The article takes up current scholarly and policy discussions on mass media and minority participation in Western Europe, where the prerogative of letting minorities ‘speak in their own voice’ occupies a central place. The article presents the mass media activities of Turkish Alevi migrants at a local open-access television station in Berlin, and problematises the notion of ‘voice’ with regard to cultural representations in their programmes and Internet publications. It is argued that Alevi media productions employ a range of representational strategies that can be understood only if their transnational context is taken into account. Confronting hegemonic discourses tied to two different nation-states which ascribe diverging negative meanings to Alevi Muslims, media producers are shown to exploit this divergence in their attempts to construct positive images of Alevilik.

Keywords: Germany; Islam; Media; Migration; Turkey
to public will-formation in plural democratic societies (Frachon and Vargaftig 1995; Fraser 1992; Husband 1994; King and Wood 2001). Increasing minority participation and representation in the media has been formulated as a political goal on EU as well as national levels across Europe.

This article focuses on the mass media activities of Turkish migrants in a particular institutional domain of German broadcasting which has been explicitly created with the aim of making the mass media accessible to those who tend to be disadvantaged in mass-mediated fields of public communication. Based on interviews, their own production activities and analyses of programmes carried out in Berlin between 1998 and 2001, I discuss the activities of Alevi migrants from Turkey who produce programmes at the city’s open-access television channel OKB (Offener Kanal Berlin). While open-access channels have been created in Germany as institutions that are to facilitate local public communication, particularly within larger cities, it will be shown that Alevi migrants introduce transnational dimensions into local broadcasting. Switching between different representational strategies in their efforts to reach Turkish Sunni Muslim and German non-Muslim audiences respectively, they interweave broadcasting materials and grapple with cultural conflicts that originate within two different nation-states.

The Idea of Open Channels

Open Channels were instituted in Germany in the mid-1980s, intended as a balance to the commercialisation of broadcasting which was seen as a threat to the functioning of mass media as a forum for public discussion (Kosnick 2000, 2003). Currently, there are more than 70 non-commercial sites of radio and television production where mainly amateurs make use of broadcasting opportunities, free of charge. Open Channels have been instituted all over Germany as local forums of communication where ‘normal citizens’ can address the public with their concerns. Open Channels in this sense aim to put into practice theories of democracy and the public sphere which regard electronic mass media as the primary vehicles of communication in complex societies, and thus as the place where opinions can become public and influence democratic decision-making processes. ‘The democratic process cannot function without the exchange of arguments, continuous public debate, and the struggle of opinions in the public sphere’, Open Channel initiators have argued (BOK 2000). No concern should be silenced, and no group excluded. These demands of critical theorists reflecting on the normative dimensions of the public sphere (see Calhoun 1992; Habermas 1991; Negt and Kluge 1993; Robbins 1993) are precisely the concerns of Open Channel advocates.

Open Channels aim to turn passive consumers of mass media productions into active producers, and give a voice to those who do not find their interests, opinions and identities reflected in the dominant structures of broadcasting (Jarren et al. 1994). Immigrants and ethnic minorities are among those marginalised groups that open-access broadcasting wants to target. The Open Channel Berlin is proud of the strong immigrant presence among its programme makers, accounting for 40 per cent of
foreign-language broadcasts on its television channel. In a brochure on Open Channels in Germany, the OKB claims:

It is precisely in the great interest of foreign groups to broadcast in their native language that the idea of Open Channels is most impressively realised: here, all those can articulate themselves who do not have a voice in the other media (Arbeitskreis Offene Kanäle 1996: 21).

Turkish-language programmes in particular are produced at the OKB in great numbers: in the first half of 1998, their share of the overall broadcasting time was 26 per cent. The majority of these programmes focus on Islam, and are produced by a wide range of groups representing almost the entire spectrum of religious and political orientations that exist in Turkey.

Alevi as a Religious Minority

Several Alevi programmes form a counterpart to the predominance of Hanefite-Sunni Islamic orientations at the Open Channel Berlin. In religious terms, Alevis are usually described as a Shi’i-derived minority that has developed in Anatolia, linked to Shi’i Islam mainly through their shared reverence for Ali, son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammed, and his descendants, whom they regard as the Prophet’s only legitimate successor. Despite the shared historical roots, Alevi belief developed in a separate direction, drawing upon sources of Turkish mystical Islam and Anatolian folk culture. Alevi sources generally claim that they constitute between 18 to 25 million among Turkish nationals, out of a current total population of an estimated 63 million, 99 per cent of whom are Muslim. Non-Alevi sources tend to estimate the figures between 4.6 to 18 million, indicating the difficulties of statistically measuring minority belonging in Turkey (Vorhoff 1995: 58). However, Alevi constitute not simply a religious minority, they have tended to form an endogamous group, until recently not accepting converts (with important qualifications, see Vorhoff 1995: 33). Alevi sources themselves variously combine ethnic, national, religious and explicitly political criteria in the definition of Alevi identity (Vorhoff 1995: 182–91; see also Ocak 1991; Seufert 1997).

