

Article

Unfinished Mourning: The Historical Formation of Alevi Collective Memory

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Abstract

This study examines the emotional architecture of Alevi collective memory through the concept of unfinished mourning, adopting a phenomenological perspective. The research draws on in-depth interviews with twenty participants from diverse regional and generational backgrounds across Turkey. The findings indicate that in the intergenerational transmission of historical traumas, unfinished mourning functions as a structural emotional formation rather than a pathological condition. While the older generation articulates feelings of loss and injustice through memories grounded in direct experience, the younger generation internalizes these effects through familial narratives, embodied practices, and the broader social atmosphere. The inability to complete mourning practices rooted in the absence of legal accountability and societal recognition generates a formation of unfinished mourning at the collective level. Female participants assume a carrier role in the familial transmission of emotional memory, whereas male participants render sentiments of resentment and anger more publicly visible. Cem rituals emerge as key sites where collective memory is reproduced, mourning finds expression, and intergenerational transmission is enacted through embodied performance. By integrating the sociology of emotions and historical sociology, the study demonstrates how collective memory is affectively encoded and elucidates the emotional foundations of social identity. Its principal theoretical contribution lies in reconceptualizing unfinished mourning not as a clinical state but as a modality of social solidarity, political endurance, and meaning making under conditions of ongoing structural non-recognition.

Keywords: unfinished mourning; melancholia; collective memory; sociology of emotions; Alevi identity; intergenerational transmission of memory; historical trauma



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1. Introduction

2 July 1993, thirty-three festival participants (intellectuals, poets, and musicians) and two hotel employees gathered in Sivas for a cultural festival were burned alive inside the Madımak Hotel. The crowd outside did not disperse; security forces did not intervene. P7, who was born in Sivas and was present in the city that day, described the scene thirty years later in an interview conducted for this study: “The soldiers had set up barricades, and crowds were watching. I cannot describe what I felt standing among them fear, anger, helplessness, all at once. Later we moved to Izmir, but Sivas never left me.” This is not simply the memory of a traumatic day. It is an account of what happens when a community is denied both protection and acknowledgment when the state’s failure to act becomes part of the wound itself.

The Sivas massacre is not an isolated episode. It belongs to a longer pattern of violence against Alevism in Anatolia, reaching back through the 1978 Maraş massacre, the 1980 Çorum massacre, the 1994–95 forced displacements in Tunceli, and the 1995 Gazi and Ümraniye killings in Istanbul. These were not neutral incidents but organised anti-Alevi attacks, and together they established a sedimented geography of fear and unrecognized grief within Alevi collective life. What this study asks is not only what happened, but how these experiences are carried affectively, generationally, bodily and why the mourning they demand has never arrived at closure.

Historical experiences are transmitted across generations not only through shared events but also through emotions, interpretations, and culturally shaped ways of making sense of the past. Since Maurice Halbwachs's foundational work, which established memory as a fundamentally social phenomenon (Halbwachs 1992, 2016), research on collective memory has largely emphasized its cognitive and narrative dimensions. In recent decades, however, scholars have increasingly highlighted the central role of emotions in shaping how societies remember. Connerton (2018, 2019) demonstrates that bodily practices, habits, and commemorative rituals play a crucial role in sustaining social memory, while Alexander (2012) shows how shared experiences of suffering can reshape collective identities through processes he conceptualizes as cultural trauma. This scholarship suggests that remembering is not merely an intellectual or narrative act; it involves emotional re-engagement and embodied experience through which the past continues to live within the present (Alexander 2012; Alexander et al. 2004; Alexander and Seidman 2017).

Since Sigmund Freud's seminal discussion of the distinction between mourning and melancholia (Freud 2019, sct. 36), this concept has undergone significant theoretical transformation. Freud conceptualized mourning as a process through which loss can eventually be worked through, whereas melancholia emerges when the lost object is fully internalized, causing the work of mourning to remain unresolved and suspended. The present study takes up this melancholic condition at the collective level and renders it sociologically as unfinished mourning. Building on Freud (2019) and Butler (2019, p. 52) extends the notion of melancholia beyond the individual psyche to the social realm, arguing that identity itself is formed through unresolved attachments and exclusions. Eng and Kazanjian (2003, p. 24) reinterpret melancholia not as a pathological dead end but as a productive space in which loss may generate new forms of meaning, creativity, and political resistance. Ahmed (2019) redirects the discussion toward the social life of emotions, arguing that emotions acquire force by attaching themselves to objects, narratives, and histories, thereby constituting collective belonging while drawing symbolic boundaries between groups. Her related account of how a promise of happiness distributes belonging and estrangement clarifies why some griefs become socially admissible while others do not (Ahmed 2016).

