

THE CIVILIZATIONS CHOIR OF ANTAKYA: The Politics of Religious Tolerance and Minority Representation at the National Margins of Turkey

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We are not “us and them.” We are “one,” on Earth and under the sun!

At the end of their *Biriz* (*We Are One*) concert, the performers assembled onstage to repeat the above verse in Turkish, Kurdish, and Laz. Organized in 2010 by the Turkish rock singer Demir Demirkan, this concert, which formed part of the events scheduled for the European Capital of Culture series in Istanbul, featured the Kurdish singer Aynur Doğan, the Laz folk singer Ayşenur Kolivar, the Eurovision-winning Turkish pop singer Sertab Erener, and the multireligious Civilizations Choir of Antakya. Before going onstage, Kolivar explained to the cameras the idea behind the event and the meaning of its concluding verse:

Nowadays, Turkey is going through a period where the importance of oneness [*birlik*] and togetherness [*beraberlik*] is being discussed in a new way. We have always said, “We are united” or “We need to be united,” but before, unity meant something different. It meant becoming the same. Today, however, we will be “one” onstage without denying our differences. We will listen to each other and sing in each other’s languages. We will give the message that if we can find union in our differences onstage, we can do so in our lives as well.

When members of the Civilizations Choir spoke, they used their religious denominations to reframe Kolivar's message of "unity in diversity." Introducing themselves in turn as "the priest of the Antakya Orthodox Church," "an Alawi sheikh," "a Jewish teacher," and "a Sunni imam," the choir members each emphasized the unity of the three Abrahamic religions under one God as the formula for peaceful coexistence. This, they declared, was something that people had achieved in the city of Antakya, the administrative capital of Turkey's border province Hatay, which was annexed from French-mandate Syria in 1939.¹ "We may not pray in the same way," one of them noted, "but we can sing together to show the rest of the world that Antakya upholds the culture of tolerance [*hoşgörü*] that it has adopted as a lifestyle and sustained for centuries."

Since its foundation in 2007, the Civilizations Choir has employed this religiously inspired language of tolerance to represent Antakya (and Turkey) as a "bridge between civilizations." In annual Hatay festivals across the country, it has staged Antakya's religious diversity as both an exemplar of harmonious coexistence and a foil to ethnoreligious tension. In the context of European cultural policy, Turkey's pending accession to the European Union (EU), and Turkey's role in the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC), this message quickly turned into one about the state of religious minorities in Turkey.² The choir gave concerts to UN ambassadors in New York City; U.S. officials in Washington, D.C.; and EU parliamentarians in Brussels. Its nomination for the 2012 Nobel Peace Prize attests to the global appeal of the choir's emphasis on togetherness under the monotheistic God of Abrahamic traditions.

My fieldwork in the Civilizations Choir's hometown, Antakya, however, has shown that this (inter)nationally endorsed narrative of "unity in diversity" (İğsız 2018, 171) is fraught with contradictions.³ The choir performances categorize minority religions as equally representable citizens of a global community of believers, while also subjecting them to the terms and conditions of representation under a Sunni-majority nation. In doing so, the choir produces contradictions as to what tolerance means for the political recognition, communal autonomy, and religious authority of its diverse constituents. This article examines how individual members of religious groups represented in the choir—Alawis, Jews, and Orthodox Christians—describe these contradictions on the basis of their distinct historical positions and unevenly situated identities vis-à-vis the country's Turkish Sunni majority. Such descriptions, I argue, reveal that the contradictions that characterize the representational practices of cultural citizenship derive from the

incommensurable conceptions of authority shaped by community-specific histories of subjection and intercommunal interaction.

Representation here refers both to re-presentation in the aesthetic portrayal of a form, conviction, or identity, and to representation as a matter of proxy, including the “representative” charged with the task of “speaking for” a particular community.⁴ Liberal politics conflates these two meanings while debating the public visibility of religious others in pluralistic societies. This is well illustrated by the controversy surrounding Muslim and Jewish markers of difference in Europe (Bowen 2010; Arkin 2013; Özyürek 2014) and in debates over the rights and recognition of groups labeled as minorities in postcolonial contexts (Chatterjee 1995; Eisenlohr 2007; Mahmood 2015).

Proponents of cultural citizenship view the public recognition of ethnolinguistic and religious signs of belonging as preventing social exclusion, which is frequently a by-product and limitation of legal approaches in pluralistic societies (Casanova 1994; Habermas 2004). Cultural citizenship here denotes a liberal vision of national membership that extends to citizens who hold a marginal position within society despite their legal status.⁵ The endorsement of recognition within the existing political structures of representation, however, often results in the reification, rather than the transcendence, of sociocultural differences (Povinelli 2002). Part of the problem resides in the majoritarian attributes of liberal democracies that maintain ethnoreligious definitions of national identity (Brown 2006; Mahmood 2015) and that remain premised on the perspective of those who have the power to offer or withhold representation to religious others (Bender and Klassen 2010). As “a dimension of multicultural governmentality and Western civilizational discourse” (Brown and Forst 2014, 18–20), religious toleration grants the tolerant the power to determine what or who is tolerable.

Yet what religious tolerance signifies and produces in a given context is not fixed in advance, and should be analyzed through the particular discourses and practices that create the conditions of its enactment. In contrast to its long history in Euro-Christian political theology, for instance, tolerance never emerged as a powerful political concept in the Ottoman Empire, with which it is often associated (Kymlicka 1996), and has only recently become one in Turkey. The contradictions that result from its invocation for religious minorities at Turkey’s national margins direct attention away from the limits and possibilities of tolerance as a prescriptive model and toward the historical shifts, ambiguous experiences, and political indeterminacies that its deployment contextually signifies. In examining these contradictions in the Civilizations Choir, the present article foregrounds

representational politics as one key site for the anthropological study of religious diversity, as well as for addressing broader problems of minority recognition inherent in liberal regimes of tolerance.

