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Alevi Spatial Politics: Placemaking and the Negotiation of Visibility Across Diaspora and Homeland

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Alevi spatial politics by analysing how space is produced, practised and negotiated across diaspora and homeland. Drawing on multi-sited ethnographic research conducted among British Alevis in London and in Alevi villages in the Afşin–Elbistan region of Turkey, it focuses on *cemevis* (*cem* houses) as key sites of religious placemaking. Rather than treating *cemevis* as fixed religious institutions or understanding spatial change as a linear outcome of migration, the article approaches them as contested and transnationally constituted spaces through which Alevi identity is publicly articulated and reworked. The London Cemevi serves as the primary empirical anchor, enabling an in-depth examination of how diasporic Alevis negotiate visibility, legitimacy and authority through religious placemaking. The discussion then extends to migrant-funded village *cemevis* in the homeland, examining them as a transnational rescaling of these spatial dynamics. By tracing practices, resources and ideas across borders, the article highlights the bidirectional circulation through which diaspora and homeland continually shape one another. The article argues that Alevi spatial politics operates through the production of visibility via *cemevis*, which function as transnationally constituted and internally contested spaces. Across diaspora and homeland, *cemevis* mediate struggles over recognition and authority, revealing visibility as an ongoing political process shaped by historical trajectories and contemporary transnational engagements. By foregrounding negotiation, contestation and circulation, the article offers a relational account of how space becomes politically consequential for a historically marginalised religious community.

1 | Introduction

Alevi religious life in rural settings developed around ritual practice, social relations and sacred natural sites rather than publicly recognised places of worship. For much of their history, Alevis have maintained this religious and communal life under conditions of marginalisation, violence and enforced invisibility. These conditions have shaped not only Alevi identity politics but also the ways in which Alevis relate to space. The absence of purpose-built religious institutions was therefore not merely theological but deeply political, reflecting the long-standing and conflicted relationship between Alevis, the state and dominant religious frameworks.

From the late twentieth century onwards, this spatial configuration began to shift. Urban migration, political activism and

migration to Europe altered the organisational and social landscape of Alevi life, creating new forms of visibility and collective expression. The 1990s constituted a particularly significant period, as Alevi organisations expanded and demands for equal rights were more publicly articulated, especially following the 1993 Sivas massacre. Together, these developments reconfigured how Alevis relate to public space in both Turkey and Europe.

Migration to Europe played a significant role in this transformation. In Western liberal contexts, Alevis encountered new legal, political and spatial frameworks that enabled different forms of public presence. *Cemevis* became key arenas through which Alevis articulated claims to identity, legitimacy and recognition. Yet their emergence did not simply resolve questions of visibility; rather, it generated new negotiations over authority, representation and religious interpretation.

This article approaches these processes through the lens of spatial politics, focusing on *cemevis* as key sites through which Alevi spatial politics unfold across borders. It understands *cemevis* as spaces in which symbolic meanings, socio–religious relations and political claims are produced and contested. From this perspective, placemaking is a collective and conflictual process, shaped by internal diversity as well as by interactions with state institutions, local authorities and wider publics. As such, it represents a political space that can generate recognition and legitimacy, as well as tension and conflict.

Cemevis are examined as dynamic sites where visibility is produced and negotiated. They are approached as multifunctional and contested spaces that combine ritual, social, cultural and political practices. The analysis centres on the London Cemevi as the primary empirical anchor, demonstrating how diasporic Alevis negotiate visibility through placemaking practices. It then extends the discussion to migrant-funded *cemevis* in Alevi villages, examining how collective remittances, ritual practices and transnational circulation rescale these spatial negotiations across borders. By foregrounding circulation rather than one-directional influence, the article demonstrates how diaspora and homeland are mutually implicated in the production of Alevi space.

The article proceeds as follows. It begins by outlining the conceptual and historical framework necessary to understand Alevi spatial politics, situating contemporary placemaking practices within longer trajectories of marginalisation and public claims-making. It then briefly introduces the methodological approach and ethnographic sites. The core analysis is organised around two interconnected empirical sections. The first examines the London Cemevi, exploring how diasporic Alevis negotiate visibility, legitimacy and authority through spatial practices. The second extends the analysis to migrant-funded village *cemevis* in the homeland, examining how spatial politics is rescaled transnationally through collective remittances. Rather than presenting diaspora and homeland as separate cases, the article traces how spatial negotiations unfold across borders, revealing *cemevis* as transnationally constituted and internally contested sites through which Alevi visibility is continuously produced and reworked.

2 | Ethnographic Fieldwork and Methods

This study draws on multi-sited ethnographic research conducted in the UK and Turkey between September 2017 and January 2020. It focuses on the British Alevi community in London and in their villages in the Afşin–Elbistan region of Kahramanmaraş province in southeastern Turkey (Hanoğlu 2021). These sites were selected to examine how religion, identity and community are produced and transformed across different socio–spatial contexts shaped by migration and diaspora experience.

The fieldwork employed a range of qualitative methods, including participant observation, semi-structured interviews, focus groups and visual documentation. In total, 63 participants took part in the research, ranging in age from 18 to 84 and representing diverse educational and occupational backgrounds.

Participants were assured anonymity, and pseudonyms are used throughout the article. All photographs were taken by the author and depict places and collective scenes rather than identifiable individuals.