The concept of unfinished mourning is deployed in this study with particular analytical caution. It is neither a psychiatric diagnosis nor a characterization of Alevi people as a community defined by suffering. Rather, it is proposed as a sociological category a descriptor of a collective emotional regime shaped by the structural persistence of unacknowledged loss. The question of terminology is itself part of the analysis. Why unfinished mourning rather than collective trauma, historical injury, or political grief? The answer lies in what Freud's framework, as extended by Eng and Kazanjian (2003) and Butler (2019), specifically captures: the condition in which the object of loss cannot be fully relinquished because it was never socially mourned because society has not recognized the loss as a loss. Understood sociologically, unfinished mourning here names neither a passing mood nor a clinical diagnosis but a durable collective affective formation: the socially patterned shape that loss assumes when the institutions through which a community might mourn courts, schools, official memory withhold recognition. The structural conditions of non-recognition,

unresolved mourning, and continuing exclusion do not themselves constitute unfinished mourning; they are what produce it and what keep reactivating it across generations. This is precisely the situation Alevi communities face: massacres whose perpetrators have not been fully held accountable; a place of worship whose legal status remains contested; an identity whose presence in official education and public life is systematically minimized. In this sense, the conceptual choice is empirically motivated rather than externally imposed.

The historical experience of Alevi communities in Turkey cannot be understood as uniform, and this study does not treat it as such. Alevism encompasses distinct regional, ethnic, linguistic, and ritual traditions. Historically, Dersim (Tunceli) has had Kızılbaş communities (Gezik and Gültekin 2019). The Alevi communities of Maraş, Çorum, and Sivas experienced the massacres of the late 1970s and 1993 within particular local geographies of Sunni-Alevi tension and political polarization. Urban Alevis in Istanbul and Izmir, many of them second- or third-generation migrants from these regions, navigate questions of identity, visibility, and belonging in contexts shaped by different opportunity structures and social networks (Massicard 2007; van Bruinessen 2015). Kurdish Alevis, Turkish-speaking Alevis, and Alevi diasporic communities approach questions of memory, ritual, and recognition through different historical lenses. The participants in this study reflect this diversity. The formation of unfinished mourning analysed here is therefore not proposed as a single emotional template applicable to all Alevism; it names the collective affective form produced by recurring structural conditions, non-recognition, unresolved mourning, and ongoing exclusion that are themselves lived and inflected differently across these varied positions.

A substantial body of scholarship has examined how these historical processes shape Alevi identity, politicisation, and the struggle for recognition. Beyond earlier accounts of the formation of Alevi identity (Dressler 2016; Massicard 2007; Ocak 2015; van Bruinessen 2015), more recent work has traced Alevi mobilisation and its transnational dimensions (Sökefeld 2008; Lord 2018), the framing of Alevi claims through the language of religious freedom and secular law (Walton and İlegiz 2024; Gedik et al. 2020), and the historical formation of the Kızılbaş-Alevi tradition (Yıldırım 2020a, 2020b). Research specifically foregrounding emotional experience and the intergenerational transmission of affect, however, remains comparatively limited. Gezik (2016) has addressed Alevi historical memory and the tension between lived past and institutionalized history, while Okan (2004) has examined Alevism through an anthropological lens attentive to everyday identity practices. A field-specific literature on cem, semah, deyiş, and mersiye¹ as carriers of embodied memory has developed in parallel (Tambar 2010; Özdemir et al. 2019; Erdoğan 2020), yet a systematic sociological analysis of how these practices transmit historical affect across generations has not yet been undertaken. This gap opens an important analytical space at the intersection of the sociology of emotions and the sociology of history.

The central questions guiding this research are as follows: How is collective memory emotionally encoded within the Alevi community, and what kinds of affective patterns are reproduced through narratives of historical trauma? In what ways does unfinished mourning function as a binding force in intergenerational transmission? How do emotional memories differ between older generations who directly experienced traumatic events and younger generations who encountered them indirectly? What role do collective practices particularly cem rituals, deyiş, and mersiye play in sustaining and transmitting these emotional memories?

The research design centers on phenomenological in-depth interviews with twenty participants as a way of examining these questions through lived experience and subjective interpretation. Hirsch's (2008, p. 55) notion of postmemory clarifies how traumatic pasts can be taken up as meaningful and emotionally charged even without direct witnessing,

through the transmission of narratives, images, and embodied practices. Building on this, the study conceptualizes unfinished mourning not as an individual pathological condition but as a collective affective formation through which social solidarity, continuity, and meaning are produced and sustained.

2. Methods

This study follows a phenomenological, qualitative design (Merleau-Ponty 2017; Schütz 2018; Lewis and Staehler 2020), seeking to understand how participants make sense of loss, mourning, and collective memory through their own experience. Between January and March 2026, semi-structured in-depth interviews (Creswell 2021), conducted according to the interview guide provided in Supplementary Material S1, were carried out with twenty Alevi participants recruited through purposive and snowball sampling (Patton 2014). The sample was organised around two generational cohorts ten participants over fifty and ten aged between eighteen and fifty drawn from diverse regional origins (Maraş, Sivas, Çorum, Tunceli, Malatya, Erzincan, and Tokat) and now living in Istanbul and Izmir, a composition that reflects both the geographic breadth of Alevi communities and the internal migration that has shaped urban Alevi life. Each interview lasted between ninety and one hundred forty minutes, took place in a setting chosen by the participant, was audio-recorded with consent, and was accompanied by field notes recording silences, pauses, and gestures.²

The 387 pages of verbatim transcript were examined through thematic phenomenological analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006), supported by MAXQDA 2024 as a technical aid; all interpretive decisions remained grounded in the researchers' engagement with the material. Coding was compared across the research team and disagreements were resolved by returning to the transcripts, yielding the five themes presented below. Participants' demographic characteristics are summarised in Appendix A (Table A1); the full participant table, together with details of the recruitment procedure and the generational cohort coding (P1–P20), is available as Supplementary Material S2.

