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LISTENING TO OTHERNESS: THE CASE OF THE TURKISH ALEVIS

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ABSTRACT

The article combines the theory of ethics of listening with an ethnographic case study of the Turkish Alevi religious communities to show how both, if followed as an example, can enable interreligious dialogue. Listening, that could be considered active rather than passive, allows an opening of a space of intersubjective hospitality. The Turkish Alevis, researched through the participant observation method, seem to have a strongly developed ability to listen to one another, and the other. It is deduced that this ability is present due to the entanglement of their ritual practices with music, in which they regularly engage.

Keywords: Turkish Alevi, listening, Alevi music, ethics of listening, hospitality, interreligious dialogue

ASCOLTARE L'ALTERITÀ: L'ESEMPIO DEGLI ALEVI DELLA TURCHIA

SINTESI

L'articolo mette in combinazione la teoria dell'etica dell'ascolto con un caso di studio etnografico delle comunità religiose degli Alevi della Turchia, per mostrare come entrambe, se prese come esempio, possono consentire un dialogo interreligioso. L'ascoltare, che dovrebbe essere considerato più attivo che passivo, permette l'apertura di uno spazio di ospitalità intersoggettiva. Gli Alevi della Turchia, studiati col metodo di osservazione partecipativa, sembrano aver sviluppato fortemente un'abilità di ascoltarsi l'un l'altro e gli altri. Si deduce che la presenza di questa capacità sia dovuta al fatto, che i loro rituali sono strettamente connessi alla musica, nella quale gli Alevi s'impegnano regolarmente.

Parole chiave: Alevi Turchi, ascoltare, la musica degli Alevi, l'etica dell'ascolto, ospitalità, dialogo interreligioso

When we are *exposed to* or *involved in* the process of listening, our bodies enable us to be part of it through the ear, that is always alert, awake, always open – the ear cannot be closed as the eye. Listening, the activity of conscious perception of sonorous stimuli is traditionally (at least in cultures of the West) characterized by a sense of passivity, obedience, subordination, inferiority, powerlessness. However, it could be thought of and perceived as a very active and intentional activity of a subject who establishes a relation with their environment through this activity (Ihde, 2007). Further on, listening does not mean only *listening to* and therefore hearing/perception of sound, but also, or even mostly, an offering of attention, the possibility of deeper understanding, an allowing space for expression (Irigaray, 2008). The gesture of listening, that becomes an activity through its repetition, can reveal itself as ethical in its foundations and also crucial for establishing intersubjective spaces of mutual acceptance and affection. Therefore, listening is an *active activity*, an ethical gesture, directed towards the other to whom we offer attention as well as the possibility to express themselves in their proper way.

The following article¹ offers an insight into the possibilities of how listening could and can be the elemental gesture or activity through which individuals and communities can approach one another in order to discover and understand each other's values that are grounded in their different religious beliefs. Through listening to one another, these values can be recognised as similar, common, or if different, not necessarily mutually exclusive.

The idea of a possibility of encouraging interreligious dialogue through the gesture or activity of listening occurred to me based on personal experience, when I was engaged with field work research about hospitality with the method of participant observation amongst the Turkish Alevi² communities in Istanbul. The mutual attention and affection amongst their members, prompted by *attentive listening*, directed me into thinking that this culture, or even *ethics of listening*, that they practice spontaneously, immanently, resulted from their long time tradition of music being a very present element in their everyday lives, but also, a central element to their religious rituals. This idea will be presented in the present article, firstly, through

the in-depth insight into the *listening process as an intersubjective gesture* and also an *ethical activity*, which allows people to cohabitate in a hospitable shared space. What will follow is a vast presentation of the Turkish Alevi, which will allow an understanding of the crucial role of the music performance for an establishment of a strong sense of community. Both perspectives will be correlated in an attempt to show how observing the Alevi musical tradition and practice could be a role model, a path to establish an acceptable space for attentive and effective interreligious dialogue. Finally, I offer a speculation on possible reasons that the example of Alevi religion could be a role model for enhancing the potential of interreligious dialogue, that is, by fostering an ethics of listening, and assuring mutual attentiveness, consideration and acceptance.

ETHICAL LISTENING: ENTERING A SPACE OF SHARING

Listening is conceived as opening to resonance, says Jean-Luc Nancy (2007, 25–27), as reverberation. This means simultaneously opening to the self and gaining or giving meaning. The listening subject is exposed to the sensual, sense, meaning, while opening *in* and *to* silence, where the ear expands: this tension of the ear is already carrying its own meaning. Listening, especially musical listening, implies an intensification of the 'auditory sense,' since with listening, the self listens to itself, too. Such an understanding offers a liberation of sense, liberation of meaning, that is way too often settled, sitting 'enthroned' to the benefit of grasping 'final truths' in the eternal philosophical and scientific realm of the Western culture, namely, its tradition of reason.³ This kind of listening is not limited to musical listening, but it is connected also to speech and dialogue, which is especially important for enabling mutual understanding (Nancy, 2007, 35–37). Listening beyond meaning allows for a plurality of possible senses, meanings, and values. Listening shifts the attention(s) outside the self, as a call to open listening, to being open to the message of the speaker. This allows for differences, otherness and the unknown to emerge (Koskinen & Lindstöm, 2013, 146). Listening offers the possibility of approaching the unexpected,

1 This article was made possible by the financial support of the Slovenian Research Agency in the frames of the project *Interreligious dialogue: a basis for coexisting diversity in the light of migration and the refugee crisis* (ARRS research project J6-9393) and of the programme *Liminal spaces: areas of cultural and societal cohabitation in the age of risk and vulnerability* (ARRS research programme P6-0279). Moreover, I would like to express my gratitude to Dr Shé M. Hawke for her reading of the article and her precious commentaries of its content.

