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“We are the descendants of *Güruh-ı naci*”: The notion of *Güruh-ı naci* in Alevism and Bektashism

Emine Yüksel

ABSTRACT: This article aims to analyze the myth of *Güruh-ı naci* and *Şit*¹ in Alevi and Bektashi piety² and its function on Alevi and Bektashi self-designation as “a saved community.” The main theme of the myth is based on the idea that the Alevi and Bektashi do not descend from Adam and Eve, but from the heavenly *hourî* *Güruh-ı naci* and *Şit*. Accordingly, they belong to a different lineage apart from Adam and Eve’s progeny and constitute the seventy-third *fırka* (party) who will attain salvation. In this context, the study argues, primarily based on the oral accounts and a modern collection of Alevi and Bektashi poetry, that the myth does not appear as a meaningless combination of random stories but rather serves to engender Alevi and Bektashi self-understanding in connection with its mythical past. Additionally, it asserts that the notion supports the idea of Alevi and Bektashi being “the possessors of the light of Muhammad-Ali,” “the true followers of the right path,” and “the bearers of esoteric knowledge” against those they consider to be “others.” Thus, it reaches a conclusion that the concept functions as a mechanism to justify the position of religious leaders of Alevi *ocaks* (lit. hearths, religious communities) as well as the Alevi and Bektashi perfection in religious terms and contributes to their ideas regarding salvation.

KEYWORDS: *Güruh-ı naci*, *Şit*, Alevi, Bektashi, self-understanding

1. *Şit*, the third son of Adam, refers to the Old Testament character of Seth. He is also respected in Gnostic traditions and is counted as one of the first prophets in Islamic lore.
2. “Alevi” is a modern term that started to be used, by both Alevis and non-Alevis, in the nineteenth century in order to define the Alid-loyal groups under one category. I use this term with the understanding that the term comes with its own history, politics, and tone. My aim is not to deny the differences between the groups that have been united into this single category.

Introduction

The Alevi and Bektashi piety has its own ritual, practice, terminology, and symbolism. The specific form of this piety, illustrated today by Alevism and Bektashism, emerged beginning in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and developed in parallel with the Islamization of Anatolia. It was further reinforced socially and doctrinally in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In the early phase of this process, the cult of saints, the desire to affiliate oneself to the lineage of a prophet and the concept of *vilayet/velayet* (sainthood), played a key role in the formation of Alevi and Bektashi institutions. Subsequently, in the changing socio-politic climate of the sixteenth century, the Safavid shah's alliance with his followers in Anatolia, including certain Turcoman and Kurdish tribes and various dervish groups, namely *Kızılbaşlık*, added another layer to the formation of the Alevi and Bektashi religiosity.³ Beginning in the nineteenth century and intensifying in the twentieth, migration, urbanization, and modernization further reshaped Alevi and Bektashi piety.

Despite this long and complicated history, we do not have a proper analysis of the historical evolution of Alevi and Bektashi doctrines, beliefs, practices, and rituals. For this reason, we lack a clear understanding of the extent to which Alevi and Bektashi doctrines, practices, and ideas changed, developed, or were abandoned in the centuries from their consolidation in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries until the present day. However, it is clear at present that the form of piety we call the Alevi and Bektashi piety partly features a mythical understanding of the past. Its mythical thought does not see history as a straight and homogeneous series of events but rather concentrates on certain periods, episodes from mythical times, and the actions of heroes. Each of these episodes and actions is transferred to the Alevi and Bektashi collective memory in a different narrative form and handed down from generation to generation.⁴ Almost all narrative forms, whether written or oral, center on events involving the saints, *ahl al-bayt* (People of the House) members, and

3. Zeynep Oktay-Uslu, "The Perfect Man in Bektashism and Alevism: *Kaygusuz Abdāl's Kitāb-ı Mağlaṭa*," PhD diss., (Université Paris, 2017), 1–8. Ahmet Karamustafa, "Anadolu'nun İslamlaşması Bağlamında Aleviliğin Oluşumu," in *Kızılbaşlık, Alevilik, Bektaşilik: Tarih, Kimlik, İnanç, Ritüel*, ed. Yalçın Çakmak, İmran Gürtaş (İstanbul, İletişim, 2015), 43–54.

4. I do not claim that the narratives have continued unchanged into the present period. Rıza Yıldırım, *Geleneksel Alevilik: İnanç, İbadet, Kurumlar, Toplumsal Yapı, Kolektif Bellek* (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2018), 185–9; Erdal Gezik, *Geçmiş ve Tarih Arasında Alevi Hafızasını Tanımlamak* (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2016). For the relationship of history and mythical thought, see Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, (New York: Harcourt, 1959); Mircea Eliade, "The Cosmogonic Myth and Sacred History," *Religious Studies* 2, no.2 (1967): 171–83. For a systematic examination of these Alevi mythological narratives and their functions in the Alevi collective memory, see Yıldırım, *Geleneksel Alevilik*, 127–55.

the Twelve Imams.⁵ These narratives typically try to prove ahl al-bayt and its descendants' exalted heroism and their superiority over all humans created.

As an integral part of a larger creation myth, the myth of *Güruh-ı naci* (a saved community) and *Şit*, which has deeply occupied the Alevi and Bektashi collective memory through its different versions, stems from the idea that the Alevi and Bektashi originated from *Güruh-ı naci* and *Şit* rather than from Adam and Eve. In the narratives, while Eve and her progeny are considered contaminated with evil, *Güruh-ı naci* and *Şit*'s lineage symbolizes an unsullied ancestry. *Şit*, in particular, with his distinctive place in the creation and his role as a conveyer, has an important place in these accounts.

The characters and motifs in these accounts show similarities with those from the sacred books, mythologies, philosophical teachings, and the many religious trends of the Middle East. These narratives reflect a deep interaction with different traditions and geographical environments that contribute to the mythical perception of Alevi and Bektashi.⁶ In a similar vein, the story of *Güruh-ı naci* and *Şit* as a complementary part of a rather complex creation myth does not arise from a single geographical or cultural environment. Instead, it unfolds as a multi-cultural product in which intermingled narratives expand over a wide range of time and space. However, beyond any doubt, the Alevi and Bektashi have created their own special interpretation of the concept of *Güruh-ı naci* according to a different construct, one based on their own worldview and societal needs.

Alevi and Bektashi written sources do not clarify mythological beliefs about *Güruh-ı naci* and *Şit*. Instead, these beliefs fragmented, dispersed, and intermingled in various sacred poems and prayers as well as doctrinal and polemical works. The content of these products generally encompasses esoteric and salvific knowledge that, until recently, was considered undesirable for outsiders to obtain. It is only in the last twenty years that this hidden religious knowledge has been accessible to the public through field research, and the compilation of this society's cultural and religious works.⁷

5. For the various examples of these narrative forms in Alevi and Bektashi piety, see Rıza Yıldırım, *Geleneksel Alevilik*; Erdal Gezik, *Geçmiş ve Tarih Arasında Alevi Hafızasını Tanımlamak*. It should be noted that while Gezik focuses on narratives collected only from the Dersim area, Yıldırım's book relies on a larger narrative collection compiled from a wider region.

6. My purpose here is not to posit Alevism and Bektashism under the category of syncretism and treat it as a belief consisting of the amalgamation of the remnants of different religious currents. Instead, I aim to indicate, as many researchers have already pointed out, that the social, cultural, religious, and institutional structure of Kızılbaş-Alevi, Bektashi, and related groups can be searched and found in the diverse and pluralist landscape of Anatolia and neighboring regions.

7. For the most significant studies on Alevi cosmology, see Yıldırım, *Geleneksel Alevilik*; Gezik, *Geçmiş ve Tarih Arasında Alevi Hafızasını Tanımlamak*; Kehl-Bodrogi, *Die Kızılbaş-Aleviten: Untersuchungen über eine esoterische Glaubensgemeinschaft in Anatolien* (Berlin: Schwarz, 1988). For the work of non-academic Alevi writers, see Pir Sultan Özcan, ed.

In addition, studies on Alevi and Bektashi cosmology are rather limited, thus preventing a more thorough understanding of its main principles. This situation stems primarily from lack of interest among researchers in the subject, an absence of interdisciplinary research, and insufficient primary sources for uncovering Alevi and Bektashi cosmogonic ideas. For this reason, this article aims to make a small contribution to these studies by addressing the idea of *Güruh-ı naci*, whose importance and function in Alevi and Bektashi piety have long been neglected.