3. Results

As a result of the thematic phenomenological analysis, five main themes emerged reflecting the emotional structure of the collective memory of the Alevi community: (1) suspended mourning and unresolved grief (2) enduring feelings of injustice and non-recognition (3) intergenerational emotional transmission and postmemory, (4) the emotional cost of identity visibility and (5) collective emotional experience in cem rituals.

3.1. *Suspended Mourning and Unresolved Grief*

One of the most prominent themes emerging from participants' narratives is the perception that grief related to historical losses can never be fully resolved. Freud's (2019) formulation of mourning describes a process through which loss is eventually acknowledged and emotional investment redirected toward new attachments; melancholia, by contrast, involves the internalization of what has been lost and leaves the work of mourning suspended; at the collective level this study renders that condition as unfinished mourning. Among older-generation participants, narratives surrounding the Sivas massacre of 1993 in which thirty-five people were killed when a crowd set fire to the Madımak Hotel while security forces failed to intervene illustrate how this dynamic extends beyond individual psychology to take on a collective dimension. The massacre is not reducible to the violence itself; the state's failure to act, and the subsequent failure of the legal system to deliver accountability, transformed an act of extremist violence into an ongoing political condition. P3 describes this enduring situation:

“Sivas is like a wound for us. It’s still bleeding. That day, the news came on television in the village. We said, ‘Bloody Sivas, oh Sivas,’ and asked, ‘How could such a thing happen in broad daylight? They burned young people so young.’ We went to every commemoration with the Pir Sultan Abdal Association. We didn’t care about our age. They were almost proven right, and we were left with our pain.” (P3, aged 72, born in Tunceli, living in Istanbul)

As Halbwachs (2016) argues, collective memory is reconstructed within shared social frameworks rather than preserved as a simple aggregation of individual recollections. In P3’s account, Sivas is remembered not only as a historical event but as an element of lived identity. When loss remains socially unacknowledged and mechanisms of justice are perceived as absent, mourning cannot reach closure. Under such conditions, unfinished mourning emerges as a constitutive component of collective self-understanding rather than a temporary emotional state. The centrality of Sivas to Alevi mourning and memory has itself become the subject of sustained analysis (Çavdar 2020).

Ricoeur’s (2017) distinction between memory and history is pertinent here: for Alevi collective memory, Sivas is not confined to the past as a completed historical episode but persists as a loss continuously re-experienced in the present. P7’s narrative reinforces this interpretation while also making explicit the legal and political dimensions:

“People say, ‘Let the mourning end so we can finally find peace.’ But how can it end? This was not an accident they were burned alive in broad daylight. Mourning may end in some situations, but not when justice has not been served. The trials are still unfinished; the perpetrators have not truly been held accountable. Everything was recorded, yet no one is truly imprisoned. With every postponement, something inside us died a little more. I was born in Sivas and grew up there. The Madımak Hotel... we were at home that day. I cannot describe what I felt fear, anger, helplessness, all at once. Later we moved to Izmir, but Sivas never left me. Every 2 July, everything comes back again. Do they want us to forget? We must not forget. But sometimes the weight of it becomes unbearable.” (P7, aged 61, born in Sivas, living in Izmir)

As Alexander et al. (2004) argues, cultural trauma is shaped less by the event itself than by the processes through which it is socially interpreted and given meaning. In P7’s experience, trauma is continuously reproduced because recognition and justice have not been achieved at the societal level. This also speaks to the broader landscape of Alevi historical violence: the Maraş massacre of 1978, the Çorum massacre of 1980, the Dersim operations of 1938 that predate but haunt later generations of Kızılbaş communities, the Gazi and Ümraniye killings of 1995. These are not discrete episodes but a sedimentary structure of violence whose layers inform one another in collective memory.

The narratives of younger participants empirically support Hirsch’s (2008) concept of postmemory, describing the memory experiences of generations who did not directly witness traumatic events yet develop strong emotional attachments through familial transmission. P14 expresses this:

“I was not in Sivas. I was not even born there. But sometimes it feels as if I burned in that hotel myself. Every year when 2 July comes, there is heaviness in our home. For years my father would turn on the television and watch the news from that day. I was a child and did not fully understand, but I could feel the silence. What I learned did not come from books. I learned it from my mother’s silence every 2 July. I learned it from the way my father looked at the television. That fire now lives inside me too.” (P14, aged 29, born and living in Izmir)

Hirsch (2008) emphasizes that postmemory involves not only cognitive transmission but also emotional and embodied experience. In P14’s account, trauma is silently conveyed

through the emotional atmosphere of the family. Assmann's (2015) concept of communicative memory further illuminates this, describing forms of memory transmitted through everyday interactions across three to four generations. The findings from this theme suggest that the inability to complete mourning is not merely a psychological condition but also a social and political one. The absence of functioning justice mechanisms and the lack of societal recognition suspend the mourning process, transforming unfinished mourning into a constitutive element of collective identity.