2 The word 'Alevi' denominates a member of the specific religious group, but also it can be used as an adjective to describe specific characteristics of this same group. The Turkish noun to name this religion is 'Alevilik', which in English publications is often translated as 'Alevism'. However, since the ending '-lik' in Turkish language is mainly used for nouns that have any, even very wide relation to the core noun, this term will be here translated as 'Aleviness', which is preferable to the former. 'Alevilik' does not denominate only a religion in its narrow sense, but also, if not mainly, the cultural tradition, the ethics, worldview and way of life. The word Aleviness is not widely used, nonetheless it can be found sporadically in some publications in the field of Alevi Studies (cf. Massicard, 2016; Yocum, 2005, 584).

3 For a critique of traditional culture of reason see for example Luce Irigaray writings such as *Una nuova cultura dell'energia: Al di là di Oriente e Occidente* (Irigaray, 2011) or "Sharing Humanity: Towards Peaceful Coexistence in Difference" (Irigaray, 2013).

the unknown. It allows for an open approach to otherness and from this position it is connected to ethical gestures.

Listening is a fundamental and complex phenomenon in the encounter with other human beings, an integral part of communication ethics and ethical caring relation (Beard, 2009, 8–9).

Connecting listening to ethics presents an understanding of the subject as being constituted by listening itself: the listening subject is the ethical subject. (Beard, 2009, 7–8)

An emergence of the ethical from listening is explicitly recognised by communicologist Lisbeth Lipari, who positions her research among language, politics and ethics. She claims that *the ethical forms from the gesture, the act of listening*. This is tied to accepting difference, which she calls ‘listening otherwise’ (Lipari, 2009, 45). This kind of listening intentionally devotes itself to the different, unknown, ununderstood, the strange, and splits with familiarity and our knowledge of the world. In this way, the role of speech in society and in the field of ethics is diminished, since it is subordinated to listening directed towards difference and otherness, and not sameness. Also, listening always entails doubt, since it does not allow distance from the one who is being listened to, with which the listener always shares space and time (see Voegelin, 2010, xii).

With authentic listening, i.e. attentive and oriented towards silence, or the unknown, as described in the ethics of listening, it is possible to accept the foreign, the surprising, even if it is frightening, uncertain or even risky (see Beard, 2009, 19). This also stands in the case when it puts us under questioning – which is crucial in order to establish attentive intersubjective relations.

Listening is a desire and willingness for otherness, it means to put oneself into question, to welcome and answer to the insistent supplication and invocation of the absolute Other (Koskinen & Lindstöm, 2013, 151).

Learning to listen and hear ‘here and now,’ getting accustomed to this activity again, can contribute to teaching towards a more open perception, regardless of who we meet, without applying to their presence any pre-existing idea, considering only what the specific moment of the encounter is offering. Accepting the encounter as it is, welcoming it with a hospitable and affectionate ‘yes.’

However, listening to the unknown and to the foreign is quite difficult, if we do not have the means of understanding of what we hear. This is the case also in the circumstances of interreligious dialogue,

when many times we can find ourselves in situations of deepening the gap of separation due to lack of understanding, since not all participants have the ability to interpret, apprehend the symbols or religious language of another. (cf. Moyaert, 2014, 234–236). An ability to listen without the need to understand can be prominently learned by listening to music, since it is not as much coded as languages and symbols are, and moreover, it does not demand any understanding for it to be listened to. This does not imply, that the listener must like the music she hears, but only, that she can listen to it without expecting, or even needing to understand it. This is another perspective of Luce Irigaray on importance of music sharing, since

music allows communication in an instant between people more easily. Of course, differences exist between the musical choices of diverse cultures but sharing them seems easier than going from the logic [of language] of one culture to that of another. We can listen to different music but not to different languages. To share a rhythm or a melody is easier and quicker than to share a linguistic universe. Above all music remains faithful to bodily and cosmic waves and vibrations which are universal, even if they are not equally discovered or awakened in all humans (Irigaray, 2004, 135–136).

With listening to music one can realise through experience, that listening is not as much a ‘reasonable’ gesture, but mainly an embodied one, a shared one. Each musical piece through its specific sounds offers a particular emotional setting, an individual atmosphere. These are brought to us listeners be it through our previous experiences of these specific sounds or through our associations, or simply through their particular sound vibrations and frequencies. Whichever of these options applies, we are listening to otherness – to a sound, music, that is not ourselves, but comes from elsewhere to resonate in and to us. Listening to music can help to realise, that we do not need to like, understand, love, agree with and confirm what we hear, but this does not mean that we should not give it a chance to be listened to. If we could learn listening as an embodied experience and not as a rational one, we could use the ability to listen to make space for a more fruitful interreligious dialogue to emerge.

