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Journal of Church and State

Volume 64, Number 2
Spring 2022

Articles

- Public Trust Lost and a Sign of Retroflexion: The Socio-Political Ecology of the Korean Church during the COVID-19 Pandemic*
David W. Kim 193
- A Heterodox Community under the Siege of Sunni Islam in Turkey: The Tahtacis
Mehmet Ali Yolcu and Mustafa Aça 215
- Church Poverty Relief during a Time of Crisis? Experiences of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland
Heikki Hiilamo 240
- The Biblical Origin of the Constitution's Two-Witness Standard
Cade S. Palmer 259
- Religious Freedom and Toleration: A Liberal Pluralist Approach to Conflicts over Religious Displays
Mark Tunick 280
- A Military Surge for God: Archbishop Robert Lucey, Lyndon Johnson, and the Vietnam War
Peter Cajka 301

Book Review Essay

- Michael Harold Paulos and Kondon Smith Hansen, eds. **The Reed Smoot Hearings: The Investigation of a Mormon Senator and the Transformation of an American Religion**
Spencer W. McBride. **Joseph Smith for President: The Prophet, the Assassins, and the Fight for American Religious Freedom**
James Simeone. **The Saints and the State: The Mormon Troubles in Illinois**
Matthew Bowman 322

Book Reviews

- Kerry O'Halloran. **State Neutrality: The Sacred, the Secular and Equality Law**
Harry G. Hutchison 327
- Mariëtta van der Tol, Carys Brown, John Adenitire, and E.S. Kempson, eds. **From Toleration to Religious Freedom: Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives**
Benjamin J. Kaplan 329
- Mark Hill QC, Norman Doe, RH Helmholtz, and John Witte Jr., eds. **Christianity and Criminal Law**
Frank R. Herrmann 331
- Jonathan Fox and Lev Topor. **Why Do People Discriminate against Jews?**
David Schraub 333
- Yaacov Yadgar. **Israel's Jewish Identity Crisis: State and Politics in the Middle East**
Guy Ben-Porat 336
- Alma Rachel Heckman. **The Sultan's Communists: Moroccan Jews and the Politics of Belonging**
André Levy 338
- Jonathan Laurence. **Coping with Defeat: Sunni Islam, Roman Catholicism, and the Modern State**
Joseph Prud'homme 341
- Tornike Metreveli. **Orthodox Christianity and the Politics of Transition: Ukraine, Serbia and Georgia**
Kristine Margvelashvili 343
- James Ramon Felak. **The Pope in Poland: The Pilgrimages of John Paul II, 1979-1991**
Jesse B.B. Russell 345
- Evan Haefeli, ed. **Against Popery: Britain, Empire, and Anti-Catholicism**
Colin Haydon 347
- Howard Gillman and Erwin Chemerinsky. **The Religion Clauses: The Case for Separating Church and State**
Edwin Cook 350
- Katherine Carté. **Religion and the American Revolution**
Stephen A. Marini 352
- Jonathan Todd Hancock. **Convulsed States: Earthquakes, Prophecy, and the Remaking of Early America**
Douglas L. Winiarski 354

John H. Matsui. **Millenarian Dreams and Racial Nightmares: The American Civil War as an Apocalyptic Conflict**
Sean A. Scott 356

John D. Wilsey. **God's Cold Warrior: The Life and Faith of John Foster Dulles**
Dianne Kirby 358

Features

Calendar of Events in Church and State 361

Books Received 365

A Heterodox Community under the Siege of Sunni Islam in Turkey: The Tahtacis

Mehmet Ali Yolcu  and Mustafa Aça 

Introduction

The name *Tahtaci* is derived from the Turkish word *tahta* (wood). The name, which was due to the community's working with woodcraft for long years, later turned into an ethnic and religious label. In some of the western regions of Turkey, they are also known by the names *Turkmens* or *Tahtaci Turkmens*. In Turkey, the Tahtacis had a seminomadic lifestyle until one hundred years ago.

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Today, they have a fully settled lifestyle, living along the south and western coastline of Turkey, mainly in the rural forest areas of Mersin, Adana, Antalya, Muğla, Denizli, Aydın, İzmir, Balıkesir, and Çanakkale.

The first appearance of the Tahtacis, who are the important members of the *Qizilbash* identity, can likely be traced to the sixteenth century, when *Qizilbash* appeared in Iran and Anatolia during the Safavid Dynasty.¹ There is strong evidence that the Tahtacis migrated from Central Asia through Khorasan and Northwestern Iran to Anatolia. One hundred years before the name “Tahtaci” was heard in Anatolia (as *Cemaat-i Tahtacıyan*, the “Tahtaci community”), the name *Agaceri* had been used in the sources.² The Agaceris are considered to be the ancestors of today’s Tahtacis.³ The question of whether the Agaceris, who were first seen in the written sources in the thirteenth century, are a Turkic tribe separate from the Oghuz tribes is a controversial one. Faruk Sümer mentions that according to the information given by Iranian historian Resideddin Fazlullah in the fourteenth century, during the Oghuzs’ migration to Anatolia, the ones who settled down in forest areas were named *Agaceri*, which means “Forest Men.”⁴ The concept had not been used before that. In our opinion, there is a strong chronological ethnic tie between the Agaceris and the Tahtacis, as well as common points between the names *Agaceri* and *Tahtaci*. Both of these names are based on economic trade. Accordingly, both names refer to populations in the same trade but coming from different tribal origins instead of just one.

The ancestral lineage of religious leaders called *dedes* in Alevism is called an *ocak*. It is believed that this lineage extends to *Ehlibeyt* (Muhammad’s family) through the *silsile* (family tree). Today, there are two separate ocaks belonging to the Tahtacis: *Yanyatir Ocagi* in İzmir-Narlıdere and *Haci Emirli Ocagi* in Aydın-

1. The word *Qizilbash* is a combination of the words *qizil* (red) and *bash* (head) in Turkish. In the sixteenth century, the Safavid supporters in Anatolia were given this name because they wore a red hood. The name *Alevi* has been used instead of this name since the nineteenth century.

2. Faruk Sümer, “Ağaç-Eriler,” *Bellekten* 26 (1962): 521–28.

3. For more details, see Neşet Çağatay, “Tahtacılar,” in *İslam ansiklopedisi*, vol. 11 (İstanbul: Milli Eğitim Basımevi, 1970), 669–72; Ethem Ruhi Fırlı, “Tahtacılar,” in *Türk ansiklopedisi*, vol. 30 (Ankara: Milli Eğitim Basımevi, 1981), 352–53; İsmail Engin, *Tahtacılar: Tahtacı kimliğine ve demografisine giriş* (İstanbul: Ant, 1998); Ali Selçuk, *Tahtacılar: Mersin Tahtacıları üzerine bir araştırma* (İstanbul: Yeditepe, 2005); Nejat Birdoğan, *Alevilik: Anadolu’nun gizli kültürü* (İstanbul: Kaynak, 2015).

