

The Turkish *Bağlama*: A Sacred Symbol of Alevi Identity

Rashid Epstein Adams
University of Cape Town

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The Turkish *Bağlama*: A Sacred Symbol of Alevi Identity

Abstract

For the Alevi, the *bağlama* has become a powerful symbol of group identity. This paper discusses the important role that this Turkish folk instrument has in Alevi musical traditions and practices by first contextualizing the historical position of the Alevi in Turkish society, and then by examining the role of the *bağlama* in traditional ceremonial performance contexts. Finally, this paper examines the role Arif Sağ, a popular *bağlama* musician, played in cultural revival and how the sphere of his influence contributed directly to the *bağlama* becoming a sacred symbol of Alevi identity.

Keywords

Bağlama, Alevi, Turkish Music, Identity, Arif Sağ



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A Sacred Symbol of Alevi Identity**

**Rashid Epstein Adams
Year IV – University of Cape Town**

I learnt that the people in the sub-province were all Muslim but split into two sects: Alevi and Sunni. Further, that no Sunni village had musicians. The Alevis, on the other hand, specialized in music.

David Shankland¹

Ever since the establishment of the secular Turkish Republic in 1923 by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, debate on cultural identity must be understood in terms of the government's promotion of secularization and Westernization. Islam nevertheless plays a significant role in the society, as up to 99.8% of the population are still classified as Muslim

1. David Shankland, *The Alevis in Turkey: The Emergence of a Secular Islamic Tradition* (New York: Routledge Curzon, 2003), 2.

according to general statistics.² It is in Turkey's convoluted social milieu that religion, culture, tradition, and politics meet, as reflected in the majority Sunni population's view of the minority Alevi as a "heterodox... community that has become secular."³ The Sunni population identify as "believing Muslims" who pray in a mosques and adhere to the five pillars of Islam (although not everyone practices them assiduously), and many believe that *Alevilik* ("Aleviness") is "not rightfully a form of Islam."⁴ Alevi do not regard the Qur'an's teachings as literal truth, nor do they emphasize the five pillars of Islam, instead favouring the "contemplation of a mystical, or esoteric version of faith, which they call *Tarikat*."⁵ Alevi religious doctrines are based on the *Tarikat* and are also strongly influenced by the *Buyruks* text.⁶

In general, the Sunni population distrusts the Alevi despite the latter's connection to Sufism (which is generally

2. United States Library of Congress, *Country Profile—Turkey*, January 2006, accessed 1 April 2016, <http://www.refworld.org/docid/46f9135d0.html>; CIA World Factbook, *Turkey Demographics Profile 2014*, accessed 1 April 2016, http://www.indexmundi.com/turkey/demographics_profile.html. It should be noted that there is no question regarding religion on the official government censuses, and thus, this estimation is based on the fact that Turkish citizens are automatically registered as Muslim upon birth (unless they have their documents changed or if their parents were of a religion different to Islam).

3. Shankland, *The Alevi in Turkey*, 1.

4. *Ibid.*, x.

5. *Ibid.*, 2. *Tarikat* literally means the "path" or "road" towards Allah. It is also an Islamic brotherhood.

6. A collection of writings and books including stories and poems, Quranic verses, and the sayings of imam 'Ali and the twelve imams.

revered in Turkey).⁷ Many Turkish Sunnis view Alevi activities as clandestine, nonconformist, subversive, and revolutionary. In particular, some Sunni conservatives regard music and dance as sinful references to the “irreligious” (*Lādinī*) nature of Alevi “drinking parties” (*Cent bezmi*), where men and women are said to engage in communal sex after a candle-extinguishing ceremony (*Mum söndü*).⁸ Janina Karolewski argues that such rumours of immorality and impurity are “probably incorrect” and are largely formed as a result of the secret nature of Alevi rituals, during which men and women are not separated (as would be customary in a Sunni mosque).⁹ David Shankland further comments that the Alevi villagers he interviewed were reluctant to talk about their religion due to “a proscription against disclosing their lives to outsiders,” as well as “a level of uncertainty or unease at the possibility of theological debate.”¹⁰ Due to the mystery that surrounds Alevi beliefs and social behaviours, Irene Markoff believes that a mythology was subsequently “conjured up” by non-Alevi outsiders that emphasizes the supposed heretical

7. For the connection between Sufism and Alevism, see Tahire Erman and Emrah Göker, “Alevi Politics in Contemporary Turkey,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 36, no. 4 (2000): 106. Sufism is Islamic mysticism, which emphasizes purification of the inner self. Jamal J. Elias, “Sufism,” *Iranian Studies* 31, no.3/4 (1998): 595–613.