One of the examples for this ethical attentive listening that is brought to enactment through embodiment can be found in the communities of the Alevi religion. This tradition was kept alive for centuries in seclusion and brought to surface only during the last century mainly through its preservation and vivid presence in musical activity. The latter offers to members of the Alevi community a hospitable place for mutual listening and ethical encounters.

WELCOMING (OF) THE ALEVIS

At the time of very first contact with the Alevi community and its members one can sense their hospitality, which they show to one another, but also, if not primarily to foreigners, to their guests. It is always possible to feel that hospitality or affection towards the other, towards a fellow human, is one of the central principles of the Alevi way of life. Eventually, one can discover that this ethical stance is being build up or prompted not by the doctrines or scriptures of their religion, but mainly through their lived experience of their inclusive community rituals, where listening is fostered especially through the musical exchange that is central to their religious worship. Before turning to this topic, the following pages include a vain attempt of a condensed description of these unorthodox religious communities, in order to sketch their tradition, history, environment and culture.

The Turkish Alevis are most frequently portrayed as a heterodox Shia religious community and the largest, otherwise unofficial, religious minority of Turkey. The word 'Alevi' means 'Ali's devotee' (Thoraval, 1998, 16) or 'Ali's supporter' (Şener, 2009, 16).⁴ The Alevi worship Ali (Ali Ibn Abi Talib),⁵ as well as Muhammad's family (Ehlibeyt) and the Twelve Imams, therefore they are commonly classified as part of the Shia branch of Islam. However, based on their diverse religious practice, which is not founded on the Quran, and is primarily seen as esoteric, they are also being connected with shamanism, religious cults of Central Asia and other pre-Islamic religions and are therefore often referred to as syncretistic. The described unorthodox characteristics (mystical rituals, disobedience to the authorities, etc.) were the main reasons that the Alevis suffered persecution, segregation and purges throughout history. Therefore, the rites of the Alevis were carried out in secrecy and they did not proclaim their creed in public. A considerable part of the Sunni majority in Turkey tended towards stigmatizing the Alevis as heretics for centuries, and sometimes this description is present even today. However, at the same time they represent an alternative to the prevailing Sunni Islam and one of the strongest political

oppositions of secular Turkey. The Alevi population estimate is approximately fifteen per cent of the total Turkish population,⁶ and it most commonly inhabits the central and eastern parts of Anatolia. The Alevis are ethnically identified as the Turks and the Kurds, the latter being divided in terms of language use to the Kurmanji and Zaza speaking Kurds. The Alevis promote interreligious tolerance, equality, fraternity, they foster hospitality, interpersonal affection and peacefulness, which is testified through their teachings. These were over the centuries of their religious practice transmitted mostly orally, in Alevi poetry and music, that still represent the central element of their rituals. Today, they are integrated into the Turkish society as the bearers of a rich Turkish folk heritage, however, the Alevis are not identified as a religious community as they would like to, as only in this way would they achieve public equality and legitimacy of their own religious beliefs.

It is crucial to understand, that any generalised description of the Alevis is quite problematic, because the information about them differs from source to source. This is because the Alevi religious and cultural tradition is non-scriptural and also because of the actual differences among the beliefs and religious practices of specific Alevi communities themselves, that allow for different interpretations.

When considering the identity of the Alevis, the key is understanding that the latter is practically fluid and defined in various, sometimes even contradictory, modes. This happens most often also with the influence of either Western science that is applied to Turkish social environment, even by Turkish researchers themselves, or adaptations to the history and interpretations introduced in search of a compromise between the 'old' tradition and the demands of the modern secular state.⁷ In any case, the objectification of their identity is prominent, which occurs in particular through any unambiguous definition of Aleviness, which distances it from its esoteric and mystical content. The codification of the Alevi practice is not congruent to their teachings, which were primarily orally transmitted. Aleviness is a non-scriptural practice, which differs from one community to another, re-

4 It is used as an umbrella term for religious communities from the Turkish region that honour Ali and Muhammad's family, and their religious practice differs significantly from the Turkish Sunni majority. The name was established only in the 20th century as a neutral substitute for the pejorative naming *Kızılbaş* (Shankland, 2003b, 19, 210).

5 Full Ali's name in the nominative case. Hereinafter, this revered figure will be referred to with a shorter version of the name, that is, Ali, since the use of the latter is the most common among the Turkish Alevis.

6 Researchers do not have accurate data on the number of members of the Alevi communities, since they are difficult to identify as some still avoid to identify themselves as Alevi, and moreover the question regarding the religious affiliation is omitted from the regular population census (Shankland, 2010, 231; see also Cihat, 2014; Kurun, 2019, 9; Öktem, 2008, 5; Poyraz, 2005, 503; Şener, 2009, 189).