Fieldwork in the UK involved extensive participant observation at daily *cemevi* activities and large public events, such as *cem* gatherings, *aşure* days and funerals, where Alevi identity was prominently articulated. As a case study of diasporic Alevi placemaking, ethnographic research was conducted at the new London Cemevi over an 18-month period, beginning during the final stages of construction and continuing after its opening. Observations focused on spatial arrangements, material settings, interactions and organisational practices. The site was visited regularly, with particular attention paid to key moments such as organisational meetings, public events and ritual gatherings.

Fieldwork in Turkey was conducted in nine villages and one major town, selected on the basis of their significant emigrant populations and the presence of *cemevis* funded through migrant remittances. Methods included formal and informal interviews, as well as individual and group discussions. Three focus groups conducted with different participant clusters were particularly important for refining the research themes, especially in rural areas where geographical conditions often limit access and research opportunities.

3 | Conceptual and Historical Framework: Why Space Matters for Alevi Politics?

Alevis, Turkey's second-largest religious group, have a long history marked by discrimination and exclusion, which has deeply shaped their social, economic and political conditions. This enduring struggle, coupled with limited religious freedoms, contributed to large-scale migration to Europe beginning in the 1960s, particularly to Germany and later to the UK. Over time, diasporic Alevi communities have become politically active and economically engaged, creating organised spaces for religious practices and promoting public recognition of their beliefs.

Understanding Alevi spatial politics requires situating space within both the historical conditions under which Alevis have lived and the religious ontology that has shaped their practices. Alevism has historically privileged ritual practice, social relations and moral conduct over fixed places of worship. Religious life has been organised around the *cem* ritual and sustained through interpersonal networks, lineage-based authority and sacred natural sites rather than formally recognised religious institutions. This orientation has often been described through the notion of *lamekan*—a form of placelessness that emphasises spirituality over physical structures. It is captured in the expression that, for Alevis, 'everywhere between earth and sky' could be a place of worship (Hanoğlu 2023, 988).

However, Alevi placelessness was not solely a theological disposition; it was also a product of marginalisation. The absence of publicly recognised worship spaces was inseparable from longstanding patterns of discrimination, surveillance and violence, which rendered visibility a condition of vulnerability. For much

of their history, Alevis became publicly visible primarily during moments of persecution and episodic violence, reinforcing a cautious and ambivalent relationship to public space. Invisibility thus functioned as a strategy of survival as much as a reflection of religious worldview, constraining the materialisation—or spatialisation—of Alevism. It is this historical experience that underpins contemporary Alevi identity politics and the ongoing pursuit of visibility and recognition.

This spatial configuration began to change in the late twentieth century with processes of urbanisation, political mobilisation and international migration, which reconfigured Alevi communal life. The 1993 Sivas Massacre marked a pivotal moment in the consolidation of Alevi identity and mobilisation and had a profound impact on the social organisation of Alevi communities. It is widely regarded as a catalyst for the expansion of Alevi identity politics and institutionalisation, commonly associated with what has been described as the 'Alevi revival' (Van Bruinessen 1996; Yildiz and Verkuyten 2011; Sökefeld 2008). This transformation has been characterised as a shift in Alevi identity 'from repression to expression' (Göner 2005), which encouraged the growth of *cemevis* as spatial and symbolic markers of Alevi collective life (Olsson et al. 2005). The emergence and proliferation of *cemevis* must therefore be understood as part of a broader historical and political context.

Shaped in part by diasporic mobilisation, these debates increasingly acquired a spatial dimension, as claims to identity and recognition required concrete sites through which Alevis could gather and establish a visible presence. One of the most immediate pressures driving this spatial institutionalisation concerned funerary practice. Zirh highlights the critical role of funerals in this process, showing how they transformed Alevism 'from a locally invisible tradition to a transnationally visible belief community' (2012, 1772). The need for dedicated spaces to conduct customary funerals constituted a central motivation for the establishment of *cemevis* through grassroots fundraising across Europe, thereby enhancing both visibility and mobilisation.

In the diaspora, Alevism has become increasingly institutionalised and spatialised through *cemevis*, which play a vital role in the social and religious organisation of Alevi communities (Hanoğlu 2023, 2024a, 2025). This enhanced visibility has led to varying degrees of official recognition across European countries, where Alevism is now included in educational curricula, such as in the UK, Germany and Austria. In Turkey, however, Alevis continue to struggle for formal recognition of *cemevis* as legitimate places of worship, reflecting broader demands for religious freedom and equal citizenship.

To analyse these developments, this article draws on scholarship on religious placemaking and spatial politics, which conceptualises space as a socially produced and politically charged arena rather than a neutral backdrop. Placemaking is understood as a collective process through which meanings, identities and claims are materialised in space, often through negotiation and contestation. Religious placemaking, particularly in secular diaspora settings, involves diverse actors and forms of agency and unfolds through interactions with state institutions, local authorities and wider publics. Such practices reveal the performative dimensions of diasporic religion, linking public and private,

religious and secular and embedding them within spatial politics of recognition (Vásquez and Knott 2014; Garbin 2014). Religious placemaking, in this sense, involves power negotiations both within the community and with local actors, other migrant groups and secular authorities (Garbin 2012). Visibility is thus not simply about being seen, but about the conditions under which presence becomes legitimate and recognisable.