4. Sümer, “Ağaç-Eriler,” 521.

Reshadiye.⁵ Among the Tahtacis, *dede* (the religious leader) lineage continues from these two *ocaks*. The institution of *dedelik*, who is the opinion leader and religious guide of Alevi communities, functions on a lineage basis, passing from father to son. The fact that these two visiting places are located in the Cukurova region suggests that the Tahtacis lived in this region at some point in history. As a matter of fact, some Tahtaci *dedes* told us that Fatih Sultan Mehmet had brought the Tahtacis from the Taurus Mountains to Mount Ida to cut timber for the construction of the ships used at the siege of Istanbul. This claim can also be read as a narrative to help a population that has been marginalized for centuries to integrate itself into the dominant community.

The interest of Westerners in the ethnicity of the Tahtacis, whose peripatetic properties have largely disappeared since the second half of the twentieth century, increased in the second half of the nineteenth century. This interest continued to increase in the early twentieth century, particularly through books in which European travelers, archaeologists, and orientalists told about their trips to Asia Minor. The information given by European researchers and travelers about the Tahtacis is speculative and based on assumptions. Today, these works offer little for revealing the Tahtacis' ethnicity. John P. Brown describes the Tahtacis as a primitive Shiite tribe, while Theodore Bent suggests that they may be a sect or cult with a Christian origin.⁶ Carl Humann, on the other hand, stated in 1880 that the Tahtacis were one of the indigenous peoples of Anatolia and that although they were Christians at first, they turned to Islam because of fear and did not later sever their ties with Islam.⁷ Felix Von Luschan sees the Tahtacis as reminiscent of the ancient Lycian people, supporting his vision with their skull measurements.⁸ Ewald Banse, who published travel notes about Turkey in 1916, evaluated the Tahtacis in a similar way to Luschan. He suggested that they were ethnically related to the Hittites because the Tahtacis harbored ancient cultural remains in their religion.⁹ French Turkologist Jean Paul

5. Yusuf Ziya Yörükkan, *Anadolu'da Aleviler ve Tahtaclar* (İstanbul: Ötüken Neşriyat, 2006), 149.

6. John P. Brown, *The Darvishes, or Oriental Spiritualism* (London: Frank Cass, 1868), 189; Theodore Bent, "The Ansairee of Asia Minor," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 20 (1891): 225-26.

7. Carl Humann, "Über die ethnologie kleinasiens," *Verhandlungen der Gesellschaft für Erdkunde zu Berlin*, vol. 7 (Berlin: Verlag von Dietrich Reimer, 1880), 241-54; Engin, *Tahtaclar: Tahtacı kimliğine ve demografisine giriş*, 68.

8. Felix Von Luschan, "The Early Inhabitants of Western Asia," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 41 (1911): 221-44.

9. Ewald Banse, *Die Türkei: Eine moderne Geographie* (Berlin: Georg Westermann, 1916); Krisztina Kehl-Bodrogi, *Kızılbaşlar/Aleviler: Anadolu'da yaşayan*

Roux, a Western researcher, said that the Tahtacis were of Turkish origin, but attributed them to Shia in terms of faith.¹⁰ In these initial assessments of the origins of the Tahtacis, it appears that the researchers strived to establish a connection between Christianity or Anatolian autochthonous people and the Tahtacis, based on their religious differences. However, considering the basic qualities of the Tahtaci demography and the presence of many elements of Inner Asian origin in religious beliefs and practices, these views have become controversial.

In Turkey, scholars such as Baha Said, Süleyman Fikri, and Yusuf Ziya drew attention to the Tahtacis in their work.¹¹ The common opinion of these researchers is that the Tahtacis are of Turkish origin. In these initial studies, the data obtained from field studies about the Tahtacis were used, but there was no detailed examination. Since the 1930s, the folklore studies of Toros, Yılmaz, and Yetişen had been on the foreground.¹² After the 1990s, the academic studies of Engin, Selçuk, and Cıblak are notable.¹³ In these studies, the Turkmenism of the Tahtacis or the links established between the Agaceris and the Tahtacis were mentioned.

The traditional worldview is a term that expresses the philosophy of a group and its viewpoints connected to its lifestyle, by referring to the collective consciousness.¹⁴ This article aims to articulate the parallelism between the traditional worldviews of the Tahtacis and their sociocultural life, structural organization, beliefs, and practices. Our study focuses on the effect of the Tahtacis' traditional worldviews on community identity, community boundaries at symbolic and structural levels, and the place and importance of various religions and beliefs in the Tahtaci worldview. We also attempt to analyze the effect of all these beliefs and

ezoterik bir inanç topluluğu üzerine araştırma, trans. Oktay Değirmenci and Bilge Ege Aybudak (İstanbul: Ayrıntı, 2012), 74.

10. Jean Paul Roux, "The Tahtacı of Anatolia," in *The Other Nomads: Peripatetic Minorities in Cross Cultural Perspective*, ed. A. Rao (Köln-Wien: Böhlau, 1987), 232.

11. See Baha Said Bey, *Türkiye'de Alevi-Bektaşî, Ahi ve Nusayri zümreleri* (Ankara: Kültür Bakanlığı, 2000); Süleyman Fikri, "Anadolu'nun dini etnografyası: Teke vilayetinde Tahtacılar," *Türk Yurdu* 29 (1927): 477-89; Yusuf Ziya Yörükân, "Tahtacılar," *DİFM* 12 (1929): 61-80.

12. See Taha Toros, *Toroslarda Tahtacı oymakları* (Mersin: Mersin Halkevi, 1938); Abdurrahman Yılmaz, *Tahtacılar da gelenekler* (Ankara: Ulus Basımevi, 1948); Rıza Yetişen, *Tahtacı aşiretleri: Adet, gelenek ve görenekleri* (İzmir: Memleket Matbaacılık, 1986).

13. See Engin, *Tahtacılar: Tahtacı kimliğine ve demografisine giriş*; Selçuk, *Tahtacılar: Mersin Tahtacıları üzerine bir araştırma*; Nilgün Cıblak, *Mersin Tahtacıları: Halkbilimi araştırmaları* (Ankara: Ürün, 2005).

