

The Role of Ali's Icon in Alevism

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Abstract

It is well known that iconographic image representations are not tolerated in Muslim societies. However, the Shiite sect differs from others in this sense. The tradition of miniature and painting in Iran included the depiction of religious figures until the middle of the twentieth century. Although there are not many examples that have survived to the present day, examples of iconography have become widespread again since the nineteenth century¹. One of these figures, Hazrat Ali's paintings were also adapted by Alevi in Anatolia in the twentieth century and took their place in religious spaces (*djemevi*) and homes. Alevi are known as an eclectic and secular Islamic sect that does not go to mosques, does not pray, does not fast during Ramadan, and basically rejects the god-slave duality. From their creation stories to their dance-like worship, it is seen that Ali is even more prominent than the prophet Muhammad. The fact that figure of Ali has become controversial for Alevi since the new written sources exposed these images to criticism. Claims that it is incompatible with the philosophy of Alevism, that Ali is not a relative of the prophet Muhammad; it is argued that these figures also have the intention of making Alevi Shiite. Essentialist studies on what Alevism is taking the efforts of Alevi to Shiite up to the sixteenth century when they entered into relations with the Safavids. According to this, Shah Ismail spoiled the essence of Alevism and added the characteristics of the Jafari sect to it. Ali and Ahlul Bayt's beliefs were added to Alevism as a result of these contacts. The Ottoman Empire tried many ways to change its philosophy, as well as using force to keep the Alevi within the borders it wanted. The assimilation policies towards Alevi continue today with an effort to define Alevi within the boundaries of Shiism and ignore their differentiating aspects from common Islam. However, does the description that Alevi have integrated with Ali since the middle of the fifteenth century really serves this purpose? Or did it create other possibilities of resistance in a historical process where Sunni Islam was dominant and Alevi were systematically massacred? Based on this question, this study aims to look at the recent discussions of Alevism through Ali's position and image, by sharing some results from previous field studies analyzed thematically around the concept.

Keywords: Alevism, anthropology of religion, image studies

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1. Introduction

Alevi are one of the ethnoreligious communities in Turkey that constitute twenty percent of the population which comprises ethnic and regional diversity (Jenkins, 2020). They differ from the dominant Sunni Islam in their understanding of religion and God. Although Alevi have been subjected to massacres throughout history, they have been able to keep their faith alive.

Their unique way of praying is called *sammah* (a kind of dance realized by men and women together at the ritual of *djem*), their place of worship is called *djemevis* (djem house) and they have folk songs that help to transfer centuries-old beliefs and understandings of Islam from generation to generation. Although there are some theories that place Alevism beyond the borders of Islam, generally Alevi associations define themselves as members of a way in Islam. They have a trilogy of "Haq (God) Muhammad Ali". According to their belief, Ali is equal to the prophet, even more, superior to him, and he is named "the lion of God".

Unlike Sunnis, Alevi have distinctive iconography. It is well known that iconographic image representations are not tolerated in Muslim societies. However, the Shiite sect differs from others in this sense. The tradition of miniature and painting in Iran included the depiction of religious figures until the middle of the twentieth century. One of these figures, Ali's paintings were also adapted by Alevi in Anatolia in the twentieth century and took their place in religious spaces (*djemevi*) and homes.

However, some of the new written sources have exposed these images to criticism for their intention to make Alevi Shia (Turan, 2021; Bulut, 2015), which is seen as a more acceptable sect of Islam for the governments. Assimilation policies towards Alevi continue today, with an effort to define Alevi within the boundaries of Shiism and ignore their differences from the dominant Islam. This study tries to understand the role of Ali's iconography in keeping Alevism alive, based on the definitions of Alevism and the understanding of Ali in a field study realized with forty Alevi in Ankara between 2019-2021ⁱⁱ. After making depth-interviews with the participants, the narratives including Ali were selected thematically to understand the position of Ali in their eyes. Thematic analysis is "a method for identifying themes and patterns of meaning across a dataset in relation to a research question..." (Braun & Clarke, 2013:175) In thematic analysis, which is both explanatory and interpretive, a comprehensive and uninterrupted process of abstraction and in-depth analysis is carried out (Toker, 2022: 327). It lets us understand how people can interact with him not only for keeping their beliefs but also to change the icon itself according to their sources, under different circumstances. Especially during the Ottoman Empire, there were *fatwas* given by *ulama* like "it is lawful to kill them, to rob their possessions and to shed their blood" (Karolewski, 2008: 444). Alevi (Qizilbash tribes then, had to survive from being systematically massacred). There have been various examples of "how individuals and small groups, because of specific economic and political circumstances in their former position and

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among the assimilating group, may change their locality, their subsistence pattern, their political allegiance and form” (Barth, 1998: 24).