Within Alevi studies, debates over the religious status of *cemevis* have long reflected these tensions, with scholars variously describing them as sacred, semi-sacred or multifunctional spaces, while emphasising their profound symbolic and ritual significance (Kehl-Bodrogi 2000; Salman 2015; Dressler 2006; Hanoğlu 2024b, 2023; Sökefeld 2008; Olsson et al. 2005). The multiple meanings and practices embedded in *cemevis* have sustained these debates. This article does not seek to redefine the religious status of *cemevis*; rather, it approaches them analytically as spaces where sacrality, public representation and community governance intersect. As Kong and Woods (2016, 117) suggest, such quasi-religious and quasi-secular spaces blur distinctions between the sacred and the secular and are often 'replete with politics and conflated ambition.' These debates highlight the ways religious, social and political practices are spatially entangled within *cemevis*. Their multifunctionality—hosting ritual practices alongside educational, cultural and social activities—does not diminish sacrality; instead, it reflects the integrative nature of Alevi communal life, in which ritual, sociality and governance are deeply intertwined.

A transnational perspective is essential to this analysis. Migration has played a central role in institutionalising Alevism and expanding its public visibility across both diaspora and homeland (Hanoğlu 2024b, 2025). However, framing transnational influence as a one-directional process—flowing from diaspora to homeland or vice versa—oversimplifies a more complex dynamic. Practices, aesthetics and organisational models circulate in multiple directions, shaped by developments in urban Turkey as well as by diasporic experiences in Europe. Diaspora *cemevis* are informed by debates and transformations in Turkey, just as migrant-funded village *cemevis* reflect diasporic priorities, resources and imaginaries. Spatial politics thus unfolds through circulation rather than export.

Bringing these strands together, the article conceptualises Alevi spatial politics as a historically grounded and transnationally constituted process in which visibility is continuously negotiated through space. *Cemevis* emerge not as fixed endpoints of religious development but as dynamic sites where competing understandings of Alevism, belonging and legitimacy are made visible, challenged and reworked. This framework provides the conceptual grounding for this ethnographic analysis, beginning with the London Cemevi as the primary site through which these negotiations can be examined in depth.

4 | The London Cemevi: Placemaking, Visibility and Diasporic Negotiations

The London Cemevi provides a key site through which to examine how Alevi spatial politics unfolds in the diaspora. More than a religious building, it constitutes a spatial claim

to visibility, legitimacy and public recognition within a multicultural diaspora context. Its emergence reflects both the opportunities and tensions that accompany diasporic place-making, demonstrating how visibility is actively negotiated through space rather than simply achieved through institutionalisation.

5 | *Cemevi* as a Spatial Claim to Public Visibility

Established in Dalston in 1993, the England Alevi Cultural Centre and Cemevi (EACC), commonly referred to as the London Cemevi, operated for many years within a modest, semi-private setting that offered limited spatial capacity and public presence. As the British Alevi community grew and became more politically organised, the inadequacy of this space became increasingly apparent. The decision to construct a new, purpose-built *cemevi* in Wood Green marked a decisive shift from accommodation to assertion: from adapting existing spaces to producing a visible and recognisable Alevi presence within the diaspora landscape.

The new London Cemevi, completed in 2018, occupies a prominent location in the borough of Haringey—an area with a significant Alevi population and dense migrant infrastructure. The neighbourhood hosts numerous Alevi-owned shops and businesses—and in 2016 the local council elected its first Alevi mayor alongside three Alevi councillors. The scale,

FIGURE 1 | The new London Cemevi in Wood Green.

architectural form and multifunctional facilities of the new building constitute a spatial claim to public legitimacy and visibility. The three-storey complex includes a dedicated *cem* hall, a multifunctional hall, educational spaces, a mortuary, a library, a café, meeting rooms, offices, social areas, a car park and more (see Figures 1 and 2). These facilities allow the *cemevi* to function simultaneously as a religious, cultural and communal centre.

The complex caters to a wide range of community needs, particularly funerals and associated rituals, *cem* gatherings and educational activities for young Alevis, including GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) support and cultural and religious training. The quality and scale of these facilities far exceed those of the former Dalston location, reflecting both the growth of the community and its aspirations. This multifunctionality is not incidental but central to the *cemevi*'s political significance: it enables the Alevi community to present itself as an organised, legitimate and socially embedded religious group.

The opening ceremony, attended by local councillors, the Mayor of Haringey, Members of Parliament and representatives from multiple political parties, exemplified how spatial presence facilitates political engagement. Through the *cemevi*, Alevis positioned themselves as a recognisable constituency within local governance structures, forging relationships with municipal authorities and political actors. Visibility here is not merely symbolic; it functions as a spatial strategy that enables claims to recognition and participation in the public sphere. As one Alevi councillor (43, female) explained:

> Cemevi has a good reputation in the Haringey area. The new *cemevi* played a major role in the acceptance of Alevism as a faith. Because when you go there, it is a place of belief in terms of its aesthetics. Having such a place actually creates something nice. It is a really beautiful and big place. People also know that all Alevis do their funeral and 40 meals there. In other words, the authorities have accepted that it is an important asset for the community. Also, they have had very positive relationships until now. It

(a)   (b)

FIGURE 2 | (a, b) Exterior and courtyard views of the London Cemevi, Wood Green. The expansive, purpose-built complex, organised around a central courtyard, reflects the scale, permanence and multifunctional character of the institution.