14. For more details, see Linda S. Watts, *Encyclopedia of American Folklore* (New York: Facts On File, Inc., 2007), 418.

practices on the formation and maintenance of the Tahtaci social structure. We investigate the place of collective values and practices related to Anatolian Alevisism in the authentic belief world of the Tahtacis. We examine the sociocultural life of this group, which develops dependent on the traditional worldview, with qualitative research method and using written literature. The data were collected through participatory observations and in-depth interviews in field studies conducted. The data in question were evaluated with an interpretive anthropological perspective.

Basic Qualities of Tahtaci Religious Beliefs

The Tahtacis are a community with their own unique beliefs among Anatolian Alevis. There are similarities of faith with other large Alevi groups in Anatolia, but they also have some cultural and religious qualities that differ from the Tahtacis. As an outwardly closed community, the Tahtacis are extremely unique in terms of social organization and structure, and the beliefs of the Tahtacis are seen as marginal by the dominant population in Turkey. They have developed a synchronous belief system containing elements of religious beliefs including animism, ancestral cults, and especially the religions of Tengrism, Shamanism, Maniheim, Zoroastrianism, and Christianity.

The religious beliefs of the Tahtacis were constructed mainly by oral tradition, along with some written texts such as *Buyruk*—a book including the religious rules of the Tahtacis and some moral advice—which is considered to be apocryphal by orthodox Islam. It can be said that these religious beliefs are enriched with gnostic and heterodox thoughts. As a matter of fact, the Tahtacis have preserved their beliefs, thinking, and mythical designs better than the other heterodox communities living in Anatolia.¹⁵ One of the main reasons for this is their geographic isolation which allowed them to protect their beliefs from external factors.

The Tahtacis have a closed social system separated from the outside world because of the exclusionary attitude of the dominant population toward them. The outward-closed social structure is remarkable in the context of a hierarchical belief scheme's existence created by the Tahtacis themselves and the formation

15. Other heterodox communities include Nusayris, Alevis, and Bektashis. For more information on the subject, see Mehmet Ali Yolcu, *Kutsalardan ritüele: Çanakkale Tahtacılarının geleneksel dünya görüşü* (Çanakkale: Paradigma Akademi, 2020), 25–30. For detailed information about the historical development of heterodox communities in Anatolia, see Ahmet T. Karamustafa, *Tanrının kurtarılmaz kulları: İslam dünyasında derviş toplulukları 1200-1550* (İstanbul: YKY, 2008).

of in-community legal systems. Again, the reality of the Tahtaci community's existence in isolated places has paved the way for the historical elements that are almost frozen in the religious world to move to the present day. Their ancient Inner Asian perspective, which includes burial traditions, cult place designs, and animistic beliefs about nature and natural beings, remains under the shroud of Shiiteism.

God, Ali, and Origin Myths in Tahtacis

Tahtaci religious life interprets sacred patterns to envision a god with an anthropomorphic character. This deity does not intensely intervene in daily life, as compared to Sunni Islam. For the Tahtacis, God's punitive aspect is not at the forefront. God has more of a sense of love. The nature of God cannot be considered to be independent of human beings, which can be explained by the influence of Neo-Platonism. Human beings are perceived as a microlevel manifestation of God and as a reflection of the divine "creation" feature rather than the feature itself. Cenksu Üçer associated the issue of the Tahtaci deity's qualities with syncretism. According to Üçer, the generally accepted opinion about Alevism is that it is a belief system that has the elements of the ancient Turkish religion, to which they belonged before Islamization, along with Gnostic and Neo-Platonist, Maniheist, and Buddhist elements. Thus, it has the characteristics of a system of syncretic beliefs consisting of the remnants of different religions such as Judaism and Christianity, a number of sects encountered in the Islamization process, and a structure that includes Sufi teachings at different levels.¹⁶

Although the vision of god in Tahtaci belief is not very clear, it is close to the view of god in pantheism. As is known, in pantheism, god is the universe or nature itself.¹⁷ However, the notion of a pantheistic god evolved into an anthropomorphic deity in Tahtaci thought. In addition, the perception of god by the Tahtacis who incorporate elements from the cults of nature and ancestors, middleman cult personalities, and anthropomorphism has gone beyond the idea of one god of monotheistic Semitic religions.

Among the Tahtacis, the anthropomorphic god design is found in the Mirac (Miraj) narrative, which is the event in the Islamic faith where Muhammad, the prophet of Islam, ascends to the sky

16. Cenksu Üçer, *Anadolu'da Alevi ocakları ve grupları* (Ankara: Ankara Okulu, 2019), 215.

17. C. Stephen Evans and R. Zachary Manis, *Din felsefesi: İman üzerine rasyonel düşünme*, trans. Ferhat Akdemir (Ankara: Ankara Okulu: 2010), 35.

and speaks to Allah.¹⁸ The Mirac explains that God resides behind a curtain on the seventh floor of the sky, that God extended his blessed hand to Muhammad behind the curtain from the doors of heaven at the end of Muhammad's journey under Gabriel's guidance in Mirac, and that they ate a meal made from milk, honey, apple, and rice together.¹⁹ There is no detailed Mirac narrative in *Tahtaci Buyruk*—an İzmir manuscript of Imam Jafar Sadiq's *Buyruk*, estimated to have been written in the nineteenth century—and there is no such a food event included: “It is said that Muhammad saw a lion on his way to Mirac. He took off his ring and put it into its mouth. He left his sign there. Then, he went back to his path and reached the gates of Eden. He met Allah. Allah told him ninety thousand words. Thirty thousand words created the sharia. . . . Sixty thousand words stayed secret with Ali.”²⁰

For the Tahtacis, humans are at the ideological center, and this idea is formulized with the saying, “Human beings are both the qibla and Kaaba of the Tahtacis.”²¹ Humanization has paved the way for a human-centered worldview in the Tahtacis. This is particularly seen in *cem* rituals. *Cem* is a word that means “gathering.” The ritual of *cem* is a central religious ritual in Alevism. In *cems* directed by *dede*, prayers are read within certain rules, *saz* is played, and religious dances are displayed. As part of the *cem* rituals, Tahtacis prostrate themselves to one another or to *dede*, which means that they are prostrating to Allah. Therefore, the value given to human beings is coequal with divine identity and has reached sanctity. The fact that the Tahtacis see God as the center of goodness while believing that evil is caused by human greediness suggests that God's nature is envisaged as absolute good.

The cosmogonic and anthropogenic myths seen in many communities might have played an effective role in shaping and developing human thought. For instance, an anthropogenic myth detected among the Tahtacis contains powerful clues about the relationship between humanity, God, and other creatures. In the Tahtacis, the myth is peopled with Islamic personalities but

18. For the details of the Mirac narrative, see. *Kur'an-ı Kerim meali*, trans. Halil Altıntaş and Muzaffer Şahin (Ankara: Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, 2009), Surah al-İsra ayat 1.