After all, does Ali really cause Alevism to lose its essence, or does he offer possibilities that make it easier for Alevis to survive? After clearing the problem of the study, it will be also under question how Ali is playing a role in drawing the borders of an ethnoreligious community. As a dynamic intersection set, ethnic identity occurs or is constructed somewhere between how they are defined and how they define themselves. It has a membership “which identifies itself and is identified by others, as constituting a category distinguishable” (Barth, 1998: 11).

2. Theoretical Frame

We are talking about Alevis as an ethnoreligious community. “The dynamics such as the formation and disruption of history, the occurrence of other ethnic groups within itself, its division and becoming inclusive in this context” (Ayđın, 2016: 13) allows us to see Alevism as an ethnoreligious category.

When the topic is religion, we have to consider its relationship with life. As Eliade says (1990: 13); “there is no ahistorical ‘pure religious phenomenon’ without its own cultural and social content. Because there is no ‘human phenomenon’ which is not a ‘historical phenomenon’. Every religious experience is expressed and conveyed in a specific historical context.”

As anthropologists, we are not interested in if there is a God or whose definition of God is better, which religion is right or wrong. These are not the questions of the anthropology of religion. “Not all religions refer to gods, nor do all make morality a central issue, etc. No religion is normal or typical of all religions; the truth is in the diversity“ (Eller, 2007: xv). Of course, an anthropologist can be or can write against a religious practice, like woman circumcision for example, or imperialistic problems. Cultural relativity doesn’t mean that we have to accept everything right because it is the culture. But what is questionable for an anthropology of religion is “what these beliefs or practices are doing in life” (Atay, 2021).

Like other cultural phenomena, religions can be treated as symbolic systems. Geertz’s emphasis on culture as an organized collection of symbolic systems focuses on how symbols affect the way people think about their world, “how symbols operate as vehicles of culture” (McGee, Warms, 2000: 467). Geertz (1973: 91) sees religion itself as a system of symbols, and defines the concept of the symbol as “any object, action, event, quality or relationship that serves as a tool for an understanding”. He is concerned with symbolic analysis from the actor’s point of view and searches for symbols within the relations with other events. In this case, these are Turk Alevis from Ankara who are originally from little cities around Ankara.

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It draws a path to place icons of Ali within the cultural system which also has political dimensions. How it is articulated with this belief or its role in the formation of the belief will be revealed in a freer discussion environment which Turkey doesn't have yet. Besides the critics of Ali as a historical figure and his implementation of Alevism; from the point of participants, these icons still have a certain level of importance. Not only as a historical figure but also as a tool for conveying the principles of Alevism from generation to generation. These principles, which belong to a belief that was kept secretly alive due to the massacres, could be transferred through oral culture, which is mostly composed of some idioms attributed to Ali.

In spite of the fact that we know them from much earlier dates, the name of the community appeared in the 18th century as Alevi, because the former name *Qizilbash* was identified with pejorative usages and had connotations of rebellions (Dressler, 2013: 273). The name itself evokes the supporters of Ali (the cousin of prophet Muhammed) and means "belonging to Ali" in Arabic, but Alevism in Anatolia and the Balkans has experienced its own adventure in filling the concept since the 16th century. There are many different groups and terms in Anatolia which are related to Alevism (like *Qizilbash* -the former name of them in the Ottoman Empire, Zaza -Kurds, Yörük, Abdal, Avshar, Tahtacı, Nusayri-Arabs, Chepni, Bektashis, etc).

3. Ali's Controversial Position

There are different views on the place of Ali and even Islam in Alevism. After giving some of these evaluations from academicians and writers, we can take a look at how Ali takes place in the narratives.