3.2. Enduring Feelings of Injustice and Non-Recognition

Honneth's (2016, p. 83) framework conceptualizes social recognition across three dimensions: emotional recognition within relations of love, legal recognition through rights, and social recognition through solidarity and social esteem. In the experiences described by Alevi participants, recognition is particularly lacking within the legal system and in broader relations of social solidarity producing a chronic sense of injustice that is not primarily retrospective but present-tense. The ongoing non-recognition of cemevis as legally equivalent places of worship, the absence of Alevi religious education in public schools, and the continued failures of judicial accountability for historical massacres together generate an experience of injustice that is not historical residue but active daily condition. P6 describes the legal dimension:

"The courts kept postponing the hearings for years. I followed every trial. Every time we said, 'This time it will be different.' In the end, they cited the statute of limitations. Can pain have a statute of limitations? Our cemevi is still not recognized as a place of worship. Everywhere we go, we have to explain ourselves. Our belief is absent from compulsory religious education classes. Our children ask at school, 'Why is our worship not taught?' I do not know how to explain this injustice to my grandchild. I wish he would not have to carry this pain." (P6, aged 66, born in Çorum, living in Istanbul)

As Honneth (2016) demonstrates, experiences of disrespect undermine individuals' sense of self-worth and weaken social bonds. In P6's account, legal injustice reflects a broader experience of not being recognized as an equal citizen at the societal level. P1's narrative reveals the existential dimension:

"Every election season hurts me inside. It feels as if they talk as though we do not exist. That weighs heavily on us. We are ignored and erased. I was born in Maraş. My family experienced Maraş when I was a child. My father said, 'We must leave,' and we moved away. Years have passed, but that fear has never left me. When we told our neighbors that we were Alevi, their behavior changed. I felt as if I had committed a crime. Over time, that feeling turned into anger. Why should I hide who I am?" (P1, aged 68, born in Maraş, living in Istanbul)

Goffman's (2014) theory of stigma provides an important conceptual framework for understanding how marginalized groups experience everyday interactions. Scheff's (1990) concept of emotional cycles explains how suppressed emotions are transmitted and intensified across generations, while Barbalet (1998) demonstrates that feelings of resentment emerge when past injustices remain unresolved and may become sources of political mobilization. Insights from the sociology of generations suggest that cohorts shaped by different historical conjunctures develop distinct emotional dispositions: older generations experienced the 1990s as a period of partial Alevi political visibility and incremental recognitional progress, while younger generations have come of age during a period marked by democratic backsliding and deepening authoritarian tendencies, producing intensified forms of disappointment. P19's account captures this generational divergence:

“When people hear my name, they immediately ask where I am from. ‘Tunceli?’ they say. Then the distance begins. During a job interview, the employer directly asked, ‘Are you from Dersim?’ I said yes. Then he said, ‘We will get back to you.’ Of course, they never did. I openly state on social media that I am Alevi because I see it as a political stance. The hate messages are very wearing they call us ‘infidel,’ ‘mum söndüren.’ After reading dozens of such messages every day, you become tired. My father says, ‘Our generation waited a long time. Maybe things will improve in yours.’ But I do not believe they will. Sometimes I think about leaving the country.” (P19, aged 28, born and living in Istanbul)

Bourdieu’s (2015) concept of symbolic violence helps explain how dominant world-views come to be perceived as natural and legitimate while alternative perspectives are systematically marginalized. Foucault (2005) demonstrates how power operates at the micro level through seemingly neutral bureaucratic and social practices that normalize certain identities while marginalizing others. Link and Phelan (2001) show that continuous exposure to discrimination contributes to chronic stress; Sue’s (2010) concept of microaggressions captures subtle yet persistent everyday forms that accumulate into significant emotional harm.

The findings from this theme demonstrate that feelings of injustice and non-recognition cannot be understood solely as responses to past events. They are continuously reproduced within present-day social relations through failed legal processes, institutional discrimination, and implicit exclusions in everyday life. This emotional condition is transmitted across generations and appears particularly intensified among younger participants.

3.3. Intergenerational Emotional Transmission and Postmemory

One of the most striking findings of the study is that younger participants who did not directly experience historical trauma engaged with these events through intense emotional attachments. Hirsch’s (2008) concept of postmemory describes the memory experiences of generations who did not personally witness traumatic events yet form powerful emotional bonds with them through familial transmission through photographs, stories, gestures, and everyday practices so deeply internalized that they come to feel like personal memories. Alongside such affective transmission, everyday observation and modelling within the family convey emotional dispositions and orientations toward the past (Bandura 1977).

As Halbwachs (2016) suggests, memory is reconstructed within social frameworks rather than preserved as individual recollection. Assmann’s (2015) concept of communicative memory highlights transmission through everyday interactions across three to four generations. Cem rituals, *deyiş*, and family commemorations of 2 July function as primary vehicles for this transmission, operating simultaneously as cognitive, emotional, and bodily processes. Yıldırım (2020b) has noted the role of collective memory in sustaining Alevi communal identity across generations, observing that this transmission is inseparable from the ritual and narrative practices that constitute Alevi sociality. P11’s account illustrates the power of non-verbal transmission:

“My mother did not talk much about these things. But somehow, she was still telling me something. Every 2 July, the atmosphere in the house would change. Heaviness would settle over us. As a child, I did not understand. My mother would be silent in the morning, even while preparing breakfast she moved slowly that day. My father too. They would not speak. My father would turn on the television and watch the news. Every year the same images carnations in front of Madımak, people crying. She would cry in the kitchen, and I would see her from the doorway. Only as I grew older did I begin to understand.” (P11, aged 39, born in Izmir, living in Izmir)