This article initially analyzes the narrative composition of *Güruh-ı naci* and *Şit* and presents differing versions compiled from field research.⁸ It then focuses on the function of the idea of saved community in Alevi and Bektashi piety. To do so, the article illustrates three main characteristics that present the Alevi and Bektashi as *Güruh-ı naci*: being “the possessors of the light of Muhammed-Ali,” “the holders of esoteric knowledge,” and “the true followers of the right path of ahl al-bayt.” It then shows how the Alevi and Bektashi perceive their exoteric “others” and categorize them in different fashions.

It is beyond the limits of this article to determine when and through which channels the idea of *Güruh-ı naci* entered Alevi and Bektashi religious thought and what changes it has undergone throughout the history of Alevi and Bektashi piety. We have only a limited number of examples that mention this concept in pre-modern written texts, and we cannot claim that the twenty-first century oral culture can directly and absolutely be representative of pre-modern oral or written lore. On the other hand, we cannot completely deny that the main doctrines of Alevi and Bektashi religiosity, which were consolidated in the pre-modern period, also have a strong legacy in contemporary times. Therefore, as the available sources allow, we can hypothesize that the concept of *Güruh-ı naci* was used as a way to justify the positions of religious leaders who are the legitimate descendants of the ahl al-bayt. In connection with this, we can also speculate that the notion is utilized as one of the Alevi

Varlığın Doğusu—Beyan Eden Başköylü Hasan Efendi (Istanbul: Anadolu Matbaası, 1992); Piri Er, *Direnen Kültür Anadolu Aleviliği* (Istanbul: Detay yayıncılık, 2006); Hıdır Çetin, *Hakikat Yolu Güruh-u Naci* (Ankara: Yurt Kitap Yayın, 2013).

8. The narratives used in this study were compiled within the scope of the project entitled “Aleviligin Ortak Referanslarının Belirlenmesi.” The project (no:113K150) was carried out in four provinces of Turkey (Amasya, Çorum, Sivas, Tokat), 2013–16, and was financially supported by TÜBİTAK. The overall output of the project was presented to the reader in Rıza Yıldırım’s book *Geleneksel Alevilik: İnanç, İbadet, Kurumlar, Toplumsal Yapı, Kolektif Bellek*.

9. It should be noted that Babagan Bektashis do not see genealogy as a prerequisite for their institutionalization. Therefore, this matter cannot apply as one of their hierarchical and institutional components.

and Bektashi self-understanding and designation methods, representing them as perfect human beings on the true path of salvation.

The Myth of Güruh-ı Naci

Apart from a few non-academic books, where the Güruh-ı naci appears as one of the many stories from Alevi and Bektashi traditional lore, Erdal Gezik was the first scholar to reference creation narratives in Alevi collective memory. In his work, Gezik focuses special attention on the first part of the creation doctrine and its connection with the institution of *musahiblik* (companionship).¹⁰ However, Gezik's research is based on a single story told by a ninety-two-year-old interlocutor from the Dersim region and is insufficient to provide useful insight about the doctrine of creation. More recently, in his book *Geleneksel Alevilik*, Rıza Yıldırım published different accounts of the Alevi creation myth, along with the myth of Güruh-ı naci and Şit and its variants.¹¹ However, in his book, Yıldırım also did not extensively discuss the motifs and the function of this concept as appears in the Alevi and Bektashi piety.

In this article, I use Yıldırım's text in *Geleneksel Alevilik* including elements related to Güruh-ı naci and Şit that I prepared.¹² I worked as a field researcher and assistant for the project, participating in the entire two-year-long field research process, and I had the opportunity to listen to these narratives from the interlocutors on site. The narratives which I worked on in this study were compiled from the Tokat and Amasya regions from 2013–15. The interviews took place in interlocutors' own houses and were performed with an unstructured, in-depth face-to-face interviewing methodology. Interview subjects consisted mostly of *dedes* (lit. grandfather, an honorific title used for the Alevi religious leaders), *babas* (lit. father, an honorific title and rank used by mostly Bektashis) *aşıks* (minstrels), *anas* (lit. mother, an honorific title used for female religious leaders or wives of the dedes), and *talips* (followers) all of whom were over sixty and some of whom were illiterate. They had spent their lives mostly in rural areas where the main rituals and ceremonies continued uninterrupted or were maintained with minor alterations. It is important to stress that the accounts provided by these interview subjects might not represent the mythical understandings of all Alevi and

10. See Gezik, *Geçmiş ve Tarih Arasında Alevi Hafızasını Tanımlamak*; Erdal Gezik, 'How Angel Gabriel Became Our Brother of the Hereafter (On the Question of Ismaili Influence on Alevism)', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 43, no.1 (2016): 56–70.

11. Yıldırım's study utilizes oral material collected from four hundred forty-two interlocutors in six hundred seventy villages within the scope of the above-mentioned project. For further information on the methods used in this field work, see Yıldırım, *Geleneksel Alevilik*, 11–38.

12. *ibid.*, 355–63.

Bektashi communities scattered over a large geographical area. Therefore, while interpreting the narratives they provided, it is not my intent to portray a unified and unchanged Alevi and Bektashi self-understanding over time and space, but rather to focus on the perception of *Güruh-ı* and *Şit* in the abovementioned regions.

Returning to the interview narratives, two different versions come to the fore, with one more widely narrated than the other. Although the narrative order and motifs in the two versions differ slightly from one another, both serve the idea of the unquestioned superiority of Adam and his blessed progeny, leaving out Eve's contribution. The central message of the narratives is that *Şit* had a special status among the children of Adam as the ancestor of the *ahl al-bayt* and Alevi *dedes*. Therefore, he was not born to Eve like the other children but to an angelic being named *Güruh-ı naci*.¹³ The events that frame the narratives follow almost the same sequence, starting with the creation of the light of Muhammad-Ali as part of the same Divine Light and Gabriel's acknowledgement of it,¹⁴ and continuing with Cain's killing of Abel. At this point, the account of *Güruh-ı naci* and *Şit* takes center stage. The best-known version of the myth in terms of the compiled narratives is as follows:

Among the many difficulties of the worldly life, Eve gets older and no longer makes an effort to fulfill her "duties as a woman."¹⁵ After a while, Adam gets tired of this situation and asks God to send him another woman. God, pitying Adam's situation, decides to deliver him a *houri*, a beautiful maiden for Muslim believers in Paradise, whose name is *Güruh-ı naci*.¹⁶ He commands the archangel Gabriel to take the heavenly woman to earth and give her to Adam. However, when the *houri* and Gabriel descend to the world, they first encounter Eve instead of Adam. Eve, surprised by the radiance and beauty of the *houri*, and fearing she will fall into disfavor, tells Gabriel that Adam will return soon, so he can leave the *houri* with her.

After Gabriel leaves, Eve is filled with jealousy, dresses up beautifully, and goes to find Adam in the fields. There she seduces Adam with her charms and just before having intercourse, she makes a pact with Adam that he cannot marry anyone else besides her. Adam, knowing that there is no other woman whom he can marry in the world, accepts Eve's condition and unquestioningly swears the oath. However, when they return home, Adam sees *Güruh-ı naci*

13. *ibid.*, 146.

14. For this part of the story, see, *ibid.*, 160–1, 190; Erdal Gezik, "How Angel Gabriel Became Our Brother of the Hereafter (On the Question of Ismaili Influence on Alevism)," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 43, no. 1 (2016): 56–70.

15. Duties as a woman in the narratives include housework, sexual intimacy, and childbearing.

16. Although *Güruh-ı naci* literally means "a saved community", interlocutors use it as a woman's name, for the *houri* sent from heaven, in the narratives.

and is surprised. When the houri explains that God sent her to fulfil Adam's needs, he realizes that Eve tricked him again by making him take an oath of monogamy.