7 The fluidity of the Alevi identity is explained explicitly by David Shankland (2003a; 2003b; 2010) and Markus Dressler (2003; 2008; 2013), who have distanced themselves from and to the research subjects to provide a more critical view of the topics under discussion. I have discussed the importance of their contribution to the Alevis' study in the article "The Turkish Alevi: In Search of an Identity" (Bjelica, 2017).

regardless of the existence of texts.⁸ This is also because over the centuries of persecution, any textual sources were rarely used, as there was a danger that the violent and hostile representatives of the ruling Sunnis would discover them and purge them.⁹ These factors broadly contributed to the fact, that the Alevi tradition was not established as uniform or homogeneous, but rather varied, flexible, and therefore fluid.

In Alevi belief, humankind, or rather, humanity, humaneness (in Turkish language *'insanlık'*) is the centre of the universe, which is primarily not so much connected with (ontological) anthropocentrism, but above all with the Alevi fundamental life-guide of the 'complete human' (in Turkish language *'insan-ı kamil'*), according to which a human is becoming whole, complete, thus, approaching god, in his or her proper (Alevi) 'way' (in Turkish language *'yol'*). One should perceive a human being as a soul, *'can'* (pron. djan), which is the reflection of god on earth. All the Alevis consider the concept of brotherhood or sisterhood (in Turkish language *'kardeşlik'*) very important, as well as equality and peace among people, regardless of their ethnic identity.

For some researchers and some Alevis themselves, Aleviness is more than faith; it is a way, a path or a lifestyle (Hanoğlu, 2017, 13; Issa, 2017, 1).¹⁰ Therefore, Aleviness, either as a moral or as a religious path, emphasizes primarily its inner significance (*batın*) rather than its shape or form (*zahir*), which is reflected in their pervasive saying "*Yol birdir, sürek binbir!*", which means "The path is one, routes are many!" (Hanoğlu, 2017, 19). This saying is established in various areas of Alevi practices. The leaders of Alevi rituals often emphasize interreligious tolerance, since according to their belief all religions deserve respect. Among fundamental philosophies of the Alevi ethics (Kılıç, 2015b) there is also the guidance "to see seventy-two nations with the same gaze" ("*Yetmişiki millete bir gözle bakmak*"),¹¹ which testifies of Alevi aspirations for equality and non-discrimination.

Since the Alevis were throughout history perceived as 'others', as heretics, as a danger, a hindrance to homogeneity (see Issa, 2017, 3), and were therefore at the best case marginalized, and at worst case persecuted and victims of blood-thirsty violence,¹² they were simultaneously receiving immense pain and suffering that is part of their collective identity, even if the latter is not homogeneous (see Hanoğlu, 2017, 14). Along with all this suffering, they developed or were developing a strong sense of compassion, which made them very understanding, tolerant and receptive. These characteristics are also promoted by the very concept of their community and their social structure which provides mutual support and mutual protection.

The described characteristics of Aleviness, which do not fix its practices, doctrines and religious beliefs in a homogeneous whole, enable the development and growth of interreligious tolerance, precisely because of its openness. Such openness allows space for discovering yet unknown or restarting new elements of this culture or religion, and the fluidity of the described identity allows for the movement and flexibility of these elements, which allow for ever new dynamics and combinations. Aleviness is the path of acceptance, expressing welcome and care. This is also noticeable in the contents and practices of their religious rituals, enacted communally and through mutual dialogue, emphasized with their traditional music.

Members of the Alevi community gather in the so-called *cem evi*, which is a place of assembly where they perform their rituals. The basic name of the Alevi ritual is *cem* (pron. jam), which in Turkish language means gathering, integration, even a group or a community, and therefore their gathering place called *cem evi* means a 'house of *cem*.' *Cem* is the fundamental religious practice of the Alevis, that is, their regular gathering in meetings in the shape of spiritual events, where members of the community, both men and women, socialize and get to know each other, thus establishing mutual relations that enable them to enjoy everyday coexistence.

8 Even though this is a non-cryptographic tradition, it does not mean that there are no books on the Alevis and their tradition. Since the eighties of the previous century, when the so-called 'revival of the Alevi culture' began, a number of publications have emerged, representing the Alevi tradition from a historical point of view or in a didactic manner, in order to make it easier for people to get to know what Aleviness is (cf. Vorhoff, 2003, 28ff).

9 It is important to note that despite acknowledging regular persecution of the Alevis by certain ruling powers, it is not accurate to speak of an entire Sunni majority or the state tradition condemning and pruging the Alevis in Turkey (I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer of this article for their sensibility to pointing this out). Throughout history there have been many clashes between the Sunni and Alevi people, some extremely violent, others acted out mainly through disagreements and discords, for example, the fact that the Alevi centres of religious worship, namely, the *cem evi*, have officially not yet been recognized as such by the Turkish state. These delicate issues unfortunately exceed the purpose of this article (cf. Kurun, 2019; Massicard, 2016; Öktem, 2008; Poyraz, 2005; Shankland, 2003b).

10 Hanoğlu (2017, 14) points out that this belief may have been shaped mainly by the lack of recognition of Aleviness as a religion. Hence the concept of both cultural and religious Aleviness is used interchangeably.

11 As a diverse region, Anatolia is known as the land of the "seventy-two peoples" (see Hanoğlu, 2017, 18); a naming that depicts and highlights its cultural diversity.