In this account, trauma is transmitted less through explicit narration than through bodily gestures and emotional atmosphere. The mother's silence and the shifting emotional environment of the home become powerful mechanisms of transmission. Ricoeur's (2017) reflections on the relationship between memory, history, and forgetting illuminate the complexity of this intergenerational process: younger generations sustain memories that official histories often attempt to marginalize or forget. P15's narrative demonstrates the constitutive role of postmemory in identity formation:

"My father would cry when he talked about Sivas. I was a child and did not fully understand, but when I saw him crying, I felt sad too. He was born in Tokat, close to Sivas. He was not there that day, but relatives were. Now, when I tell my friends about it, I feel the same emotions. I have never been there, but it feels as if I have. Being Alevi means carrying this history. My friends say, 'Why are you so affected? You were not there.'" (P15, aged 26, born and living in Istanbul)

Older participants reported consciously attempting to transmit this history while simultaneously recognizing the emotional burden involved. P8's account captures this intergenerational dilemma directly:

"I try to be careful when telling my son, because I wonder whether I am passing my fear onto him. But he needs to know. I was born in Tokat; we experienced Çorum I cannot forget it. We lived through fear. Then Sivas happened. Then Gazi. It never ends. When my son was little, he asked, 'Dad, why are we Alevi?' What should I tell him? Should I tell only the beautiful parts that we turn semah in the cem and believe in Hızır? How much detail should I give? It is a very difficult balance." (P8, aged 59, born in Tokat, living in Istanbul)

As Connerton (2019) demonstrates, social memory is transmitted bodily through ritualized performances. Stories, folk songs, and cem rituals function not merely as cultural expressions but as carriers of historical affect.

3.4. The Emotional Costs of Identity Visibility

Participants' experiences of openly expressing or concealing their Alevi identity can be analyzed through Goffman's (2014) theory of stigma and Ahmed's (2019) conceptualization of how emotions circulate within social spaces. Goffman demonstrates that individuals with stigmatized identities develop strategies of information management, continuously making decisions about disclosure or concealment both of which carry emotional costs. Goffman's (2016, p. 148) account of everyday self-presentation extends this point, showing how the staging of identity in ordinary encounters becomes a sustained form of interactional work. The sociology of Alevi identity has documented how fear, sustained secrecy, and experiences of discrimination shape the subjective dimension of this identity over time (Okan 2004; Dressler 2016). Importantly, the historical practice of concealment among Alevis is not simply a psychological response to social anxiety; it reflects a structural condition in which the alternative open identification has historically been associated with real vulnerability to violence and institutional marginalization (Yıldırım 2020b). P6's account illustrates the long-term psychological costs:

"When I moved from Çorum to Istanbul, I came with a different name. The change did not give me peace; on the contrary, it created constant fear. Every time I met someone, I worried they would discover my real past. Hiding who you are is terrible. I lied to my friends. When they asked where I was from, I said Ankara. Over the years, I lost a part of myself. Now I realize how painful it was to hide who I was. I tell my grandchildren never to hide themselves. But they also experience similar things, perhaps in different ways." (P6, aged 66, born in Çorum, living in Istanbul)

Hochschild's (2012) concept of emotional labor helps explain how everyday social interactions require continuous emotional regulation. Younger participants, by contrast, often embrace identity visibility as an explicit political stance while simultaneously experiencing its emotional burdens. P18's narrative illustrates the forms stigma takes in contemporary digital environments:

"It takes courage to tell university friends that I am Alevi. Some ask strange questions out of ignorance, others out of prejudice 'Do you blow out candles?' they ask. Constantly having to defend your identity exhausts you. I openly state that I am Alevi on social media because I see it as a political stance. Visibility matters. But the hate messages are very draining. At first, I responded to each message, but now I block them. Still, the anger remains inside me. Sometimes I wonder why I must live this way while others practice their beliefs freely." (P18, aged 25, born and living in Izmir)

P4's account reveals the long-term force of embodied memory the way fear, once formed under conditions of existential threat, does not dissolve when external circumstances improve:

"In our time, we had to keep everything hidden. There were no visible cemevis; we practiced secretly in homes. I grew up in Malatya, in an Alevi village, yet fear was always present. During the Maraş events in the 1970s, we were terrified, wondering if they would come for us too. My father bought a gun, and we kept watch at night. That fear still lives inside me. Now I live in Istanbul, and things seem better we can openly go to cemevi. But the fear never disappeared. Even today, when I go to a cemevi, I still look around instinctively. My daughter tells me not to be afraid anymore, but those who lived through those days know. That fear has entered our bodies." (P4, aged 74, born in Malatya, living in Istanbul)

The expression "fear has entered our bodies" captures something that Bourdieu's (2015) concept of habitus illuminates well: bodily dispositions formed under conditions of danger can persist long after those conditions have formally changed, embedded in gesture, posture, and perceptual orientation. Both concealment and visibility of identity thus carry significant emotional costs, though their forms differ across generations. Concealing identity produces self-alienation; revealing it requires a constant defensive posture. As Halbwachs (2016) and Ricoeur (2017) suggest, collective memory reproduces these experiences within broader social frameworks, sustaining emotional patterns across time.