Recent anthropological work has already identified such politics in disputes within minor traditions regarding the re-presentation of their religious practice in public. Aramaean and Assyrian groups of the Syriac Orthodox Christian diaspora in the Netherlands, for example, practice discordant singing styles during liturgical performance that reflect tensions over where to situate the collective self within the secular legal distinction between religion and ethnicity (Bakker Kellogg 2015). For Sephardi Jews of Paris (Arkin 2013) and Istanbul (Brink-Danan 2012), representational politics materialize in debates concerning the public display of Jewish visual signs, and blur the boundary between religion, culture, and race. Compare also the case of Alevis in Turkey whose youth and senior leaders differ about the public performance of their *cem* ritual as “a type of national folklore rather than as a form of communal worship” (Tambar 2014, 82), often bringing the material-aesthetic history of the ritual to the political fore.⁶

With its focus on the entanglement of representation and re-presentation in a multireligious context of performance, this essay shifts attention from intra- to intercommunal dynamics of political aesthetics. In bringing together the signs, songs, and singers of distinct minor traditions through the joint performance of national interfaith unity, the Civilizations Choir throws into sharp relief incommensurabilities in the lived realities of what produces authority and who holds it in each religious tradition. The specific aesthetic forms that elicit religious authority for politically recognized minority groups in this context become the very ground for the exclusion of others who lack recognition. To understand how majoritarian positions set the terms of minority representation in multireligious settings, then, we must turn to the history of cultural power dynamics not only between states and religious minorities but also between communities differentiated on the basis of their religion and citizenship. This relational matrix of diversity and its governance ultimately invites a rethinking of representational politics of tolerance through the material effects of history, authority, and collective realities that such politics often obscure.

EZAN, ÇAN, HAZAN

During my visit to his office in March 2011, the vice governor of Hatay gave me a small painting of Antakya created by a local artist, with “Ezan, Çan, Hazan” handwritten at the bottom. This phrase was a term for the Muslim call to prayer,

Christian church bells, and Jewish chazzan, as well as the title of a 2004 state television documentary about the city. The image itself was a painted version of a well-known photograph taken from the courtyard of the city's Catholic church (figure 1). Although no synagogue can be seen from the courtyard, and the original photograph shows only the freestanding bell with a cross in the foreground and the minaret of a historic mosque in the background, the vice-governor justified the insertion of the synagogue into the picture, reminding me that it was only a short walking distance from where the photograph was taken. "The culture of tolerance in Antakya you see in this picture reflects Turkey's commitment to democracy," he explained. "We owe this culture to our Ottoman ancestors."



Figure 1. Ezan, Çan, Hazan. Photo on the left by Seçil Dağtaş.
Photo on the right by Pelin Emrahoğlu.

This was not the first time I had heard Antakya being called a "city of tolerance." Since the early days of my fieldwork, the designed illustrations of the entwined religious symbols have inundated the city in material forms, such as jewelry, souvenirs, state monuments, local artwork, and architectural ornaments. When asked to comment on them, local residents often assured me of the authenticity of such representations by referring to their neighbors, school friends, and business partners who belonged to different religious communities or (as did the vice-governor) to the physical proximity of Sunni mosques, Alawi tombs, and churches of various denominations.

Obscured in these depictions are the exceptional circumstances that have historically enabled Antakya to maintain an ethnoreligiously diverse demographic profile. Antakya was excluded from Turkey's national pact (1920) under the French mandate for Syria. Hence, the region's Arab and Armenian populations remained relatively protected from the national homogenization of the early Republican years. For instance, unlike the majority of the Greek Orthodox community who were compelled to leave Turkey through the population exchange between Turkey and Greece in 1923 (İğsız 2018), Antakya's Orthodox Christians remained in the region.⁷ Today, they constitute the largest officially recognized minority community, with a population of a few thousand in the city and seven thousand in the province.

With the annexation to Turkey as the province of Hatay (1939) began the gradual dispossession and outmigration of the region's religiously diverse populations through assimilationist language, education, and population policies, along with economic and property-ownership restrictions (Neyzi 2004; Shields 2011). In 2011 only about a dozen Arabic-speaking Jewish families still resided in Antakya, which led to difficulties in forming the quorum required for Sabbath services. Constituting over one-third of Antakya's population, Alawis have a stronger socio-economic presence in the province, yet they remain demographically insignificant within the country as a whole. Consequently, dominant frames of representation substitute for them either Sunni Muslims or "Anatolian" Alevis, other Twelver Shi'a sects associated with a Bektāşi-Sufi lineage that have distinct ethnolinguistic and theological orientations.

Against this backdrop, the everyday life of religious plurality in Antakya moves among exclusivist claims, incommensurable differences, and shared practices. Most of my Alawi and Christian interlocutors express more affinity with each other than with Anatolian Alevis or Istanbulite Rums. Such expressions point to the traffic of objects, concepts, and practices among these communities, on both cultural and theological grounds. Alawis, for instance, honor Christian saints and celebrate many Christian festivals (Prager 2013; Kreinath 2014). Both Alawi and Christian women cook a wheat-and-meat stew made of the animal sacrificed in these festivals, but they differentiate their versions with spices. The established custom of tomb-shrine visitation in the region is associated mostly with Alawis, yet I joined my Christian interlocutors in similar healing and visitation practices in nearby villages. Because birth determines religious membership in each of the Alawi, Christian, and Jewish communities, interfaith marriages and conversion are

subject to strict communal regulation. When such events do occur, however, they rarely generate violence between families or communities.

Anthropologists have long used instances of religious fluidity to challenge the fragmentary models at the heart of colonial and national projects that position different religions as opposed to each other. While some have examined these instances in reference to the historical legacies of cohabitation (Bryant 2016), the “competitive sharing” of religious sites and objects (Hayden 2002), and agonistic modes of relatedness (Singh 2011), others have turned to the transnational movement of religious texts, discourses, and practices in relation to the processes of colonization, migration, and globalization (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991; Keane 2007). Public representations of religious diversity as indexing tolerance provide further insight into the sociopolitical conditions under which ethnoreligious boundaries maintain their significance. In the case of the Civilizations Choir, these representations explain how and why tolerance operates largely within the framework of nationalism rather than transcending its exclusionary cultural logic.⁸

Viewed from this angle, the choir’s representatives of minority religions also converge in their shared ambiguous position vis-à-vis the dominant understandings of nationhood in Turkey. Secularist Turks have historically affiliated Arabic-speaking populations near Turkey’s southern borders with “the Islamic Middle East” in their attempts to align the country with “modern and secular Europe” (Stokes 1998, 268). As “non-Sunnis,” these groups have also become the targets of Islamist attacks in moments of political instability, such as Cold War–era conflicts involving Turkey (a NATO member) and Syria (a Soviet ally). In recent years, sectarian (Alawi-Sunni) divisions have been exacerbated by the current government’s support for the Syrian opposition and the Sunni refugees fleeing the Assad regime (Can 2017, 184), despite the cross-communal bonds that have endured these divisions (Navaro 2017).

