spoons, cushions, tea kettles, sugar, glasses of water—in short, food, comfort and safety via the trappings of Anatolian household culture.

The home is at the centre of Alevi village life, and the hearth is at the centre of the home. The Turkish word *ocak* refers to a hearth, or a bread oven, or even gas and electric ovens; it also references military units, and inherited land holdings. The lineages of the Alevi are traced to a home hearth, also known as an *ocak*. The Dedes are “sons of the *ocak*” (*ocakzades*) from the Alevi *ocak* lineages, descended from the Prophet.

The hearth appears in many Alevi village homes as a broad, arched opening made into the lower stone courses of a house’s ground level. | **fig. 5** | The hearth chamber itself may reach into the masonry of the supporting wall or may be formed from a protrusion that terminates in an exterior chimney. Whitewashed clay or another suitable material might be layered over the stone. Bread baking and other regular food preparation is undertaken in outside ovens in many communities, so the *ocak* might be a source of heat, for needs such as hot water for tea or coffee. | **fig. 6** |

Necla Ateş, reflecting upon the essential role of the hearth in the home, said:

Every home used to have a hearth. My grandmother would sweep around the hearth as we woke up in the morning. They would never scrape out the ashes at night, they would do the sweeping in the morning. They would make prayers of entreaty all around, and only after would they light the fire. My grandparents would sit by it, and my mother would cook and serve them coffee.⁴⁵

Hasan Ateş described his elderly grandmother, by whom he was raised, beginning each day before the hearth:

Every morning, as she woke up from bed, the first thing, she would step out, wash her face, face the sun, spread her hands apart, and pray... as she entreated the sun. She would place the coffee on the hearth. After it was cooked, she would pour some for the hearth’s share. Why would she do that? We did not know... there are still those who do that, giving the share of the tea, the coffee to the hearth.⁴⁶

44. The consumption of coffee was integrated into Sufi practice in the early fifteenth century by a member of the Shadhili order who visited Ethiopia. J. Spencer Trimmingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 199n2.

45. N. Ateş.

46. H. Ateş.

David Shankland's ethnographic study of Alevi life in a Turkish village undertaken between the late 1980s and early 1990s notes not only that the *cem* was being held in village homes at that time, but that many other significant events, beyond the scope of the *cem* but overseen by the Dede, take place in the homes and landscapes of the village. Shankland includes a description of a special meal, served and eaten to commemorate a deceased person. It may be placed on long tables outside the home in fair weather. The Dede's prayer over this meal begins, "In the name of God, Let (the) morsels be accepted, Let hearths be lit (Ocaklar aydın ola)."⁴⁷ Shankland notes the appearance of the *ocak* in this prayer, in its dual role as hearth and "the lineage which owns the house."⁴⁸ He makes another important connection with "the *dede* attached to the house," because "a man may refer to his *dede*... as 'our hearth,' *ocağımız*."⁴⁹

The etymological relationship between *ocak* (hearth) and *ocak* (lineage), and the intertwined notion of the lineage as an extension of the household, have clear resonances with hearth and home. The hearth is not widely referenced in Alevi hymns, nor within the texts known as the *Buyruks* (lit. Commandments), which are handbooks containing prayers, stories, and teachings once compiled for use by Dede. The household of the Prophet Muhammad (*ehl-i beyt*) and his Dede/*seyid* lineage descendants are sometimes evoked by the physical hearth itself. A description of a ceremonial hall of the Bektashi Sufis, with whom many Turkish-speaking Alevis share teachings and practices, notes that, "in the middle of one of the long sides of the room is an alcove like a fireplace and called the *ocak*, fireplace, and sometimes *Fatma Ocağı*, the fireplace of *Fatma*."⁵⁰ *Fatma* is the daughter of the Prophet, the wife of Ali, and the mother and grandmother of the Twelve Imams. She is therefore the x-times great grandmother of the Dede themselves. This is her hearth and her lineage, the fire in the heart of the homes of her descendants.

The relationship between the domestic interior and Alevi ceremony is about the *use* of the space. There are two ways to regard this phenomenon: in one, the designs of homes in which the *cem* has been held are not primarily concerned with religious assembly, so when the people, the music, and the Alevi teachings are vacated from the houses after the ceremonies reach their conclusion, the house returns to the domestic realm; in the other, the home, the hearth, food, family, community, service, and morning coffee itself are the intrinsic elements of life and immanentist belief, and they remain. Thus, the teachings of the Dede and the divine itself are embedded within the quotidian surroundings of the Alevi person.

