The Reckoning of Pluralism: Political Belonging and the Demands of History in Turkey

Kabir Tambar
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At the time Tambar wrote *The Reckoning of Pluralism*, there was a brief opening in Turkish political life during which ethnic and sectarian plurality was both imaginable and debatable. This opening, initiated by the ruling AKP, attempted to create an official conversation about the Alevis and the Kurds. This move indicated that those who have state power were willing to accept the suggestion that Turkish nationalism could encompass sectarian and ethnic diversity. The opening, however, was brutally closed via the violent attacks on peaceful protestors during the Gezi Park events of 2013. Turkish politics changes rapidly, and what was a moment of optimism among those who hope for a greater freedom of expression in Turkey may be revived. This means that Tambar conducted his research when Turks were beginning to discuss religious and ethnic difference, the ongoing war with the Kurds and possible solutions, and a troubled national memory avoided by nationalist historians. Only further research can tell us if the Alevi community feels there is a possibility of greater religious expression. But even within the context of this brief opening, Tambar's work contributes to the question of how the Turkish government locates, defines, and confines religion, in this case Alevism, in the national imaginary via nationalist historians.

Tambar's work contributes to a growing body of ethnographic and sociological literature on Turkey's powerful if obviously constructed ideological worldview, in which the state ushers into existence self-evident "truths" for its citizens. In this case the truth is the origin, meaning, and role of the nation's Alevis. The author describes how their history has been domesticated (chap. 3), how public performances of religiosity are self-contained by the Alevis, who are now burdened with the need to perform national unity and forget aspects of ritual that appear "irrelevant" to contemporary, urban, political, and ideological issues (chaps. 2 and 4), and how ritual has become intellectualized and historicized (chap. 5). Chapter 6, the final chapter, discusses a non-state Alevi mosque run by imams trained in Iran.

The book will be useful for specialists, for whom lingering questions about this group's oft-repeated "shamanistic" origin is a puzzle. Tambar forcefully illuminates the origins of this nationalist fiction and the related denial of any possible connection with Shi'i Islam. Naturally, for those with some background in Ottoman history, the denial of the Alevis' sectarian connections to

the grand Safavid/Iranian enemy is evident. This book helps explain the Republican state's interest in defining Alevis in a manner that squarely locates them in an authentically "cultural" space of Anatolia and therefore an originating point of Turkish spirituality, neatly divorced from both Shi'i Islam and the Sunni Islam associated with the Ottoman Empire.

Truthfully, I would have liked to hear more about Çorum, this small central Anatolian city divided down the middle by a river and religion: Alevis on one side and Sunnis on the other. This division happened after the 1980 military coup, which ended sectarian and political violence throughout Turkey. To achieve peace in this small place, people sorted themselves out and created a sectarian division. One must recognize that this is a "meta" ethnography of ideas rather than a detailed description of the ins and outs of life in Çorum to understand what Tambar wants to achieve. That said, there are many effective passages of friction. A youthful folkloric dance troupe, for instance, expects to "perform" segments of a religious ritual as older religious leaders balk at the troupe's lack of interest in the full event. In other words, young people have correctly absorbed the state's message that the Alevis are an authentically Anatolian "cultural" group that is not "religious," but traditional, and therefore can "perform" dance rather than practice ritual. The fact that journalists, researchers, and politicians are invited to these "cultural/religious" events heightens the sense that the Alevis experience their rituals via the expected effect that these undertakings are meant to have on "audiences." Tambar traces this crooked line of ideological self-engagement and self-conscious politically inflected performances of (state-approved) authenticity.