FIGURE 3 | (a, b) Thematic materials transported from Turkey and prepared for installation at the London Cemevi, reflecting the transnational movement of ritual symbolism and aesthetic forms.

> is a big place having rooms made to book for some events when needed. For example, the regional Labour Party London Conference was at the *cemevi*, in the newly built community house. With such things, it became known more. The old *cemevi* were like a teahouse, with a small kitchen and ordinary tables. But this place literally represents a faith community visually.
>
> (24 May 2019, Tottenham)

These remarks underscore the markedly different public presence of the new London Cemevi compared to the smaller facility in Dalston. Its extensive purpose-built infrastructure, combined with carefully curated thematic and aesthetic design, strengthens the community's visibility and contributes to its perceived legitimacy within the local public sphere.

This aesthetic vision is further reflected in the decorative materials displayed throughout the London Cemevi. The materials and design elements that establish the thematic atmosphere were largely produced in Turkey and transported to the UK, pointing to transnational networks of production and meaning. During my visit in November 2017, a range of religious items—mostly figures, images, poems and quotations—were newly arrived from Turkey (see Figure 3a,b). Many of these symbols, poems and quotations were designed in the UK and produced in Turkey. This pattern applied to most elements of the décor, from marble installations to carpets. Featuring traditional Anatolian patterns, carpets and cushions were handmade in Turkey using natural dyes (see Figure 4). The circulation of these materials reflects both religious and commercial ties to the homeland and exemplifies what Johnson (2007, 45) terms the 'commerce of memory-making,' whereby economic exchanges reinforce homeland connections by marketing notions of authenticity to the diaspora.

The visibility of the London Cemevi extends beyond its material form, operating through transnational Alevi networks. The opening ceremony, for instance, brought together *pirs/dedes* and representatives from Alevi federations in Germany, Belgium, Austria and Turkey, alongside Members of Parliament from Turkey's main opposition parties (HDP and CHP) and a large UK-based audience. The new *cemevi* thus functions as a

FIGURE 4 | The *cem* hall, arranged in a circular layout that centres on ritual gathering. Handmade carpets from Turkey, perimeter seating, calligraphic panels, figurative imagery and a geometric ceiling design collectively frame the sacralised space.

transnational hub through which visibility and legitimacy are articulated not only locally but across Alevi networks in Europe and the homeland.

6 | Religious Materiality, Aesthetics and the Politics of Representation

Cemevi literally means '*cem* house,' but in practice, *cemevis* encompass far more than a space for *cem* gatherings alone. Within the London Cemevi, the *cem* hall remains the only explicitly sacralised space among a range of predominantly non-ritual facilities. The removal of shoes upon entry marks a clear boundary between this space and the rest of the building.

The politics of visibility embedded in the London Cemevi is articulated not only through its location and scale but also through its material and aesthetic choices. The interior design of the building, particularly of the *cem* hall, reflects a carefully curated vision of Alevism. The *cem* hall combines modern architectural techniques with symbolic references central to Alevi belief. These choices reflect the materialisation of religion, through which belief is rendered visible and legible in architecture, iconography and spatial layout.

The interior design brings modern technology into dialogue with symbolic representation. An extensive air-conditioning system circulates air through concealed channels behind the ceiling, which consists of 12 large platforms symbolising *Oniki İmamlar* (the Twelve Imams), a core reference in Alevism (see Figure 4). The dodecagonal ceiling structure, surrounded by platforms extending outwards from the centre, forms the primary visual focus of the *cem* hall and was described by those involved in the project as the most architecturally demanding element of the design and construction.

This ceiling design is mirrored in the 12-sided marble platform on the floor, which is used for *semah* performances (see Figure 4). The platform is composed of large marble pieces transported from Turkey. Its design is inspired by the *teslim taşı* ('stone of devotion'), a 12-cornered stone symbolising commitment to Alevism. Adjacent to the marble platform is a wooden seating area for religious leaders who guide the *cem* rituals. Together, these elements form what the interior designer referred to as the *sahne* (stage).

The aesthetic prominence of the *semah* platform as a stage is closely linked to broader ritual transformations characterised by folklorisation and standardisation, alongside the increasing performance of *semah* in non-ritual contexts as a public expression of identity and visibility (Sökefeld 2004; Erol 2010; Hanoğlu 2023). In this sense, the spatial design of the *cem* hall both reflects and reinforces changing modes of ritual practice.

At the same time, the selective representation of religious figures within the *cem* hall signals a conscious positioning within internal Alevi debates. This is evident in the carefully curated iconography—paintings, symbols and texts—designed to articulate a particular vision of Alevism. One example is the depiction of Ali, the central holy figure in Alevism, shown only through his face, encircled by a disc of light against a blue background on a wrought-iron panel (see Figures 4 and 5). This depiction departs from more conventional pictorial forms, which typically represent Ali as a full-bodied figure—often seated with his sword or positioned among the Twelve Imams—and echo visual conventions commonly associated with Islamic (particularly Shia) iconography.

FIGURE 5 | The *cem* hall during a *cem* ritual, where participants gather in circular formation, enacting the collective and relational structure of Alevi worship.

