



## Music of the Kurdish Alevi Diaspora in Germany: Struggling *'with'* and *'for'* Multiple Identities

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With the help of the Andrew W. Mellon Pre-Dissertation Research Grant provided by the Council for European Studies, I was able to conduct early fieldwork during the summer of 2010 for my dissertation, which examines the music produced for and consumed by the Kurdish Alevi diaspora in Germany at the turn of the twenty-first century. The music produced by the Kurdish Alevi musicians in their second homeland reaches back to Turkey and Kurdistan, where most of the Kurdish Alevi people still reside. My dissertation project investigates the different forms of articulation of ethnicity and nationality (Kurdishness), religion (Alevism) and integration into the German life in both sacred and secular spaces in Cologne. I took a month-long trip to Germany to meet Kurdish Alevi musicians and producers to get a better sense of how Kurdish Alevi music was mediated within the social and political movements from the perspectives of the musicians and producers. By meeting these artists in their settings and by conducting in-person interviews, I had the chance to elicit and record the details of the Kurdish Alevi musicalities in Cologne.

Since my research investigates the perception of the music of the Kurdish Alevi ethno-religious double minorities living in Germany, I decided to approach music as the arena where multiple religious, ethnic and national identities are contested and negotiated outside their first homelands. During my trip, I conducted more than 20 interviews with prominent musicians, producers and sound engineers, as well as members of the communities I contacted in the vicinity of Cologne. Respondents, musicians and producers

AUTUMN 2011  
VOLUME 41  
ISSUE 2

were selected through personal connections and networks established via family ties and referrals. I spent time in my respondents' houses, attended their weddings, and visited *türkü* bars, *cemevis* and other cultural centers in the vicinity of Cologne.

Germany is the country with the largest immigrant population from Turkey in Europe, and Cologne hosts the country's second-largest immigrant population. I decided to follow a group of immigrants coming from the same place of origin as a way of starting my research. My consequent fieldwork began in Wuppertal, which is near Cologne, and in Essen, where my cousin lives. I began with my relatives and friends living in and around Cologne, who are immigrants or refugees from Turkey, who are of Kurmanji-Kurdish ethnicity, and who practice Alevism.

Cologne is home to one of the largest and most organized Kurdish Alevi populations, and is also one of the most active German centers of Kurdish and Alevi cultural activities. While Kurdish Alevi communities are widely dispersed throughout their first homeland in Turkey, there is a more cohesive group in Cologne, which allows for crystallization of their ethnic, national and religious identity struggles. The Kurdish Alevi communities that my project focuses on comprise members who largely emigrated from three cities in Eastern Turkey: Adiyaman, Malatya and Maraş. My sample consisted of immigrants and refugees who are ethnically Kurmanji-Kurdish and religiously Alevi, and who speak Turkish. In most cases, they are Turkish citizens living in and around Cologne. What makes this group a unique anthropological subject is that their places of origin are the same villages in their first homeland in Turkey. I have observed, and many other ethnographers have pointed out, that one of the most significant associations leading to the creation of collective identities has been the place of origin, which could be the village or province that the members associate with. Another corollary identification criterion is the tribal/kinship connections or historical references given to those connections that resulted in specific claims about

the places of origin. These are epitomized at the organizational level in the form of hometown associations.

The discrimination and violence by the Turkish state against its Kurdish citizens since the late 1970s have resulted in a significant exodus. The majority of these refugees fled to Germany, where there are approximately 300,000 Kurds (Ammann 2005). Although this population is often thought of as a single cohesive minority community, there is actually significant religious diversity among Kurds such as Sunni Muslims, Yezidis and Alevis. While a number of social and political studies have been published on Kurds or Alevis in Germany, the Kurdish Alevi subgroup, which consists of more than 100,000 individuals, has not been the subject of any ethnographic research. My research fills this gap. I focus on the Kurdish Alevi communities in Germany at the turn of the twenty-first century as they engage in a unique set of ethnic and religious identity struggles in their present-day homeland and in Turkey. Although Alevis and Kurds constitute the second-largest religious and ethnic minority communities, respectively, in Turkey, their existence is not officially recognized by the state; rather, they are subsumed under the officially sanctioned designation of Turkish and Sunni Muslims.