Beginning with the mid-twentieth-century and still ongoing urbanization and mass rural-urban migration, nationalist historians realized the need to objectify and construct knowledge about the Alevis. But this is not to disregard the earlier ideological engagement with the Alevis at the nation's founding in the early twentieth century. At this earlier point, Anatolia was intellectualized as the real origin of the Turkish people. As such, all rural Anatolians were elevated to a high status as ideological objects, although the acceptance of actual rural people was less warm. Interestingly, Tambar describes how Çorum's Alevis have accepted these objectifying constraints and reflected them back to the ethnographer, bemoaning their ignorance of Alevi life. For instance, while visiting with a family, the father, Ercan, mentions how the youth no longer understand the meaning of the *semah*, a part of the *cem* ritual. "He explained that he had acquired a partial understanding only because he read a book on the subject" (p. 117). Others also reflect on how they are ignorant of Alevi life because they have not studied authoritative works on it.

Tambar smartly describes awkward moments when people do not answer his questions or change the subject. Ethnographic silence is a feature of the book, as is the sense that the Alevis know they are being observed. For example, at a ritual held to commemorate the tenth of Muharram, the author notes that there were no lamentations or dirges for the martyred Husayn, the battle of Karbala was not described, Husayn was only mentioned once, and overall emotional responses were suppressed. When he asked why, "Ali Amca explained to me why they were not performing the rituals of mourning. 'The setting today is mixed,' he said, as he brought his hands together, fingers interlaced to indicate the joint presence of Sunnis and Alevis" (p. 48). The Alevis who held the event had invited Sunnis to attend in order to show national unity. This display of unity prevented the performance of the actual ritual and thereby transformed its spiritual purpose and truncated any expression of cultural memory. Instead, the oranizers' had felt they needed to enact a cultural performance of "national cohesion" (p. 48). Tambar's ethnography includes these spaces of denial, self-conscious performance, and silence, as well as the historiographic construction of "the Alevi" as an object of knowledge.

Perhaps due to these silences, Tambar takes up the many threads of intellectual constructions of Aleviness and engages them, rather than dismissing them as nationalist demands. Engaging the threads of objectification proves a fruitful source for his consideration of what the state (viz., the dominant Sunni majority) wants the Alevis to be: colorful, folkloric, and authentic – but not a self-actualized, marginalized Shi'i-inflected minority that expresses spiritual rites of mourning and lamentations echoing a painful history of oppression. This historiographic reconstruction places them within the nation and allows them to express patriotism and allegiance to Atatürk, the founder of the republic. Although Tambar only mentions the specter of Iran briefly in the last chapter, the looming fear of any past or present connection to Iran seems to be a clear reason as to why nationalist historians stridently argue for the Alevis' authentic Anatolian nature. The book, then, is about the disavowal of a people's history and the nationalist demands to rewrite that history, pressing it into a pattern of accepted knowledge.

The book's most striking part is the last chapter, which deals with an Alevi mosque recently built in Çorum. There, Tambar relates the open display of mourning rituals, which parallel those in Shi'i countries — but without the passion and with paranoia. This is a non-state-run mosque. All Sunni mosques in Turkey are run by the Diyanet (Presidency of Religious Affairs). This is the first I have heard of a Shi'i mosque in Turkey. The author describes how its

attendees refuse to engage with the nationalist construction of Alevi identity and, instead, hold rituals according to their own interests and spiritual desires. This is liberating indeed. Does it indicate a possible space for religious freedom? But according to the author, many contemporary Alevis in Turkey completely embrace the political construction of their historiography and regard the activities in this mosque as irrelevant and/or threatening. Given the political and social stakes, such a reaction is unsurprising. Who but a small minority would attend an Alevi mosque where the leaders have been trained in a religious seminary in Iran? Nevertheless, this chapter is very interesting. It would have been useful to learn more about this place and whether there are other such mosques in the country.

This book is useful for scholars of contemporary Turkey and for those interested in a government's ideological intervention in the construction of religious identity. Tambar makes an important contribution in this ethnography of ideology and of ordinary people who forthrightly declare how they have successfully contained themselves within pre-drawn conceptual borders. Their masks rarely slip. That is, Tambar effectively captures the echo chamber of urban life in contemporary Turkey in which thinking outside the lines is not permitted.

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