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Paradoxes of Pluralism:

Ritual Aesthetics and the Alevi Revival in Turkey

Abstract

This essay queries the politics of pluralism in contemporary Turkey by examining the historical processes that have consolidated Alevism as a public religion. Constituting a sizable minority within Turkey, Alevi have acquired a public presence in urban spaces only within the last several decades, provoking political and public reflection on the limits of existing imaginaries of the Turkish nation. I suggest that the emergence of the Alevi community into public prominence has been facilitated not only by the ideologies of identity politics and recognition but through a distinctive aesthetics of ritual form. Specifically, I examine the development of public performances of the *semah*, a traditional Alevi practice. Such performances have provided a public legibility to communal traditions but at the cost of being encoded by the state as a species of folklore rather than of worship. The essay demonstrates that the ritual aesthetics that has enabled a public display of Alevi ritual has sustained, rather than challenged, the authority of the nation-state. Efforts by Alevi movements to challenge state designations of communal ritual as folkloric are compelled to challenge the social forms that have enabled Alevism to become a public religion. I argue that the publicity of Alevi religion has come to serve, paradoxically, as both an index of pluralism in Turkey and the limit that pluralist projects struggle to overcome.