19. Ali Selçuk, *Tahtacılar: Mersin Tahtacıları üzerine bir araştırma*, 30.

20. This scripture contains the principles of belief and worship of the Tahtacis. It is one of the *Buyruk* books that Alevis consider to be sacred. It is estimated that these books were written by the Safavids in the sixteenth century and spread in Anatolia through the Turkmen tribes; Sefer Aytakin, *Buyruk* (Ankara: Emek Yayın, 1958), 7. Historically, Ali is the fourth khalif of Islam.

21. Ali Yolcu, *Kutsaldan ritüele: Çanakkale Tahtacılarının geleneksel dünya görüşü*, 112.

associated with archaic beliefs before Islam: “According to what was previously said, Adam, the first human being, was created from mud. The mud which Adam was created from met the soul after being kneaded and kept for 40 days. When the soul could not fit Adam’s body, it was filed and put back in his body. The fallen parts of the soul of Adam while it was being filed created animals and plants. When Adam turned forty, God realized that Adam was lonely; so, he created Eve. This is how Adam and Eve were sent to the world together.”²²

This myth shows the creation of all living entities on earth along with the first human and has a monist quality in terms of linking the source of existence to a single substance. In Semitic religions, Adam was created from the mud, but here, along with the mud, the gift of God was passed on to man with a symbol of divine light. In the Tahtaci worldview, this establishment of an equal relationship between natural beings such as plants, animals, and human beings is likely a reflection of an archaic belief that finds a place in this myth. Similarly, Tahtaci prayers containing an apology to the forest spirit when the tree is cut down are based on the principle of equality in the human-nature relationship in which human beings and the natural world are created from the same essence, rather than a nature-centric ideology in which human beings in classical religions are *ashref-i mahlukat* (elite creatures).

The trilogy of Allah, Muhammad, and Ali, which is often encountered in the religious lives, prayers, and rituals of the Tahtacis, represents concepts that are inextricably interwoven with each other.²³ Although God comes first in this trilogy, Ali stands out the most. In *nefes* (Alevi religious poems that are read with melodies) and myths produced in Tahtaci oral tradition, Ali and Shah (Shah does not always refer to Shah Ismail who is the founder of the Safavid state) are more dominant than other actors. The Tahtacis favor a mythological vision of Ali over the historical person of Ali. In other words, Tahtacis see a binary Ali in their belief system where the mythological Ali is more prominent than the

22. Ibid., 30.

23. The nature of the trilogy has been interpreted differently by various researchers. Rıza Yıldırım states that the sacred space and the profane sphere are intermingled in Alevism, and uses a cone analogy to define the understanding of the sacred in Alevi theology, with its main concepts of “divinity,” “prophethood,” and “custody.” In this analogy, the top point of the cone represents divinity that is God. As the cone widens toward the base, the sacred slightly opens up to prophethood and custody that are represented by Muhammad and Ali. This triple structure, which constitutes the core of Alevi holiness is expressed with the formula “Hak, Muhammed, Ali.” See Rıza Yıldırım, *Geleneksel Alevilik: İnanç, ibadet, kurumlar, toplumsal yapı, kolektif bellek* (İstanbul: İletişim, 2018), 166-67.

historical Ali. This mythological Ali is a creature that has always existed since before the creation of the universe. One of the written sources of the *Qizilbash*, *Buyruk* (Menakib ül-esrar Behcet ül-ahrar) has the following statements explaining Ali's importance: "Firstly, God generously and kindly created a green sea. He looked at the sea. The sea fluctuated and overflowed. Out of that sea, a gem came ashore. God split that gem into two. One became green, and the other one became white. A candle was hanging like a green dome. Allah put that divine light in this green dome, hanging like a candle. That green one was the soul of Muhammad, and the white one was the soul of Ali."²⁴

As can be seen in these statements, Muhammad and Ali were created from a godly gift of divine light. This is unlike the creation myth of orthodox Islam. Here divinity is expressed in the principle of unity in three, where the boundaries are ambiguous among the trilogy. The phenomenon has, in this respect, similarities between the idea of manifestation in Christianity which is based on the Holy Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Moreover, another instance in which Ali was perceived as a mythological hero in the Tahtacis is related to Ali's birthday. The belief that Ali was born on March 21 (*nawruz*) shows that there is an intellectual connection between the Turkish calendar myth and Ali.

The trilogy belief of the Tahtacis is based on the sameness of each of the divine entities in the trilogy. These are different manifestations of one thing. In reality, they are all the same. It is not overlooked that the case is mostly handled in a kind of a *hulul* (incarnation) dimension. As a matter of fact, although some accept the divinity of Muhammad-Ali among those who mention this matter, this ideology is built more on the Allah-Ali duo. According to this understanding, the function of Muhammad in this trilogy is almost absent; the subject here is fully focused on the manifestation of God in Ali.²⁵

Phrases such as "The person sitting on the throne before the world was created," "the owner of this earth," "he created the eighteen thousand universes," "Ali tells, Cafer writes verses," seen in Tahtaci poems are direct references to Ali's divine nature.²⁶ However, we note that the formulation of divine light in the worldview of Alevism can be interpreted as the compression of each part of the trilogy into a singular ontology. Accordingly, God, Muhammad, and Ali are the same in terms of essence, but the

24. Abdülbaki Gölpinarlı and Pertev Naili Boratav, *Pir Sultan Abdal* (İstanbul: Derin, 2010), 151.

25. Cenksu Üçer, *Anadolu'da Alevi ocakları ve grupları*, 270.

26. Ali Yolcu, *Kutsaldan ritüele: Çanakkale Tahtacılarının geleneksel dünya görüşü*, 42.

incarnation of Allah was transferred to Ali. Here, along with the intense *hulul* interpretations of Hurufism, the beliefs of the Safavids must have entered into the Tahtaci worldview.²⁷ However, all these theological perspectives are unclear and nonsystematic.

According to the traditional Tahtaci worldview, which puts human beings at its center, under the influence of their *vahdet-i vücüt* (unity of existence) understanding, a divine light from God resides in humans' hearts. Therefore, there is no sharp distinction between both entities. The sacred in the Tahtacis was built according to this worldview, lowered from heaven to the ground and mixed into the life. In our view, there is a very subtle nuance in the matter of Ali's divine manifestation. Although the mythological Ali is not a god in essence, he is God's incarnated form. As a matter of fact, this mythological Ali is considered to be the first ancestor in the Tahtaci ethnogeny. Therefore, the mythological Ali has actually gained his sanctity through the mythological history of the community. In addition, Ali was reborn many times in the body and disguises of other individuals, which is a different dimension of reincarnation.