Associations between the home and the *cem*, the house and the arrival of the Dede, the dwelling and ceremony, have positive connotations of hospitality, family, and comfort, but fear of outside harm was also the impetus for holding *cem*s in the home.⁵¹ The inconspicuous character of houses, when compared with identifiable ceremonial halls or purpose-built sites, provided some degree of safety during periods of persecution. Indeed, the occupants of the houses selected for the *cem* were required to uphold certain moral qualities to be considered able to provide a safe haven for the duration of the *cem*.⁵²

The work of the *cem* was shared. As one speaker explained, "the clearing and tidying of the house would be done collectively, so as not to cause any burden to the house owner."⁵³ The role of food connects the *hizmet*s, the hearth, and

47. David Shankland, *The Alevis in Turkey: The Emergence of a Secular Islamic Tradition* (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 115.

48. *Ibid.*, 116.

49. *Ibid.*

50. Birge, *The Bektashi Order of Dervishes*, 178.

51. Z. Kaya.

52. Bayram Bey, interview with Angela Andersen, London, England, September 9, 2010.

53. N. Ateş.

the assembled. A sacrifice, typically an animal like a chicken or a sheep, may also may be another type of food offering, and is an aspect of *cems* and other Alevi assemblies. Necla Ateş remembers that she would regularly cook food for *cems*, and for *kurbans*, which in her village were open to the entire community while *cems* only included initiated adults.

A friend of ours brought a *kurban* to Hamza Baba. We do the cooking in the evening and serve to neighbours the next morning. She brings a rooster. They cut it, the Dede prays over it, and we put it on the fire. We wait and wait to no avail: the rooster won't boil. I say, "The rooster won't boil. They will ask for the meal soon—let's summon the *kurban* owner and let her know about it." I tell her when she comes, "Sister, look, something isn't right about the *kurban*... Whoever you are upset with, go entreat (do *niyaz*) with her, I mean, apologize if you must, then come back and do *niyaz* with the hearth." She says, "Yes, there is something," and she goes and apologizes, returns, does *niyaz* to the hearth, and the rooster is cooked before the table is laid. These all comprise our faith, I lived it myself.⁵⁴

This story highlights several important aspects of Alevi praxis and the domestic realm. There is a clear division of labour, so that while the male Dede performs the ritual sacrifice of the rooster, it is the job of the women to prepare the meal from its meat. The Alevi prohibition on participating in the *cem* and other ceremonies without a clear conscience interferes with the cooking process, and the person contributing the sacrifice, the person with whom she is in conflict, and the hearth on which the potted rooster is to cook must all be involved in making things right. For the *kurban* to include not merely the death of the animal, but the nourishment of the community, the hearth itself has interceded to guide those involved toward a return to harmony. The animate and the inanimate, the male and the female, the ceremonial participants and the house each play essential, active roles.

Analysis and Conclusion

Large, urban *cemevis* constructed in the past thirty years have not widely sought an intentional integration of domestic features. Design references to a hearth, to rural Anatolian elements such as the winnowing baskets and storage sacks clearly seen in Günkut Akın's image of the *cemevi* house in Yahyalı, or to the wooden closets and cupboards described by Gazi Kara, would seemingly support the connection between the *cem* and domestic settings that is so vivid for our interviewees. Indeed, those interviewed associate the conceptual category of "architecture" with the antithesis of the home: Gazi suggests that he currently sees "*cemevis* with architectural features, which are now also in the villages—they have made some changes in order to keep up with the new age." This may be a matter of what the domestic means to individual Alevi communities. 9016 Architecture's winning designs for a *cemevi* in Beylikdüzü, Istanbul, include a set of sleek, cuboid buildings with wood and stone revetment, which the designers intend to evoke an "abstracted" form of the "spatial traces and logic" of the traditional Anatolian house.⁵⁵ | **fig. 7** |

Our article engages Alevi perceptions of houses once used to hold *cem* ceremonies as a case study in the continuous, widespread use of domestic interiors as temporary sites of congregational religious ceremony. We support the inclusion of domestic buildings, particularly those constructed in a regional idiom by the community, within the record of religious architecture. This is

54. Ibid.

55. 9016 Architecture, "Beylikdüzü Cemevi & Cultural Center: Info," 2018, accessed March 9, 2019, <http://www.dokuzbinonalti.com/en/project/65>.

56. Mahir Polat, "Alevilikte Mekân ve Liturjinin Varlık Halleri Açısından Cemevi'nin Anlam Katmanları," *Beylikdüzü Cemevi Mimari Proje Yarışması 2015* (Istanbul: Beylikdüzü Belediyesi Kültür Yayınları, 2017), 11–28. He contrasts houses used for the *cem* with what he suggests was a tradition of *cemevi* spaces in villages associated with Alevi lineage heads (*ocak köyleri*). Unpublished conference presentation, *Alevi-Bektashi Communities in the Ottoman Realm: Sources, Paradigms and Historiography*, held at Boğaziçi University, Istanbul, December 13–15, 2011.