While Ali and the Twelve Imams remain central to the symbolic architecture of the *cem* hall—most notably through the 12-sided ceiling and the *semah* stage—their visual representation departs from conventional iconography. Rather than full pictorial depictions of the Twelve Imams or a complete bodily representation of Ali, their presence is selectively articulated through abstraction and architectural symbolism. According to those responsible for the thematic design, this approach reflects a deliberate distancing from pious iconographic forms closely associated with Islamic visual traditions. Instead, greater prominence is afforded to Hacı Bektaş Veli, a central figure in Anatolian Alevism and other dervishes, whose representation is understood as embodying a more inclusive vision of Alevism.

Materiality here operates as a political language through which particular interpretations of Alevism are privileged. As Johnson (2007) suggests, attachment to new places in diaspora entails religious materiality and practices to be visualised and presented in new ways. Rather than simply reproducing inherited traditions, the iconography of the London Cemevi articulates a contemporary, inclusive and publicly legible vision of Alevi identity. This symbolic emphasis highlights shared reverence for historical figures across diverse Alevi communities and may be understood as a gesture towards perceived roots that fosters unity within Alevi diversity. The coming together of different ethnic and regional groups within the community encourages religious associations to articulate commonalities in belief and practice in order to consolidate collective belonging (Yang and Ebaugh 2001).

As Johnson (2007) argues, diasporic religions function as 'memory performances,' sustaining continuity through a 'conscious recollection' that reworks the past within the present. This process generates a 'retroactive force' that anchors contemporary practices in selectively remembered histories. In this sense, the past becomes a social construction, reframed through the lens of contemporary diasporic realities and needs. This re-materialisation does not neutralise religious meaning; rather, it reconfigures it within a diasporic context where ritual practice, collective memory and political representation intersect.

7 | Internal Politics of Alevi Place: Cohesion and Conflict

The long and challenging construction process of the London Cemevi was marked by extensive collective effort and cooperation within the Alevi community. The England Alevi Cultural Centre and Cemevi (EACC), which oversaw the project, raised over £1.5 million through donations from community members and sponsorships from Alevi businesspeople, completing construction in 2018. This achievement illustrates a strong sense of shared responsibility in creating a communal space. The mobilisation required to realise the project—through financial contributions, voluntary labour and sustained commitment—demonstrates the community's capacity for cohesion. For many first-generation migrants, the *cemevi* symbolised a means of safeguarding Alevi identity for future generations, particularly in a diasporic context where religious transmission was

perceived as fragile. These aspirations invested the building with emotional and symbolic significance that extended beyond its physical form.

The construction project involved several key individuals, including the architect (42, male), who worked as a full-time volunteer and the construction manager (47, male), both of whom assumed primary responsibility for the project. Like many others, they emphasised their motivation to preserve Alevi—and often explicitly Kurdish—identity for future generations. They highlighted the importance of the *cemevi* as a space for transmitting Alevi identity and tradition, particularly to children growing up in the diaspora. As the construction manager explained:

> Such buildings make up our future. It is not just a building; it is our future. [...] There are no places where our people can take their children. Children born here are asking: 'What are we' or 'Who are we.' Some say I am Christian; some say I am Muslim; but what do we say? They cannot express themselves properly. That is why such places are very beneficial to them. Plus, Alevism is not something that comes with a written history but a lifestyle that comes with a tradition. If these places do not exist who will tell our children about this in the future?

Temporality—rooted in both past and future—emerges as crucial to the construction of identity and community in the diaspora. Concerns about whether younger generations would maintain their Alevi identity surfaced repeatedly among first-generation migrants. This anxiety reflects broader challenges faced by diasporic communities, particularly those historically marginalised and forced to conceal their identities. Alevi families in the diaspora, committed to transmitting their traditions, view the *cemevi* as a space that helps younger generations navigate questions of identity and belonging, offering a tangible connection to their heritage. The collective mobilisation to construct the *cemevi* thus became an expression of diasporic solidarity and an effort to secure cultural and religious continuity across generations. Religious placemaking, in this sense, functions as a bridge between past and future, creating a space in which Alevi identity and tradition can be sustained and transmitted. Echoing Tweed's (2006) concepts of 'dwelling' and 'homemaking', the *cemevi* emerges as a space of belonging that conveys collective memory and tradition while fostering a sense of rootedness in diaspora. Attachment to the *cemevi* not only consolidates religious identity but also enhances engagement in the public sphere, generating opportunities for collective action and community development.

However, while the London Cemevi stands as a powerful symbol of collective achievement, its construction and governance also reveal the tensions inherent in diasporic placemaking. Like many diasporic communities characterised by overlapping and sometimes conflicting relationships (Werbner 2002; Pasura 2014), the British Alevi community exhibits significant internal diversity shaped by political, ethnic and regional differences. These dynamics complicate collective placemaking efforts.

The prolonged construction period was marked by internal disputes, including legal conflicts between rival boards over administrative control. These legal proceedings lasted for 3 years and culminated in a court-mandated election of a new board under the supervision of the Charity Commission. The disputes significantly delayed construction, consumed a substantial portion of the financial resources initially raised for the project and exposed deep-seated ideological and political divisions within the community. Disagreements over governance reflect broader debates within Alevi institutions worldwide, particularly concerning the relationship between Alevism and Islam, Turkishness and Kurdishness and engagement with the Turkish state. The *cemevi* thus operates as a contested space in which competing visions of Alevism are negotiated and enacted.