Nature and Animal Cults in the Tahtacis

One of the factors that shape traditional worldviews is nature.²⁸ With a lifestyle intertwined with nature, the Tahtacis have created sensitive beliefs about plants and animals that exist in their natural environment. These beliefs are both about the living areas of the Tahtacis in forests and their communication with different cultures they have encountered in the historical process. In addition, the rules governing the worldviews of the Islamic religion have affected the way they look at plants, trees, and animals. Among the Tahtacis, the goose, deer, rooster, crane, and snake are considered to be auspicious animals, while the owl, crow, dog, coyote, pig, partridge, and goat are seen as ominous animals. The rooster, especially the white rooster, is slaughtered as a sacrifice to Gabriel in cem rituals in order to make a vow or to end the exclusion from the community.²⁹ If an owl perches on a house, it is believed that there will be death in that household. In the same way, a bond between crow and death is established. When

27. Hurufism is an esoteric sect which appeared in Azerbaijan in the fourteenth century and interprets the Quran through various symbols based on letters.

28. The ethnographic data used in this section were obtained from Tahtaci villages in Çanakkale, Balıkesir, and İzmir provinces (Turkey's western provinces) during the fieldwork between March 2019 and November 2019.

29. Ritual differences of Gabriel sacrifice vary between Turkish Tahtacis and Alevi. See Serkan Köse, *Alevi inanç sisteminde kurban ritüeli* (İstanbul: Kesit, 2019). Exclusion is a way of punishment in the internal law of Alevism. Alevi

Hussein, the son of Ali, was killed in Karbala, his blood is believed to have been splashed on the feet of a partridge.³⁰ That is why its feet are red-colored and the partridge is, therefore, considered to be ominous. Even mentioning the pig is a taboo since it will jinx that household. The goat is associated with devil, while the sheep is associated with angels. The deer is considered to be an auspicious and sacred animal, and even deer-related *nefes* (hymns) are available. In Anatolian Alevism, the rabbit is associated with the narratives created around Ali, Hussein, Fatma, and Imam Riza, or Yazid who is despised by Alevites. That is why rabbit meat is not edible. Even objects touched by a rabbit, such as a stick, cannot be reused and should be thrown away. If a rabbit is encountered on the way somewhere, the traveler must turn back home since they believe that it means bad luck.

For Tahtacis, who have made a living with woodwork for many years, trees have gained sanctity as a cult object. The Tahtacis see a human image in trees and believe that there is a connection between trees and human beings. Before cutting trees, the Tahtacis offer an apology to the tree spirit. They prostrate themselves before great trees. Animals are also sacrificed in front of trees before the cutting process starts. Tree and forest-oriented beliefs are developed to support the trees' protection. Again, as a magnifying process in folk medicine, tree-related practices stand out. Cloth fragments are sometimes attached to trees in visiting places designated for making wishes. Bans related to trees are also prevalent. For example, large old trees and green trees are forbidden to be cut down.

The cult of water is still dominant in the belief system of the Tahtacis. Water is prohibited for the Tahtacis in the month of *Muharram*.³¹ Spitting in the water is forbidden, and streams, fountains, and lakes cannot be polluted. Beliefs about fire among the Tahtacis are often associated with the fact that fire cannot be contaminated and that there is a semantic bond between fire and family. Pouring water over the fire, stepping on it, and polluting the fire are not allowed. Things that can pollute the fire or make

who do not comply with certain rules are excluded by the community for a certain period of time, and their participation in the gatherings is banned. This institution is similar to some aspects of the excommunication in Christianity.

30. Hussein was the son of the fourth khalif of Islam. He was murdered by the Umayyads in Karbala along with his relatives. The Karbala incident paved the way for sectarian divisions in the Islamic world, and Shiitism took its strength from this.

31. The month of Muharram is the first month of the Hijri calendar. This month is a month of mourning-fasting for Alevites because it is associated with the Karbala event. The mourning is carried out by fasting for ten or twelve days. At the end of the days, a meal called "ashure" is cooked, and the mourning is over.

the spirit of the fire stink cannot be thrown in. Fire cannot be taken out of a house in the evening. The practice of lighting a fire in the funeral home is believed to be related to necromancy spells.

The Kaz Mountains, which stretch along the northwest of Turkey, including the provinces of Balıkesir and Canakkale, are at the center of the mountain cult of the Tahtacıs. They consider the grave sites of the Tahtacı saint Sarıkız and her father, Cilbak Baba, at the top of the Kaz Mountains sacred, making sacrifices on their behalf in certain periods. On August 15, they climb the mountain, set up their tents, and stay there for ten days. Sacrifices are made and they whirl *semah*.³² Tanyu says: "Visiting this place is a tradition; Alevıs and the Tahtacı Turkmens, claiming that Sarıkız is Hz. Ali's daughter, go to Sarıkız every year to call for her from mountain to mountain."³³ Julian Baldick reports that the Tahtacıs have a myth about Muhammad's daughter Fatma. According to this myth, Fatma is believed to have become pregnant with her own daughter without any intervention from a man and to have fled to Mount Ida—named as the Kaz Mountains by Turks—with one of Muhammad's companions. According to the myth, the girl died there and, after her death, she began to be called Sarıkız. According to Baldick, Roux found Inner Asian traces here, such as the idea of miraculous pregnancy, the yellow color symbolizing the sun with light, and the idea that sacred sites were visited by females thought to be half-human and half-goose.³⁴ Located on two different hills at the summit of the Kaz Mountains, Sarıkız, and Cilbak Baba (Baba Hill) should be considered as a personified form of a central mountain cult in the belief systems of the Tahtacıs. The Kaz Mountains are a place in ancient Anatolia which has been told by many civilizations through mythological stories and which is sacred. With the arrival of the Tahtacıs in the region, the local cults must be synthesized with the mountain cult in Turkish mythic ideology. In this context, the similarities of Sarıkız with the character of Artemis, who was slandered for unchastity despite her vow of celibacy, are very prominent.

32. The date of the Virgin Mary festival in Christianity and the date of Tahtacı's commemoration of Sarıkız are the same. Some researchers have interpreted this as a Christian aspect of the belief system of the Tahtacıs. See F. W. Hasluck, *Bektaşılık incelemeleri*, trans. Ragıp Hulusi Özden (İstanbul: Say, 2012).