Ayfer Karakaya-Stump (2016: 13), who sees Alevism as a mystical and oppositional understanding of Islam, emphasizes that this understanding is Ali-centered and got formed with its institutions in the 15th century.

Another researcher, Erdoğan Aydın (2013: 24-27), who examines the relationship of Alevism with Ali, clearly states that the figure of Ali, especially before the death of the prophet Muhammad, does not fit with the philosophy of Alevism. According to him, Ali, mentioned by Alevism, is "a concept that includes divinity, not in the sense of cousin-groom Ali, but in the sense of a transcendent being". The "Haq, Muhammad, Ali" trilogy in Alevi idioms "pretends to talk about three separate personalities, but actually expresses the unity of the body in the sense of a single divine being". Behind this way of saying lies the fact that Alevism have to hide their identity against systematic oppression. The author, unlike the others, connects this trilogy of Alevism to the influence of the approach of Eastern churches such as Christianity, especially Armenian and Syriac, which consider the father, son, and holy spirit not as three separate gods, but as different aspects of the same god, and adds that Ali in the "Haq Muhammed Ali" trilogy is very much like Jesus.

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Turan (2021: 204, 217), one of the late writers, claims that the belief in the Ahlul Bayt and Ali was included in Alevism under the influence of the Safavids during the 15th century and harmed its essence. Shah Ismail, who tried to unite the anti-authoritarian Alevism and the Jafari sect of authoritarian Shiism, within the scope of his contradictory ideology, according to the author, “used Alevism to support the Turkmens while the Safavid state was being established”. The author, who also criticizes the studies that associate the “Haq Muhammad Ali” trilogy with Christianity, emphasizes that this trilogy was included in Alevism by Shah Ismail, who tried to please both Jafaris and Alevis, but the meaning of Alevism was different from the Ali that the Jafaris meant. For Alevis, “Haq Muhammad Ali” is three different ways of saying God; are three lights with the same meaning”. Because according to early sources of Alevism, there is no duality of God-servant in the belief, we are all bearers of the same light (Turan, 2021: 106).

Author Faik Bulut (2015: 13), who says that seeing Alevism in Islam is a method of brainwashing, claims that Alevism is shaped by its struggle with Islam. According to this, Hz. Ali is a sharia figure and is used for the purpose of dissolving Alevism in Islam, by converting it to Shiite.

If we look at the narratives of Ali, we find written sources mostly transmitted by the *dedes* in *djem*, and poems and folk songs transferred from generation to generation.

A narrative that shows the bodies of the prophet Muhammad and Ali in one piece can be understood as the symbol that expresses the meaning of the institution of "road brotherhood/companionship" (*musahiplik/gaham*). It is a solidarity institution that ensures the survival of the Alevi society socio-economically. Companionship, which is accepted as more than brotherhood, means "to undertake the responsibility of his lifelong brother and his family, support, and solidarity, sharing the property" (Kehl-Bodrogi, 2017: 169). The road brotherhood, which also takes place as the contribution of the *Ahilik* institution to Alevism in scientific studies (Turan, 2021); is symbolized through the prophet and Ali in a story originating from the Buyruq (Imam Cafar) and mostly told by the *dedes* to the community:

“The prophet said: Two men should be in league with each other! Be right now, Hazrat Muhammad became a companion and brother to Shah-e Mardan Ali and showed the meaning of unity. ...someone enviously asked: Prophet, take off your shirt and let us see! Thereupon, the prophet took off his shirt from his skin. All those who were there saw that the two of Muhammad and Ali were one body: We believed, they said” (Bal, 1997: 95).

As in this narrative, Alevis; while transferring their philosophy that brings equality instead of the separation between Muhammad and Ali to the next generations, paints a picture that will place the institution of "companion" on the ground of a society based on social solidarity. Although companionship cannot be kept alive as an institution because of urbanization, the perception of "equality" that identifies Ali and the prophet Muhammad continues to be conveyed as the most basic motto by Alevis: There is no duality.