Nonetheless, Adam wants to find out which woman is better and asks Güruh-ı naci and Eve to ferment milk in two separate jars.¹⁷ However, Eve keeps secretly shaking the houri's jar whenever she has the opportunity. When they eventually open the lids, snakes, insects, and centipedes come from Eve's jar, while a moon-faced boy, Şit, appears from Güruh-ı naci's jar. The child is born paralyzed due to Eve's shaking of the jar, but the light of Muhammad-Ali nevertheless shines on his forehead. When Şit becomes an adult, Adam marries him to Güruh-ı naci.¹⁸

The second version of this narrative generally focuses more on the rivalry between Adam and Eve, rather than on the one between Güruh-ı naci and Eve. A discussion begins over a child's essence, to which both parents claim to be of central importance. Since children grow in the womb of Eve, she does not want to back down from her argument. To prove this, they both put their essences into jars, but Eve constantly shakes Adam's jar. Nine months later, snakes and insects emerge from Eve's jar, while a luminescent boy, Şit comes out of Adam's.¹⁹

Motifs in the Myth of Güruh-ı naci and Şit

Four different characters, the houri, Şit, Adam, and Eve, come to the forefront in the narratives. Starting with the houri motif, it can be easily recognized that she portrays an unspoiled woman, and therefore has a superior status to Eve in the accounts. She is also illustrated ontologically as more privileged than Eve regarding the creation, due to the fact that her essence is light (*nur*) itself. Since she is an immaculate woman sent from Heaven and free from evil, she, along with Şit, represents the first link in the chain transmitting the sacred

17. The jar motif symbolizes the womb. While yeast symbolizes the sexual fluids of the male, milk symbolizes the sexual fluids of the female. Fermentation refers to the process of combining the two. The essence of yeast is the essence of matter, so Adam places his own essence, that is his sperm, into the womb in order to create another human like himself. Here the traditional perception arises that the vital substance for the child is the man's sperm.

18. For this variant of the myth, see Yıldırım, *Geleneksel Alevilik*, 355–61.

19. For the second version of the narrative, see *ibid.*, 361–63. This narrative is important in terms of showing the competition between genders found in many cultures. It repeats Aristotle's view that the sperm of a man alone has the structure necessary to form a fetus and the soul that gives life to the unborn child. See Mineke Schipper, *Adem ile Havva Her Yerde*, trans. P. Doğu, (İstanbul: Ayrıntı Yayınları, 2015), 244. For the analysis of this view in Islamic traditions, see Alysaa Gabbay, *Gender and Succession in Medieval and Early Modern Islam Bilateral Descent and the Legacy of Fatima* (London: I.B Taurus, 2020).

substance of Muhammad-Ali to the temporal world, which later will continue on from generation to generation in the Alevi and Bektashi.²⁰ Eve could not replace her and fulfill this sacred duty, so all the negative traits attributed to Eve—jealousy, craftiness, inability to bear children after a certain point—are described in a series of events that eventually legitimizes the arrival of the houri from Paradise. First, she is deceived by Satan, causing the loss of purity. Then, with her expulsion from Heaven, her initial status as a loving wife and a remedy for Adam’s loneliness turns into a completely negative image. Furthermore, her offspring also perform immoral actions, being associated with incest, and Cain becomes the first fratricidal murderer in the world. Because of this, the pure light in the loins of Adam passed neither to Abel nor to Cain but instead to Şit, who does not have any affiliation with Eve. Thus, the Alevi and Bektashi separate their pure lineage from the corrupted progeny of Eve through their own unique interpretation of the Adam and Eve myth. Most notably, they maintain the idea of Adam’s function as the transmitter of the divine essence, but completely discard Eve’s role in this sacred responsibility. This immaculate lineage subsequently passes on from generation to generation, from the prophets to ahl al-bayt and imams to saints, reaching to present-day Alevi and Bektashi.

Regarding Şit’s character, various special features imputed to him arise in the narratives. The first one that catches the eye is his extraordinary birth from a jar without any sexual intercourse. In the part describing his birth, there is no mention of any physical activity between Adam and *Gürüh-ı naci* or Eve. Instead, both Eve and the houri put milk—or their essence—inside separate jars, as any act of intercourse would pollute the progenitor of the elected people.²¹ In addition, even though Şit came out of the houri’s jar, no reference is made to the houri as being the mother of Şit in the narratives. Instead, she appears later as the wife of Şit. The reason for this may be the conventional understanding that a woman cannot provide the main substance that creates offspring but can only supply a place for it to grow. On the other hand, Eve

20. For a detailed analysis of the concept of the Light of Muhammad-Ali as the essence of the ahl al-bayt and Alevi oaks as it is reflected in Alevi collective memory, see Yıldırım, *Geleneksel Alevilik*, 159–74.

21. Eszter Spät’s research on the Yazidi myth of Shahid bin Jar, Şit’s counterpart in the Yazidi creation myth, shows that the first examples of this concept appear in Gnostic traditions. As she points out, most Gnostic texts and some reports of heresy by the Church fathers imply that Seth was not born in an “ordinary” way. Responsibility for his birth is often attributed to a divine intermediary, and in many accounts Eve plays almost no role. See Eszter Spät “Shahid bin Jarr, Forefather of the Yazidis and the Gnostic Seed of Seth”, *Iran & the Caucasus* 6, no.1/2 (2002): 44–48. The Yazidi myth of Shahid bin Jar is close to the second and less common Alevi version of the *Gürüh-ı naci* and Şit narrative, which shows the rivalry between Adam and Eve on the essence of a child. For full account, see *ibid.*

also does not appear to be his mother in any narrative. In fact, she represents a disgraceful, evil figure that tries to prevent Şit from being born and cripples his leg. It must have been thought that her progeny had also been corrupted and were prone to evil, thus no components, either spiritual or physical, are transferred from Eve to Şit in the narratives.

Another remarkable feature is Şit's ontological distinctiveness compared to Adam and Eve's progeny. In the narratives, he constitutes a different and pure lineage separated from the rest of humanity. The divine power involved in Şit's birth, the light, and the prophetic substance he inherited from his father puts him and his descendants in a superior position to others, especially his siblings. This divine substance, that was created in the incorporeal world, was initially inserted in Adam's loins, then passed to Şit's loins and shined on his forehead as a light. This light, which did not shine on any of his other siblings' foreheads, provided Şit with the nature of a prophet and authority after Adam's death.²² In addition, his marriage to a *hourî*, as opposed to his siblings' marriages, places him in a more favored place in the narratives. He marries an immaculate *hourî* from heaven who is purged of any evil, thus their offspring are born uncontaminated and distinct from the other seventy-two children of Adam and Eve. This prestigious lineage descended from Şit and the *hourî* constitute the seventy-third *fırka* in the world, avoiding any connection to Adam and Eve's seventy-two offspring.

Lastly, as the ancestor of these eminent people, Şit also appears to be the possessor and transmitter of the divine knowledge that he inherited from his father, Adam. Şit inherited the esoteric knowledge via the divine light he received from his father. This gave him the privilege of a true understanding of both the worldly and spiritual realms. The esoteric knowledge is also bequeathed to Şit's progeny, the chosen people, who claim to be the maintainers of the proper path that will carry them to salvation. With this exalted status, they bear the principles of the indestructible true faith that will bring the people shrouded in the darkness of ignorance toward the light of wisdom. This esoteric knowledge of Şit passes from generation to generation down to the Alevi and Bektashi, ensuring that they will eventually reach salvation.

22. Yıldırım, *Geleneksel Alevilik*, 164–65, 193, 361–62. The idea that Şit/Seth and his descendants constitute a unique lineage distinct from the rest of humanity appears also in the Judeo-Christian, Gnostic, and Shi'i traditions. See A. F. J. Klijn, *Seth in Jewish, Christian and Gnostic Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 1977). For the analysis of the Judeo-Christian elements in the Shi'a traditions regarding the concept of prophetic substance and light passing through Seth, see Uri Rubin, "Prophets and Progenitors in The Early Shi'a Tradition," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* I (1979): 41–65.

Alevi and Bektashi as *Güruh-ı naci*

The idea that the Alevi and Bektashi constitute the seventy-third *fırka*, *Güruh-ı naci*, that will reach salvation refers to the widely known hadith attributed to the prophet: “The ummah will be divided into seventy-three groups and only one of them will be saved and the rest will be in hell.”²³ However, Alevi and Bektashi interpretation of the seventy-two *firkas* differs from that of other Islamic sects and those found in heresiography texts. For one, the Alevi and Bektashi approach does not attempt to compile a list of sects that will be in Hell and to indicate their errant characters. Instead, the concept of being the seventy-third *fırka* in Alevi and Bektashi practice focuses on salvation by reaching perfection in each stage of the path through the love of the ahl al-bayt and its progeny. Therefore, they situate themselves as members of the esoteric dimension of Islam against the rest of the Islamic community.