It was precisely this ambivalence between ethnic and religious difference that brought these populations to the center of public attention in the mid-2000s, with the liberalization of Turkish politics under the rule of the Justice and Development Party (AKP). Since its rise to power in 2002, the AKP has fostered an Islam-oriented neoliberal agenda and invoked the Ottoman past as an alternative to the homogenizing tendencies of the preceding secularist era. Expressed in Kolivar’s statement at the *Biriz* concert as a transformation from “sameness” to “difference,” this liberalization included a series of symbolic government gestures for the legal rights and political recognition of formerly excluded citizens.⁹ Introduced in response to pressure from different segments of civil society and under the scrutiny

of the EU and the European Court of Human Rights, these reforms have proven short-lived and failed to meet the targeted populations' expectations (Özgül 2014; Tambar 2016; Biner 2019). The contradictory effects of this process for religious minorities nevertheless reveal the ethnoreligious hierarchies rooted in the political structuration of liberal governance, underpinning what critics today perceive as the failures of democratization in Turkey.

Indeed, the limits of Turkey's liberalization became apparent long before the government's authoritarian turn (White 2012). Legal mechanisms of religious toleration have facilitated, rather than resolved, discrimination against religious minorities, as legal reforms have marked claimants for official self-representation as "more visible and hence more manageable subjects" (Özgül 2014, 630), while concealing the historical injustices they have endured. The antiterror laws for Alevis and Kurds have led to a radicalization of the youth (Yonucu 2018), as well as to problems of co-optation akin to those experienced by non-Muslims (Tambar 2014, 2016; Biner 2019). Tolerance, in short, has worked not as a political ideal but as a discursive tool to circumvent the socioeconomic and legal roots of minority subjection in the present (Kaya 2013).

My analysis builds on these works, especially in addressing how the incorporation of religious differences into public performances of cultural citizenship reproduces the nation-state's authority to define the proper limits of difference. As evident in the vice-governor's appeal to realness in relation to the "Ezan, Çan, Hazan" in the painting, such performances further expose the tenuous conditions of religious coexistence that require its legitimation through representation in the first place. By equating cultural performances of religious diversity with minority recognition, the Civilizations Choir helps identify these conditions of political violence outside the legal mechanisms of representation and shows their ability both to support and to undermine the normative claims of religious tolerance. This ability, as the ethnography will show, rests on the community-specific forms of religious practice and intercommunal dynamics structured by Ottoman and post-Ottoman regimes of governance.

THE CIVILIZATIONS CHOIR

The Civilizations Choir of Antakya came into existence in 2007 with the support of the Hatay governorship as a one-off event to celebrate Antakya's religious diversity as part of the annual Turkish Culture and Tourism Week. Its initial members hailed in equal numbers from Armenian, Alawi, Sunni, Orthodox, Catholic, and Jewish communities living in the region. In early performances, each



Figure 2. Image from a concert ticket depicting the Civilizations Choir of Antakya on stage.

community dressed differently, stood separately, and sang only its own hymns in its own language—except for the first and last songs, which all members performed in Turkish.

After Culture and Tourism Week ended, local participants decided to continue the choir but changed its name and format to stress not only diversity but also unity. This resulted in an increase in members, a standardization of costumes (which became nonethnic and nondenominational) and music (with all songs performed by the whole ensemble), and the integration of communities during performances. The choir's new insignia featured the cross, the crescent, and the Star of David entangled together within an Ottoman star (figure 3). As such, the choir became a means of promoting Turkey's Ottoman legacy in various publics as both the instantiation of—and a path toward—a more inclusive democracy.

The concept of *civilization* (*medeniyet*) played a key role in this new incarnation and invoked liberal discourses of intercultural dialogue that emerged under the UNAOOC, under European cultural policy (İğsız 2014), and under the Islamic Gülen movement (an AKP ally until 2012). Although understandings of civilization as culture writ large informed early nationalist debates concerning the place of Turkish customs within European civilization (Gökalp 1959), the adoption and pluralization of the term in naming Antakya's multireligious choir had a more recent global appeal.

After 9/11 the idea of an “alliance of civilizations” has gained prominence in countering theories of civilization clash and inherent conflict between Muslim and Western values. Among the advocates of this idea was Ahmet Davutoğlu, Turkey's minister of foreign affairs (2009–14) who made the country's accession to the EU



Figure 3. The choir emblem.

a priority. Davutoğlu criticized theories of civilizational antagonism as the intellectual justification for Western powers to securitize Islam for political ends. Instead, he promoted “the self-perception of the Islamic personality as a civilizational prototype,” which he argued was “inclusive, egalitarian, and easily accessible,” and thus could “spread in different civilizational zones comprising different ethnic and sectarian communities” (Davutoğlu 2014, 75).

Davutoğlu promoted Turkey as a mediator between Western and Islamic civilizations, and turned to the historical legacies of the Ottoman Empire as an Islamic and expansionist model of pluralism. Identified by some scholars as neo-Ottomanism (Walton 2017; Iğsız 2018), the cultural memory and staged performances of a tolerant multicultural past reimagined minorities as nostalgic remnants of the Ottoman Empire (Mills 2010) so as to legitimate the nation-state’s aspirations for Turkish and Muslim dominance (Brink-Danan 2012). As “pressing political issues such as immigration and integration [were] increasingly deflected into the realms of cultural policy” in Europe (Karaca 2010, 28), performances of art (Karaca 2009), music (Jackson 2013), and dance (Potuoğlu-Cook 2006), as well as museum and cultural-heritage practices (Walton 2015; Iğsız 2018), became central to staging Turkey’s liberalization. As a “historical representation that actually dehistori-

cize[s] alterity” (İğsız 2018, 202), neo-Ottoman nostalgia has reconfigured urban culture in this process through commemoration ceremonies, popular television series, and urban renewal projects that have sought to revitalize Ottoman arts and architecture (Türeli 2018).

While Istanbul, the former capital of the Ottoman Empire, constituted the main site of such performances (Göktürk, Soysal, and Türeli 2010), a series of projects focused on Antakya as a vital node in Turkey’s multifaith composition, mirroring the emphasis placed on the Muslim identity of minorities under Western liberal democracies (e.g., Rogozen-Soltar 2017). Numerous performances of interfaith dialogue that took place in Antakya, such as the 2005 Hatay Civilizations Conference and the 2010 European Heritage Days events, brought together community leaders as heirs to the Ottoman millets (administrative and legal tax groups).