Alevi television producers in Berlin similarly shift in their respective emphasis on ethnicity, culture, religion and politics in their representations of Alevilik (Aleviness/ Alevi people). Affiliated with different and partly competing Alevi organisations in the city, they nevertheless all claim to represent, in the sense of embodying and speaking for, the real Alevilik, true to its historical origins, religious beliefs and traditions. In the years 1998 and 1999, five different programmes were broadcasting more or less regularly on the Open Channel: Al Canlar, Kirk Budak, Gelin Canlar Bir Olalim, Ehl-i Beyt Yolu, Kuran ve Ehl-i Beyt Alevilerin SESİ. Two of them will be discussed here in more detail.

Al Canlar

The programme Al Canlar has been broadcast on the Open Channel since 1993, and
differs from other Alevi programmes at the OKB mainly in terms of its explicitly political orientation. Literally translated, the title of the programme means ‘red souls’, and it offers a play on the Turkish flag (Al Sancak) and the dervish word for brother, friend, disciple, can. It is common Alevi usage to greet other Alevis as canlar. Halit Büyükgöl, a construction worker in his early thirties, is the main producer of the programme. Initially, Büyükgöl simply wanted to show people in Berlin familiar landscapes and faces, those of the local Alevi population near his hometown in eastern Anatolia. As a result of earthquakes and particularly the military offensive of the Turkish state in the area, almost two-thirds of the population has fled the region over the past 20 years. Halit Büyükgöl himself joined his father in Germany in 1983, when he was 13 years old.

In 1993, he began to be active in the Anadolu Alevi Kültür Merkezi, the Cultural Centre of Anatolian Alevis in Berlin (AAKM). The date is no coincidence: it was the year of the Sivas murders, when a hotel in the Turkish town of Sivas where Alevi left-wing intellectuals were holding a conference was burnt down by angry Sunni extremists, killing many people and igniting a wave of Alevi activism both in Turkey and Europe in response. Members of the Cultural Centre encouraged Büyükgöl to expand his broadcasting at the Open Channel in order to publicise the activities of the Centre and create a new media presence for Alevis, in explicit reaction to the absence of such a presence in the mass media in Turkey. Al Canlar initially was concerned with simply publicising material, such as events, discussion panels, concerts and documentaries, that could throw light on Alevis from an Alevi point of view, Büyükgöl states. In the following years, he began to produce material himself and moved toward live programming. At the same time, Al Canlar continued to show material from Turkey, for example the popular video clips of Alevi musicians in Turkey that never get shown on Turkey’s music television channels because of their political implications, or images of the Hacı Bektas Şenliği, the Alevi festival which takes place each August in Nevşehir and draws thousands of people, also from Europe.

But the programmes had a political dimension from the start: when Al Canlar broadcast the images of the Sivas event, anonymous letters arrived at the OKB threatening the producers with violence if they would continue to ‘defame’ Islam. Halit Büyükgöl sees his position at the OKB as quite precarious, given the range of Turkish-language programming there: he deems himself to be one of the few producers who subscribes to democratic, left-leaning views. The Open Channel is not aware, he says, of the many programmes which, under the cover of a foreign language, incite violence: either seriat kökenli, Islamic programmes which mobilise for the Sharia, or sag görüslü, the programmes of Turkish nationalist right-wing extremists. Al Canlar is the only programme which speaks for Anatolian Alevis, he claims, with an emphasis on Anatolian: by distancing himself from the label Turkish, he seeks to emphasise the diversity of Alevis, who are of different ethnic backgrounds. Other producers active at the Open Channel, such as the Hacı Bektas Veli Kültür Cemiyeti (Hacı Bektas Cultural Association, or HBVKC, named after the founder of the Alevi-Bektasi order in Anatolia in the thirteenth century), take a very different position. Different from Büyükgöl’s organisation, the HBVKC stresses Turkishness, and their
loyalty to Atatürk and his ideals. Consequently, Büyüköl claims, the HBVKC cannot represent the unity of Alevis across ethnic differences, cannot include bütün renkler, all colours of Alevi culture. What is more, Büyüköl argues that since the very beginnings of the Alevi tradition, Alevis have always stood on the side of the oppressed: mazlumdan yana. This political stance dates back to the very origins of Alevi belief, he claims.