3.5. Collective Emotional Experience in Cem Rituals

Participants' descriptions of cem rituals extend beyond viewing them as purely religious practices; these ceremonies emerge from the data as social spaces in which collective emotional experience is produced, historical memory is reproduced, and the affective wounds of non-recognition find symbolic repair. This interpretation aligns with Collins's (2004) theory of interaction rituals, which identifies four core elements: bodily co-presence, shared focus of attention, emotional synchronization, and the generation of collective emotional energy. Cem rituals incorporate all four dimensions. Crucially, however, the cem is not simply a generic ritual space, it carries specific forms and practices through which the transmission of historical trauma occurs. The *deyiş* (devotional folk songs), *mersiye* (elegies for Karbala and other martyrs), *semah* (the ritual turning dance), and the moment of collective remembrance in which the names of the fallen are spoken aloud all function as specific carriers of affective memory. Yıldırım (2020b) has documented how the cem's ritual structure is organized around a collective memory that encompasses both pre-Islamic Anatolian and Shi'i commemorative traditions, with the mourning of Karbala and the commemoration of Alevi martyrs forming an integrated affective sequence.

Connerton (2019, p. 85) demonstrates that social memory is sustained through ritualized bodily performances; in the cem, this sustenance is not incidental but architecturally central.

Durkheim's (2011) concept of collective effervescence explains how sacred rituals transport participants beyond the boundaries of everyday life, while Turner's (2018) concepts of liminality and *communitas* illuminate how ritual participation temporarily suspends ordinary social hierarchies and generates an egalitarian sense of community. The cem constitutes a space in which a stigmatized identity is not merely tolerated but affirmed the antithesis of the everyday experiences of exclusion described in the previous themes. P7's account captures this affective complexity:

"Faith flows like a flood from whatever the heart carries. A deep sorrow on one side, a state of love on the other. In that sacred space, there is no 'you' or 'me'; we become one. The dede speaks from the post, and the community begins the semah. Sisters, brothers, elders, the young everyone turns together. While the body turns in the semah, the mind travels elsewhere. Pir Sultan comes before my eyes. I remember Sivas; Maraş bleeds within me. I feel all the losses and departed souls, yet strangely the pain does not weigh as heavily there. Sorrow is kneaded with love. When the cem closes and the final prayer is recited, my old body grows tired, but my soul becomes light like a bird." (P7, aged 61, born in Sivas, living in Izmir)

In this account, the semah does not simply commemorate past suffering it transforms it. The body turning in ritual motion becomes a site where grief and love are simultaneously present, neither dissolving the other. Ahmed's (2019) theory of the circulation of emotions helps explain how emotions are produced relationally between individuals, symbols, and shared practices; the cem creates a structured environment in which grief circulates and is collectively held rather than privately borne. Assmann's (2015) concept of communicative memory further clarifies how such transmission unfolds through intergenerational interaction within ritual settings. P2's narrative illustrates how collective emotional experience materializes through the specific ritual acts of the cem:

"When the cem ends, everyone embraces each other. Those embraces contain so much shared pain, shared history, mutual understanding. The dede prays, saying, 'May your unity endure,' and people cry. Sometimes we laugh, sometimes we cry, but always together. No one is a stranger in the cem. Outside during the week, you feel alone and excluded because you are Alevi. But in the cem you are not alone; everyone accepts you. My children come with me, and it is important that they feel this belonging. This tradition must continue otherwise what would hold us together? The cem keeps us united." (P2, aged 57, born in Sivas, living in Izmir)

The contrast P2 draws between outside and inside between the week's exclusion and the cem's acceptance performs the sociological function Goffman (2014) described as relief experienced when stigmatized individuals are surrounded by members of their own group. Halbwachs (2016) highlights the role of collective practices in reproducing social memory, while Ricoeur (2017) distinguishes between official history and lived memory: the cem is a space of remembrance where traumas marginalized by official narratives are actively recalled and ritually held. P5's account connects this theme directly to the earlier finding on suspended mourning:

"When we commemorate during the cem, my heart cries. We are not remembering only one person; we remember all our losses Karbala, Sivas, Maraş, Gazi. Every loss finds a place in that ritual of remembrance. When the dede says, 'We remember our martyrs,' everyone falls silent. Tears flow. This is our way of mourning. The mourning we cannot perform elsewhere, we perform in the cem. I bring my grandchildren so they will learn

this tradition. Otherwise, they will be forgotten." (P5, aged 52, born in Erzincan, living in Izmir)

P5's account reveals the cem as the site where suspended mourning which cannot reach resolution within official public life finds its most complete expression. The ritual mourning for Karbala and the collective naming of contemporary martyrs are structurally fused, creating a commemorative practice that bridges centuries while remaining fully embedded in the present social condition of the community. Beyond serving as a site of worship, the cem thus operates simultaneously as a space where collective memory is reproduced, intergenerational emotional transmission occurs, unresolved mourning finds expression, and experiences of non-recognition encountered in everyday life are symbolically repaired.

4. Discussion

The central tension Freud identified in distinguishing completed mourning from melancholia concerns the inability to relinquish the lost object. Whereas mourning theoretically moves toward completion through gradual detachment from loss, melancholia involves the internalization of what has been lost the lost object collapses into the self and becomes constitutive of the subject's identity rather than remaining something external and separable (Freud 2019, p. 55). When this structure is extended to the collective level to the relationship, a community establishes with its historical losses, the dynamics become considerably more complex, and the explanatory stakes considerably higher.