This inversion framed religion as culture and replicated the ideas of progress embedded in the term’s historical role in Turkish modernization. As the choir director Yılmaz stated:

Antakya is a cradle of civilizations. From Roman to Islamic, each has contributed to the culture of tolerant coexistence here, instead of diminishing the civilizations that it has replaced. So when we say *medeniyet*, we mean something more than religion. We also mean the civility [*medenilik*] of Antakya’s peoples, in their respect of other cultures and willingness to open themselves to their influence.

This narrative endorses a language that valorizes openness to diversity as civility and places the demands of modernity within the history of Antakya’s religious diversity. The choir enacts this moral language as the core of cultural citizenship in both the arrangement and the staging of its performances. The concerts are free. Singers receive no compensation, and in fact pay a nominal participation fee. These payments, together with funding from local government and concert sponsors, cover the salaries of the instrument players who, unlike the rest of the choir, make their living solely from music. The number of singers (and the particular individuals involved) is chosen in rotation. Hence the choir forms a non-commercialized site of citizen participation whose members are expected to share responsibility for the choir’s maintenance as well as to represent (i.e., embody) its onstage message for diverse audiences.

Such participation enlists citizens to identify as members of particular ethno-religious communities as a condition for transcending differences. During the concerts, the director presents each song to the audience with commentary on the community from which it originates. For instance, before the performance of an Orthodox hymn in classical Arabic, he referred to Antakya as Antioch, the land of the first Christians, and described the Orthodox Christians of Antakya as their descendants. For the Sunni hymn, he emphasized Muslim tolerance and recounted the story of Habibi Neccar, a Christian saint from Antakya whose name has been given to a mosque. The Turkish lyrics of the Alevi song were sung in two different styles, starting in the conventional rhythms of the *cem* ceremony of the Turkish Alevi and then moving to a style similar to the Sunni hymns before returning to the Alevi rhythms, which begin slowly and then speed up, concluding with the fastest-paced part. This shift in style functions as an aesthetic illustration of Yılmaz's preceding speech on the absence of an Alawi-Sunni conflict in Antakya, which contradicts the local accounts of violent clashes between Alawi and Sunni youth in the 1970s and emergent tensions in the context of the recent Syrian displacement.

By telling the audience "what to listen for," Yılmaz's introductory speeches direct both re-presentation and representation as communal expression. The final move of subsuming the singers' communal commitments under the larger story of the Turkish nation is nevertheless musical. Concerts always end with the song "Memleketim" ("My Homeland"), whose lyrics glorify Turkey's landscape, heroes, and epic stories. "Memleketim" was arranged in 1972 from the Jewish folk song "Rabbi Elimeylekh" and became a national hit after Turkey's 1974 invasion of Cyprus. When the concerts take place in Turkey, the director motions to the audience to join in the singing, making hand movements suggesting that he is now also conducting them. In a concert that I attended in Toronto in 2015, the Turks who made up the majority of the audience joined in with the singing on their own and clapped rhythmically to express allegiance to their country of origin. In either case, the collective singing of an appropriated patriotic song brings the audience to the concert's climax, the moment at which the "community of believers" becomes the "nation."

In the course of the performance, religious tolerance casts its prescriptive norms of interreligious engagement by turning the performed songs—and their performers—into properties of distinctively perceived religious communities. The visual (e.g., costumes) and aural (e.g., songs and speeches) aspects of live concerts give material substance to the national framing of religious tolerance while also

creating the conditions under which such framing is continuously contested and negotiated. The choir's expanding repertoire includes religious songs not only in Arabic, Kurdish, Armenian, Laz, and Hebrew but also in Italian and Latin to represent those involved in Antakya's Catholic Church.¹⁰ Because only Arabic and Turkish are widely spoken in Antakya, and only Turkish is intelligible to all, singers are given the song lyrics transliterated into Turkish during rehearsals.¹¹ The single tune in which the white-robed choir sings these songs creates a sonic image of sameness overriding difference. Yet the absence of vocal or instrumental polyphony—common in popular genres of Turkish music (Stokes 2010, 14–15)—also widens the range of participation by singers and listeners.

Those committed to performing religious tolerance in the choir, however, have different—often conflicting—perspectives on how to re-present their religious traditions (e.g., which songs, costumes, and images to select) and on who will do the re-presenting. Dissonant viewpoints about re-presentation generate tensions that often become enmeshed in the political problems of minority representation. These tensions predominantly concern neither the qualities, recording, and training of physical voice (Bakker Kellogg 2015; Schäfers 2017) nor their sensorial, affective, or technological mediation (Stokes 2010; Eisenlohr 2012; Gill 2017). Instead, they concern the terms and national implications of the physical togetherness of minorities (and their songs) onstage.¹² The remainder of this article delves into these tensions as described by community representatives in the choir.

“WHICH SONGS?”: The Choice and Performance of Religious Verses

The Civilizations Choir presents music as a bridge between religious communities and as a means to transcend communal boundaries. Singing religious verses, however, exposes the incommensurabilities in each community's musical forms, the authority of such forms in religious practice, and the place of distinct identities within the nation. The tensions that emerge from these differences show both the contingencies of religious tolerance and the significance of representational politics for its national legitimation.

Ismail, a shop owner in Antakya, became involved in the choir at the request of the head of the Antakya Jewish Foundation. Although he lacked musical training, he felt obliged to join the choir to save his community from poor representation. This feeling echoed other accounts I heard from Jewish men about the moral obligation to attend Sabbath services, which appeared inseparable from the survival of the community and its recognition in public arenas. But Ismail never

equated praying in the synagogue to singing onstage. “It is not appropriate to have such musicality in the synagogue,” he remarked, “There, we pray in the hopes of being heard by God. Onstage, we appeal to the nationalistic sentiments of our audience by our togetherness.”

Such distinctions proved especially difficult to maintain when they concerned the sacred quality of the prayers performed onstage, and led to tension between Yılmaz and Salma, a Jewish woman from Syria who had lived in Antakya for more than thirty years. Salma criticized Yılmaz for truncating the Sabbath Morning Prayer “El-Adon” (“God is the Lord”) during a concert. When she insisted that this caused a sin on every singer’s part, Yılmaz told her that they were not onstage for religious purposes. Salma agreed, yet also maintained that the prayer’s sacred quality lay beyond the context of its performance. “This is why,” she told me, “the Antakya Jewish Foundation needed the permission of the Chief Rabbinate in Istanbul to be able to sing the prayers in concerts.”