Upon examination of available oral sources, including modern collections of Alevi-Bektashi poetry and doctrinal works, it appears that descent from *Güruh-ı naci* represents three main features for the Alevi and Bektashi: first, Alevi and Bektashi belong to the immaculate lineage of ahl al-bayt, which is ontologically in the highest position in comparison with the rest of humankind; second, they are the followers of the right path, or true faith, that began in the time before existence; and third, they are the possessors of the esoteric knowledge that ultimately leads them to salvation.

The fact that *Güruh-ı naci* descended from the immaculate lineage of ahl al-bayt according to the Alevi collective memory is closely related to the concept of the light of Muhammad-Ali. While there is unending speculation about this concept of light in different Islamic traditions, the notion of the unity of Muhammad-Ali as one eternal Light appears as the most significant tradition in Alevi and Bektashi circles. According to this, Muhammad and Ali were created from the same Light in the time before creation, a thousand years before anything else existed in the universe. This concept is related rather symbolically in Alevi and Bektashi faith with the motifs of the “eternal sea” and the “jewel.”²⁴ As in both Alevi and Bektashi literary and oral lore, as well as in *buyruks* (commandment),²⁵ God first created an endless sea and looked upon

23. For different versions of this hadith, see Paul E. Walker, “An Isma’ili Version of the Heresiography of the Seventy-two Erring Sects,” in *Medieval Isma’ili History and Thought*, ed. Farhad Daftary (Cambridge University Press, 1996), 161–77; Roy P. Mottahedeh, “Pluralism and Islamic Traditions of Sectarian Divisions,” in *Diversity and Pluralism in Islam: Historical and Contemporary Discourses Among Muslims*, ed. Zulfikar Hirji (London-New York: I.B. Tauris, 2010), 31–42.

24. For the analysis of the light concept as it is embodied in the Alevi collective memory, see Yıldırım, *Geleneksel Alevilik*, 159–83.

25. *Buyruk* is a generic name for the works that contain the backbone of Alevi piety, which contains the main principles of Kızılbaş-Alevi teachings, practices, and institutions. This

it. The sea then overflowed and from within emerged a valuable substance, *cevher* (essence), which consisted of two components that complemented one another. Of these, the green one represented Muhammad and the white one, Ali. Accounts of this conjoined light can be found in other Alevi and Bektashi sources. For instance, in his *Fazilet-name*, which is one of the most frequently cited works among the Alevi and Bektashi, an *abdal* poet, Yemini, narrates how the archangel Gabriel witnessed these two lights in a *kandil*, a lamp hanging from the emptiness of the sky. According to the story, after Gabriel is created, God tests him to see if he can recognize his self and creator. Gabriel fails to answer the question of "Who are you, and who am I?" and is punished by God, who forces him to fly away. After thousands of years of flying over the endless sea, he recognizes a dome and there sees a lamp filled with luminous white and green lights that represents the union of Muhammad and Ali. Ali instructs Gabriel that God is the omnipotent creator of everything, and that Gabriel is created by Him. Thus, the archangel admits that Ali is his *murşid*, his master.²⁶

generic name is not often found in the manuscripts themselves but refers to the entire collection of text in a manuscript. Although buyruk copies share a certain thematic structure, they have a dynamic nature and sometimes differ from each other in content as a result of local differences and belief practices. According to research, buyruks were brought to Anatolia by the Safavids. The oldest dated buyruk manuscript that exists dates back to the early seventeenth century, but it is assumed that the Alevi have had these manuscripts since the sixteenth century. The Alevi attach great importance and respect to buyruks. For the analysis of buyruk manuscripts, see Anke Otter-Beaujean, "Schriftliche Überlieferung versus Mündliche Tradition: Zum Stellenwert der Buyruk-Handschriften im Alevitum," in *Syncretistic Religious Communities in the Near East*, ed. Krisztina Kehl-Bodrogi, Barbara Kellner-Heinkele and Anke Otter-Beaujean (Leiden, New York, Köln: Brill, 1997), 213–26; Dogan Kaplan, *Buyruklara Göre Kızılbaşlık*, PhD diss., (Selçuk Üniversitesi, 2008); Ayfer Karakaya-Stump, "Documents and Buyruk Manuscripts in the Private Archives of Alevi Dede Families: An Overview," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 37, no. 3 (2010): 273–86; Janina Karolewski, "Discovering Alevi Rituals by Analysing Manuscripts: Buyruk Texts and Individual Notebooks," in *Transmission Processes of Religious Knowledge and Ritual Practice in Alevism between Innovation and Reconstruction*, ed. Johannes Zimmermann, Janina Karolewski, and Robert Langer (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2018); Ayfer Karakaya-Stump, *The Kızılbaş/Alevis In Ottoman Anatolia: Sufism, Politics and Community*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020). According to his new findings, Rıza Yıldırım has demonstrated that there was a canonical main text on which the existing buyruk copies are based and that the new copies have taken this main text as a model in the sixteenth century. Yıldırım also criticizes the widespread understanding that buyruks were written as propaganda tools to manipulate the Kızılbaş in Anatolia by stating that the Safavid and Ottoman Kızılbaş shared the same religious and social institutions. For the analysis and new findings on the buyruk manuscripts, see Rıza Yıldırım, *Menakıb-ı Evliya (Buyruk) Tarihsel Arka Plan, Metin Analizi, Edisyon Kritik Metin*, (Istanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 2020).

26. Derviş Muhammed Yemini, *Fazilet-nâme*, ed. Yusuf Tepeli (Ankara: Türk Dil Kurumu, 2002), 230–4. For the full account of this story, see *ibid*.

Another established tradition in Alevi and Bektashi faith adds the family of the Prophet and Imams to the notion of this light. In a different version of the preceding account, Gabriel enters the dome and sees a radiant woman, Fatima, instead of the union of the green and white lights.²⁷ According to this version, the archangel again lands in the dome after a thousand years of flying over the sea and asks the woman her identity. Fatima answers back that she is the daughter of Muhammad, the seal of the prophets. Fatima sits with a crown (*tac*) upon her head, a belt (*kemberbest*) around her waist, and earrings (*Shubbar u Shubbayr*)²⁸ on her ears. When Gabriel asks what these accessories are, Fatima explains that the crown represents her father, the Prophet Muhammad; the belt symbolizes her husband, Ali; and the earrings signify her children, Hasan and Husayn. Through this, Gabriel learns of the existence of ahl al-bayt, and that they were created with an exalted nature long before. In another version of the story, the content of the narrative remains the same, but this time it is Adam who sees Fatima and the light of ahl al-bayt while he is visiting Heaven. There he learns about the divine names of ahl al-bayt and of the Imams from Fatima, and he repents using these exalted names when he is expelled from Heaven.²⁹

After being created in the times before existence, God puts this light in Adam's loins and, on occasion, he transmits it from there into undefiled wombs. The light passes from Adam to his son Şit and the other prophets, and its journey continues until Muhammad and Ali, reaching the loins of Abd al-Muttalib, their grandfather. In Abd al-Muttalib, the light is divided into two parts, with half of it resting in the loins of his son, Abd Allah, who begat Muhammad, and the other half resting with Abu Talib, who begat Ali.

27. For the analysis of Fatima's inclusion to the light concept in Shi'i traditions, see Matti Moosa, *Extremist Shiites: The Ghulat Sects* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1988), 56–7; Gabbay, *Gender and Succession in Medieval and Early Modern Islam*, 30–3.

28. These two names refer to the names of Aaron's two sons. It is said that archangel Gabriel revealed to the Prophet these names and ordered him to give these names to Ali's two children. The rendering of these names was al-Hasan and al-Husayn. Uri Rubin, "Prophets and Progenitors In The Early Shi'a Tradition," 52.

29. Rıza Yıldırım, "Red Sulphur, the Great Remedy and the Supreme Name: Faith in the Twelve Imams and Shi'i Aspects of Alevi-Bektashi Piety," in *Shi'i Islam and Sufism Classical Views and Modern Perspectives*, eds. Denis Hermann and Mathieu Terrier, (I.B Taurus, 2020), 266–70. Although the approach towards the divinity of the Prophet and his family continues, the concept of light in Alevi theology differs from the ideological and political aspects of institutionalized sect of Twelver Shi'ism. Anatolian Alevi and Bektashi rather show a mystical approach to the nature of ahl al-bayt, arguing that Fatima, Ali, and their children are part of the same light as Muhammad, and the traits attributed to them are far beyond their historical personalities. *Ibid.*, 265. For the analysis of Shi'i traditions that include *ahl al-bayt* to the light concept, see Matti Moosa, *Extremist Shiites*, 54–6.