8. Irene Markoff, “Alevi Identity and Expressive Culture,” *Garland Encyclopedia of World Music Volume 6: The Middle East*, ed. Virginia Danielson et al. (New York: Routledge, 2001): 793.

9. Janina Karolewski, “What is Heterodox About Alevism? The Development of Anti-Alevi Discrimination and Resentment,” *Die Welt des Islams*, New Series 48, no. 3/4 (2008): 443–444.

10. Shankland, *The Alevi in Turkey*, 3.

nature of Alevism.¹¹ The majority of Alevis visit mosques infrequently, preferring private religious ceremonies; they do not fast during Ramadan; and they have no prohibitions against alcohol—all factors leading to the Sunni-influenced classification of Alevism as “heterodox Islam.”¹²

Alevi Ancestry and Identity

The Alevis trace their ancestors to Central Asian Turkmen, who first encountered Islam in the form of Sufism in the eleventh to thirteenth centuries in Khurasan and then later in Asia Minor. Today, the majority of Alevis are found in Central Anatolia, although they are also found in small groups throughout the Aegean and Mediterranean coastal areas. Having apparent historical links with Shi'ism¹³, adherents have self-identified as Alevi, meaning “followers of (Imam) 'Ali,” according to their belief that secret truths were revealed by God

11. Markoff, “Alevi Identity,” 793.

12. Karolewski argues that this classification was first classified by Western academics “in analogy to the Christian usage of the word “heterodox,”” in order to present the Alevi tradition in contrast to its “orthodox” counterpart, Sunni Islam. As there is no Turkish equivalent to the word, more and more Alevis are themselves adopting the term (“heterodoks”) to describe themselves in a self-determining and aggressive way in order to underline their non-orthodox, liberal and egalitarian tradition. Karolewski, “What is Heterodox,” 436, 456.

13. Shi'ism is the second largest branch of Islam after Sunnism. Its main point of departure is that it disregards the first three Sunni caliphs by asserting that Imam 'Ali (the fourth caliph) was Muhammed's true successor.

to 'Ali, the Prophet Muhammed's son-in-law.¹⁴ The Alevi believe that Muhammad “passed the divine light” to 'Ali who, along with his descendants, were given the ability to interpret the hidden meaning of the Qur'ān.¹⁵

In the sometimes politically-hostile atmosphere in Turkey, many Alevis feel that they have not been equal beneficiaries in the transition from a predominantly rural to an urban society, and that the Turkish government has excluded them from material benefits on religious grounds. Whilst the Alevi community supported secularism wholeheartedly, the state actively supports a Sunni form of Islam as evident in institutions such as the military, the judiciary, the educational system, and the state bureaucracy, which, “though ostensibly secular, [are] strongly influenced by Sunni Islam.”¹⁶ The Alevis's search for an identity separate from Sunni Islam has thus become entangled in ideological and material conflicts.¹⁷ Within this framework, I discuss how the *bağlama* has become a symbol and representation of Alevi social identity in contemporary Turkish society.

14. For a detailed history of Alevi ancestry and their connection with Shi'ism see Karolewski, “What is Heterodox,” particularly 438–440.

15. Markoff, “Alevi Identity,” 794; Shankland, *The Alevis in Turkey*, x.

16. Markus Dressler, “Religio-Secular Metamorphoses: The Re-Making of Turkish Alevism,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 76, no. 2 (2008): 282.

17. Dressler, “Religio-Secular Metamorphoses,” 282.

The *Bağlama*

The *bağlama* belongs to the *tanbūr* family of long-necked, fretted, plucked lutes used in art and folk traditions in the Middle East and Asia.¹⁸ The existence of the lute in Mesopotamia goes back to the Akkadian era, in the third millennium BCE. By the eleventh century CE, a long-necked lute similar to the *bağlama*, known as the *kopuz*, was the favoured instrument of the *ozan*, minstrel poets of the Oğuz Turkish tribes in southwest Asia. Their Ottoman descendants, called *saz şairleri* (minstrel poets) or *aşıklar*, used the *bağlama* to accompany the recitation of epics, popular tales, and new improvised songs drawn from traditional material. The term *bağlama* refers to the instrument's tied frets (*bağ*: “fret” or “knot”; *bağlamak*: “to tie” or “knot”), and dates from the seventeenth century.¹⁹ Although it is played by Sunni and Alevi musicians, the instrument holds special significance as a symbol of religious and cultural identity amongst the Alevi.²⁰ Its physical construction enforces this perception, as the Alevi assert that the *bağlama* symbolically represents Imam 'Ali and the tenets of his faith: the resonator his body; the neck his sword, *Zülfikār*; the twelve strings the twelve Shi'ite imams;