The problem of Jewish representation in the choir echoes the debates surrounding the performance of *maftirim* (paraliturgical songs of Istanbulite Sephardic Jews) in the Istanbul-based Birlikte Yasamak concert series (Jackson 2013). The *maftirim* performances in secured synagogues “focus exclusively on cultivating and transmitting musical and religious culture within [the] community” (Jackson 2013, 126). When opened to the “outside” to stage “an Ottoman music world,” however, these performances required Jews to act as “tolerated” citizens to maintain the majority’s pride. Ismail’s and Salma’s reactions present two different perspectives from within the Jewish community on how the practitioners negotiate this predicament in a context in which cultivating an exclusively Jewish musical practice is not an option. To maintain the integrity of religious practice in the face of anticipated communal disappearance, Ismail highlights the specific setting and purpose of performance as a determining factor, while Salma emphasizes the power of prayer to sacralize the singer, venue, and presumed audience.

Although the director Yılmaz echoed Ismail’s reaction in discourse, the choir eventually addressed these dilemmas in a way that confirmed Salma’s point. When I returned in 2015, Salma had left the choir and “El-Adon” had been removed from the repertoire. I was told that some new Muslim members felt uncomfortable singing Jewish prayers, so Yılmaz kept only the Jewish folk song “Hava Nagila” (“Let’s Rejoice”). This compromise had a clear precedent in the choir’s history of institutionalization, vis-à-vis Alawis.¹³ Antakya Alawis do not practice musical forms such as *mersiye* or *kaside* that represent the “Islamic civilization” in the choir.¹⁴ They also do not perform the *cem* ritual of Bektashi Alevi.¹⁵ Mehmet, an Alawi sheikh and

one of the founding members of the Alawi Ehl-i Beyt Foundation, told me that when the governorship contacted the foundation for assistance in finding Alawi singers for the choir, many people regarded the task as a burden: “Since we don’t have a religious culture of singing, we had difficulty at first, both persuading our people that it was acceptable to represent Alawism through songs onstage, and finding songs that would really represent us.”

Unlike Alevis who are ambivalent about the folklorization of *cem* in twenty-first-century Turkey because it erases the ritual’s material-aesthetic history,¹⁶ the Antakya Alawis debated the implications of acquiescing to more intelligible modes of representation that lack clear precedent in their communal history. After some research, they found an Arabic Shi’a song called “Mevla Ali” (“God Ali”) and sang it in the first concerts. But some members (mostly other religious figures in the choir) objected to that song for representing the fourth caliph of Islam and the first imam of Shi’as, Ali, as God (*Mevla*). Along with hymns about Jesus and Mary, it was eliminated from the choir’s repertoire to forestall religious conflict within (and outside) the group. Anticipating the solution Yılmaz found for “El Adon,” the endeavor to transcend religious differences in this case set aside—rather than engaged with—what appeared to be intractable disagreements from a liberal point of view. The replacement of “Mevla Ali” by some Turkish *cem* songs, however, meant a double effacement for Antakya Alawis, who saw their contribution to the choir as both oppressed by the dominant Sunni identity and unrepresented beyond Bek-tashi Alevi voices.

The choir’s mission to transcend religious boundaries—and to represent such transcendence—through collective singing appeals most to the Orthodox Christian liturgical tradition to which choral music is fundamental (Erol 2015). In the face of communal dispossession, class distinctions, and the threat of the Catholic and evangelical missions, community leaders emphasize the liturgy as a symbolic resource for Antakya’s internally divided Christian population, connecting urban Christians to immigrants from nearby Christian villages. The liturgical service in the Orthodox church consists of synagogal hymns that originated in Antioch and are performed by the church’s local mixed-gender choir. Although accompanied by an electronic organ and amplified with microphones, liturgical performance relies on human voice and monophonic singing, which are considered more appropriate for divine service.

Moving these hymns to the concert stage for political expression, however, breaks the hierarchies surrounding liturgical singing, the religious authority of community leaders, and the sacredness of particular songs and their media. Şirin,

a schoolteacher who sang in both the church choir and the Civilizations Choir, differentiated onstage performances from liturgical singing: “Most singers in the choir—including nonpracticing Christians—don’t know about the historical and religious significance of the Orthodox hymns. They just memorize the songs.” Indeed, Civilizations Choir rehearsals rarely involved musical or religious training and instead consisted of the director’s announcements and the collective repetition of songs for the next concert. Emphasis lay on the political message related to the communal affiliation of singers, as evident in Yılmaz’s comments, during one rehearsal, about upcoming auditions: “Of course, we will pay attention to the talents of new members. But we should not have too many people from one community. We don’t want all the new members to be Alawis or Sunnis. We have to be democratic.”

However distinct the Christian, Jewish, and Alawi positions are in the Civilizations Choir, their problems regarding the choice and performance of songs register political concerns about how to properly represent religious differences in the public sphere. As [Chantal Mouffe \(2005, 98\)](#) suggests, liberal pluralism postulates “the availability of a public sphere where power and antagonism would have been eliminated.” In denying the political dimension of social interactions, pluralist models disguise how the deprivation of voice can result from the idea of harmonious coexistence itself. The removal of controversial religious songs from the choir performances attempts to build consensus within the choir through a similar denial, one that has produced other forms of violence (as in the case of the Alawi representation). Further revealed through the experiences of Jewish and Christian singers is the need to analyze such violence in relation to the specific conditions of its manifestation, which reveal differences about what counts as authority and who can authorize the representability of particular aesthetic forms in each tradition. Although the choir’s dominant mode of representation (choral music as the ground for unity and transcendence) derives largely from the Christian tradition itself, it also requires Christians to relinquish their religious authority and communal autonomy for the sake of the nation, as I examine further in the next section.

“WHO SINGS?”: The problem of autonomy and authority

From the perspective of the Civilizations Choir members, the difficulties of re-presenting religious difference for public consumption do not merely concern the commensuration of their distinct musical forms. Compelling the members to engage with each other’s musical traditions outside their religious homes, the choir’s institutionalization turns questions of political representation—especially

the identity of representatives—into another major site of contestation. Ferit, a former choir member, summarized the general discomfort among the Christians about this process:

When the choir was first founded, we, the Orthodox community, supported it. But over time, it lost its meaning . . . I don't find it right that everybody is forced to sing each other's hymns. A Christian should be able to sing the songs that are about Jesus or Mary if they wish. The Alawis should be able to sing "Mevla Ali." To me, tolerance means being able to listen to those who have different beliefs but not necessarily taking part in their singing.