This light is later reunited through the marriage of Ali and Fatima and is further passed on to the imams and their progeny. Thus, it can be asserted that the exceptional position in the creation of the family of the Prophet is superior to other creatures, and also placed their offspring in a privileged position.

The concept of this light, which became one of the central doctrines of Alevi and Bektashi theology, is represented in the lineage-based Alevi and Bektashi religious structure as well. Alevi and Bektashi religious leaders (*Çelebi*) benefit from this stature by asserting that they are from the same lineage as the Prophet and trace their ancestry back to ahl al-bayt. Aside from all other characteristics, whether religiously educated or not, they are distinguished from commoners by the claim that they are descended from the uncontaminated lineage of ahl al-bayt.³⁰ This advantage ensures their status as *Gürüh-ı naci* and gives them the authority to conduct religious ceremonies,³¹ lead the talib (follower) groups, and collect the *hakkullah* (Allah's share)³² in return for their religious services. Talib groups also benefit from their status, even though they are inferior to the sacred families in the religious hierarchy. They are included in the *Gürüh-ı naci* through an affiliation with one of the sacred families and a religious initiation ceremony.

Another feature that illustrates the Alevi and Bektashi as *Gürüh-ı naci* is that they are the true followers of the right path, which started in the pre-eternal time. The Alevi and Bektashi appear as a group of people who accept the existence of God in a place called *Bezm-i elest or Kalu bela*³³ in various

30. Alevi Ocakzades are considered to be the transmitters of their sacred lineage. They ensure that this divine light is transmitted within the Alevi community to secure the continuation of the right path because, it is impossible for an individual to achieve salvation alone without a spiritual leader of Muhammad's lineage. One of the reasons why endogamy is prevalent in the Alevi community is to preserve the purity of this sacred lineage for the same purpose. Thus, the sacred lineage of the ahl al-bayt does not mix with a person of lesser rank but remains pure and preserved to be passed on to other generations. Zeynep Oktay Uslu asserts that Alevi-Bektashi poetry does not indicate any hierarchical difference between the Alevi ocakzades (sacred family members), who possess the light and spiritual knowledge, and the talibs (followers). See Zeynep Oktay-Uslu, "Alevism as Islam: rethinking Shahab Ahmed's conceptualization of Islam through Alevi poetry," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 49, no. 2 (2020): 9n39.

31. According to the Alevi religious structure, the one who conducts the religious ceremony should have a link to Muhammad's progeny. Its evidence is found in the *Buyruk* as follows: "*Evlad -ı Muhammed-Ali'den ola ki pirligi caiz ola . . .*" [Let him be the descendant of Muhammad-Ali so that his *pirlik* is permissible]. *Buyruk*, ed. Sefer Aytekin (Ankara: Emek Yayınevi, 1958), 12.

32. *Hakkullah* is money or goods that are given to Alevi and Bektashi religious leaders by the participants of religious ceremonies in return to religious service.

33. The phrase *bezm-i elest* or *elest bezmi* refers to the Quranic verse 7:172 where the sentences "Elestu bi-rabbikum" (Am I not your Lord?), and *Kalu bela* (they said yes) appear.

types of Alevi and Bektashi sources, mostly poems. This term refers to an agreement made between God and all human spirits in which the spirits affirm the existence of God. According to the records, after having created Adam, God took from his loins all the spirits that he would create up to the day of resurrection, and he then made them bear witness that he was their Lord. Hence, the spirits recognized Allah's lordship prior to the creation of their bodies.³⁴ According to Shi'a traditions, after this pact took place, God deposited the true religion (*fitra*) inside human nature and made this fundamental feature immutable. On the other hand, another interpretation states that all the descendants of Adam, the believers (*mumin*) as well as the infidels (*kafir*), made this covenant. However, while the true believers took the oaths of the esoteric part of the religion, the infidels, although monotheistic in their original nature, fell into "infidelity," forgot their oath and disobeyed God.³⁵

The same pattern dichotomy is clearly visible in the Alevi and Bektashi interpretation of *Bezm-i elest*. As observed in Alevi and Bektashi poems, the true religion that was inserted in the loins of Adam passed on to Şit and his offspring and then reached the present-day Alevi and Bektashi. Thus, they became the true believers of the right path on earth by means of the true faith in their disposition.³⁶ These very features gave them the status of Gürüh-ı naci and brought them closer to salvation. However, the ones who did not testify to God could not possess the true religion and, as a result, followed the wrong path. Thus, they manifested as the oppressors of the true believers in the worldly realm.

This aspect can also be found in the following verse attributed to the sixteenth century Kızılbaş-Alevi poet, Pir Sultan Abdal:

*Hasan Hüseyin'i sevdik
Biz anlara ikrar verdik*

34. Uri Rubin, "Pre-Existence and Light—Aspects of the Concept of Nūr Muḥammad," *Israel Oriental Studies* 5 (1975), 67–8.

35. Amir Moezzi, *The Divine Guide in Early Shi'ism: The Sources of Esotericism in Islam*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 36. This approach condemns exoteric Muslims or Sunnite who fail to recognize the esoteric aspect of belief.

36. The Right Path is commonly referred to as *Hak-Muhammad-Ali Yolu* or *tarikāt* in Alevi piety. The importance of the right path for the Alevi is illustrated in an account regarding Husayn's position as *Pir* in *tarikāt*. According to the narrative, Husayn asks once to Muhammad whether the Path or Husayn is greater. The Prophet replies to him that in his eyes, Husayn is greater. As an answer, Husayn says that the Path is much vital than a single individual like him and warns Muhammad to question his own self (*özünü dara çekmek*). Then, Husayn proceeds to ask the same question to Ali, Hasan, and Fatima; all of them give the same answer as the Prophet, thus facing the same warning by Husayn. As this narrative shows, the significance of the Alevi path of righteousness surpasses even the exalted status of ahl al-bayt members. For different accounts regarding the Path, See Yıldırım, *Geleneksel Alevilik*, 341–7.

*Yezid'in neslini kırdık
Ta Kalu bela'dan beri . . .*³⁷

*We loved Hasan Husayn
We acknowledged them
We destroyed Yazid's descendants
Ever since Kalu bela*

Also, a nineteenth century poet, Sıdkı Baba, reflected these ideas in the context of the seventy-two sects as follows:

*İndi sulbümüzden yetmiş üç millet
Yetmiş ikisinden eyledim nefret
Yar oldum Şit ile kıldım muhabbet
Hakikat bezminde irfan idim ben*³⁸

*Seventy-three nations descended from our seed
I hated seventy-two of them
I fell in love with Şit, I showed affection*³⁹
I was wisdom in the majlis of truth

In addition to being the possessors of the light of Muhammad-Ali and the true religion, the Alevi and Bektashi also appear as the owners of divine knowledge. The continuation of the right path and the faith, which started in the cosmic realm, depends upon bearing this divine knowledge that will lead its possessors to salvation. This knowledge is originally bestowed upon Adam in the pre-existential realm along with the light and the psalms that are sent to him, and then transmitted to Şit and his successors including the Alevi and Bektashi.⁴⁰

In the Alevi and Bektashi written and oral corpus, we generally encounter this esoteric knowledge through the term *sırr* (secret), which refers to the cosmogony of God and Muhammad-Ali. In particular, the accounts in which

37. Cahit Öztelli, *Pir Sultan Abdal: Bütün Şiirleri*, (İstanbul: Milliyet Yayınları, 1971), 115–16.

38. Altınok, Baki Yaşa, *Sıdkı Baba Divanı*, (Ankara: Sistem Ofset Basımevi, 2013), 214–19.

39. Another translation for this line would be "I became friend with Seth, I made a conversation [with him]".

40. For the analysis of the nature of this knowledge and its transmission from generation to generation in Alevi piety, see Yıldırım, "Red Sulphur, the Great Remedy and the Supreme Name," 272–79; Yıldırım, *Geleneksel Alevilik*, 159–60. Similarly, in Shi'a literature, Adam entrusts Seth with knowledge and faith, along with the ism-i a'zam and the remaining prophetic legacy, before his death. Following the tradition, Muhammed assigns to Ali his knowledge and faith as well as the ism-i a'zam and the legacy of knowledge and prophethood, so that the transmission of the divine heritage would be followed through the prophet's offspring. Rubin, "Prophets and Progenitors in The Early Shi'a Tradition," 49–50.