Before proceeding with the analysis, it is worth addressing directly the terminological question that the concept of unfinished mourning raises. The choice of this term in a study of a marginalized community that has historically been subject to external pathologization requires justification not merely deployment. Alevism has long been interpreted through frameworks that cast Alevi identity as inherently secretive, doctrinally unstable, or psychologically defined by suffering. The *takiye* accusation the claim that Alevis deliberately conceal or misrepresent their beliefs is one among several external categorizations that have shaped how Alevi communities have been read from the outside (Dressler 2016). Introducing any affect-centred analytical category into this context requires that its function be made explicit.

Unfinished mourning in this study does not describe a psychological profile of Alevi people. It describes a collective emotional regime, a structured pattern of affective life produced by specific social, political, and historical conditions: the non-accountability of perpetrators, the non-recognition of places of worship, the ongoing marginalization of Alevi identity within official public culture. The question of why unfinished mourning rather than collective trauma, political grief, or historical injury is therefore not rhetorical. Collective trauma, as theorized by Alexander (2012), captures the processes through which communities narrate and collectively interpret shared suffering, but it does not specifically address the condition in which mourning is structurally prevented from reaching resolution by the ongoing absence of recognition. Political grief, following Butler's (2009, p. 73) formulation of grievable and non-grievable lives, captures the power asymmetry that determines whose losses are publicly mournable, but it does not address the intergenerational affective transmission that sustains these losses across generations who did not directly witness them. The melancholia reworked by Eng and Kazanjian (2003, p. 171) captures precisely the condition in which loss cannot be relinquished because it was never socially acknowledged as a loss and in which this irresolvable attachment becomes generative: a source of solidarity, creativity, and political endurance rather than a condition of passive suffering. It is this generative and structurally sustained condition that the present study renders, in sociological terms, as unfinished mourning. Reading unfinished mourning as a

political and aesthetic form rather than a private pathology has itself become a distinct line of inquiry (Frantzen 2024).

Within the historical trajectory examined in this study, Alevi losses extend far beyond the lives taken in Maraş, Çorum, and Sivas. What has also been lost are forms of equal citizenship, public recognition, and the social legitimacy required to mourn openly. Certain losses are never rendered socially mournable; when loss remains unrecognized, it cannot enter a collective process of mourning. It becomes internalized within both individual subjectivity and collective identity what might be described as a social texture of unfinished mourning that is neither chosen nor pathological but structurally produced.

Moments during the interviews in which participants wept while recounting events that occurred more than four decades earlier demonstrate that these experiences exceed individual grief. They indicate the persistence of unresolved collective affect. The structure of the Alevi fast observed during Muharram provides a particularly revealing instance: unlike the celebratory atmosphere associated with Ramadan, the Muharram fast is oriented toward mourning for martyrs and is characterized by restraint, remembrance, and collective sorrow. Read through Connerton's (2019) theory of bodily memory, this practice constitutes a ritualized form of mourning organized not according to individual life cycles but according to the weight of historical time. The suffering associated with Karbala is ritually re-enacted each year through laments and mersiye, transforming historical pain into an ongoing social experience embodied in the present.

From Ahmed's (2019) perspective on the circulation of emotions, these rituals function as sites where grief and sorrow attach themselves to specific narratives, symbols, and shared practices, thereby producing a common affective ground. The community does not simply invite the past into the present; the past persists because it has never fully departed.

The formation of unfinished mourning described here thus names not a psychiatric condition and not a community's essential character, but an analytical category describing how structural non-recognition across legal, political, and social domains produces and sustains a particular collective emotional regime. Viewed through Honneth's (2016) theory of recognition, this represents a chronic failure within both legal recognition and solidaristic recognition spheres. Such structural non-recognition prevents mourning from achieving resolution at the collective level. The repertoire of lamenting folk songs, the continuity of the mersiye tradition, the ritualized expressions of mourning within cem ceremonies, and the long-term symbolic transmission processes that Assmann (2015) conceptualizes as cultural memory collectively demonstrate how a shared emotional condition becomes embedded in the texture of social memory. Crucially, mourning has never reached closure: perpetrators of massacres have not been fully held accountable, places of worship remain insufficiently recognized within legal frameworks, and Alevi identity continues to oscillate between enforced concealment and everyday exclusion. This condition of unfinished mourning cannot be understood solely as a psychological or religious phenomenon; it is also, and perhaps primarily, a sociological and historical category, and treating it as such constitutes both an analytical and an ethical necessity.

5. Conclusions

This study examined the emotional structure of Alevi collective memory through the concept of unfinished mourning, demonstrating how historical traumas rooted in massacres, political violence, and ongoing non-recognition give rise to a distinctive collective emotional regime. The findings reveal that unfinished mourning should not be understood solely as an individual psychological condition but as a constitutive element of collective identity produced and sustained by structural social and political conditions. The persistence of unfinished mourning, combined with the ongoing experience of injustice and non-

recognition, produces a structure of unfinished mourning that simultaneously sustains practices of solidarity, meaning making, and resistance within the community.