Ferit's distinction between "listening" and "singing" points to changes to the choir's format that have come at the expense of the Orthodox community. In the choir's early days, community leaders and priests selected the songs, trained the singers, and conducted the Orthodox hymns. Most of the early Orthodox members of the Civilizations Choir were in fact chosen from the church choir and included two priests. With the standardization of songs and the mingling of groups, however, the Orthodox representation in the choir became less about the visibility and expertise of identifiable community members under a recognized authority and more about the performance of Orthodox hymns by unidentifiable subjects for the national public. In other words, the popularization of the musical practice has not only detached the singing from its liturgical context but also challenged the religious authority of community leaders and the musical authority of liturgical singers.

In this context, Ferit's preference for "listening" does not express a refusal of engagement with other religions. He wants to preserve the community's relationship to its religion on its own terms while performing for diversified publics. Metaphorically speaking, the move from "listening" to "singing" symbolizes the loss of autonomy and communal authority on the political path from the preservation of difference within a hierarchical system of plurality (as in the Ottoman millet system), to its denial and exclusion (as in early republican nationalism), and then to its valorization (as in nationalist and liberal discourses of religious coexistence). In categorizing religions as preestablished distinct entities, however, Ferit's formulation, just like the choir's representation of tolerance itself, elides the heterogeneity of the Christian community and the existing forms of relatedness among Antakya's diverse religious traditions.

While Christian singers struggle to preserve their existing spaces of autonomy and authority, Alawis who lack institutionalized religio-musical settings seek to create spaces for recognition. The international fame that came with the Civilizations Choir, for instance, inspired some singers to plan the first Alawi Choir of the Ehl-i Beyt Foundation. This choir, they claimed, would not only introduce the practice of singing to Antakya's Alawi community but also allow them to freely sing the songs Mehmet had initially recommended to the Civilizations Choir. In this quest for autonomy lay also a desire to withdraw Alawi participation from the governmental representation of religious diversity as Ottoman. "The Civilizations Choir has given us some visibility," commented Hasan, an Alawi singer.

But we do not have much power over this [visibility]. When they credit the Ottoman rulers or Sunni tradition for Antakya's tolerance, it offends us. We as a community bear the responsibility to show others that the Alawis have an undeniable role in Antakya's culture of tolerance. The Civilizations Choir may be one place to do that, but an independent choir can provide more opportunities to get our voices to be heard.

The Ehl-i Beyt Choir project did not succeed due to a lack of resources and interest from the community. But the idea itself has shown the centrality of representational politics in Alawi imaginations of cultural citizenship. As is evident in the contestations of the Civilizations Choir as a whole, cultural citizenship concerns not merely the cultural rights and national membership of minority communities but also the question of whether the aesthetic forms and communal histories of their religious practice remain legible enough to ensure the political representation of these communities.

This necessity for legibility has informed the continued identification of its Alawi singers with the choir's mission and the material forms such identification has taken. One striking example was a framed newspaper article on the walls of Mehmet's office. It included a picture of the choir members wearing the costumes of their separate communities (figure 4), but the tags that labeled each community were not from the original newspaper article. They had been glued to the picture by Mehmet himself, as he proudly told me when I asked his permission to photograph the image.

This self-guided act of categorization can serve as an example of Mehmet's attempt to position his religious identity within the statist imaginaries of religious tolerance that align collective singing with religious representation and that



Figure 4. Mehmet's tagged and framed newspaper cutting. Photo by Seçil Dağtaş.

rearticulate *religion* as a representable category of affiliation. Yet Mehmet's nostalgia for the earlier days of the choir, when community boundaries were clearly demarcated, also contradicts the intentions of governing agencies to stage an indivisible and standardized entity of the governed. Given that not only particular religious congregations' sounds but also individual bodies are put on display, such contradiction extends beyond the realm of music to visual markers of difference.

The public visibility of Jewish tradition in the choir, for instance, contradicts the strategies of “public secrecy” that Jews in Turkey have long employed to protect themselves (Brink-Danan 2012, 144). When the Jewish songs are sung by all choir members, this contradiction manifests in the use of identifiable religious markers and their visual perception. Even after the standardization of concert costumes, most of the Jewish men continued to wear kippahs during the concerts. Amit, a retired merchant, was the only one who refused to do so:

We don't wear kippah in our daily life, so why do we wear it for the concerts? To make our identities recognizable to others? Maybe I don't want to be recognized by others! Maybe the whole point is to mingle with others so that we cannot be distinguished as Jews. I'm a Turkish citizen, too, and want to be in the choir to show that I am no different from you or the others.

Amit's desire to be “no different from . . . the others” inverts the logic of cultural citizenship by highlighting sameness as national identification. As for

other non-Muslim/non-Turkish members of the choir, such a path to citizenship is caught between inclusive rhetoric and exclusionary practices of minority representation: on the one hand, the consistent necessity for those who are different to express their sameness with the majority; on the other hand, the hegemonic denial of sameness due to their racial or religious differences. The paradox, of course, is the impossibility of moving beyond the particularities of difference in a setting where many have found a place precisely because of their differences.

CONCLUSION

When the terms of national belonging rest on the values of the majority religion despite (or arguably due to) the state's secularist orientations (Mahmood 2015), liberal discourses of tolerance present a political possibility for those who inhabit difference to acquire voice and recognition. They offer a moral and political ideal of harmonious coexistence against the threat of religious violence. They also represent a mode of cultural citizenship for religious others that seeks to ensure their "right to be different" without being excluded from the nation (Rosaldo 1994, 57), an endeavor that carries contradictions shaped by the distinct historical experiences of authority formation and religious coexistence.

The Civilizations Choir of Antakya provides a lens through which to examine these contradictions from the national margins of Turkey, a country where liberal pluralism has long been subservient to nationalist discourses of unity. The choir emerged at a particular conjuncture in which an imperial and Islamic model of diversity conceived in opposition to the secular nation-state became re-envisioned through the lens of nationalism while also giving a nod to liberal and EU-oriented accounts of cultural difference. As the performance of multiculturalism in Europe deployed intercultural dialogue to regulate Muslim immigrants (Karaca 2009; Rogozen-Soltar 2017), the neo-Ottoman framing of such performance-as-civilizations accentuated religious identity for recognition within a nationalist framework of Sunni supremacy (İğsız 2018), rendering certain religious identities, markers, and practices more recognizable than others.