the actions of Ali are highlighted more than those of Muhammad, Ali's divinity is revealed as a manifestation of God and is commonly labeled as *sırr-ı Ali* (the secret of Ali). In these types of accounts, Ali stands out as someone who can fight giants and dragons, change form into a lion, and perform tasks that normal individuals cannot accomplish. He appears simultaneously in thousands of different shapes (*binbir donda baş göstermek*) and the other characters cannot initially grasp his sırr but admit his Godlike nature in the end.⁴¹ Thereby, the manifestation of God in the body of Ali emerges as the secret itself.⁴²

However, this secret knowledge can be taught only to the people who can understand its esoteric aspect (*batın*), since it is dangerous to reveal it to outsiders. In Alevi and Bektashism, reaching maturity to attain the divine secrets is only possible through a religious initiation ceremony in which the individuals pass through different phases. The rite corresponds to the *musahiblik cemi* (ritual of companionship) in Kızılbaş-Alevi religious structure and is also described as an initiation to the Bektashi Path. Through the ceremony, two married couples symbolically accomplish the requirements of the *şeriat*, *tarikât*, *marifet*, and *hakikat* gates⁴³ and become brothers and sisters in the material world and thereafter. In the ritual, the couples leave behind all kinds of self-evident signs and desires, referred to as "to die before dying" (*ölmeden önce ölmek*) in Alevi and Bektashi tradition, in order to attain the secrets of the Godhead in the last stage.⁴⁴ At the end of

41. The popular accounts based on Yemini's *Fazilet-name*, such as *Mir'ac ve Kırklar Meclisi*, *Salman-i Farisi ve Erzene Gölü* and *Nusayr*, portrays symbolically the secret of Ali (*sırr-ı 'Ali*). See Yemini, *Fazilet-name*.

42. John Kingsley Birge, *The Bektashi Order of Dervishes*, Oriental Religion Series 7 (London: Luzac and Co., 1937), 159.

43. "Four gates and forty stations" (*dört kapı kırk makam*) is a four-stage doctrine in which each gate and station carries the Alevi and Bektashis to religious knowledge and experience. *Şeriat* represents Sunni religious law, *Tarikat* refers to the Path, *Marifet* means spiritual knowledge, and *Hakikat* translates as truth. In each rank the initiates' level of spiritual awareness and perfection gradually increase. While perfection depends on the personal spiritual achievement of each stage in Bektashism, in Alevism the focus shifts to the last two stages, due to being born as an Alevi and already being situated in the *Tarikat* stage. See Birge, *The Bektashi Order of Dervishes*, 102–9. Oktay-Uslu, "Alevism as Islam," 8; Zeynep Oktay, "Layers of Mystical Meaning and Social Context in the Works of Kaygusuz Abdal," in *Literature and Intellectual Life in Fourteenth- and Fifteenth-Century Anatolia*, ed. A.C.S. Peacock and Sara Nur Yıldız (Würzburg, Ergon Verlag, 2016), 73–99; Gezik, "How Angel Gabriel Became Our Brother of the Hereafter," 62–63.

44. In his *Fakrname*, Virani explains all the stages to reach the rank of *gürüh-ı naci*. See Virânî Abdal, *Fakrname*, ed. Fatih Usluer (İstanbul: Revak Yayınları, 2015). For *musahiplik*, see Cenksu Üçer, *Alevilikte Musahiplik*, (Ankara: Araştırma Yayınları, 2011); Yıldırım, *Geleneksel Alevilik*, 246–55.

the ceremony, the initiates who have successfully completed all the stages and are now aware of the divine secrets, count as fully-fledged members of the Güruh-ı naci.

The following sentences recited by the initiates during this ceremony are clear expressions of this understanding:

*Rah-ı zulmetten çıkıp doğru yola bastım kadem
Hab-ı gafletten uyandım can gözüm kıldım guşa
On iki imam bendesiyem men güruh-ı naciyim
Yetmiş iki firkadan oldum beri dahi cüda⁴⁵*

*Departing from the way of darkness, I have put foot on the straight path
I have awakened from the sleep of indifference, I have opened the eye of my soul
I am the slave of Twelve Imams, I am of the group of salvation
I have become separate from the seventy-two parties⁴⁶*

Joining the Güruh-ı naci by accepting all the difficulties and secrets of the Alevi and Bektashi path then makes the newly added members responsible for keeping the secret from outsiders, as one of the principles of the hakikat gate indicates.⁴⁷ This secret should never be revealed to the Yazids, for they do not have the ability to understand this esoteric knowledge. The necessity of keeping the secret is particularly emphasized in buyruks. There are warnings that the buyruk (*evliyanın menakıbı*) should be read and understood, and what is written there should be fulfilled to the extent possible. Nevertheless, the knowledge that has been learned from these books must be kept in the hearts and not divulged to the *munafıks* (hypocrites), for the *evliya kelamı* (the words of the friends of God) is the *sırr-ı Ali* (secret of Ali) itself.⁴⁸

As is evident, possessing the light of Muhammed-Ali, the true faith, and the esoteric knowledge place the Alevi and Bektashi in the seventy-third *fırka* that is descended from the houri and Şit. This self-identification of the Alevi and Bektashi as a preeminent group with these characteristics allows them to define their adversaries, in other words the seventy-two *firkas* descended from Adam and Eve, as secondary to them.

45. A. Y. Soyger, "19. Yüzyılda Yapılan İki Bektaşî Nasib/İkrâr Ayini," in *Alevilik*, ed. İsmail-Havva Engin (Istanbul: Kitap Yayınevi, 2004), 267, 276, 277, 282, 283.

46. The English translation of this *terceman* belongs to Birge. See Birge, *The Bektashi Order of Dervishes*, 193. *Tercemans* are short prayers, usually in Turkish, recited in front of the *murşid* by dervishes, disciples, or initiates during the Alevi and Bektashi rituals or ceremonies.

47. "Hakikat sohbetinde esrar söylemek" (To speak of mysteries (only) in the fellowship of mystics). *Ibid.*, 104.

48. Dogan Kaplan, *Buyruklara Göre Kızılbaşlık*, PhD diss., (Selçuk Üniversitesi, 2008), 118–19.

Güruh-ı naci and Others

As Islam spread to further geographies, the diversity of societies in the conquered regions prompted an attempt by Muslims to define themselves and others. This effort led to the appearance of heresiology literature in the tenth and eleventh centuries. This genre attempted not only to define Muslim identity against that of the “other,” but also to create a normative pattern of belief and practice against which “heresy” and difference could be measured. These texts accommodated essentialist interpretations of Islam and a precise distinction of identity based on binary oppositions. They also employed a discourse in which identities and differences were constructed negatively as illustrated by terms such as *bidat* (innovation), *ghulat* (extremists), and *mulhid* (disbeliever).⁴⁹ These terms, along with many others, were used not only in early Islamic period but were also subsequently employed by the representatives of dominant traditions to describe the “other” on both theological and political grounds.⁵⁰

In the case of Anatolian religious circles, creating the boundaries in the formation of religious identity took various forms. Even though there was not an established religious orthodoxy⁵¹ in the early formation period of the Alevi and Bektashi piety, certain dervish circles were the subject of enmity in terms of their “infidel” religious views. However, this hostility was always reciprocal and created different performative identities. For instance, the early poets, who are counted today as members of Alevi-Bektashi milieu, differentiated themselves from the representatives of institutional Islam, due to their purely legalistic understanding of religion. On the other hand, they presented themselves as the spiritual, esoteric lovers of the religion in their poems and writings.⁵²

49. Azim A. Nanji, ‘Portraits of Self and Others: Ismaili Perspectives on the History of Religions’ *Medieval Ismaili History & Thought* ed. Farhad Daftary, (London: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 154.

50. As an example of an interesting case of how Muslims positioned in different relationships to power interpreted Islamic heritage differently, see Baki Tezcan, “Dispelling the Darkness of the Halberdier’s Treatise: A Comparative Look at Black Africans in Ottoman Letters in the Early Modern Period,” in *Disliking Others: Loathing, Hostility, and Distrust in Premodern Ottoman Lands*, ed. Hakan T. Karateke, H. Erdem Çıpa, Helga Anetshofer (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2018), 43–74.