In response to these tensions, some community members who lost administrative control established the first regional and kinship-based hometown associations. Today, approximately 20 such associations represent the areas from which the majority of British Alevis originate. Internal tensions continue to surface during board elections and meetings, where competition and lobbying are common. Speeches at these gatherings frequently include calls for constructive rather than destructive criticism, signalling an awareness of ongoing disputes within the community.

The story of the London Cemevi illustrates the community's capacity for both unity and conflict. The *cemevi* stands simultaneously as a product of collective effort and as a symbol of the complex dynamics of diasporic life, where unity and division coexist. This underscores how space is produced through ongoing negotiations that can both consolidate and fracture community relations. The *cemevi* thus functions at once as a space of belonging, contestation and political articulation, testifying to the diversity and dynamism of the community.

Taken together, the spatial politics enacted through the London Cemevi do not remain confined to the diaspora. Rather, they extend across borders through ongoing material, symbolic and organisational engagements with places of origin. These transnational connections are most visibly expressed in migrant-funded *cemevis* in Alevi villages, which rescale negotiations over visibility, legitimacy and belonging from the urban diaspora into the rural homeland. Village *cemevis* thus represent an extension of these spatial politics, reworked through local histories, power relations and transnational engagements.

8 | Village Cemevis and the Rescaling of Spatial Politics

Migrant-funded *cemevis* in Alevi villages have been conceptualised as '*remittance cemevis*' (Hanoğlu 2024b), referring to spaces that translate collective remittances into built form and operate as transnational nodes. Building on this concept, this article shows how these *cemevis* rescale Alevi spatial politics

across diaspora and homeland. Rather than merely reflecting economic investment, they materialise transnational forms of belonging, visibility and ritual continuity.

9 | Collective Remittances as Spatial–Political Practice

Alevi villages are typically located in mountainous regions; however, visitors to these remote areas are often struck by the noticeable presence of migrant-built houses, many of which are comparatively large and ostentatious. In villages with high levels of emigration, most houses have been rebuilt by migrants. The majority of remittances are invested in the construction, improvement and maintenance of homes, benefiting the local construction sector, suppliers and craftsmen and contributing significantly to the local economy. At the same time, in these villages that are heavily reliant on migrant remittances, agricultural activity has declined sharply, especially in comparison to Sunni villages, which experience far lower rates of emigration. Whether this decline is linked in part to the gendered organisation of agricultural labour (Gardner and Osella 2003) or to broader socio–economic transformations associated with migration, traditional rural activities such as farming have become increasingly devalued.

The Alevi villages in the study area (in Turkey) are largely empty during the winter, with only a few, mostly elderly, residents remaining. An account from a permanent resident of Kötüre (56, female) illustrates this vividly. One winter, following a power outage, technicians arrived to restore electricity and knocked on doors to check whether supply had returned. Finding no one in houses, one of the electricians remarked in surprise upon reaching her house: 'We had given up hope of finding anyone in this village. Where are all these people? This is a ghost village.' This desolation, however, is reversed during the summer, when migrants return for holidays and family visits. A social gathering I observed in Köseyahya village in August 2018—attended mostly by people from London, alongside a smaller number from Edinburgh and İzmir—captured this seasonal transformation. Almost every household in Köseyahya has at least one member living in the UK, and the village depends heavily on remittances. This informal gathering preceded the annual summer festival, which attracted hundreds of participants and filled the village with European-registered cars.

Migrant remittances have long played a central role in reshaping rural landscapes. In Alevi villages with high emigration rates, individual remittances are most visibly invested in housing, while collective remittances are directed primarily towards the construction of *cemevis* and only to a lesser extent towards other forms of infrastructure.[1] Although migrant-funded communal spaces are not unique to Alevi communities, the construction of *cemevis* carries a distinct political significance rooted in Alevi historical experiences of invisibility and exclusion.

Research suggests that migrants often collaborate with state authorities to fund development projects in their places of origin (Lopez 2015). This pattern, however, rarely applies to Alevis, particularly Kurdish Alevis, who constitute the majority among British Alevis. The historically contentious relationship between Kurdish Alevis and the Turkish state frequently constrains such partnerships. As de Haas (2005) notes, a lack of trust in state institutions can act as a barrier to remittance transfers, discouraging migrants from engaging in collective social, political or financial investments and reducing their motivation to return or sustain transnational circulation. Based on my observations, Kurdish Alevi investments in their villages are typically limited to building houses, renovating ancestral graves and contributing to *cemevi* construction. Beyond these domains, collective initiatives rarely progress further.

For migrant Alevis, contributing financially to the construction of a village *cemevi* constitutes a spatial claim, rendering Alevi presence publicly legible in contexts where religious identity has long been marginalised or suppressed. The collective effort to build *cemevis* thus carries both religious and political significance and reflects a deep 'spirit of solidarity' (Garbin 2019), rooted in historical experiences of persecution. Initially concentrated in urban settings, the expansion of *cemevis* into Alevi villages marks a further phase in this ongoing struggle for visibility and recognition in Turkey. In doing so, village *cemevis* enable the performance of rituals previously confined to private or improvised spaces and provide infrastructure for funerals, commemorations and collective gatherings. For the first time, the Alevi identity of village populations is visibly and explicitly inscribed in the built environment, transforming what was once hidden into a material presence. These spaces thus emerge as powerful symbols of Alevi resilience and solidarity, reinforcing belonging to both faith and place of origin while uniting communities across transnational boundaries.