The ensuing problems of recognition are not limited to the legal domains of citizenship, but are cultivated and exacerbated by the representational practices of tolerance. Minority representation in the sense of abstract political voice relies on categorical understandings of identity that often treat re-presented groups as inherently coherent, externally bound, and commensurable with each other. But the material forms necessitated by such re-presentation—that is, "actual signs, symbols, figures, images, narratives, words, and sounds—in which symbolic meaning

is circulated” (Hall 2002, 8)—indicate historically contingent modes of inter- and intracommunal action, indifference, and political violence beyond discrete identities. Without attention to such modes and their incommensurabilities, we cannot fully address the political contradictions that arise for different communities that states govern through tolerance.

In the choir context, problems of re-presentation for each community point to historical processes of differentiation. Alawi singers who have no legal status as minorities approached the new form of multireligious performance as an opportunity to acquire long-awaited social recognition and cultural rights, even though they remained wary of references to the Ottoman past and to neo-Ottoman politics. For Orthodox Christians and Jews who lost their communal autonomy under modern Turkish policies, at stake were the preservation of internal hierarchies and the communal legacies of their religious practices. As Arabic-speaking communities in direct interaction with each other, all three groups shared an ambiguous position vis-à-vis the Turkish state in that they operated on the peripheries of national citizenship and served as key figures in the country’s projection of religious coexistence, staged for both national and international audiences.

Overall, representational politics of religious tolerance in the Civilizations Choir revolved around the problem of when and how difference should turn into sameness, be tolerated, or be integrated into the shifting signifiers of nation. This problem manifested itself differently for the political mediation of diverse religious voices, positions, and authorities through staged performances that, in turn, reflected the hierarchies of legibility between represented communities. Despite their criticisms and hesitations, many (such as Mehmet and Şirin) maintained their involvement with the choir on the basis of their religious affiliation. They objectified their religious difference and re-presented their transcendence of it through costume, music, and the collective performance (which, paradoxically, only confirms that which is transcended). Others (such as Ferit) could not accept the conditions under which differences became subsumed into the nation—and quit. For them, the national framings of religious tolerance resonated more directly with the loss of communal autonomy and the weakening of religious authority, especially when accompanied by the historical process of their exclusion from the legal and cultural domains of citizenship.

As Turkey moves from a seemingly pluralist vision toward an authoritarian nationalism under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s regime, the Civilizations Choir continues to illuminate the majoritarian underpinnings of both visions and the centrality of representational politics to their realization.¹⁷ It is telling, for instance, that this

multireligious choir did not disappear from the political scene under the pressures of “sameness” encapsulated in Erdoğan’s populist rhetoric calling for “one nation, one flag, one country, one state.” On the contrary, the choir has manifested the shifting (and persisting) images and voices of the nation by giving concerts dedicated to those who died on the night of the 2016 coup attempt while resisting the army, an approach much in the spirit of the government-sponsored “democracy rallies” (featuring Turkish flags and Islamic banners) against the coup.

Participation in such national spectacles has once again transformed the visual markers of difference in the choir, this time by gender rather than religious identity: men and women now wear different costumes, all of them with Ottoman-inspired embroidery. The choir has maintained its discursive focus on civilizational dialogue as the organizing trope of its performance. However, religious songs and those with Armenian and Kurdish lyrics have become minimized in the overall presentation of difference by a greater emphasis on national and popular songs from across Turkey. While these changes have so far ensured the survival of the choir by conforming to the conservative gender norms and racial hierarchies inherent in Turkish nationalism that have resurfaced in the current political context, their ramifications remain to be seen. The choir’s activities over the past decade nonetheless echo the contradictions of Turkey at large regarding the place of minority voices within the representation of the nation. These contradictions will likely prevail in the context of Turkey’s majoritarianism and its neo-Ottoman reconfiguration of international relations with Europe and the Middle East. They also provide important reminders of the limits and contingencies of religious tolerance, as Western multiculturalism cedes its hegemonic place to anti-immigrant rhetoric, stricter border regimes, and new populist movements in the state management of racial and religious differences, not only in Turkey but across the world.

ABSTRACT

This article examines the politics of minority representation focusing on the Civilizations Choir of Antakya, a multireligious ensemble formed in the mid-2000s against the backdrop of Turkey’s democratization process and involvement in globally funded programs of intercultural dialogue. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in the choir’s hometown, Antakya, near Turkey’s border with Syria, I compare the experiences of Arabic-speaking religious groups who simultaneously represent and are represented in the choir. These experiences, I argue, manifest different historical positions and political tensions that defy the choir’s categorization of minority religions as equally representable constituents of a tolerant nation. Together, they expose the uncertainties of ethno-religiously defined citizenship and the representational work such uncer-

tainties demand for constructing nationhood. By analyzing this process, the article foregrounds representational politics as one key site for the anthropological study of religious diversity, and for addressing broader problems of minority recognition inherent in liberal regimes of tolerance. [tolerance; religious diversity; representation; minority; nationhood; Turkey]

ÖZET

Bu makale, 2000'li yılların ortalarında Türkiye'nin demokratikleşme süreci ve küresel olarak finanse edilen kültürlerarası diyalog programlarına katılımı zemininde kurulmuş çok dinli bir topluluk olan Antakya Medeniyetler Korosu özelinde azınlık temsili politikalarını incelemektedir. Koronun kurulduğu, Türkiye'nin Suriye sınırı yakınında bulunan Antakya şehrinde yapılan etnografik saha çalışmasından yola çıkarak hem koroyu temsil eden hem de koroca temsil edilen Arap kökenli dini grupların deneyimleri karşılaştırıyorum. Savım, bu deneyimlerin, koronun azınlık dinlerini hoşgörülü bir ulusun eşit temsil edilebilir bileşenleri olarak sınıflandırmasına ters düşen farklı tarihi konumları ve siyasi gerilimleri ortaya koyduğu. Bu konum ve gerilimler, etnik ve dini köken temelinde tanımlanan vatandaşlık kavramının belirsizliklerini ve bu tür belirsizliklerin milliyet inşası için gerektirdiği temsili çabayı gözler önüne sermektedir. Makale, temsil politikalarını kilit bir çalışma alanı olarak ön plana almak suretiyle, hem dini çeşitliliğin antropolojik olarak incelendiği klasik çalışmalara, hem de liberal hoşgörü rejimlerinde esas olan azınlıkların tanınmasına dair daha geniş çaplı sorunların analizine katkı sağlamaktadır. [hoşgörü; dini çeşitlilik; temsil; azınlık; milliyet; Türkiye]