Alevi adherents of Ali, son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammed, whom the latter had allegedly intended to become his successor. Alevi sources claim that Sunnis were responsible for his death as well as for that of his son Hüseyin and his family at Kerbela, an event that continues to be remembered by Alevis in Turkey today (Gülçiçek 1996: 26; Sener 1994: 9). In later centuries, Alevis in Anatolia often went into hiding, as rulers tended to adhere to Sunni principles of Islam. The founding of the Turkish Republic under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk promised to many Alevis the end of Sunni dominance, and they by and large welcomed the secularisation and modernisation programme enforced during the first decades of the Republic. While some Alevis closely identify with the contemporary Turkish state, others like Büyüköl diagnose a resurgence of Sunni Islam in Turkish politics and state institutions, and are critical of the state for its nationalist course of Türkçülük, ‘Turkism’. The name of Halit Büyüköl’s organisation signals this criticism quite strongly: it is the cultural centre of Anatolian Alevis, not of Turkish Alevis. While Anatolia does not geographically include the ‘European’ part of Turkey’s territory, the identification with Anadolu suggests primarily a refusal to identify with Turkishness, given the political connotations of the term. Büyüköl also uses ‘Türkiyeleyi’, meaning ‘stemming from Turkey’, when he speaks of the migrant population, but never ‘Türk’.

From this state-critical perspective, the history of Alevis is marked by almost continuous suffering and oppression. A straight line can be drawn from the massacre of Kerbela to the contemporary events that have come to be known as ‘Sivas’ and ‘Gaziosmanpasa’, places where Alevis have come under attack by violent Sunni Islamists and Turkish police forces.¹ It is particularly the Sivas event which led to a wave of Alevi mobilisation both in Turkey and Western Europe, and the Al Canlar television programme was created in its wake.

The introductory sequence to one of its live broadcasts on the Open Channel in the first week of April 1998 indicates the importance of the Sivas event. The following is a description of what unfolds on the television screen during the first three minutes of the programme:

1. A portrait of Ali is shown, set in a round frame. The frame remains present throughout the introduction, leaving a circle in the midst of a pink screen, while the mournful, mounting sound of violins introduces tension.
2. A portrait of Haci Bektas Veli follows, the founder of the Anatolian Alevi-Bektasi movement, with text framing it: ‘Gelin canlar, canlar bir olalim. Dönem dönsün ben dönmezem yolumdan’ (Come you souls, let us be one. Those who turn back let them, I will not divert from my path.)
3. Images of a Cem ceremony are intercut with footage of a march in Berlin, banners of the AAKM, others declaring ‘yasasin 1 Mayis’, long live the 1st of May.
4. Cut to a small group of elderly men and women performing together the Semah, part of the Cem ceremony, in which they dance in a circle, circling also themselves, accompanied by Saz music and mystic songs.
5. Images of a fire burning the remnants of a building in the dark.
6. Back to the march in Berlin. The pictures of people who died in the Sivas fire are carried on posters in the front rows of the demonstrators. Then images of Turkish soldiers in combat gear are shown, beating a man lying on the ground.
7. The music has changed to a more upbeat rhythm, a song begins to the images of the hotel burning in Sivas. The song speaks of persecution and struggle against the enemy, assuring:

Dost, senin derdinden ben yana yana.
(Friend, I stand by your side in your troubles.
Ali, Ali, Ali, I am burning, burning.)

8. Meanwhile, one can see an excited crowd that has gathered in front of the burning hotel in the town of Sivas in which Alevi intellectuals, writers, painters etc. hold a meeting. A small group of people is carrying off an injured person, looking for help.
9. The police are shown standing around, looking on, not intervening.
10. The crowd is shown again, the flames of the fire now engulfing the entire building. Over this scene, images of the Semah dance are inserted, so that the men and women seem to be dancing in the flames.
11. Newspaper clippings are shown, a headline states, ‘Sivas gergin’, Sivas in tension.

After this dramatic introduction, the programme cuts to the live studio space of the OKB, with two men sitting at a desk, behind them the grey studio walls on which posters announce the fourth Alevi Kültür Haftası, the Alevi Week of Culture with Cem ceremonies, concerts and panel discussions. The young moderator, clean shaven in a green shirt, introduces his guest, Dr. Yüksel Ozdemir, president of the AAKM. Both congratulate their viewers, since it is the day of Kurban Bayrami, the Feast of Sacrifice. The theme of the programme is the coming Week of Culture. Özdemir explains the reasons for the Week of Culture, stating that Alevis have faced a long period of suppression in Turkey, but after the murders of Sivas and the Gazi events, they have had enough and have begun to organise. Due to the restrictions in Turkey, they have founded the centre in Germany and Europe for organising and teaching about Alevi philosophy and beliefs, primarily to Alevis there. The different groups targeted by the teachings of the Centre are, in the first place, Alevis who need to learn about their own faith and community, secondly other migrants from Turkey, and thirdly the German public with whom integration is being sought. One of the days at the Week of Culture is dedicated to a panel discussion held in German, with German academic experts joining representatives of the Centre to explain Alevi culture and philosophy.
Halit Büyükgöl also stresses the importance of reaching a German audience, as when *Al Canlar* was broadcasting live in German from the International Broadcasting Fair (*Internationale Funkausstellung*) held each year in Berlin. During a visit to his home, he showed me excerpts of the broadcast: Alevi youngsters were asking one of the representatives of the Centre questions about Alevis in German. It was obvious that the questions had been prepared in advance, and that they were geared toward countering potential preconceptions and prejudices that a German audience might be expected to harbour: as Halit explained, in Germany and Europe as a whole Turkey is seen as an Islamic state, and that state is associated with Sunni Islam, with Sharia rule, with human rights violations and the oppression of women:

All of that is the Turkey that the flashy papers write about, that the state television is showing, the Turkey that is made known to people. But those who do a bit of research, they will see that Turkey is in fact beautiful Anatolia. They can see that this beautiful Anatolia is made up of different cultures, different religions, different minorities, different groups. In this mosaic of Anatolia, people with very different ethnic roots are living. Now if I say to a German or a European, there are 20 million Alevis in Turkey. Is there anyone like that in Turkey? Or they will wonder, so who are those people? But if they are told what *Alevilik* is about, see, it is this, it is liberal in its religious beliefs, it wants to build schools instead of mosques in the village. It is laicist, it respects human rights. … There is no division between men and women. … See, the Alevi woman does not wear a headscarf. She dresses any way she wants to. She is free. When I say that, they ask, does all of that exist in Turkey, in an Islamic state? They don’t know that. … Unfortunately, because this liberal, democratic group is in the minority, and since they don’t have a media presence like *Al Canlar*, as I said, no television, no newspaper, they have not been able to make themselves known to the outside world (Büyükgöl, interview June 1998, translated from Turkish).

When Germans find out that he comes from Turkey, they immediately make assumptions regarding his behaviour toward women or his perspective on religion, Halit Büyükgöl states. But while these assumptions might be justified for the majority Sunni population of Turkey, Alevis share with Germans and Europeans a democratic, laicist and egalitarian outlook, he claims. They do not pray five times a day, he says; they do not go to mosques; nor do they regard pork-eating or drinking alcohol as a crime. *Alevilik* thus presents a culture, philosophy and version of Islam that is perfectly compatible with, and in some respects even exemplary of, the ideals of Western democratic societies. One function of Alevi media in the migration context is thus to promote this understanding among German and European audiences.

But Halit Büyükgöl identifies another group that has prejudices concerning Alevis, namely non-Alevi people in Turkey and migrants from Turkey. Their prejudices differ from those of Germans and Europeans, since they have come into contact with a range of stereotypes commonly held among the Sunni majority population in Turkey. These stereotypes target Alevis as Alevis, not as Turks, and derive from misconceptions of Alevi cultural and religious practices that have long persisted among the Sunni population. It is necessary to dispel such prejudices among non-Alevis who could be allies in terms of their critical perspective on the state, Büyükgöl claims:
We want to reach those people in Turkey who are not Alevi and who still don’t know us, the democratic, revolutionary people. There are liberal people there, definitely. We want to make people see those beautiful, nice dimensions of Alevilik that they don’t know about. And definitely, even among those who know of us, we think there are some prejudices. To remove the prejudices, I don’t know, the slander that has been levelled against Alevis, well, things like mum sön dü, not distinguishing between mother and sister and such. To stop this ugly slander that people have picked up, there is a need for these broadcasts. We want them to learn about Alevilik, not from others, not from the media of the state, not from the Alevis that are on the side of the state, but from the real Alevi people, from those who struggle for the original Alevilik!

‘The candle went out’, mum sön dü, is an expression that refers to the alleged hidden polygamy and sexual looseness thought to characterise Alevi gatherings that include both men and women (Vorhoff 1995: 69). Even ‘liberal’ and ‘revolutionary’ (devrimci) people (the meaning of these attributes lies much closer together for the Turkish context than for a European or Anglo-American one, in that they signal a critical distance toward an authoritarian state) are suspected of harbouring such prejudices, thus preventing potential alliances.

Depending on the audience one addresses, then, representing Alevilik to German or non-Alevi audiences from Turkey requires two different strategies: for German audiences, it is the libertarian and egalitarian dimension of Alevilik that is emphasised, while non-Alevi audiences from Turkey need to be primarily convinced of the moral and sexual integrity of Alevis. Certainly, there is a common ground in terms of the commitment to a laicist state and to the principles of democracy, central to both strategies. But Al Canlar and ‘true’ (asil) Alevi media are trying to intervene against two dominant regimes of representation, one carrying importance in the German, the other in the Turkish context.

The kinds of representations produced for an Alevi audience, however, introduce a third strategy: it is a political history of suffering that is invoked to mobilise Alevi solidarity, as could be seen in the introduction to the programme discussed above. A second example of Alevi programming contextualises and responds to this suffering in a different way.