12 There are very specific massacres throughout history that reinforce the victimized status of the Alevis, for which there is no space in this article. Cf. note 9 of this article (see also Dressler, 2003; Bjelica, 2017).



Image 1: Members of the Hz. Ali Cem Evi Religious and Cultural Association at the cem, sitting on the floor in circle.

Most of the Alevi rituals are communal because the rituals main aim is to foster unity and love within society (Hanoğlu, 2017, 21).

During these rituals, the Alevis become acquainted with their religion, with the history of their own traditions. At the same time these rituals represent a fundamental ground for the formation of Alevi ethics. Namely, this is the framework for the discourses of compassion, fraternity, tolerance and other virtues that the Alevis are supposed to develop and adopt. These rituals represent the central space for the establishment of intersubjective and community ties, and thus the fundamental and potential source of mutual hospitality. At the same time, the rituals offer an opportunity for the members of community to examine any potential resentment or to discipline any potentially harmful or violent acts; in order to be performing the ritual, all

members of the community must be reconciled (Shankland, 2003b, 121). In this way the entire community can learn through mutual listening and reciprocal dialogue and aim towards a most appropriate application of Alevi ethics.

Cem is a religious ritual where members of the Alevi communities venerate their saints and approach their God with a collective prayer, recitation of mystic formulae, and executing the callings to God accompanied with deep breathing. These rituals represent a place of hospitality, a place of welcome for each member of the community, and usually it turns out to be also welcoming to the visitors who are not members of the local or any other Alevi community. Because of its non-discrimination, *cem* is also often referred to as a 'folk prayer' (Ayışit Onatça, 2007, 31). At these religious gatherings, community members sit on the rugs and pillows on the floor, forming a kind of circle to enable

13 All the photographic material presented in this article has been created during fieldwork in March and April 2015 by the author.

the participants to look at each other face-to-face, thus making it easier to raise awareness of the community and the unity of their coexistence. This disposition also allows for a mutual attentive listening to happen more spontaneously than it would otherwise, e.g. when sat in chairs positioned in lines one after another.

Members of the community regularly gather on Thursdays¹⁴ when they perform the *cems*, which especially welcome young members of the community, to whom the elderly want to introduce their traditional religious practices. In addition to these regular gatherings, the community organizes and participates in other events, especially on major holidays or special occasions that are celebrated in order to reminisce, preserve and recreate their traditions.¹⁵

The *cem* is led by the Alevi religious leader, the so called *dede*, or sometimes, *baba*.¹⁶ Besides leading the ritual, the *dede* plays a key role in establishing the community's cohabitation. He often takes on the role of spiritual leader of the community and is treated with special respect. *Dede* should be among the elderly in the community, he should be selfless and able to give advice. "He translates abstract notions into everyday practice, turning them into a manner of living, world view, faith and hope" (Sipos & Csáki, 2009, 37). *Dede* or *baba* of each Alevi community is primarily a role model of behaviour and ethical conduct with a primal focus on love, tolerance, hospitality and the essential importance of spiritual and common values of the community. The results of an ethnographic study performed in Thrace (Sipos & Csáki, 2009, 37), state examples of unconditional hospitality of one of the *babas* of their Alevi community, who would

calmly put up a prisoner released that very day for the night in his own house, then take him to the bus terminal the next morning and buy him a ticket to home. He welcomes and puts up Christians as well, gives his last blanket to orphaned Roma children, gives a large sum in advance to Gypsy musicians and is certain that however long he has to wait, the musicians will come as they promised. He is exemplary in rejecting prejudice and truly respecting people (Sipos & Csáki, 2009, 37).

This kind of behaviour gives example to the members of the community, that are more prone to imitate the kind and attentive gestures of their *dede*, then they would be if he would not be the first one to execute them. In this way the members are more confident in facing the unknown, more willing to accept the differences and otherness, and also, to attentively listen to others' stories and wishes. The *dede* is the one to encourage contact with strangers and guests, and also to stimulate tolerance towards and acceptance of all religions. Therefore, he is also crucial for promoting proneness to interreligious dialogue.

EXPERIENCING HOSPITALITY

The fieldwork with the Alevis of Istanbul was carried out through the methodology of participant observation for a period of three months in 2015. It revealed a genuine hospitality that was multi-layered, and evident through various types of attention and gestures, such as: listening to one another, considering each other's wishes and attempting to realize them, preparing space for the visitors, and accepting the beliefs of people who think differently.

I followed some specific activities of the *Gaziosmanpaşa Hoca Ahmet Yesevi Cem Evi İnanç ve Kültür Derneği* (Religious and Cultural Association Gaziosmanpaşa Hoca Ahmet Yesevi Cem Evi), an Alevi association in the Gaziosmanpaşa district of Istanbul, named after their sage Ahmet Yesevi. I was introduced also to another Alevi community in Istanbul from the district of Esentepe, that is *H. Ali Cem Evi İnanç ve Kültür Derneği* (Saint Ali Cem Evi Religious and Cultural Association), and attending their regular ritual gathering I could compare it to the one of the other association.