18. Markoff, “Alevi Identity,” 795–796.

19. In modern-day Turkey, the instrument is also commonly referred to as the *saz* (deriving from the Persian word meaning “instrument”). S. Qassim Hassan, “Tanbūr,” *Grove Music Online* (Oxford University Press, 2014), accessed 13 April 2016, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/52071?q=tanbur&search=quick&pos=1&_start=1#firsthit.

20. Markoff, “Alevi Identity,” 789.

and the lowest course the Prophet Muhammad.²¹

Traditional Performance Contexts²²

The *bağlama* plays an important role during Alevi musical services, known collectively as *cem* or *ayin*, where adherents of the faith express their religion. These ceremonies, which also act as a means of reinforcing social solidarity and Alevi identity, are performed during specific Muslim religious festivals such as *Kurban Bayrami* (Festival of the Sacrifice); *Nevruz* (the Persian New Year); and *Hidrellez* (a celebration on the fortieth day after the spring equinox in honour of the legendary Hızır, who is equated with St. George).²³ The *cem*, which includes elements of *zikr*, *sema*, Qur'ān recitation, and

21. Irene Markoff, “The Role of Expressive Culture in the Demystification of a Secret Sect of Islam,” *World of Music* 28 no. 3 (1986): 48.

22. In contemporary live performances—e.g. weddings and circumcision celebrations—the performers often amplify their *bağlama* or *saz*. Urban musicians, whether or not they are Alevi, often purchase an *elektrosaz* with electronic pickups for convenience and recording versatility. The introduction of the electronic instrument caused the creation of new playing techniques, physical modifications, and a change of aesthetics. There is now an emphasis on left hand technique and the dense polyphonic textures of the acoustic *bağlama* (a result of its two or three strings to a single course) have been replaced by a smooth, highly ornamented sound. My discussion of the *bağlama* focusses on the acoustic tradition, rather than electronic. Martin Stokes, “The Media and Reform: The Saz and Elektrosaz in Urban Turkish Folk Music,” *British Journal of Ethnomusicology* 1 (1992): 95.

23. Irene Markoff, “Introduction to Sufi Music and Ritual in Turkey,” in *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin* 29, no. 2 (1995): 158.

prayer, are highly structured, with a focus on collective ritual and spiritual exercises.²⁴ These exercises are accompanied by sung mystical poetry (in the vernacular) and “the sacred ritual instrument,” the *bağlama*.²⁵ The sacred Alevi musical repertoire includes *deyiş* or *deme*, *nefes*, *düvaz*, *mersiye*, *miraçlama*, and the *illalah* (or, *lāilāhe illāllāh*).²⁶ During *cem* ceremonies, 'Ali's courage is crystallized in the exclaimed phrase, “Lā fetā illā 'Ali lā seyfe illā Zūlfikār” (There is no one more valiant than 'Ali, no sword like Zūlfikār). Apart from the direct reference to Imam 'Ali, the Alevi's connection with Shi'ism is further underlined during the first twelve days of the month of Muharrem when they fast, curtail all festivities, and silence their instruments to respect and commemorate the martyrdom of Huseyn. Karolweski asserts that to the Alevi, the *cem* is “their form of worship corresponding to the Sunni...*salat*.”²⁷ As an important part of these ceremonies, the *bağlama* thus plays both a direct and indirect role in solidifying the Alevi religious identity.

24. *Zikr* involves “controlled breathing to induce or conduct trance and ecstatic states.” *Sema* is a whirling ritual dance. Markoff, “Introduction to Sufi Music,” 157.

25. Markoff, “Alevi Identity,” 795.

26. These genres are, respectively, songs of mystical love; hymns concerning the mystical experience; hymns in honor of the twelve Shi'ite imams; laments for the martyrdom of Imam Huseyn; songs about the ascent of Muhammad to heaven; and, a genre that incorporates the *tahlil* formula into a poem to create an atmosphere of *zikr*. Markoff, “Introduction to Sufi Music,” 159.

27. Karolewski, “What is Heterodox,” 455. *Salat* is the standard ritual prayer or supplication which a Muslim performs five times a day while facing towards Mecca.