Kirk Budak TV—Haci Bektas Veli Kültür Cemiyeti

Ibrahim Alkan and his friends started their programme Kirk Budak TV in 1997.² He and others used to go to the AAKM, but split off because they were dissatisfied with the organisation’s politics. They want to separate Alevi belief from politics, and though there was no direct accusation levelled against the AAKM, it became clear from Alkan’s statements that they disagreed with the latter’s support of minorities such as the Kurds. In the organisation’s headquarters, a small storefront in Neukölln, a rather poor working-class district in Berlin’s southern city centre, pictures of Atatürk line the walls, suggesting an identification with Turkish republican traditions. Unlike Halit Büyüköglü, Ibrahim Alkan has no misgivings about identifying as a Turk—an Alevi Turk but Turkish nevertheless. Like the AAKM, however, their media representations
are oppositional, in the sense that they have been designed to counter and correct stereotypes, particularly among Sunni Muslims:

Unfortunately, the Sunnis have been told the wrong things about us, very wrong! … We say to them, look, you say this and that, but we are not like that, we are different. This is what we are trying to do. This is what we are like. For example, we Alevis don’t go to the mosque five times a day, we don’t go there at all! But that does not mean that we condemn them, that we dislike them, no! Those who want to go should go. But we organise Cems, once or twice a year. This is also worshipping. We do Cems and invite people! Let the Sunnis come, the Alevis, the Germans, let them see with their own eyes how we worship, what we do, what we say’ (Alkan, interview April 1998, translated from Turkish).

In a programme in May 1998, an unidentified moderator introduces the topic of the programme as follows:

Now we want to present to you some misconceptions that are widespread among the people (halk), and will try to learn about them from the most knowledgeable sources, if you permit, esteemed viewers. As you all remember, we have had a radio station for some time, Köln Radyosu. … In a recent broadcast there, there was a Sunni sister (baci) who called, and this is what I heard from her: ‘I slaughtered the animal to be sacrificed (kurban kestim) and gave some meat to the Germans, some to the kizilbaslar,’ that is to the Alevi. Now I wonder, did I do injustice to the sacrifice? How sad that we hear such dangerous fatwas, using modern technologies. Of course it is not the sister to be blamed, she has been taught like that. But so we will hear today from our dede how it is that the Alevis and Bektasi actually sacrifice their animals, listen closely (translated from Turkish).

The programme is thus structured mainly as a response to Sunni stereotypes of Alevis, assuming as its audience a Turkish-speaking population that is potentially hostile, or at least unfamiliar with Alevi beliefs and practices. The Kirk Budak programme represents an effort to find common ground with Sunni Muslims under the roof of Islam, Alkan states:

I think the importance of our programme for the Turks here is as follows: we try to make ourselves known to those people who come from Islam, those who call themselves Muslim. We tell them, yes, there are differences between us, but there is only one Islam and only one right way! Let’s find this way together, this is why we explain ourselves to them. Let’s stop the enmity between us (interview April 1998, translated from Turkish).

Alkan came to Germany in 1973 and does not speak German, like many of the members of the Haci Bektas Kültür Cemiyeti. The HBKC has difficulty attracting younger members. It is thus mainly first-generation male labour migrants who are active at the OKB for their organisation. As a consequence, the language barrier cannot but orient them toward a Turkish-speaking audience.

Still, Alkan states that Germans need to learn about Alevilik as well, and about what makes it different from other forms of Islam. While there are no German-language Alevi programmes on the Open Channel Berlin, in their conversations with me all the producers and representatives of the organisations they are linked with nevertheless stressed the importance of reaching out to German audiences and ‘making themselves known’ to them. While the fact that I was a non-immigrant German interviewing
them certainly played a role in our conversations, other Alevi migrant forms of public representation, such as websites, journals or conferences are also indicative of practical efforts to reach German non-immigrant audiences. This double orientation toward fellow migrants and non-immigrant audiences will be elaborated below.

**Relational Identities**

In his important study of political Islam in Turkey, Günter Seufert has termed the Alevis in Turkey the ‘significant Other’ of Sunni Islam (Seufert 1997: 55). In doing so, he describes Anatolian Alevi culture as a dialectical counterpart of the latter, reflected in their attitudes toward alcohol and music during religious ceremonies, toward mosques, fasting, and the visibility of women. ‘It appears’, Seufert claims, ‘as if the respective doctrines had been developed in a process of mutual exclusion and rejection’ (1997: 210, footnote 453, my translation from German). He suggests, therefore, that it is necessary to regard both partly as a result of their conflictual coexistence.