Collective projects to build *cemevis* also extend beyond villages to other politically significant sites. A prominent example is the construction of the Erenler Cemevi in Yörükselim, the neighbourhood that was the primary site of the 1978 Maraş massacre. This initiative emerged through transnational collaboration among Alevi associations in the UK, Germany and Turkey and was led by the UK-based community. In parallel, British Alevi organisations also initiated commemorations of the massacre in Yörükselim, despite such events having previously been banned in Turkey. These efforts subsequently encouraged commemorative practices across Turkey and Europe. This case illustrates what Garbin (2014) describes as practices of religious territorialisation linked to diasporic politics, revealing how transnational engagements actively reconfigure political space across homeland and diaspora.

By extending spatial politics into the rural homeland, migrant-funded *cemevis* demonstrate how visibility is reworked across scales and settings. They demonstrate that the politics of space initiated in the diaspora not only transforms into institutional consolidation but also continues through ongoing negotiation, circulation and adaptation.

10 | *Cemevis* and Transnational Circulation

Building a *cemevi* in their village is highly valued among British Alevis, with many research participants expressing pride in their financial contributions to such projects. The primary motivation behind these investments is to facilitate funerals, as

deceased community members are often returned to their birthplace for burial. Kong (2012, 416) highlights the symbolic and religious significance of burial in the birthplace, describing it as 'focal points of identity and expressions of relationships with the land'. *Cemevis* play a key role in coordinating the repatriation of the deceased from the diaspora to their villages and in enabling funerals to be conducted in accordance with Alevi beliefs and ritual traditions. This final journey of repatriation, culminating in burial in the village cemetery, is described by Zirh (2012, 1758) as 'a ritualised and spatial practice of (transnational) community-making beyond national categories and cartographies'. The coordination between the 'sending' *cemevi* in the diaspora and the 'receiving' *cemevi* in the village exemplifies a vital transnational practice through which homeland–diaspora ties are sustained. Visibility here is enacted not only through buildings but also through the spatial choreography of death, burial and remembrance, sustaining ritual continuity across borders.

As noted earlier, Alevi villages with high emigration rates—largely deserted during winter—are reanimated during the summer months when migrants return. Funded and maintained through remittances, village *cemevis*, typically quiet for much of the year, also become active during this period and become active sites of ritual and social life, as *cem* gatherings, festivals and collective events take place only when sufficient numbers are present. This seasonal pattern reveals how migration reshapes not only rural space but also the temporal rhythms of community life, transforming villages into transnational sites that are periodically reassembled through return visits and ritual gatherings. Through these spaces, migrants not only contribute to the consolidation of a transnational community but also actively reshape the social, spatial and cultural landscapes of rural Alevi areas in Turkey. They facilitate interaction between local and diasporic populations and enable the circulation of ideas, practices and expectations.

While sustaining ties to cultural heritage, village *cemevis* also represent the evolving needs of migrants. They differ from diaspora *cemevis*, reflecting the specific practices and seasonal rhythms of village life, co-produced jointly by resident and migrant villagers. In addition to *cem* rituals, funerals and *kırk* (40) meals, village *cemevis* also host weddings—a practice generally absent from diaspora *cemevis* such as the London Cemevi, where it is often contested. The limited time migrants spend in their villages appears to encourage the incorporation of features associated with communal spaces in diaspora, emphasising practicality and multifunctionality. These differences underscore the diverse roles *cemevis* play within Alevi communities, shaped by their respective social and spatial contexts.

While diaspora resources and organisational models undoubtedly shape village *cemevis*, developments in urban Turkey and long-standing local traditions also inform diasporic expectations. Approaching village *cemevis* through the lens of circulation rather than export enables a more nuanced understanding of transnational Alevi spatial politics. Practices, aesthetics and organisational forms do not simply move from diaspora to homeland; they circulate between sites, mediated by actors positioned across different locations. In this sense, migrants' visions of what a *cemevi* should look like, how it should function and who should govern it are shaped by experiences across multiple sites.

These circulatory dynamics are further reinforced through the transformation of village space. In villages and nearby town centres, large, modern migrant houses stand alongside older structures, signalling transnational mobility and economic distinction. These new houses, renovated communal areas and *cemevis* together represent what may be described as diasporic spatial markers, producing a landscape in which migration becomes materially present even in the absence of migrants themselves. Such remittance-funded developments generate broader effects that shape how space, mobility and the future are imagined by those who remain in the homeland. In doing so, they embed village life within wider transnational networks while reshaping the social and cultural fabric of rural Alevi landscapes in Turkey.

For younger Alevis who have not migrated, this remittance landscape plays a significant role in shaping aspirations and imaginaries of the future. During interviews and focus group discussions, young participants frequently referred to migrant-built houses, summer return visits and *cemevi*-based gatherings as evidence of alternative life trajectories beyond the village or region. The visibility of migration—materialised in buildings, consumption patterns and seasonal social life—contributes to what may be described as a transnational horizon of expectation, within which the diaspora emerges as a tangible and desirable point of reference. Village *cemevis* serve as key sites where non-migrants encounter diasporic practices, narratives and values. Through funerals, commemorations and collective gatherings, these spaces bring together migrants and non-migrants, temporarily reassembling dispersed communities. In such moments, the *cemevi* functions as a node of encounter where transnational belonging is enacted and made visible, reinforcing perceptions of the diaspora as both accessible and authoritative.