33. Hikmet Tanyu, *Dinler tarihi araştırmaları* (Ankara: AÜ İlahiyat Fakültesi, 1973), 61.

34. Julian Baldick, *Hayvan ve şaman: Orta Asya'nın antik dinleri*, trans. Nevin Şahin (İstanbul: Hil Yayın, 2010), 98.

The Afterlife Beliefs and Death Rituals in the Tahtacis

In the belief system of the Tahtacis, it is believed that with biological death, one's body dies and his or her soul "walks to God."³⁵ In general, it is believed that with biological death, bodies are reintegrated with the soil and that the soul continues to live in a different dimension and shape in relation to both this world and beyond the world. They believe in "coming from God" and "turning back to God." In this sense, there is a similarity between this world and the afterlife.³⁶ However, in our interviews during the field research, there were also the traces of the existence of reincarnation beliefs as well as afterlife beliefs.

If a person of the Tahtaci community dies in the evening or at night, the burial waits until the next day. The deceased is dressed in special clothes worn in cem rituals, wrapped in shrouds on top of these clothes, and laid on their back with their face exposed to a room. Iron objects such as knives and scissors are placed on the body. If the deceased is a woman, henna is applied to her hands and feet, her eyes are tinged with kohl and a hood is put on her head. Then, fragrant flowers are put on top of the woman's ear and nose. After men are dressed in the clothes used in the cem and the Tahtaci wrap is put on their head, a symbolic amount of money is placed in his right pocket and he is shrouded over his clothes. In fact, this ritual bears similarities to the practice in which money referred to as "boatman's money" in some Pre-Christian European and Scandinavian societies are placed on the eyes of the deceased. If a person dies in the evening, a fire is lit in two separate places in the morning in front of the deceased's house. For those who die outside the house, the place where he or she died is covered with stone and a fire is lit. In the house, women lament, while men wait in front of the house where the fire is lit.

People gather in the room where the funeral is held and prayers are read by *dede*. *Dede*, putting his hand on the chest of the deceased, says: "Bismillah Allah Allah! We came to world; we will migrate to the afterlife house. We are connected to twelve Imams. Let the place you go be a place of truth, let the place you dive into be a lake of truth, let the house you arrive at be the truth house. The hand is not mine, but the hand of Shah-i Merdan Ali. For the love of Shah, for the love of *pir* (patriarch). Oh God, Muhammad,

35. The ethnographic data used in this section were obtained from Tahtaci villages in Çanakkale, Balıkesir, and İzmir provinces (Turkey's western provinces) during the fieldwork between March 2019 and November 2019.

36. Şeref Uluocak, "Kazdağı Tahtacı Türkmen kozmolojisinde hakka yürümek," *Türk kültürü ve Hacı Bektaş Veli araştırma dergisi* 71 (2014): 59-60.

Ali. Take us to reality!”³⁷ After this ceremony and women’s lamenting for the dead, a *sazandar* (saz musician) comes and reads songs of death with *saz*, a common folk instrument in Turkey. The funeral does not leave the house until at least three death songs are sung.

Then, if the deceased is a man, his face and body are shaved. After praying to the water where the body will be washed, thyme, linden, lemon blossom, and other seasonal flowers are usually added to the water. If the dead person was married, the surviving spouse shall prostrate himself or herself at the feet, arms, and head of her dead spouse. Then, the boiler where the water is heated is reversed and kept in front of the house of the deceased for three days. Men’s shrouds are sewn by men and women’s shrouds are sewn by women. If the deceased is a man, a man washes the deceased; if the deceased is a woman, a woman washes the deceased.³⁸ Meals are offered to visitors who come to the house of the deceased on the day of the person’s death. The tomb is dug extensively near the place, where the person selected while he or she was alive, or near the family cemetery. Then, mattress, pillows, and duvets are added on top of death boards and the deceased is prepared for burial. The graves of those who died without a *musahip* (a companion) are located in a separate place inside the cemetery.³⁹

In the religious lives of the Tahtacis, prayers are not considered as one of the main rules of Islam. They are only performed at funerals and are led by imams in nearby Sunni villages. Before the deceased is put in the grave, one of the grave-digging men opens the face of the shroud and spreads some soil over the eyes of the deceased. The body, having been placed on the floor of the tomb, is covered with duvets, and on top of it, loincloths, handkerchiefs, towels, writing, flowers, etc. are placed. Then, death boards are laid horizontally inside the tomb. During the burial, it is ensured that women do not enter the cemetery, that participants in the burial ceremony throw soil three times, and that the shovel is not passed directly from person to person during this time. After

37. Ali Yolcu, *Kutsaldan ritüele: Çanakkale Tahtacılarının geleneksel dünya görüşü*, 83.

38. Cem Meriç, “Bayramiç yöresi Tahtacı Türkmenlerinde ölüm etrafında oluşan inanış ve ritüeller,” *Kültür araştırmaları dergisi* 1 (2018): 74–75.

39. The *musahiplik* is the fraternity institution created by a ritual between two families in Alevism. The *musahiplik* (holy companionship) cem is a religious ceremony in which two families (of husband and wife) are declared brothers in Alevism. The *Musahip* families are responsible for each other until they die, and the children of the *musahip* families cannot marry each other. The Tahtacis who are not *muhasips* cannot participate in cem rituals.

someone throws soil into the grave with a shovel, the shovel is left on the ground, then the other person picks up the shovel. We presume that this avoidance behavior is related to a death contact magic. After the burial process is completed, water is poured from head to toe on top of the tomb with a jug. The headboards and tombstones of the tombs of the Tahtacis are embroidered with a crowbar motif which is a Tahtaci symbol. Sources say that this is the trilogy of Allah, Muhammad, and Ali, but there are strong signs that it is a more archaic remnant from pre-Islamic times.

In some Tahtaci settlements, people hide a lock of hair, which is cut in the haircut ritual, in their chests.⁴⁰ When they die, these hairs are placed on the chest of the deceased, and that is how the parents are buried. At the end of the burial process, items that were used frequently in daily life by the deceased (such as a cane, keychain, lighter, cigarette, raki, etc.) are left next to his or her grave. For forty days, pine branches are thrown on the soil so that the deceased will not be haunted by the devil or evil spirits, and the tomb is surrounded by a white rope. In addition, a fire called *delil* is lit for three days in the place where the deceased was washed and around his or her house. To relieve the soul of the deceased, three-, seven-, and forty-day ceremonies are successively held, each of which is done by making sacrifices and distributing meals.