However, given the dominance of Sunni Islam in Turkey, it is particularly the Alevis who have had to define their identity in oppositional-relational terms. This becomes visible also in the media representations produced by Alevi migrants that constantly involve Sunni Islam as a point of reference: as an audience that has misconceptions about Alevi belief and religious practice, as a historical legacy of oppression and persecution, and as a form of Islamic doctrine and practice from which Alevis diverge. Seufert in fact characterises the contemporary Turkish state in its ideological dimension as a ‘Turkish-Islamic synthesis’ (Seufert 1997: 182; 1998), referring to the increasingly explicit emphasis on Islam as a central dimension of nation-building since the 1980s. The Islam that is mobilised by the state to legitimate itself and gather support is Sunni Islam. To identify, or to be identified, as non-Sunni Muslim and ethnically non-Turkish has therefore come to signify distance from the nation, and from the state which claims to represent its political embodiment. Seufert himself speaks of Staatsferne and Staatsnähe, distance from and closeness to the state which is defined by religious and ethnic-national criteria (Seufert 1997: 209).

Yet, given the very different degrees of association of particular ethnic and religious criteria and thus of categorical identities with the Turkish nation-state, one cannot speak of these identities as equally mirroring and producing each other, as Seufert at times suggests (e.g. 1997: 204). The dominant articulation of national identity produces Alevi identity as subaltern, forcing those who identify and/or are labelled as Alevi to constantly grapple with schemes of classification that assign to them a lesser place in the nation. The identity of Sunni Muslims in Turkey is certainly much less affected by Alevi identity than the other way around.

Seufert terms the entities produced by the fault lines of political conflict in Turkey ‘cultural camps’, listing among them Sunnis, Alevis, Kurds, Turks, non-Muslim minorities, Muslims, and secularists. With the term ‘camp’, he wants to indicate their positioning and constitution in the political field: it is in their name that politics is conducted. ‘Cultural’ indicates the necessity to consider ‘their culture’ in order to
understand their political orientation (Seufert 1997: 203). While belonging to these cultural camps is influenced by ‘communities of origin’ (Herkunftsgemeinschaften), it is nevertheless a form of identification that can in principle be chosen. The multiple dimensions of these groups that allow them to be described variously as nations, ethnic groups and religious communities (all at once or with changing emphasis), suggest the importance of the ‘politics of meaning’ in Turkey, of processes of cultural struggle through which they become meaningful categorical identities in particular historical constellations. Seufert suggests that the historical continuity of oppositional consciousness and identity of Alevis in relation to the state (both the Ottoman and the Turkish-Republican, despite the latter’s official secularism that has been weakened over the past two decades) have created a particular affinity between Alevis and the political Left in Turkey:

The process of political placement according to religious background proved so dominant that the Turkish Left has found its forms of expression and action in the culture of Alevis. … The Left found the historical continuity of liberatory movements in its country in the Alevi-dominated ‘folk-tradition’, which was now given a socialist make-over (Seufert 1997: 211, translated from German).

As becomes evident in the television programmes of Al Canlar, the articulation of Alevi identity with left, oppositional positions allows for an envisioning of political alliances that potentially unite Alevis with other minorities that are critical of the Turkish state. Potential allies can be those groups that insist on identities marginalised by the dominant Turkish-Islamic synthesis, and those demanding an end to the often violent suppression of criticism enacted by the state (this category, as explained above, can therefore include ‘democrats’, ‘liberals’ and ‘revolutionaries’).

However, the formation of what Gramsci would have called an oppositional ‘historical bloc’ has to grapple with the stereotypical traits alleged to characterise Alevi culture. These traits endanger the claim to moral worth necessary for a new national alliance in the name of democracy, sevgi (love) and saygi (respect) for the people. The love that unites this alternative national community may not be tainted by the morally scandalous possibility of mum sündü and incestuous relations alleged to prevail among Alevis in the negative ascriptive stereotype that is part of the dominant scheme of categorical identities in Turkey. As a consequence, Al Canlar, like other oppositional articulations of Alevi identity, has to convince its potential allies of the falseness of such stereotypes. What needs to be accomplished is a re-articulation of Alevi cultural traits that demonstrates both superior morality and superior suffering with regard to the national community that is its political goal. The egalitarian relationship claimed between the sexes, known to involve the mingling of men and women in religious ceremonies, is defused of its sexually explosive potential by the use of kinship terms: Alevis are united through bonds of kardeslik, brotherhood, and women can participate as bacilar, sisters, thus creating a setting of mixed-sex interaction that is permissible also by Sunni standards. The gendering of public spheres in Turkey which leads to mostly separated and different forms of political activism for men and women (Delaney 1995; Göle 1996, 1997) can thus be partially subverted through the introduction of bonds that pertain to the ‘private’ sphere of the family.
In terms of suffering, Alevis can make a strong case for having been subjected to and having fought continuous injustice for centuries, as stated above. Beginning with the mythical invocation of Ali and continuing with all other 11 Imams recognised by Alevis as legitimate heirs to the Kalifat, theirs is a history of assassinations, massacres and poisonings. The Sivas fire brought them once again to the forefront of suffering, allowing Alevis to claim a particular moral stake and central role in the struggle for a different kind of Turkish nation, on the basis of their sacrifice for a greater common good. A history of suffering can thus be mobilised to give Alevis a central place in the oppositional ‘historical bloc’ (in the Gramscian sense) that is forming against the Turkish establishment on the political Left, unifying those who measure the libertarian potential of parliamentary democracy in Turkey against its record of violent suppression of different kinds of opposition. In the migration context, however, this history can also be invoked to stress the differences between Alevilik and Sunni Islam, articulating it for a different kind of cultural struggle.