Youth narratives frequently linked desires to migrate to experiences of inequality and exclusion in the homeland. Rather than treating these accounts as general expressions of youth dissatisfaction, this article situates them within the specific spatial regimes produced by migration. The contrast between stagnant local infrastructures and the visible presence of transnational wealth and mobility intensifies perceptions of constrained futures at home. In this sense, aspirations to migrate can be understood as effects of transnational circulation rather than as independent social phenomena. Remittance houses and *cemevis* together produce a landscape in which mobility is normalised, success is spatially displayed, and belonging is increasingly oriented beyond the national frame. These spatial dynamics shape how possibilities are perceived, evaluated and pursued.

11 | Conclusion: Rethinking Alevi Spatial Politics Across Borders

This article has examined how Alevi spatial politics operates through the negotiated production of visibility across diaspora and homeland. By focusing on *cemevis* as central sites of place-making, it has shown that spatial politics is not a linear outcome of migration or institutionalisation, but an ongoing political process shaped by historical trajectories, internal diversity and transnational circulation. Rather than treating space as a neutral backdrop, the analysis has approached it as a field in which

claims to legitimacy, authority and belonging are articulated, contested and reworked.

The London Cemevi illustrates how these dynamics unfold in a diasporic context. As a purpose-built, multifunctional institution, it constitutes a strategic spatial claim to visibility and legitimacy within the public sphere of the diaspora. Its location, scale and engagement with local political actors demonstrate how space facilitates legitimacy, recognition and participation. At the same time, the material and aesthetic articulation of the *cem* hall reveals how religious meaning, collective memory and political representation are spatially negotiated. In this sense, it represents a reimagined form of *cemevi*, reflecting processes of re-materialisation and re-memorialisation through which Alevism is rearticulated beyond its conventional frames.

Crucially, the internal disputes surrounding the governance of the London Cemevi underscore that visibility is not inherently cohesive. Control over space entails control over representation, and placemaking becomes a site where competing visions of Alevism, community and authority are enacted. While the community can mobilise remarkable unity around common causes, it simultaneously generates tensions shaped by conflict, negotiation and power struggles. These dynamics highlight that spatial visibility can consolidate collective presence while also intensifying internal contestation.

Extending the analysis beyond the diaspora, the article has shown that these spatial politics are rescaled through transnational engagements with the homeland. Migrant-funded village *cemevis* do not constitute a separate or derivative phenomenon; rather, they represent an extension of the same negotiations over space and visibility. Shaped by both diasporic priorities and local histories, village *cemevis* foreground the bidirectional nature of transnational influence and demonstrate how spatial politics unfold across interconnected sites.

The impact of migration on the social and cultural fabric of Alevi villages in Turkey is complex and operates through multiple channels, evident in both material transformations and shifting social relations. Remittance-funded houses, village *cemevis* and seasonal return visits contribute to the transnationalisation of rural life, reconfiguring landscapes, temporal rhythms and social expectations. Youth aspirations further illuminate how these transnational spatial regimes make mobility visible, desirable and materially grounded.

Approaching these dynamics through the lens of circulation rather than export allows for a more nuanced understanding of transnational Alevi life. Practices, aesthetics and organisational models move back and forth across borders, mediated by actors positioned in multiple locations. Village *cemevis* are therefore neither replicas of diasporic institutions nor static embodiments of tradition. They are dynamic sites where transnational engagements are localised, negotiated and continuously reconfigured across different scales and temporalities.

Taken together, this article demonstrates how historically marginalised communities use space not only to assert presence, but also to negotiate the terms under which they become visible, recognised and politically meaningful across borders. By centring

spatial politics, the article contributes to scholarship on Alevi transnationalism and religious placemaking, while also speaking more broadly to studies of migration, diaspora, religion and space. The analysis advances four key pillars. First, it reframes Alevi visibility as a negotiated and contested spatial process rather than a straightforward outcome of migration or institutional recognition. Second, it conceptualises *cemevis* as transnationally constituted spaces where sacrality, politics and power intersect. Third, it bridges debates on religious placemaking with internal and transnational community politics, showing how authority and representation are spatially enacted. Finally, it offers a relational account of diaspora–homeland connections that foregrounds circulation, negotiation and adaptation over linear models of influence.

Disclosure

The author has nothing to report.

Ethics Statement

The study obtained ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee (REC) of the School of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Research (SSPSSR) at the University of Kent.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Research data are not shared.

Endnotes

[1] For example, Kötüre, a village in Afşin with more than 2000 migrants residing in London, represents one such rare case. Through collective remittances, emigrant villagers have financed key infrastructure projects, including a sewerage system, bridges and an asphalt road, all without support from local municipalities. These initiatives have been coordinated by the *Kötüre Köyü Güzelleştirme ve Yardımlaşma Vakfı* (Beautification and Solidarity Foundation of Kötüre Village), an association established by UK-based villagers for this purpose.

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