At the first meeting with the *dede* of Gaziosmanpaşa Alevi community Aşur Nergis, spiritual leader of the community, I was surprised to note his enthusiasm for my work. I came to the house of *cem* long before the beginning of the ceremony in order to meet with the *dede* and other members of the community. Aşur *dede*¹⁷ immediately invited me to sit at his side the moment I came in. This was a little unusual, as only specific

14 Most of the *cem* ceremonies are held on the night from Thursday to Friday, marking the night of Ali's birth. Fahriye Dinçer traced the changes in the *cem* ceremonies that took place during the second half of the 20th century and concluded that these changes also corresponded to the social structure of the Alevi community. These occurred mainly the 1950s, especially due to migration of the Alevis into urban areas of Turkey and because of their identification with their own political tendencies (Dinçer, 2000, 35). During her research in the years 1997 and 1998, she was able to determine that the *cem* ceremonies were no longer secret but open to everyone, even to non-members of the Alevi community, and that they were performed on Sundays as well (and not strictly on Thursdays as traditionally).

15 There are different types of *cem*, intended to meet demands of certain functions in Alevi community. Some *cems* are annual, while some are linked to an experience of an individual. Some *cems* are unlimited in number, they can last long in the night – for example, *muhabbet cem* ('affection *cem*') where socializing in kindness and fondness is crucial (Shankland, 2003b, 121; Ayışit Onatça, 2007, 35–40).

16 *Dede* is generally a Turkish name for any male member of the Alevi community, but it is commonly used for those members who stand out in their knowledge, importance, wisdom, and the like, or those who lead religious rites. *Baba* is another denomination for the same role, i.e. religious leader, that is used mainly in the Bektaşî Alevi communities in the region of Thrace.

17 The Alevis are addressed by their personal name, followed by the general title: in the case of *dede* Aşur Nergis, they call him Aşur *dede*. This form of address is typical of the Turkish language in general and will be preserved in the present text as well.



Image 2: *Aşur Nergis, dede of the Gaziosmanpaşa Hoca Ahmet Yesevi Cem Evi Religious and Cultural Association.*

persons would be sitting beside him – it seemed that I, as a guest, had ‘special privileges,’ like the usual rules would not apply to me, the guest. I sat next to him and our conversation began. Anyone who came into the room approached *dede*, greeted him with a kiss on his hand and a little bow, so I was presented to each one of the coming members separately. When they were greeting him, he encouraged them to demonstrate some of the characteristic moves of the rite so that I could see them. One of their customary moves when greeting the members of the community and the *dede* emphasized their fondness of compassion and protection: when they greet *dede*, the believers cover the thumb of their left foot with their thumb of the right foot in a sign of compassion with Imam Hussein, who supposedly hit his left thumb and bled. This gesture is

called *dara durmak*,¹⁸ and it recognizes Husein’s pain, it is a gesture of compassion. At the same time, *Aşur dede* emphasized another essential characteristic of the Alevi community, the so-called *rızalık*, which literally means both acceptance and decision, and it suggests mutual affection, consideration, rejoicing together and understanding each other (Nergis, 2015).

Many members of the Alevi community proved to be particularly hospitable: they greeted me from afar with smiles on their faces, sometimes even children and adolescents, especially when they were excited about their upcoming public presentation at the annual Alevi ritual, or older women who were glad that I joined them in their morning prayer time, despite the cold temperatures and the early darkness. As a guest and a researcher, I also had ‘special privileges’ regard-

¹⁸ The literal translation of this phrase would read ‘stand, be close, in anxiety,’ which may indicate a position, where the legs are close together, but the term refers primarily to the anxiety experiencing the pain and difficulty of the circumstances, which Hussein suffered at the blow – a blow in the thumb and all the other painful experiences he had to go through. It is a symbolic gesture that regularly reminds us of the importance of compassion.



Image 3: Participating at the lokma blessing by the dede.

ing free movement during the ritual and the freedom to ‘break the rules’ of silence because of documentation process: Aşur *dede* called me to come closer during the ritual even if I preferred staying a bit further away not to intrude too much. However, he was persistent, and I had to come to the front where I could record the rituals better. Once I brought a *lokma* (cakes or any food that is shared among believers after the ceremony) Aşur *dede* suggested me to step in the queue with the others and greet him. It seems that their customs are non-breakable, hospitable to all the foreign, the unknown: even if I did some gestures myself as an external observer, no one in the community thought this to be disrespectful or heretical, just the opposite: they viewed my consent to greet the *dede* through the *dara durmak* position with pleasure and accepted it as a sign of respect.