51. Cemal Kafadar uses the term “metadoxy” to mark this period as beyond doxies, in which neither orthodoxy nor heterodoxy was strictly solidified. See Cemal Kafadar, *Between Two Worlds: The Construction of the Ottoman State* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), 71–76.

52. In the case of Yunus Emre and Kaygusuz Abdal, see Oktay-Uslu, *The Perfect Man in Bektashism and Alevism: Kaygusuz Abdāl’s Kitāb-ı Mağlaqa*, 99–110.

The medieval Anatolian epic-legendary corpus linked to the memory of Karbala, was also one of the examples for picturing this twofold approach.⁵³ These works were widely read by the Alevi and Bektashi, as evidenced by the abundance of these texts in their private libraries and were highly influential in reinforcing this dichotomic viewpoint. The main leitmotif of these texts appears as the avenging of Husayn's blood, and thus the entire corpus represents the eternal fight between the true Muslims and their oppressors.⁵⁴ In these texts, the true Muslims are illustrated by names and phrases such as "Torabi," "the lovers of Hasan and Husayn's progeny," "the passionate lovers of ahl al-bayt," and "the friends of the House of the Prophet." Meanwhile, adversaries are referred to using the terms "Harici," "Yazidi," "Marvani," "killers of the Prophet's sons," and "those who removed Ali's name from *khutbah*." This approach also became an ideological stimulus to fight injustice, thereby mobilizing the socially and economically dissatisfied masses.

Kızılbaş⁵⁵ were another group who were also classified under pejorative terms by the religious scholars and administrators of the Ottoman Empire due to their religious understanding that existed outside the Sunni interpretation of Islam, their Mahdist aspirations, and close socio-religious and economic relationships with the Safavids. These features were perceived as a threat to the centralization process and the escalating Sunnization policies across the empire, which led to harsh policies implemented against the Kızılbaş. As has been shown in various archival sources from differing periods, they were

53. The most important among them are *Maqal-i Husayn*, *Abu Muslim-name*, *Junayd-name*, *Battal-name*, *Dāneshmand-name*, and *Saltuk-name*. See Ebu'l Hayr-ı Rûmî, *Saltuk-nâme*, cilt I-II-III, eds., Necati Demir, Dursun Erdem, (İstanbul, TİKA-UKID, 2013); Necati Demir, ed., *Dānīshmend-nāme* I-IV: Critical Edition, Turkish Translation Linguistic Analysis, Glossary, Facsimile, (Cambridge: Harvard University, 2002); Irène Mélikoff, *Abu Muslim: Le « Porte-Hache » du Khorassan dans la tradition épique turcoiranienne* (Paris: A. Maisonneuve, 1962). For the analysis of the perception of Islam in this corpus also see, Rıza Yıldırım, "In the Name of Hosayn's Blood: The Memory of Karbala as Ideological Stimulus to the Safavid Revolution," *Journal of Persianate Studies* 8 (2015): 127–54.

54. In these texts, the supporters of the House of Prophet are usually referred as "Sunni," while the enemies of them are attributed with the name "Khāreji" in this literature. Thus, in the context of the texts both terms are emptied of their classical meaning. Yıldırım, *In the Name of Hosayn's Blood*, 135–41.

55. "Kızılbaş" is a historical name used for one of the many groups that were, before the nineteenth century, categorized as Alevi. For the term Kızılbaş and its implications in the early modern period see Ayşe Baltacıoğlu Brammer, "One Word, Many Implications: The Term 'Kızılbaş' in the Early Modern Ottoman Context," *Ottoman Sunnism: New Perspectives*, ed. Vefa Erginbaş (Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 47–70. For the analysis of the term "Alevi" in the late Ottoman and early republican period, see Markus Dressler, *Writing Religion: The Making of Turkish Alevi Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

described as *zındık* (apostate), *mulhid* (disbeliever), and *rafizi* (heretic), and thus were liable to execution, exile, and confiscation of property.⁵⁶

As was the case in the texts of early dervish circles and the medieval epic legendary corpus, Kızılbaş also had their own self-understanding in opposition to the accusations and charges against them. They interpreted the events from the past that were most important to them through certain characters and legendary figures. Thus, they associated negative characters and behaviors with “others,” while identifying themselves with affirmative characters and behaviors. Furthermore, the Kızılbaş utilized terminology that contrasted with the prejudice they faced. This was based on the idea that they were “the lovers of ahl al-bayt” against “the enemies of ahl al-bayt.” Apart from the already established practice of accusation toward the representatives of the legal form of religion regarding their exoteric views and hypocrisy, they also utilized the terminology from the drama of Karbala where the grandson of the Prophet, Husayn, was beheaded by Yazid’s armies in 680. We can also add to that the notion of *on dört masum-ı pak* (the Fourteen Pure Innocents), who were the children of imams and were killed in the battle of Karbala.⁵⁷

In addition, the Alevi and Bektashi doctrinal corpus and poetry used other vocabularies and concepts to define the “self” against the “other” while creating the religious identities in the early modern and modern periods.⁵⁸ The notion of *Güruh-ı naci* was among these designations to identify Alevi and Bektashi as true Muslims who will attain the salvation through the love of ahl al-bayt. For instance, as Zeynep Oktay-Uslu has illustrated, the buyruk texts

56. For the analysis of these terms in Ottoman context, see Ahmet Yaşar Ocak, *Osmanlı Toplumunda Zındıklar ve Mülhidler: 15.–17. Yüzyıllar*, (Istanbul: Türk Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, 1998). For accusations of heresy and Ottoman persecution of the Kızılbaş, see Ahmet Refik, *Onaltıncı Asırda Rafizilik ve Bektaşilik* (Istanbul: Muallim Ahmet Halit Kütüphanesi, 1932); Colin Imber, “The Persecution of the Ottoman Shi‘ites According to the Mühimme Defterleri, 1565–1585,” *Der Islam* 56, no. 2 (1979): 245–73; Fariba Zarinebaf-Shahr, “Qizilbash Heresy and Rebellion in Ottoman Anatolia during the Sixteenth Century,” *Anatolia Moderna* 7 (Fall 1997): 1–15; Saim Savaş, *XVI. Asırda Anadolu’da Alevilik*, (Ankara: Vadi Yayınları, 2002); Rıza Yıldırım, “Turkomans Between Two Empires: The Origins of The Qizilbash Identity in Anatolia (1447–1514)” PhD diss., (Bilkent University, 2008), 549–65; Ayşe Baltacıoğlu-Brammer, “The Formation of Kızılbaş Communities in Anatolia and Ottoman Responses, 1450s–1630s,” *International Journal of Turkish Studies* 2, nos. 1&2 (2014): 21–47; Karakaya-Stump, *The Kizilbash/Alevis In Ottoman Anatolia: Sufism, Politics and Community*, 256–319; Nir Shafir, “How to Read Heresy in the Ottoman World,” in *Historicizing Sunni Islam in the Ottoman Empire, c.1450–c.1750*, ed. Tijana Krstić and Derin Terzioğlu (Boston: Brill, 2020), 196–232.

57. Birge, *The Bektashi Order of Dervishes*, 147–48.

58. For Alevi and Bektashi poetry, see *Alevî Bektâşî Nefesleri*, ed. Abdülbâki Gölpınarlı, (Istanbul: İnkılap, 1992); *Alevî-Bektaşî Şiirleri Antolojisi I-V*, ed. İsmail Özmen (Ankara: T.C. Kültür Bakanlığı, 1998); Şah İsmail *Hatâyi Dîvânı* ed. Muhsin Macit, (Istanbul: Türkiye Yazma Eserler Kurumu, 2017).

position the Kızılbaş as the true Muslims against the rest of the Islamic community on the basis of the aforementioned hadith attributed to the Prophet, "*Bu sırrı arif anlar ve dahı Resulullah buyurur kim, 'Benüm ümmetüm yetmiş üç fırkadur. Heman bir fırkası cennetlikdür; ol güruh-ı nacidürler'*" (The gnostic knows this secret. And the Messenger of God says, "My ummah consists of seventy-three sects one of which will enter heaven. This is the saved community").⁵⁹ Furthermore, an *abdal*, Hurufi, and Bektashi poet, Virani's *Fakrname* designates Güruh-ı naci as the friends of God and specifies that only they can reach the Godhead and be a member of saved community:

*güruh-i naci güruh-i evliyadır ve güruh-i evliya andan malum olur kim bu dört eczayı kendüde puhte eylemiş ola ve cemi-i masıvayı ve heva-yı nefsinı ve tamamı kendüden red eylemiş ola ta ol kimse insan nedir ve şeytan nedir anı bile ve ruh-ı ızafe kadem basa güruh-i naci ve güruh-i evliyadan ola zira kim ol şah-ı şehinşah yani ol Aliyyün veliyyullah kendi kerem-i lutfından buyurmuşdur*⁶⁰

The saved community is the friends of God. The group of friends of God is known as that they perfect the four elements in themselves. They stay away from anything that distance them from God, deny themselves from the worldly desires and cupidity so that they know what is human and what is evil. And they take a step to reach the Godhead and be from the saved community and the group of the friends of God. Because the king of kings, Ali the friend of God, has offered from his own generosity of grace.

