On 21 November 2000, Martin van Bruinessen, ISIM Chair at Utrecht University, delivered his inaugural lecture entitled ‘Muslims, Minorities and Modernity: The Restructuring of Heterodoxy in the Middle East and Southeast Asia’. The lecture compared Alevism in Turkey with kebatinan in Indonesia, where adherents of heterodox folk belief and practice – rather than gradually shifting towards scripturalist, shari-a-oriented Islam – were transformed into distinct religious minorities deliberately distancing themselves from orthodox Islam. The following is composed of excerpts from the lecture.

**Transformations of Heterodoxy**

In the early 20th century, Java witnessed the appearance of the first kebatinan movements. Mystical teachers with a smaller or larger following had been a common phenomenon, but now several such followings were organized into formal associations that outlawed their founders. They established rules for membership, regular meetings at set times, and standardized meditation exercises. Some movements established chapters in other towns and even villages, organized by a mystical bureaucracy that institutionalized itself. The teachings were – and this is another novelty – written, several have their own sacred scripture. Reading and studying these texts became part of the practice of kebatinan adepts – something I like to think of as the scripturalization of kebatinan.

After independence, most kebatinan movements joined in a confederation that lobbied for official recognition with a status comparable to religion. In the context of the political struggle between the Muslim parties and the Communists and Nationalists, the boundaries separating kebatinan from Sunni Islam were sharpened, most kebatinan movements affiliating themselves with the Communist or Nationalist parties. The Islamic element in their belief system, which had always existed, was often deliberately played down.

The name Alevi is a blanket term for a variety of heterodox communities, formerly relatively isolated one from the other, that are found all over present-day Turkey. Islam has strongly marked their belief system, but they have distinctive rituals that are very different from those of Sunni Islam. A long history of oppression made Alevi identity a stigma that many wished to conceal. Some communities assimilated, at least formally, to Sunni Islam; most Alevis enthusiastically embraced Turkey’s secularism that appeared to give them equal rights.

It was as recently as the late 1980s that there suddenly emerged a strong and successful movement to redefine, reconstruct and perhaps reinvent Alevism as a religious identity. This movement may be seen as a response to two developments that deeply affected the Alevis: the radical left, in which many Alevis had found a political home, was destroyed after the military coup of 1980, and in an attempt to pre-empt radical Islam, the new regime embraced a conservative brand of Sunni Islam which it imposed – though unsuccessfully – even on Alevi citizens.

In response to this, a new type of organization emerged: the Alevi cultural association, spearheaded by intellectuals of Alevi background and financed by Alevi businesses. It was these associations that reinvented Alevi ritual in the new urban context. The Alevis’ traditional religious authorities, a caste of holy men whose status was inherited, were involved in the process but no longer in leading roles. Lay intellectuals published numerous books and articles defining what Alevism was and what Alevis believed, interpreting their rituals, developing something of an Alevi theology. From a largely orally transmitted folk religion, Alevism appears to be developing into a scripturalist version of itself, a distinctly modern phenomenon.

The cases of Alevism and kebatinan represent an interesting variation on the gradual but inexorable shift from folk Islam to scripturalist Islam predicted by, for instance, Gellner’s well-known model of Muslim society. The emergence of a learned variety of the local tradition appears to be an alternative. In both cases, political developments were of crucial importance in the process. Under other circumstances, it may not have occurred. And even in establishing this alternative, the communities concerned had to engage scripturalist Islam and were to a large degree shaped by it.