On the evening of the burial, guests arrive at the house of the deceased to offer their condolences, bringing food—considered a mourning dish—with them. The Tahtacis offer their condolences to people at the house of the deceased. In the house of the deceased during the mourning period, it is important to light a fire on the stove and to keep the lights on for three days. The mourning takes forty days for the Tahtacis. After the mourning is over, guests who participate in the mourning bring henna and food with them. Henna is distributed to women, the bread is split, and all participants are given a piece. The clothes the deceased wore in his or her life are brought, and laments are said around the room. Meals are then cooked and distributed to both those who are there and to other houses in the village. Those who participate in this ceremony pour the water in the containers out due to the fear of the contagiousness of death.⁴¹ There are no grave visits before forty days have passed after death.

40. When every Tahtaci boy reaches the age of 6–7, his first haircut ritual is performed for him. Hair is cut in a ceremony and some of this hair is stored in a box. In this ceremony, a rooster is sacrificed, and food is eaten.

41. During the funeral and mourning, water is not kept in containers in the house, water is brought from outside and consumed immediately.

Graves can be visited in certain sacred times, such as *Hidirellez*, a spring holiday celebrated in Turkey on May 6.⁴² In the cemetery, the tombs are cleaned. Visitors then prostrate themselves toward the stones of the tombs, and *uclemes* (prayers with the name of God, Muhammad, and Ali) are said. Then some food and beverages are left on the tombs. Tahtaci graveyard visits and Hidirellez traditions are integrated. In rituals marking the transformation of nature, such as Hidirellez, Tahtacis may visit an entombed saint close to the area, where visitors may make various wishes. No one works on the first day of Hidirellez and people usually spend time at home with their families. On May 7, everyone wears their traditional clothes and goes to stoves at the grave of their deceased relatives in the cemetery. After the mattresses are set and the stoves are lit, sacrifices are made for the soul of the deceased. The blood of a sacrificed goat is poured over the grave and the tables are prepared. Here, a raki drinking ritual called *dem alma* is performed. After eating food and drinking an alcoholic drink called *raki*, they whirl *semah* (religious dance) in the graveyard with the songs of the *sazandar*. In the morning of May 8, they visit the village of the *dede*. After prostrating three times to the *turbe* (shrine), the stove is prepared, and sacrifices are made.

The culture of death among the Tahtacis is extremely vivid, being largely unchanged since the sixteenth century, when the Tahtacis began to be seen in Anatolia. Sacrificing goats or roosters in the name of Gabriel for the dead, burial of the dead with their clothes on and with a mattress and some personal items, and mourning traditions are common among ancient Turks and other Inner Asian steppe civilizations.⁴³ In Turkish death culture, the feast of the dead has undergone a transformation from concrete to abstract in the form of the food presented to the dead person or the grave of the dead. These present evidence that the existence of an other-world faith in the three-tiered universe, which appears in the shamanic worldview, remains. For Tahtacis, the designs of advanced afterlife on the reward-punishment axis are extremely insignificant. The concepts of heaven and hell are known, but many punishments and rewards are in this world. Rather, beliefs that assume that the dead have a similar life to this world in the afterlife are more dominant.

Among the Tahtacis, the concepts of heaven and hell are only found in language superficially. In addition to these concepts,

42. Feast of Sacrifice (*Qorban*), Hidirellez, sacred visit times, and so on.

43. Jews are known to have sacrificed roosters for atonement purposes on Kaparot Day. In fact, the rooster is also an important figure in Indian, Iranian, Armenian, and Jewish cultures. See Selçuk, *Tahtacılar: Mersin Tahtacıları üzerine bir araştırma*, 126.

beliefs about the transition of the soul to another body have been identified. Tahtaci *dedes* say that if a soul is not clean, it does not pass to another body; however, if it is clean, it moves to another living life/body. *Tenasuh* (reincarnation) is a faith of Buddhism and Maniheim, which flourished in Indian and Chinese cultures. *Tenasuh* in the Tahtaci belief system emerged under the influence of Maniheim, based on the purification of the soul every time it comes to the world. However, a cult of powerful ancestors pushed *tenasuh* to a secondary position because it contradicted with their own beliefs. Syncretism in the belief system of the Tahtacis has complicated their beliefs of afterlife, the day of reckoning, and heaven and hell. However, it is a fact that, for the Tahtacis, these issues are not as important as the sanctity and application of the ritual itself. The conditions of faith are in the background more than praying and worshipping.

Tahtacis hold a similar belief to the messianic beliefs in Christianity in the way Mehdi returns to earth. The Twelfth Imam Mehdi, who is known as “missing” in Tahtaci eschatology, will come back in a time close to the apocalypse. Twelve imams are associated with a strong need for soteriology in these communities, both in Shiiteism and, indirectly, in the Tahtacis. This theology is a remedy for or freedom from pain, especially in heterodox communities where pain is placed at the center of their identity. With its rituals, Alevism repeats and remembers its suffering, exclusion, and the grief of victimization. In this context, it is necessary to think about the effect of the liberal theological perspectives in the formation of Mehdi beliefs.

Tahtaci Identity in the Process of Urbanization and Modernism

In terms of the emergence of the Tahtaci identity, sociocultural transformations and the emergence of the Safavids in the sixteenth century played a very important role in Anatolia. Turkish Alevism has been built according to the rural and nomadic lifestyle since the sixteenth century, being carried to the present day with ritualistic forms which have been going on for centuries. Urbanization has had negative effects on the traditional belief system of the Tahtacis, since these beliefs survive through rituals that are adapted according to rural settlements. The first signs of the dissolution of Anatolian Alevism, in general, were seen in the second half of the twentieth century in Turkey, especially in the phenomenon of migration from village to city. Tahtaci ritual continuity in cities has a disrupted appearance. The only possible

way to understand the inner sociocultural transformation of the Tahtacis is through a good analysis of the modernization process.

In the early twentieth century, the transition from a theocratic Sunni Empire to a nation-state adopting the principle of constitutional secularism was a positive development in terms of maintaining and expressing the Tahtaci identity which had been covered up for centuries. However, after a while, the homogenizing policies of the republican ideology were also applied to Anatolian beliefs. These policies led to negative developments, in that (1) the new regime institutionally inherited the Ottoman heritage, and (2) there was a lack of Alevi representation under the central religious authority established under the name of the Directorate of Religious Affairs. The fact that the Tahtacis who migrated to cities had to create funds for worship houses (*cemevi*) to perform their religious rituals reveals one of the most important obstacles to the continuity of the Tahtaci identity and to the protection of the multicultural structure in Turkey. Another challenge exists in the form of taxation. A number of taxes collected from citizens of all faiths are spent on religious affairs. However, they are used to meet the requirements of the Sunni Islamic faith. Moreover, this religious taxation has become a very strong and non-negotiable tradition.