Intergenerational emotional transmission, interpreted through the concept of post-memory, shows that younger generations develop intensely affective attachments to traumatic events they did not directly experience transmitted through emotional atmospheres, bodily practices, and everyday familial interactions rather than through explicit narrative alone. Women emerge as central actors in this process, functioning as primary carriers of emotional memory within familial and communal contexts. Cem rituals reinforce collective bonds by providing spaces in which shared emotional experiences are enacted through specific ritual forms *deyiş*, *mersiye*, *semah*, collective commemoration and in which the suspended mourning that cannot find expression in official public culture achieves its most complete articulation.

The primary theoretical contribution of this study lies in bringing together the sociology of emotions and the sociology of history to analyze the emotional dimensions of Alevi collective memory. By reconceptualizing unfinished mourning beyond a pathological framework and by grounding this reconceptualization in empirical material rather than applying it as an external schema the study proposes unfinished mourning as a mode of social solidarity and collective meaning production. It also proposes that the Alevi case offers a productive site for testing and extending existing frameworks: the community's internal diversity, the specificity of its ritual practices, and the particular form taken by structural non-recognition in the Turkish context all call for analytical attention that general theories of collective trauma alone cannot provide.

Future research may explore how geographical and cultural variations within Alevis shape emotional experiences more comparatively, particularly contrasts between Dersim-origin Kurds and Alevis and Maraş-Pazarcık-origin communities (the Elif Ana ocak communities), or between rural and urban Alevi contexts. Research including individuals who conceal their identities or disengage from ritual practice may illuminate alternative identity strategies and their emotional consequences. Ultimately, this study demonstrates that collective trauma cannot be understood through political or economic analysis alone; it possesses deeply affective and psychological dimensions. Placing these emotional dimensions at the center of analysis is essential for understanding how communities live with and through their historical experiences.

Supplementary Materials: The following supporting information can be downloaded at: <https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/rel17080897/s1>, Supplementary Material S1: Semi-Structured Interview Guide; Supplementary Material S2: Participant Demographic Characteristics.

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Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are not publicly available due to ethical restrictions and the need to protect participant confidentiality. The data were collected through audio-recorded in-depth interviews and are stored on encrypted devices accessible only to the research team. Anonymized transcripts may be made available upon reasonable request and subject to ethical approval.

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Appendix A

Table A1 summarises the demographic characteristics of the twenty participants.

Table A1. Participants' Demographic Characteristics.

PARTICIPANT	AGE	SEX	PLACE OF BIRTH	EDUCATION	OCCUPATION	CITY
P1	68	Female	Maraş	Primary school	Homemaker	Istanbul
P2	57	Female	Sivas	Middle School	Cleaning Worker	Izmir
P3	72	Female	Tunceli	Primary school	Retired	Istanbul
P4	74	Female	Malatya	High school	Retired Teacher	Istanbul
P5	52	Female	Erzincan	University	Civil Servant	Izmir
P6	66	Male	Çorum	High school	Retired worker	Istanbul
P7	61	Male	Sivas	Middle school	Small business owner	Izmir
P8	59	Male	Tokat	University	Teacher	Istanbul
P9	54	Male	Malatya	High school	Construction Worker	Izmir
P10	56	Male	Erzincan	University	Civil Servant	Istanbul
P11	39	Female	Izmir	University	Lawyer	Izmir
P12	44	Female	Istanbul	High school	Sales worker	Istanbul
P13	33	Female	Istanbul	Master's degree	Lecturer	Istanbul
P14	29	Female	Izmir	University	Engineer	Izmir
P15	26	Female	Istanbul	University	Graphic Designer	Istanbul
P16	31	Male	Izmir	University	Software developer	Izmir
P17	24	Male	Istanbul	University	Student	Istanbul
P18	25	Male	Izmir	University	Accountant	Izmir
P19	28	Male	Istanbul	Master's degree	Research Assistant	Istanbul
P20	22	Male	Istanbul	University	Student	Istanbul

Notes

- Central Alevi terms recur throughout this article. The *cem* is the principal Alevi collective worship ceremony; the *cemevi* is the building in which it is held. The *dede* is the hereditary spiritual guide who presides over the ceremony. *Semah* is the ritual turning performed during the *cem*; *deyiş* are sung devotional poems, and *mersiye* are laments commemorating the martyrs of Karbala. *Hızır* is an immortal, protective figure invoked in Alevi devotion and honoured through a period of fasting.
- The interview guide, reproduced in full in Supplementary Material S1, covered family narratives and their emotional tone, first encounters with accounts of collective violence, mourning practices, everyday experiences of injustice, the emotional dimensions of identity visibility, and affective experience within the *cem* and other rituals. The 387 pages of verbatim transcript, with paralinguistic detail preserved, were coded iteratively; codes were grouped into sub-themes and integrated into the five analytical

themes. Methodological rigour followed established qualitative criteria (Patton 2014): credibility through member checking with three participants, transferability through rich contextual description, dependability through step-by-step documentation, and confirmability through reflexive notes and transparent archiving. Ethical approval was granted by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Social and Human Sciences at Kocaeli University on 12 January 2026 (Decision No. 2026/01-7); participation was voluntary and could be withdrawn at any time, informed consent was obtained, and identifying details were anonymised. Given the sensitivity of the narratives, breaks and referral to professional psychological support were offered; encrypted data will be retained for five years and then destroyed.

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