Cultural Identity: Arif and the Alevi Revival

The 1980s marked the beginning of a widespread cultural revival amongst Alevis, who had largely hidden their identity in the past. Artists such as *bağlama* musician Arif Sağ played an important role in this revival. In the 1980s, Sağ began to refer to his music as a “contemporary folk” that would “maintain and evoke the essence of tradition through stylistically correct modes of expression.”²⁸ In 1982, he held an “unprecedented historic” event in the form of a two-hour solo recital at the Şan Theatre in Istanbul which was recorded and released under the title *İşte Bağlama, İşte Arif Sağ* (Wherever You Find the *Bağlama*, There You Will Certainly Find Arif Sağ).²⁹ As a young *bağlama* virtuoso, he soon gained a substantial following, enabling him to introduce certain traditional style—particularly those rooted in aspects of Alevism—to popular audiences.³⁰ His “strong commitment to his [Alevi] roots... led him to perpetuate and politicalize Alevi expressive culture,” culminating in the “Muhabbet” recordings (1984–1987), featuring Alevi artists such as Yavuz Top, Muhlis Akarsu, and Musa Eroğlu.³¹ Sağ soon moved from a general folk repertoire to songs that “actively promoted his

28. Irene Markoff, “Arif Sağ—Alevi Bağlama Teacher and Performer Par Excellence,” *Garland Encyclopedia of World Music Volume 6: The Middle East*, ed. Virginia Danielson et al. (New York: Routledge, 2001): 790.

29. Markoff, “Arif Sağ,” 790.

30. Markoff. “The Role of Expressive Culture,” 52.

31. Markoff, “Arif Sağ,” 790.

image as an Alevi artist.”³² He was no longer afraid of performing this traditional Alevi repertoire, which included Shi’ite songs praising the twelve imams and songs associated with Kurdish Alevi liberal poets.³³ The simultaneous growth of Sağ’s fame as a *bağlama* musician and his increasing sense of cultural pride, contributed to the identification of the *bağlama* as a symbol of Alevi cultural identity. This notion was further perpetuated when the sphere of his influence expanded to include politics after he became the first musician elected as a deputy of the Turkish National Assembly, from 1987 until 1991. He then directed a foundation associated with the Karace Ahmet shrine in Istanbul, whilst continuing to participate in annual Alevi festivals as a *bağlama* musician.³⁴

As a result of important Alevi figures such as Arif Sağ, the Alevi Revival of the 1990s fortified the Alevi populations political, juridical, and social status, leading to greater educational opportunities and, subsequently, economic success.³⁵ Part of this emancipation process was the attempt to quell “officially accepted prejudices from the public domain... [such as] public insult and discrimination.”³⁶ These unjust prejudices towards Alevis have, however, continued to persist throughout the Sunni population—even after they were officially condemned.³⁷ Whilst the abolishment of certain discriminations helped the Alevi position to a certain degree,

32. Ibid., 791.

33. Ibid.

34. Ibid.

35. Karolewski, “What is Heterodox,” 452.

36. Ibid., 452–453.

37. Ibid., 453.

Alevism still lacks official religious acceptance.³⁸ This is perpetuated by traditional Sunni notions that Alevism is, or has become, a culture rather than a religion, and can thus not be accepted as “religious” or “Islamic.”³⁹ Some Alevis fear that the state may again support prejudice, as in Ottoman times, and that an official recognition of their religious status is the only way to avoid marginalization in modern Turkish society.⁴⁰ Taken in such a context, the *bağlama* thus, as a powerful sacred symbol for the Alevi, serves to respond against State suppression—extending from cultural identity into the domains of politics and religion.⁴¹

Conclusion

The recent bombings by Kurdish militants in Turkey’s capital, Ankara, demonstrate the increasing hostility in the Turkish political arena. Many Alevis feel aggrieved at their political situation, in which the state has actively favoured Sunni Islam, and music has played a vital role for adherents of the minority population to express their mystical faith. The significance of the musical *cem* ceremonies are two-fold. They serve to reinforce Alevi identity and solidarity as well as inculcating the beliefs and doctrines of the Alevi community—which are themselves based on Shi’i teachings, with a particular emphasis on Imam ‘Ali. The *bağlama*, as the

38. Ibid., 435.

39. Ibid., 455.

40. Shankland, *The Alevis in Turkey*, 2.

41. Markoff, “Alevi Identity,” 796.

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quintessential sacred ritual instrument, plays a significant role in these religious ceremonies and has come to symbolically represent Imam 'Ali and the tenets of his faith. The instrument extends as not only a physical symbol of their religion, but also a figurative symbol of solidarity.

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