Figure 7. Beylikdüzü Cemevi, façade detail, under construction, Istanbul, October, 2019. Photo: Angela Andersen and Can Gündüz, Istanbul.



based on clear evidence that the symbolic, allegorical, and structural elements of the house embody rich, lasting relationships between people, their practices, and settings for ritual.

There are other ways to approach the role of homes in Alevi communities. In a brief essay, art historian Mahir Polat makes the interesting proposal that such houses are primarily *cemevis*, and secondarily homes: perceived via their physical properties as village houses, it is rather through busy holidays, space for liturgical items, and the presence of the hearth that “they reveal their actual identities” as settings for the *cem*.⁵⁶ Günkut Akın’s work, on the other hand, seeks a distinct, Alevi architectural symbolism with which to indicate Alevi practice within the traditions of both domestic buildings and

monumental Sufi sites.⁵⁷ None of these approaches need exclude the others.

The symbolic role of Alevi domestic space comes from the integration of daily life and belief. There is no sanctification process that permanently distinguishes the home space as a religious one in Alevism. The *hizmet* rituals of the *cem* can purify and prepare a room in the house for worship: the domestic chore of sweeping the floor cleans the *meydan* and at the same time metaphysically cleanses the ritual setting. The *cem* relies on these

participatory elements and on the presence of a community engaged in ritually sanctioned constructions of family bonds and spiritual kinship (*musahiplik*).

Rural Alevi communities have not had the resources, nor the imperial or government patronage with which to commission congregational religious architecture. Improvements to pilgrimage sites and guesthouses remain a priority, and some Alevi communities complain that the government will construct a mosque if there is a designated *cemevi* already in the town.⁵⁸ The inconspicuous place of historic domestic architecture therefore served both the need to maintain secrecy and the desire to foster the intimacy of the *cem*.

There are several inherent problems that emerge in the study of domestic spaces which are temporarily transformed for ceremonial activities. We identified three categorical approaches to the ceremonial use of domestic space within the comments made by our interviewees and in our own analyses of texts and in situ *cem* settings. These oscillated between elements of nostalgia and memory, current praxis in Alevi communities, and allegory in verse and language. The connections between “home”/“house” and “*cemevi*” are intensely pragmatic and highly spiritual, a seeming dichotomy that would perhaps not appear so according to Alevi teachings. Alevis who are of an age to remember *cem*s in rural homes have seen many changes. In one way or another, they all lament the shift from intimate, seasonal *cem*s held amongst extended family members in the home to weekly *cem*s, sometimes held amongst hundreds of participants in large urban halls. These are frequently led by a professional Dede who does not guide the lineages of those in attendance.⁵⁹

57. Günkut Akın, “The Muezzin Mahfili and Pool of the Selimiye Mosque in Edirne,” *Muqarnas* 12 (1995): 63–83.

58. For the approaches towards religious architecture adopted by the Turkish state and Alevi communities, see Angela Andersen, “Resisting the Architecture of the Mosque in Turkey: The Alevi Case Study,” in *Comparing Muslim Societies*, ed. David Stephan Powers and Eric Tagliacozzo (Connecticut: Yale University Press, forthcoming).

59. This subject emerged with all of the speakers included here, and is discussed in detail in Markus Dressler, “The Modern Dede: Changing Parameters for Religious Authorities in Contemporary Turkish Alevism,” in *Speaking for Islam: Religious Authorities in Muslim Societies*, eds. Gudrun Krämer and Sabine Schmidtke (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 269–294; Martin Sökefeld, “Alevi Dede in the German Diaspora: The Transformation of a Religious Institution,” *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 127 (2002): 163–186.

The use of Alevi family dwellings for the *cem* ceremony denotes the closeness of communities and lineages assembled under the guidance of a Dede, the centrality of the home and its aura of safety and protection, and Alevi teachings that emphasize community service and conflict resolution, the inclusion of male and female members of society in work, education and decision making, and the emphasis upon that which holds inner truth (*batin*) rather than outward displays (*zahir*). A *cem* gathering based on honesty and belief held in a home embodies this teaching via architecture. In this sense, the house is one of many ideal designs and models for the *cemevi*.

The Alevi home is transformed into religious space through people, their words and actions, and a few assembled objects, all of which temporarily activate a spiritually potent communal space. Agreement about the use of the home, and the gathering, welcoming and sharing of food and drink with the Dede and the community ritualize the very act of hosting guests. These conditions and characteristics manifest as an immanent approach to the *cemevi* setting as well as a quotidian one. While the home may not play a role in the *cem* experiences and memories of all Alevis, the words of our interview subjects make clear the connections between Alevi ceremony and the domestic interior. In terms of our specific approach to domestic space, our analysis of the domestic interior as the setting for Alevi *cem* ceremonies is not merely about structure, furnishings, materials and even doctrine, but is rather the result of oral history, memory, and lived experience. In the words of Necla Ateş, “It can only be Alevism when it is lived.”⁶⁰ ¶

60. N. Ateş.