While observing the activities of Gaziosmanpaşa Alevi community, it was possible to follow the revival of one of the pre-Islamic rituals that the community

carried out with the cooperation of the Movement for the Revival of Aleviness. Members gathered around the dervish lodge, alongside the tomb of a saint named Karyağdı Baba. Mustafa Cemil Kılıç (2015a), a theologian and writer, who also assumes the role of a *hoca* (pron. hodja), spiritual teacher in the community, connected the ritual with the daily prayers of the Alevis, which they once abandoned for the sake of assimilation to the Sunni Islam. Such a prayer is supposed to be in line with some suras of the Quran, and, above all, saluting the sun stands for saluting Ali himself. Mustafa *hoca* appealed to everyone that they should perform worshipping in their own *proper* manner and to respect differences in worshipping of Ali. He also called upon each individual to turn to the sun and salute it in the way that they *feel* most appropriate. Such freedom in the conduct of the rituals shows tolerance for individual worship in allowing them to engage in their own, singular religious practices. The believers mostly raised their



Image 4: Members the Gaziosmanpaşa Hoca Ahmet Yesevi Cem Evi Religious and Cultural Association at the morning prayer to the sun, raising their hands in different ways.

hands to the sun, but in different ways, some of them rubbed their faces several times. Some members of the Sunni community also attended the ritual or its continuation: Mustafa *hoca's* Sunni colleague, that was present at the morning prayer to the sun, after its termination invited some representatives of the Alevi community to the municipal centre for religious affairs to attend a common gathering with the Sunni community. There they read from the Quran and listened to the 'stringed Quran,' that is the *bağlama* (pron. baahlahmah), their folk string instrument. This kind of sensitivity for the individual, their own proper approach to religion and spirituality, and mutual inclusivity of different religious traditions, points to Aleviness as being a hospitable tradition, that allows for the development of different but compatible, even collaborative ethical practices. Obviously, they have space also for interreligious dialogue, fostered especially by listening to each other.

The enhanced ability to listen that members of the Alevi community embody mainly without explicitly stressing it, may be fostered by their regular engagement with musical activity. Namely, each *cem* is thoroughly entrenched with musical performance of the *zakir* (pron. zahkeer), the player of the *bağlama* (also known as the Turkish *saz*), that strongly affects the atmosphere of the ritual space. All other members engage with the music at least by listening, letting go to it, but also with singing along, scanting, humming, rocking their bodies, clapping on their knees and the like. Many scholars state (cf. Ayışit Onatça, 2007; Clarke, 1991; Duygulu, 1997; Tambar, 2010), that central to the *cem* is music itself, because it allows to the believers a connection with the divine unity. Due to the different forms of *cem* and the variety of occasions at which it is performed, and always being entangled with musical performance, it could be said that



Image 5: Bektaş Çolak, zakir of the Gaziosmanpaşa Hoca Ahmet Yesevi Cem Evi Religious and Cultural Association.

the role of music can be identified as social, educational, an expression of religious beliefs and cultural concepts, a means of preserving the core of culture, and even as providing aspects of governing and judicial roles” (Clarke, 1991, 140).

Alevi music, in the long period of persecution and repression, had the important role of preserving the Alevi cultural, religious, social tradition, while enabling a space for its sharing, spreading and developing.¹⁹ The Alevi tradition, be it religiously or culturally, would not be what it is without the help of their music. It could also be argued that there would not be any Alevi community at all, if it were not for the music that enabled the Alevis to save and foster their religion and tradition in the music they performed, without having any scriptural references to turn to.

Being immersed in musical activities, the Alevi tradition, transmitted orally, is hence based also on the activity of listening. In this sense, listening is one of the main pillars of their communities, since it enabled a continuous tradition, preserved mainly in their music and poetry. Therefore, it could be argued, that the Alevi communities were (and are) constantly re-binding themselves to their beliefs and among their members through their ability and competence to listen. Moreover, through listening, they transmit and internalise their ethical principles and values, such as, as listed before, hospitality, acceptance, openness to otherness, compassion. Through one of their musical forms named *mersiye*, for example, they relieve the suffering and pain of their persecuted predecessors, which enables them to develop strong feeling of empathy, compassion, not only among themselves, but also for every being

¹⁹ The Alevi unorthodox religion found its ‘safe place’ in the traditional folk songs of the rural lands of Anatolia, which is the Asian part of nowadays Turkey. The Anatolian musical tradition mentioned was carried in the practices of the rural musicians that played the folk lute, *bağlama*, a kind of wandering Anatolian bards, the so called *aşık*, that eventually were also the carrier of the wisdom and knowledge of the Alevi religion.



Image 6: Members of the Hz. Ali Cem Evi Religious and Cultural Association engaging in musical activity.

in general. In this way they learn about the vulnerability of all the beings to which they are prone to turn with care and acceptance.

The re-binding process enabled by listening practices was not performed only inherently among the members of Alevi communities, but also extrovertly, with other communities, in the realm of sharing. The Gaziosmanpaşa Alevi community is establishing regular activities with their neighbouring Sunni communities, with which they gather together and exchange their religious tradition, through chanting sacred texts on one part and singing their traditional songs, *deyiş*, on the other. On another important example, Alevi music that was offered to be listened to, played a crucial role in the acquiring certain recognition by the public already since the 1980^s. (Tambar, 2010, 654–655) For the Alevis, music represented the only way to be acknowledged, or better, the most acceptable language with which they could ‘correctly’ or properly present themselves as ‘the others’ of a certain culture to that culture itself. If it were not for the music, maybe, they would not

be having this kind of crucial role in their society, namely, an alternative in the cultural, political and especially religious sphere of their environment.