Double Engagements: The Conversion of Stereotype into Cultural Asset

In an essay on ‘Ethnicity and identity among migrant guestworkers in West Berlin’ and other writings, Ruth Mandel has remarked upon a peculiar ‘reversal of hierarchies’ on which Alevis are able to capitalise in the migration context (Mandel 1989, 1990, 1996). While Alevis are in one sense ‘doubly liminal’—with regard to Sunni Turks as Alevis and with regard to Germans as ‘Turks’—the very religious-cultural traits that are negatively valued by the dominant Sunni-Islamic perspective in Turkey take on a positive meaning in Germany (Mandel 1989: 68). Alevi organisations stress in their German-language representations of Alevilik the criteria that make them different from Sunni Muslims: not praying in mosques, women and men intermingling in religious ceremonies, women not wearing headscarves. All of these dimensions, which among Sunni Turks tend to be interpreted as morally suspect and non-Islamic, turn Alevi beliefs and practice into a kind of Islam which in the German context tends to be interpreted as progressive and tolerant. Alevi insistence on ‘internal qualities’, the purity of the soul as opposed to alleged ‘externals’ such as praying five times a day, approximates a ‘privatised’, more secular understanding of religion prevailing in Germany that sees it as linked to the conscience of the individual and less appropriate for public, communal manifestations.

While in Turkey the ideological dominance of the Turkish-Islamic synthesis renders Alevis ‘lesser Turks’ whose cultural contributions to the nation are suspect, the German context provides different standards for the evaluation of such contributions, according to which Alevis appear as ‘less alien’ than their Sunni counterparts. What Seufert has called the Staatsferne, distance from the state that characterises Alevi identity in Turkey, becomes Staatsnähe, closeness to the state in Germany, insofar as the processes of nation-building prevailing there allow them to cast themselves as the representatives of a ‘benign’ Islam and as a model minority. Mandel speaks of a ‘resulting paradox’: ‘What for one group is counter-hegemonic, replicates another group’s hegemony’ (1989: 68). Yet the apparent paradox is not a matter of different
groups but can be explained by the conjuncture of two national contexts within which different kinds of cultural hierarchies dominate. The migrants effectively partake and situate themselves in both, and this double engagement cannot be regarded as a relic of ‘cultural baggage’ brought along from Turkey that is bound to disappear. Transnational affiliations continue to be forged, linking Alevi migrants in Western Europe to communities of origin, to places of worship but also to new political-organisational structures emerging in Turkey, which are actively supported and even initiated in the migration context. The Sivas event mobilised Alevi migrants just as much as Alevis in Turkey, and serves as an important point of reference for current representations of Alevi identity, as the discussion of the television programmes above has shown. Sunni Muslims who have migrated from Turkey can be expected to have similar affiliations and perceptions of Alevilik, perceptions that are not just part of the migration baggage but that continue to be shaped and reinforced by contemporary cultural politics in Turkey.

Thus, defining oneself as a form of progressive, democratic Islam. Confronted with the stereotypes of Islam pervasive in the German context—oppression of women, strict adherence to religious rules and prohibitions, the importance of ritual practice—Alevis are able to capitalise on them by insisting on their being different. Simply put, Alevis do not represent themselves as Germans, but as Muslims who are different from Sunnis in a way that renders them more acceptable to Germans. Alevis want ‘schools instead of mosques in the village’, Halit Büyükgöl has argued. ‘There is no division between men and women. ... See, the Alevi woman does not wear a headscarf’. By distancing oneself from those criteria deemed to form part of German stereotypes of Muslims, an implicit closeness and affinity with ‘German’ dominant positions regarding religious practice and gender relations is produced. The Alevi Cultural Organisation Bochum and Surroundings similarly describes itself on the Internet by stressing its difference from a negatively valued Islam based on the Sharia:

Sharia means: an obligatory prayer five times a day conducted in a strictly prescribed manner, Ramadan month of fasting, prohibition of alcohol, separation of the sexes, strict roles for man and woman, exclusion of women from public rituals in the mosque. ... In Alevi-Bektasi belief, a human being is an individual with the right to his or her individual freedom to act (http://www.alevi-bochum.de/, translated from German).