ملخص

يبحث هذا المقال سياسات تمثيل الأقليات من خلال التركيز على جوقة الحضارات في أنطاكيا. تشكلت الجوقة المتعددة الأديان في أواسط سنوات ال 2000 في سياق مسيرة التحول الديمقراطي في تركيا والإنخراط في برامج دولية داعمة وممولة للحوارات بين الثقافات. وإعتماداً على بحثي الميداني والإثنوغرافي في مدينة أنطاكيا؛ مسقط رأس الجوقة، أقدم مقارنة لتجارب المجموعات الدينية الناطقة باللغة العربية التي تُمثّل و تُتمثّل في آن واحد في الجوقة. وأناقش أن هذه التجارب تُعبّر عن مواقف تاريخية مختلفة وتوترات سياسية تتحدى تصنيف الجوقة للأقليات الدينية وتماشياً مع فكرة الوطن كمتسامح. وتكشف هذه التوترات والمواقف مجموعة من الشكوك المتعلقة بالمواطنة العرقية والدينية وبالتالي العمل التمثيلي الذي توظفه هذه الشكوك في صنع الوطن. وعن طريق دراسة هذه السيرورة، يناقش المقال السياسات التمثيلية كحيز جوهري لدراسة أنثروبولوجية التنوع الديني، وكرن أساسي لتناول إشكاليات أوسع متعلقة بإعتراف الأنظمة الليبرالية للأقليات. [الكلمات الرئيسية: تسامح، تنوع ديني، تمثيل، أقليات، وطن، تركيا]

NOTES

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1. Antakya's current population of 370,000 comprises bilingual (Arabic-Turkish) Jewish, Orthodox Christian, Sunni, and Alawi groups, as well as Turks and Armenians with ties to Gregorian, Protestant, and Catholic churches. Since 2011, the city has also hosted more than 80,000 displaced Syrians, the implications of which I have examined elsewhere (Dağtaş 2017).
2. The UN launched the UNAOC initiative in 2005 with the cosponsorship of the Spanish and Turkish governments to "promote international peace and security" against the clash of civilizations in the post-9/11 era. Representing "Islamic civilization," Turkey took a leading role on the "Eastern side" of the initiative with its national action plan, sponsoring hundreds of intercultural dialogue projects, including the 2010 European Capital of Culture series (İğsız 2014, 692).
3. I attended weekly rehearsals of the Civilizations Choir from May 2010 until November 2011. I visited the choir members in their homes, workplaces, and places of worship and conducted thirty-two interviews with choir members. I also draw on booklets, news articles, publicly available audiovisual material, and my continued interaction with the choir's past and current members.
4. I draw from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (1999, 259) analysis of *Vertretung* (representation as proxy) and *Darstellung* (re-presentation as portrait) as together complicit in problems of "speaking in the name of." Spivak (1999, 63) criticizes the obliteration of this distinction in poststructuralist theories of subjectivity for reducing postcolonial critique to identity politics, and "leaving out the real Others because of the ones getting access into the public places due to the waves of benevolence." Although Spivak's analysis concerns the ethical impasses of the subaltern's intellectual portrayals, this formulation helps identify the gap in the choir between the necessities of political representation and the historical ways of being (and being-with) that exceed institutional channels of voice giving.
5. Anthropological inquiries into cultural citizenship have focused largely on migrant, diasporic, and creole communities (Rosaldo 1994; Eisenlohr 2007) and debated the power and limits of statecraft in inscribing cultural norms of race and language (Ong 1996; Clarke 2013). This article brings questions of religious practice, tolerance, and representation to bear on these debates.
6. Alevism is a Twelver Shi'a sect associated with a Bektaşî-Sufi lineage. *Cem* is the Alevi worship service that takes place in houses rather than mosques, and it involves the recitation of religious verses, the commemoration of revered figures, sacrificial offerings, and the *semah* ritual, which sees male and female participants dancing in a circle to the singing of spiritual songs.
7. Although tied to the Ecumenical Patriarchate and identified as *Rum* (Greek) since Ottoman times, the region's orthodox churches associate themselves with the Eastern

- Orthodox Patriarchates in Damascus and Latakia and perform their rituals in ancient Arabic, not Greek.
8. See [Marc David Baer \(2009\)](#) and [Esra Özyürek \(2009\)](#) on how Turkish secular nationalism has historically limited the possibilities for religious fluidity in cases of conversion and syncretism.
 9. Among the reforms introduced in this period were the “democratic opening” policies of 2007 and 2008 that allowed Kurdish-language broadcasting and instruction by the state and considered Alevi demands for religious accommodation, and 2014 legislation that recognized Syriac Orthodox land rights.
 10. The Catholic mission, since its empowerment during the French Mandate (1923–38), has targeted the rural Orthodox Christian community and Alawis suspected of secret Christian proclivities. Less than a hundred people are officially registered as Catholic in Antakya, yet most attendees of the Catholic services are Orthodox Christians.
 11. Since 2013, the choir has been conducting its weekly rehearsals in a renovated Antakya townhouse named *Medeniyetler Evi* (The House of Civilizations), which was allocated exclusively to the choir’s administration by the governorship.
 12. Although the choir’s Facebook page includes video clips, many listeners are unaware of this. Choir members told me that the recorded performances do not give the same feel as the live concerts on which the choir’s national and transnational existence relies.
 13. Unlike their Christian and Jewish neighbors, the Alawis were never granted the status of millet, nor officially recognized as a religious minority. Because they suffered persecution under Sunni rulers, many embrace the secularist principles of the republic and its denial of the Ottoman past.
 14. *Kaside* and *mersiye* are two poetry forms found in Divan literature that are sung to praise Islamic figures or express their divine suffering.
 15. Alawi rites include initiation rituals in which the esoteric parts of the Koran are revealed to adolescents in a male-only ceremony, shrine visitation, dreaming and healing practiced by men and women.
 16. Since the 1970s, the *semah* element of *cem* has gained popularity and state recognition as a public token of national folklore, divorced from the ritual’s overall performance, spiritual references, and religious (Shi’a) history of communal lamentation ([Tambar 2014](#)).
 17. Since 2011, Turkey has had three general elections (the second restoring the AKP’s parliamentary majority, which it had lost in June 2015), the end of the peace process with the Kurds followed by heightened state violence in Kurdish provinces, and a referendum that granted the president sweeping executive powers. Held during a nationwide state of emergency declared in response to the 2016 failed coup attempt by Gülenist factions of the army, the referendum has enabled a series of purges and the imprisonment of thousands of journalists, academics, politicians, and public employees on charges of treason and terrorism.

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