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It is said that Ali is referred to as the “Lion of Allah”, both in my own interviews and in field studies with Alevi. The lion, to whom the prophet Muhammad gave his ring, is also seen as the guide that opens the “door of forty” when he says “I am the servant of the poor (hadimülfukara)” rather than “I am the messenger of God” (Kehl-Bodrogi, 2017; Yıldırım, 2018). All those in this council of forty are fed with a grape, and when one is injured, the others bleed. There are criticisms that similar Alevi narratives are full of stories demystifying Alevi history (Dressler, 2013; Algül; 1996). However, these narratives are important in keeping the egalitarian-sharing philosophy of Alevism alive.

The conveyed narrative of an Alevi *dede* from Çankırı, who was also invited to the djems in Ankara, on the origin of Alevism is within the framework of Islam and is Ali-centered, emphasizing that Islam has become cruel with Ali's elimination. This narrative is also the basis of the stories updated in the Alevi memory. Important principles such as not being on the side of those who allow persecution and not turning back from their path come to life in this narrative:

“Islam is love, egalitarian, against slavery. The Prophet says don't look for a guardian after me, raises Ali's hand and says, whoever loves Allah, loves Ali... An Alevi is also one who does not relinquish his confession, one who does not return despite being killed, hanged, cut, or flayed... Allah is one, Muhammad is the prophet of the end times, and Ali is his guardian. Ali is honest... Muawiyah and his successors did the worst things for Islam”ⁱⁱⁱ

These narratives obviously play an important role in shaping their understanding of Islam. Although their different point of view on Alevism, most of the Alevi interviewed told a quote attributed to him while they are defining the principles of their belief: “*Even if you are oppressed a thousand times, do not be cruel once*”^{iv}.

Some of those who have never been educated about what Alevism is, its history or rituals, and those who have the opportunity to listen to Alevism from the *dedes*; attribute important meanings to the figure of “Ali”. “*Ali is the lion of God for me. He is tolerant and fair*”^v. “*This is how I understand Alevism; Everything about me is free in Alevism, I understand my freedom. I understand how to express myself as a person. When you say Ali, my heart aches, I cry when I listen to your sayings. I cry for their suffering and injustice*”^{vi}. “*You will not be cruel once, and you will not stand on the side of the oppressor. In summary, this is Alevism for me*”^{vii}. “*Ali is a master, a mentor, a guide, he does not weigh the scales wrong, God is with Ali, and to remember him is the greatest worship in my opinion, this is what we heard from our dedes*”^{viii}. Contrary to the critical sources on Ali, Alevi participants’ understanding of Ali shows parallelism to their understanding of Alevism, which is based on justice and freedom.

With their Ali narratives, Alevi have also managed to keep their distance from the Sunni Islamic framework. For example, the theory that there is no need for formal conditions because the door of sharia was opened to them is not known by all of the Alevi. But instead,

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the claim that Ali was killed in the mosque in practice, constitutes the defense of some Alevi against the pressure for going to the mosque: *“We became Alevi because of Ali. We neither pray like them nor pray where Ali was killed while praying”*^{xix}, *“They don't accept the djeme house, why should Alevi go to the mosque? Didn't they stab Ali to death there”*^{xx}. For centuries, Alevi resist the pressure of dominant Sunni Islam which points out the mosques to Alevi instead of the recognition of djemevis. They do not define Ali according to his religious practice when he was alive, but they combine their belief with his life story including his death.

As in these examples, it would be wrong to think that believers are merely passive actors. In the work of Bria and Mayera (2017), we can see people revive their belief after communism in Albania with the help of such icons: *“Their embodying experiences contribute to setting the normative and semiotic elements of the worship. For example, in the mausoleums and tombs, they deposit the photos of people to ask for beatification and healing for them”* (2017: 47). In this study, we can see some examples of how they even see him in their dreams to search for hope sometimes: *“Of course, everything will be better, he (Ali) appeared in my dream with his green turban and sword. He tells me that this side will be flooded soon, and to go in the direction he showed us. I turn around and it shows a lush green field. We are heading there”*^{xxi}.

Sometimes, these icons can turn into a tool for making their existence accepted. When the president of Turkey visited for the first time an Alevi lodge in 2022, instead of Alevi icons, Arabic inscriptions hung on the wall behind him^{xxii}. This situation was met with great reaction by all of the Alevi organizations.^{xxiii} Icons of Ali and other figures of Alevi could make them come together against the dominant discourse.