Alevism is an Anatolian religion, whose relations to both Sunni and Shi'a Islam are historically controversial. Markus Dressler defines Alevis as "a number of heterogeneous socio-religious communities in Turkey and the Balkans, historically referred to as *Qızıلبaş*, who in the twentieth century began to share in a common trans-regional Alevi identity called Alevism" (2008: 93). The Alevi number some 25 percent (20 million) of the total population in Turkey. Most Alevis are ethnic and linguistic Turks, mainly of Turkmen descent from Central and Eastern Anatolia. Some 20 percent of Alevis are Kurds (although most Kurds are Sunnis), and some 25 percent of Kurds in Turkey speak Alevi, Dimili and/or Kurmanji (Zeidan 1999).

While these Kurdish Alevis enjoy a greater

freedom in Germany, they have been almost invisible among the larger pool of immigrants from Turkey, further contributing to their religious identity struggles. This invisibility has contributed to the silencing of their specific concerns and problems, since they are treated as either ‘Muslims’ or ‘Turks’, depending on the issue at hand. This dual minority status, I observed, plays an important role in shaping the aesthetic practices of the Kurdish Alevi communities that are manifest particularly in their music.

During my research trip to Germany, I was also able to conduct participant observation in religious events, such as the *cem* ceremonies, in order to assess the importance of sacred music within the Kurdish Alevi communities. To understand the cultural formation and cohorts within the Kurdish Alevi communities, I conducted participant observation at cultural events sponsored by different social and political organizations that provide an arena for Kurdish and Alevi sociability and socio-political outreach and organizing. In addition, my research included participant observation at weddings among the members of the communities; intimate *muhabbet* gatherings where the members of the communities sang together, and at *türkü* bars located in Cologne, all of which constitute significant spaces of Kurdish and Alevi musical practices. In addition to conducting in-depth interviews with the people attending those events, I even had the chance to perform in those venues with various musicians.

During my field trip, I observed that the music a particular person enjoys may end up being the identity marker s/he would like to associate herself with. Some politically active musicians or music groups are rendered as either directly associated or perceived to be associated with certain political movements or parties that are active in Turkey and/or Germany. The musicianship and engagement with the musicians and music groups entail strong political choices for the people I contacted. The affinity to certain musicians in many cases might go beyond aesthetic listenership, but in the cases of

politically active respondents, it signifies a political identification with the parties that those particular musicians or groups have been or rendered as organically related to. I observed that *türkü* bars have become transcending entertainment venues, perhaps the only viable spaces occupied by almost every immigrant group from Turkey, including leftists, conservatives, Alevis, Sunnis, Kurds and Turks alike. All of these socio-political identities or boundary markers have been welcomed in those bars as long as they do not interfere with the economic interests of the owners.

Inside all the bars that I visited in the Cologne vicinity, I observed the prominent display of some traditional garments and artifacts on the walls, all exhibiting *şark odası* (eastern room) sensibility. The *şark odası* decorations at the *türkü* bars seem to create a space for the audience to feel “better” and “at home.” I argue – particularly as a result of discussions with owners, musicians and audience members during my trip – that the atmosphere in those bars has been designed to reenact an imaginary place and time while the audience engages with the modern music, which presumably represents old, innocent and imagined times. By putting a *şark odası* decoration inside the bars, the owners of those venues attempt to make their spaces look or become more Kurdish, Anatolian, Turkish or Oriental in the German context.

Lastly, the information I gathered during my time in Germany helped me to refine my dissertation project. I now compare and contrast Kurdish Alevis’ music and lives in Germany to those in Istanbul and their ancestral villages. Historically, artists and musicians in their second homelands have been able to bend the aesthetic norms of the first homeland, not only by cultural but also by political modes of conduct. In some cases, artists have managed to create their own aesthetics, sending them back to the first homeland, like social or cultural remittances (Levitt 2001). Kurdish Alevis maintain their ties with their origins. For example, many who reside in Istanbul tend to return to their

villages in the summer. More significantly, in the past several decades, many have started investing millions of dollars to improve the living conditions of village life. In my dissertation, I argue that music functions much like remittances; it is a means of

the communication, mobilization and, ultimately, transformation of the Kurdish Alevi communities both in Germany and Turkey.

### **References**

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