The 1960s were the years when left-wing movements around the world were popular and consequently affected Turkey. In these years, a political Alevi identity emerged alongside the weakening of the traditional structure. This new Alevi identity with social democratic veins had a secular worldview based on left-wing opposition and pushed back on traditional beliefs and religiosity. As a result, contemporary urban Alevis do not find *dedes*, *mushaps*, entombed saints, and *cems* as important as sociopolitical issues such individual rights and freedoms, justice in income distribution, women's rights, ecological sensitivity, etc.⁴⁴ In fact, these sociopolitical concerns are the values that are significant in the belief system of the new Alevism. Nevertheless, in order to keep the collective memory alive, the "common pain" such as the Kerbela event and the historical Ottoman oppression, and the religious-based Marash, Corum, and Sivas massacres against Alevis during the republican period have also been accepted as identity-reinforcing elements.

44. David Shankland, in his ethnographic research, sees this change as the consequences of urbanization, but believes that Alevis cannot adapt to the modern Turkish state without abandoning their own beliefs, religious ceremonies, and ideas because they are the elements that undermine the legitimacy of the central authority. See David Shankland, *The Alevis in Turkey: The Emergence of a Secular Islamic Tradition* (London & New York: Routledge Curzon, 2003).

Efforts to revive the Alevi identity have paved the way for association in cities, with the goal of reviving traditional Alevism, which has emerged in recent years. The lack of knowledge in the new generation and the fear of their Sunnization have led to the search for ways to overcome the disconnect in terms of transferring knowledge. Fear of extinction has resulted in the recourse of the traditional patterns of religious identity, while the dissolution of the tradition has brought up efforts to rebuild the tradition. This includes the efforts to re-establish the community by recreating and interpreting the myths, rituals, and institutions of the tradition. The symbolic reconstruction efforts of the community also aimed at teaching the tradition through demonstration. For example, the cem ritual is staged as a stage art at Alevi cultural nights, festivals, or within the framework of association activities. This is interpreted by some people as degeneration.⁴⁵ The threat of assimilation has led to the reduction of differences between the Tahtacis and other Alevi groups in the cities, bringing them together on a common ground.

In recent years, political and ideological transformations in Turkey have made the Tahtacis visible in the political sphere. Thus, the Tahtacis reconstruct their Alevi identity which is a more general identity on a political basis. Urban Tahtacis have now begun using civil society organizations as new areas where the Tahtacis can express themselves. Egalitarian and nature-centric features found in the traditional beliefs of the Tahtacis are reproduced in urban environments with contemporary concepts.

Another thing that stands out on the political ground of Turkey is the interest of nationalist movements in the Tahtacis. Tengrism and shamanistic remnants in the belief system of the Tahtacis have led to the search for “pure” pan-Turkism, glorified by some nationalist groups, celebrating the pre-Islamic period. However, this interest does not go further than the level of discourse, stroking their community pride, and does not go beyond the goal of keeping the Tahtacis in a state-built system. As a matter of fact, there is still no significant marriage between the Tahtacis and the dominant society, and the Tahtacis are still marginalized and othered by Sunni Turks who form the dominant majority in Turkey.

Conclusion

As a result of the Ottoman-Safavid conflict in the historical process from the sixteenth century to the present, the Tahtacis have

45. Sabir Güler, *Aleviliğin siyasi örgütlenmesi: Modernleşme, çözülme ve Türkiye Birlik Partisi* (Ankara: Dipnot, 2008), 64.



Figure 1. Eating at the *dede* visit (Courtesy of Mehmet Ali Yolcu).



Figure 2. Attaching cloth to the tree (Courtesy of Mehmet Ali Yolcu).



Figure 3. Funeral dinner (Courtesy of Mehmet Ali Yolcu).



Figure 4. Putting food on the grave (Courtesy of Mehmet Ali Yolcu).



Figure 5. A *sazandar* (Courtesy of Mehmet Ali Yolcu).



Figure 6. A Tahtaci's tomb (Courtesy of Mehmet Ali Yolcu).



Figure 7. The objects of request on the tombs (Courtesy of Mehmet Ali Yolcu).



Figure 8. Ashura meal (Courtesy of Mehmet Ali Yolcu).



Figure 9. Cemevi and sazandar (Courtesy of Mehmet Ali Yolcu).

created a secret and unique organizing system to protect their faith and identity. In this context, the Tahtacis have developed an internal law based on oral tradition called “the path,” and a closed social structure within this framework has emerged, with orders and prohibitions shaped by social relations.

The religious beliefs of the Tahtacis have very interesting characteristics. Many of these beliefs come from and are enriched by folkloric tradition. The traditional worldview of the Tahtacis is a bearer of ancient semantic ties between God and human beings. Human beings carry a gift from God, divine light, inside of them, and that is why they are sacred. On the other hand, as animals, plants, and trees carry part of this divine gift, nature is also glorified. In fact, an animistic perspective toward natural beings is dominant in the belief system of the Tahtacis. As a natural consequence of this human-centered worldview, Tahtaci women are not in a secondary position in terms of gender, unlike Sunni Muslims. Women are active at every stage of life and have an equal status with men, except for some religious rituals (because religion is generally produced in masculine contexts). The Tahtaci daily life does not have any practices that discriminate between men and women.

In the traditional worldview of the Tahtacis, holiness has an important place. Rituals in contact with the sacred play a central role in the traditional Tahtaci life. The main carriers of the traditional Tahtaci identity are the institutions of *dedelik*, *cem* rituals, *musahiplik*, and cults of nature, the dead, and ancestors. As urbanization and modernism eradicate these rituals, this traditional identity weakens and is replaced by the political Alevi identity invented in urban contexts. In parallel with this, in the young population, the traditional Tahtaci identity built on rituals and faith has begun to largely erode.

Nowadays, the Tahtacis face a number of problems in relation to the rise of political Islam in Turkey. In this context, the relationship between the dominant apparatus of the system and the Tahtacis—the “others” of the mainstream society—has weakened. The construction of mosques, which are the symbol of Sunni Islam, has continued in Tahtaci villages since the 1980s. Tahtacis are unable to react against such a direct assimilation policy since such assimilation actions are necessary for investment and service to their villages. As a consequence, Tahtacis unfortunately conform to this process—which is degrading for them—in order not to be blacklisted. We anticipate that the religious transformations of the Tahtacis—who have very low access to public resources and investments in rural areas—will be dramatic as sociocultural transformation in relation to urbanization continues. Moreover, if these transformations continue apace, the beliefs and rituals of the Tahtacis will, after a while, weaken and gradually disappear.



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