There are some other icons of their belief that are indispensable for Alevi, like Haci Bektash (1209-1271), and Pir Sultan Abdal (1480-1550) which are important for conveying the belief. *“Alevism says what universal human rights say. We can even add animal rights, I remember Haci Bektash sitting among animals from his paintings”*^{xxiv}. We can add also the founder of the Turkish Republic, Atatürk (1881-1938) to these figures as the guarantee of their secular lifestyle. It is very common for Atatürk's photographs to be hung on the walls of djemevis.

Therefore, for Alevism, where oral sources come to the fore, the symbolic meanings of historical figures are more important than their reality in terms of their role in cultural transmission; and they have been changing historically. Some of them come forward while some are staying in the shade. For many Alevi today, like Ali and Haci Bektash, Atatürk is an important figure in this sense. An anthropological perspective, which considers culture as “a dynamic output of lived interactions” (Moore, 2015: 411), tinkers with today's world of meaning and takes into account the aspects that essentialist efforts miss. Historically, like all religions and sects, Alevism has redefined its borders by updating its discursive traditions with new personalities and new ideas. Just as the Alevi, who were in interacted with the

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leftist worldview, brought forward Hacı Bektash as a revolutionary figure in the 1970s (van Bruinessen, 2013). Atatürk also has been embraced again as a “secular” and “enlightened” figure against the rising Islamist discourse since the 2000s: *“It is more important for us, especially our girls, that our children receive a scientific education. We have moved far away from the republic of Atatürk”^{xv}*. *“The Alevi is someone who believes in democracy, defends secularism and stands up for Atatürk's principles. In short, the insurance of the country is Alevis”^{xvi}*. Alevis are still resisting anti-secular practices and regulations by playing with the borders of their ethnic identity and by putting forward their icons as symbols of the principles of their lifestyle, which is getting harder to protect. They can extend the borders for more solidarity against the pressure as they did before the election of 2023. Some of the participants had sympathy toward Kurdish opponents for the first time in their life. *“The HDP (Democratic Party of People) is a despised party, a victim of fate. We do compulsory military service, we pay taxes. But we do not get a share of the wealth. We give the imam's salary, yet we are humiliated”^{xvii}* *“I find what Selahattin Demirtaş (former leader of HDP) does very valuable. I think that (Alevis too) feel close to the established understanding of protecting the oppressed and the persecuted from the Alevi tradition”^{xviii}*. The story of Selahattin Demirtaş, who is still in prison after opposing the one-man regime, despite the decision of the European Higher Court of Human Rights, has caused the nationalist attitudes of Alevis to change, as it reminds the tragedy of Karbala that befell Ali's sons.

Conclusion

Ali as a religious figure has adapted to the belief of Alevism in the 15th century. Even the name itself (Alevis as the ones who are the followers of Ali), which began to be used after the eighteenth century; seeks to remove the insurgent connotations in order to make the *Qizilbash* manageable. Despite his controversial position in the recent Alevi literature, he is still a very important icon for many Alevis today. After resuming the literature, it has been aimed to show that with some data of field research conducted with Alevis from Ankara.

We can see the icons used creatively in different cases. They can be considered as the embodiment of faith that has been suppressed for centuries or as proof of their existence. They can serve to convey the principles of the belief from generation to generation. They can be tools for interpreting actively different cases by the believers and letting them be active. They can help to keep the borders or make them extend according to new circumstances.

It is necessary to make Alevis meet with the new sources of Alevism in a freer environment. It should be their decision to decide how to keep their belief alive from now on, or how to change it. But after being slaughtered for hundreds of years and performing their belief secretly; it should be accepted that Ali played an important role in adapting themselves to new conditions, as all of the beliefs have done with different figures in different epochs. With