Through offering their music to the public, to members of other communities in the environment where they live, the Alevi communities invite also outsiders to listen to them, without demanding any confirmation, but solely allowing for their receiving, their acceptance, with facing the unknown and the unexpected, without fearing it. The Alevi tradition that inherently engages in practices of ethical listening, is a complex, yet simple example of the impact that the act of listening can provide also for interreligious dialogue.

MUSIC SHARING AND ETHICS OF LISTENING: A PATH TO AND FOR INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

The heart of listening is to openly stand before the absolutely Other in my own vulnerability, and entails an infinite responsibility to say the words I am here in my own vulnerability, to ap-

proach the Other with respect and as a secret script that opens up for me if I am able to read (Koskinen & Lindström, 2013, 154).

The activity of listening ‘in the present moment’ allows an acceptance of the perceived world and other beings without the burden or influence of knowledge of the past, nor expectations for the future. This meets Oliver Sacks’ claim that “*remembering music, listening to it, or playing it, is entirely in the present*” (Sacks, 2008, 226). Listening is prominent in musical activity; moreover, listening to music is more easily oriented towards the perception and acceptance of the unknown. Therefore, musical activity and creation is an adequate space to awake to active listening.

The insight of an active nature of the gesture of listening offers the possibility of another step forward in overcoming traditional dichotomies. (See e. g. Ihde, 2007; Nancy, 2007) In parallel to the overcoming of the borders and distinctions between active and passive, ‘us’ and ‘them’, the limits between new and old are also questioned. At the same time music should (again) gain the conscious function of connecting a community and establishing intersubjective relations (with)in it. With ethical listening, also deriving from it, a similar process evolves with pertinent values. Therefore, in the transmission of the values, be it common or different to other traditions, listening is an invaluable activity that can educate future and nonetheless, re-educate present generations, for a multireligious cohabitation of mutual care and respect for each other values.

The case of the Turkish Alevis, presented here, is a robust example of the possibility of establishing an attentive intersubjective space for interreligious dialogue, where everyone can be accepted and listened to.

Dialogue, in its ideal form, involves a conversation or exchange in which participants are willing to listen and learn from one another. [...] To be sure, far from every dialogue between religions will actually yield religious fruit. But it is the very possibility that one may learn from the other which moves religious traditions from self-sufficiency to openness to the other (Cornille, 2013, 20).

In this presentation of the Alevi tradition it is clearly noticeable that these communities have a strongly ability to listen and a developed openness to the other. Therefore, they are a suitable role model to follow in pursuing a successful interreligious dialogue. It seems that Alevi (musical) tradition fulfils all the conditions for a successful interreligious dialogue, as presented by Catherine Cornille (2013): humility, commitment, interconnection, empathy, and hospitality. Moreover, they do not give precedence to the outside forms of religious practice, but rather to the inner meaning of the gestures and beliefs. The Alevi do not expect ‘outsiders’ to perform their rituals ‘correctly’. If visitors want to participate, they are always welcome, and never perceived as intruders. Overcoming these perspectives that are usually considered to hinder the involvement of interreligious dialogue (cf. Moyaert, 2014, 232–236), gives the Alevis more opportunities to establish contacts with members of other religions and accept them for who they are, including their beliefs. Following their example, namely, embodying ethics of listening in interreligious dialogue, would help to foster and deepen its success for mutual acceptance of difference and a discovery of possible shared beliefs.

POSLUŠANJE DRUGOSTI: PRIMER TURŠKIH ALEVIJEV

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POVZETEK

Pričujoči članek povezuje teorijo etike poslušanja z etnografsko študijo primera turških Alevijev z namenom predstavitve možnosti spodbujanja medreligijskega dialoga, ki jo kot vzorna ponujata oba vidika. Zamisel o teh možnostih se je porodila na osnovi izkustva avtorice, ko je ob terenskemu delu na osnovi metode opazovanja z udeležbo proučevala alevijske skupnosti v Istanbulu. Članice in člani teh skupnosti so se izkazali za izredno gostoljubne, medsebojno naklonjene, posebej pozorne do drugačnega in neznanega, kar je izhajalo iz njihove nagnjenosti k pozornemu poslušanju. V slednjem je bilo mogoče prepoznati geste etike poslušanja, ki je med Aleviji tako rekoč ponotranjena. V besedilu je predstavljena hipoteza, da je tovrstna spontana naravnost k poslušanju druge-/ga osnovana na okoliščinah alevijske tradicije, ki se je stoletja prenašala predvsem preko poezije in glasbe, z njunim udejanjanjem, izvajanjem. To pomeni, da je prenašanje alevijskega nazora bilo v temelju odvisno od zmožnosti (medsebojnega) poslušanja. Slednje je tudi osnova za njihov odprt odnos do drugačnosti in pripravljenost na medreligijski dialog. Prispevek nadalje prikazuje možnosti, ki jih glasbeno udejanjanje nudi za razvijanje etike poslušanja, ki bistveno pogojuje tudi možnosti odprtega, naklonjenega, razumevajočega, sprejemajočega medreligijskega dialoga.

Ključne besede: Turški aleviji, poslušanje, alevijska glasba, etika poslušanja, gostoljubje, medreligijski dialog

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