These efforts to distance oneself from Sunni Islam in the (imagined) eyes of a German audience reinforce negative stereotypes of Islam and Muslim communities as rigid, totalitarian and fundamentalist. Yet, in the Turkish-language representations of Alevilik directed toward an imagined non-Alevi Muslim audience, commonalities rather than alleged differences are emphasised. Alevi belief is represented as a form of ‘proper’ Islam, defending it against accusations of immorality (mixing of the sexes) and of worshipping multiple deities (particularly the cult of Ali).
Conclusion

Up until the mid-1990s, analysts as well as policy-makers in Germany tended to characterise the situation of immigrants from Turkey as being ‘torn between two cultures’ (Durgut 1993; Mushaben 1991; Salt 1985; see also Çaglar 1990; Soysal 1999 for a critique). The story of ‘in-betweenness’ cannot have a happy ending: caught in a vicious circle of marginalisation and alienation, migrants are left with a revisionist nostalgia that has no existing referent outside their imagination. More recent studies of Turkish-German identity have criticised this story at length and have shifted toward a more or less qualified celebration of hybridity and diasporic consciousness that allegedly frees migrants from the ideological grip of nation-states (Kaya 2001; see also Soysal 2003). Yet, the above discussion of Alevi media representations has revealed the extent to which cultural hierarchies and conflicts in Turkey and Germany enforce a dual orientation that is far from post-national, a condition that characterises the lives of Muslim immigrants in various European countries (see Grillo, supra). To recognise the new and ongoing importance of ‘dual’ affiliations and orientations does not, however, imply a return to the ‘identity crisis’ paradigm. The evidence that has been provided to bolster such claims can be interpreted differently, as indicators of more complex processes of transnational cultural politics and identification.

The example of the Alevis is a case in point: far from experiencing an identity crisis, Alevis in Germany, as in Turkey, try to strengthen their position by stressing their difference from ‘mainstream’ Turkish-Sunni Islam. At the same time, they seek alliances across the Sunni-Alevi divide in both countries, and also maintain close ties with Alevi communities and organisations in Turkey. In order to make sense of these apparently paradoxical shifting articulations of Alevi identity in Germany, they need to be situated in the contexts of ‘cultural struggle’ that is mobilised in migrant media representations. These representations are linked to the wider discursive fields within which cultural schemes of classification and ‘rankings’ are produced, fields that in the case of Alevi migrants are tied to two different nation-states and their histories. While these fields should not be regarded as completely autonomous and unrelated, the dominant articulations of national identity, of how to be a full member of a society, and the cultural production of legitimate and illegitimate difference from the national norm nevertheless differ widely in Turkey and Germany. Correspondingly, a range of different cultural practices and articulations of identity can be shown to characterise the lives of migrants, linked to dominant cultural hierarchies and schemes of classification in Germany as well as in Turkey. While many authors describe this double engagement mainly as a predicament that enhances migrants’ marginality and leaves them unable to develop a sense of belonging, the study of Alevi media production reveals multiple strategies that ‘reconcile’ these double ties in different ways. Rather than being caught in a vicious state of homelessness and in-betweenness, Alevi television producers intervene in several discourses at once with their representations of Alevilik, in order to forge different kinds of alliances. The search, however, for Alevi voices finally ‘speaking for themselves’ on open-access television is bound to end in disappointment. This search itself has to be recognised as a symptom
of the essentialist misconception that haunts much of the contemporary literature on minority media participation: that any public utterance produced by members of subaltern ethnic groups will represent an authentic expression of minority culture.

Notes

[1] Gaziosmanpasa is a poor neighborhood in Istanbul whose inhabitants are predominantly Alevi. In 1995, 15 Alevis were killed in clashes with police forces after unidentified gunmen opened fire on a teahouse. For the Sivas fire, see below.

[2] *Kırk budak*, literally ‘forty branches’, refers to the forty saints that the Prophet Muhammad met according to Alevi interpretation during his ascent to heaven (*mirâç*).

[3] The term *kızılbas*, ‘redhead’, has become a widespread pejorative term for Alevi in Turkey. It emerged in the early sixteenth century in the Ottoman Empire as a label for heterodox Muslims, and is traced back to the red turban of Ali, but also to the traditional headgear of Türkmen populations.

[4] Brackette Williams has pointed out the importance of ‘bleeding for the nation’ among subordinated groups, greater sacrifice allowing groups to make a stronger claim for ‘equal citizenship’ due to its contribution to the nation (Williams 1989).

[5] They are connected both through the historical ties that link Turkey and Germany and through the wider, in part global cultural and economic contexts in which they are differently implicated.

References