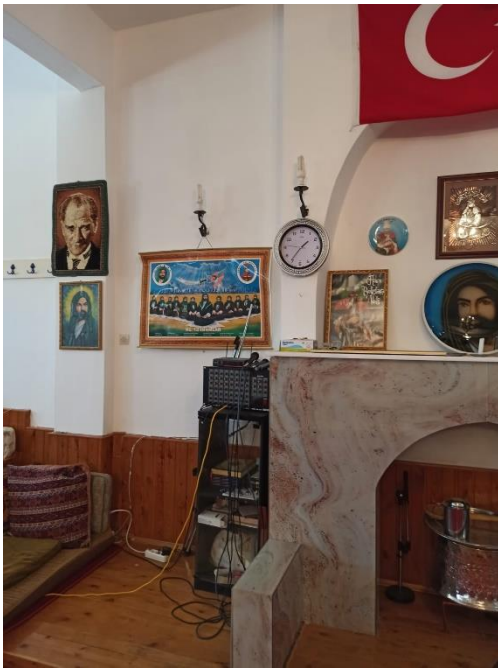
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their narratives of Ali, they might have reconstructed some parts of their belief but they also had a possibility to keep the essence of their belief by changing Ali.

Additional



Pictures from the archive of the writer, 8 August 2020, a djemevi, Çankırı/Turkey.

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Endnotes

ⁱ “Kaçarlar Döneminde Hz. Ali Portresi”, (Portrait of Ali during the period of Kachars), 27 Eylül 2014, *Şiilik Araştırmaları*, <http://siilikarastirmalari.blogspot.com/2014/09/kacarlar-doneminde-hz-ali-portresi.html>, cited 18 February 2022.

ⁱⁱ These are Turk Alevi who are mostly affiliated with their village associations, which was helpful to reach them, instead of Alevi organizations. The field research was aimed to grasp their understanding of Alevism, which has some different tendencies than the other Alevi, but there was also some data related to their ideas about Ali, which constitutes the subject of this article. The interviews were realized at their homes and attention was paid to the balance of the participants in terms of gender, age, and occupational diversity.

ⁱⁱⁱ Male, age 68, *dede*, interview date, and place: 8 August 2020/Çankırı

^{iv} Female, age 38, housewife, university graduate, interview date and place: 1 October 2019/Ankara; Female, age 45, housewife, high school graduate, interview date and place: 3 October 2019/Ankara; Female, 57 years old, retired worker, high school graduate, interview date and place: 26 February 2020/Ankara; Female, age 56, lawyer, university graduate, interview date and place: 4 August 2020/Ankara.

^v Female, age 50, informal worker, primary school graduate, interview date and place: 20 February 2021/Ankara

^{vi} Female, 59 years old, retired worker, primary school graduate, interview date and place: 18 August 2020/Ankara

^{vii} Female, age 45, housewife, high school graduate, interview date and place: 3 October 2019/Ankara

^{viii} Female, age 49, housewife, secondary school, interview date, and place: 17 February 2021/Ankara

^{ix} Male, age 75, retired worker, primary school graduate, interview date and place: 23 August 2020/Ankara

^x Female, age 38, housewife, university graduate, interview date and place: 1 October 2019/Ankara

^{xi} Female, age 61, housewife, primary school graduate, interview date and place: 18 February 2020/Ankara

^{xii} T24 Haber sitesi, 9 August 2022, <https://t24.com.tr/haber/erdogan-in-huseyin-gazi-cemevi-ziyareti-oncesi-yerleri-degistirilen-resimler-eski-yerlerine-asildi,1051629>, cited 31 August 2022.

^{xiii} Artigercek, “Alevi örgütlerinden Erdoğan’ın Cemevi ziyaretine tepki” (Reaction to Erdoğan’s djemevi visit by Alevi organizations), <https://artigercek.com/politika/alevi-orgutlerinden-erdogan-in-cemevi-ziyaretine-tepki-220489h>, cited 25/06/2023.

^{xiv} Male, age 30, accountant, university graduate, interview date and place: 1 October 2019/Ankara

^{xv} Female, age 48, housewife, high school graduate, interview date and place: 8 March 2020/Ankara

^{xvi} Male, age 66, retired civil servant, college graduate, interview date and place: 5 August 2020/Ankara

^{xvii} Male, age 66, retired civil servant, college graduate, interview date and place: 5 August 2020/Ankara

^{xviii} Female, age 56, lawyer, university graduate, interview date and place: 4 August 2020/Ankara