One prominent example is also found in *Risale-i Husniye*, a Shi'a polemical work and an integral component of the Alevi and Bektashi religious corpus and faith. Husniye is asked about the identity of *fırka-i naciye* on an occasion where issues related to faith and religion are discussed among the religious scholars. In response to the question, she utilizes the hadith quoted above and asserts that the *fırka-i naciye*, or the saved community, consists of those who follow the path of Muhammad and ahl al-bayt⁶¹.

Apart from the Alevi and Bektashi doctrinal and sacred texts, the poetry pays a great deal of attention to the notion of Güruh-ı naci. This term is often used in poems to describe the Alevi and Bektashi as good, innocent,

59. Oktay-Uslu, "Alevism as Islam: rethinking Shahab Ahmed's conceptualization of Islam through Alevi poetry," 7. Oktay-Uslu quotes this hadith from *Risale-i Şeyh Safi* which is located between fol. 1b–61a of the manuscript that figures under the name *Menâkıbü'l-esrâr behcetü'l-ahrâr* at Mevlana Museum Ferid Uğur Kitaplığı No. 1172.

60. Perihan Kaya, *Fakirname (Virânî Baba Risâlesi) Giriş – İnceleme – Metin – Sözlük – Tıpkıbasım*, Yayınlanmamış Yüksel Lisans Tezi, (Isparta: Süleyman Demirel Üniversitesi, 2002), 47.

61. Fatih Usluer, Sıdıka Demirsöz, "Risâle-i Hüsnîye," *Alevilik Araştırmaları Dergisi* 4 (Winter 2012), 88–89. For full text see *ibid.*; Yusuf Ünal, "More Than Mere Polemic: The Adventure of the Risâlah-i Hüsnîyah in the Safavid, Ottoman, and Indian Lands" MA thesis (Boğaziçi University, 2016), 52.

righteous, and loyal to Ali with repeated references to events before and after creation. The following lines, attributed to the sixteenth-century poet Pir Sultan Abdal, exemplify this approach by referencing the seventy-two groups as follows:

*Yetmiş iki millet sevmedi Şah'ı
Biz severiz Şah-ı Merdan Ali 'dir . . .*⁶²

*The seventy-two groups did not love the Shah
We love[him], he is Şah-ı Merdan Ali [the king of the brave]*

Another poem, written by a nineteenth century female Bektashi poet named Hayriye Bacı, references the entire cosmogonic process and places *Güruh-ı naci* on the opposing group of Yazidis in the following verses:

*Muhammed Ali'nin kuluyuz kulu
Ta Elest bezminde demişiz beli
Aslımızdır Hacı Bektaş-i Veli
Güruh-ı naciyiz dönmeyiz geri
On iki imamların demin görmüşüz
Sefine-i Nuh'a biz de binmişiz
Muhammed Ali'ye ikrar vermişiz
Güruh-ı naciyiz dönmeyiz geri
Atamız Adem'den aldık haberi
Yezidlere çektik tig u teberi
Ebu Turab dendi bize ezeli
Güruh-ı naciyiz dönmeyiz geri . . .*⁶³

*We are the servants of Muhammad Ali, we are the servants
We have said yes in the bezm-i elest
Our Origin is Hacı Bektaş-i Veli
We are the Güruh-ı naci, we do not go back [on our promises]
We have seen the time of Twelve Imams
We also have gotten on the Ark of Noah
We have acknowledged Muhammad-Ali
We are the Güruh-ı naci, we do not go back [on our promises]
We received the news from our ancestor Adam
We have drawn the sword and axe to the Yazids.
We were called Abu Turab from all eternity.
We are the Güruh-ı naci, we do not go back [on our promises]*

In oral lore, the practice of positioning oneself is seen in the same fashion. Alevi and Bektashi, along with different aspects and approaches to religious

62. Öztelli, *Pir Sultan Abdal: Bütün Şiirleri*, 110–11.

63. İsmail Özmen, *Alevi-Bektaşî Şiirleri Antolojisi*, Cilt: IV (Ankara: T.C. Kültür Bakanlığı Yayınları, 1998), 507.

self-designation, consolidate their self-understanding as *Güruh-ı naci*, as the possessors of the true religion, and the enthusiastic followers of the straight path of ahl al-bayt.

In the narratives, they cleverly formulated the idea of *Güruh-ı naci*, confidently identifying themselves as the descendants of *Şit* and the *hourî*, hence as the members of the seventy-third group. On the other hand, they considered those who were hostile to the ahl al-bayt as members of the seventy-two groups, who were equivalent to the ones that came out of Eve's jar. These were none other than the ones who understood the religion in its exoteric terms, Yazids, Muaviyas, and Marvans, and their followers that antagonized the members of ahl al-bayt and Imams.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article has been to address the function of the myth of *Güruh-ı naci* and *Şit*, which is perhaps one of the most important myths that constitute the collective memory of Alevi and Bektashi. In the first part of the article, I included different forms of *Güruh-naci* and *Şit* narratives that were collected from field research and the motifs in these accounts. In the second part of the article, I showed the perception of "self" and "other", which Alevi and Bektashi created based on available myth of the *Güruh-ı naci* and *Şit*. I have partially used the pre-modern and modern doctrinal and polemical works, the oral sources of the twenty-first century, as well as contemporary Alevi and Bektashi poetry collections. Based on available oral sources, modern collections of poetry, and the Alevi and Bektashi written religious corpus, it is possible to find three main features that represent the Alevi and Bektashi as *Güruh-ı naci*: 1) carrying the light of Muhammad- Ali and coming from the lineage of ahl al-bayt, which was created before anything else in the time before existence; 2) following the right path of the true religion which is found in *Bezm-i elest* or *Kalu bela*; and 3) possessing the esoteric knowledge that will ensure the maintenance of the right path. All these features were primordially incorporated into the loins of Adam and then passed from him to his beloved son *Şit*. Through the union of *Şit* and a *hourî*, these characteristics and virtues were also inherited by their descendants—prophets, saints, ahl al-bayt and Imams—and extend to the Alevi and Bektashi of the present day. Thus, Alevi and Bektashi religious leaders legitimize their own posts as members of *Güruh-ı naci*.

Through the notion of *Güruh-ı naci*, the Alevi and Bektashi have formulated their salvation theory, designating themselves as the seventy-third *fırka* that emerged from the jar of the *hourî*. Identifying themselves as the seventy-third group that will attain salvation also allowed them to define the others

on their own terms. They adopted multiple approaches to designate their adversaries, and in doing so, they characterized themselves with affirmative attributes. This religious understanding of “self” and “other” was constructed reciprocally. While they trace their descent from *Gürüh-ı naci* and *Şit*, follow the right path of the true religion, and possess the esoteric knowledge, the seventy-two *firkas* come from the lineage of Eve, follow the wrong path, and are deprived of the esoteric knowledge. Hence, the Alevi and Bektashi consider their salvation impossible. They also used specific vocabulary to describe the seventy-two *firkas*. They borrow the terminology from their mythical history, including the themes and notions from pre-existence and Karbala. This specific approach and terminology have continued to be used by this community throughout their history to characterize the representatives of injustice, and the performative dualist notion of the opposition is preserved as an important feature of the Alevi and Bektashi political, historical, and mythological mindset.

Recognition of “self” as members of *Gürüh-ı naci* is only one of the many approaches of Alevi and Bektashis to make sense of and position themselves in Islam in their own terms in the pre-modern and contemporary periods. Many narratives involving the different Islamic interpretation strategies of Alevi and Bektashis still await investigation. A useful methodology for historicizing religious ideas and doctrines of Alevi and Bektashis will enable us to understand their different interpretation strategies that reflect their worldviews.

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