



Saints in Islamic Ritual Music: Grief for İmam Hüseyin in Alevi Tradition

Dînî Müzikte Veliler: Alevî Geleneğinde İmam Hüseyin Yası

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the significance of saints in Islam based on the music used in rituals. The religious group Alevi, which this paper focuses on, has religious beliefs and practices that are a mixture of Shi'i Islam and Sufism. Alevi rituals are known to include song and dance as important elements. The music of the Alevis expresses not only their beliefs, philosophy, and religious customs, but also their social-political situation. Among the saints venerated in Alevi tradition, Imam Hüseyin (Al-Ḥusayn ibn 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, 626-680), who is the third Imam in Shi'i Islam and Prophet Muhammed's grandson and Imam Ali and Fatma's son, is one of the most important, after Muhammed and Ali. The song *mersiye* performed in Alevi ritual is dedicated to Imam Hüseyin. These songs are always incorporated in the Alevi *cem* ritual. How is he portrayed in the *cem* and music? This study examines the role of Alevi ritual singing by comparing how saints are represented by different types of ritual songs, with a focus on the *mersiye*.

Keywords: Alevi, music, Mersiye, cem, Karbala, Imam Hüseyin.

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INTRODUCTION

This study aims to explore the significance of saints in Islam based on the music used in rituals. The cultural characteristics of the religious group Alevi, referenced in this paper, are a involved combination of Sufism, Shi'ism, Shamanism and other religious elements. Alevi rituals are known to include songs and dances. Their music expresses not only their beliefs, philosophies, and religious customs, but also their social-political situation. Among the saints venerated in Alevi, Imam Hüseyin (Al-Hüsayn ibn 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālīb (626-680), who is the third Imam in Shi'i Islam and Prophet Muhammed's grandson and Imam Ali and Fatma's son, is one of the most important, after Prophet Muhammed and Imam Ali. Imam Hüseyin is the subject of a poem called *mersiye*. *Mersiye*, or *marthiya/marsiye*, is an important tradition in the Islamic world, especially in Shi'i Islam. In the Alevi tradition, *mersiye* is one of the procedures for their own ritual *cem*. This study examines the role of singing in Alevi rituals by comparing how saints are represented in the music played during the ritual, with a focus on the *mersiye*.

Alevi music has been examined by combining the methods and views of musicology with a sociological perspective. The sociological perspective is necessary because their musical practices often reflect their position as a religious minority and the political environment of Turkey. Karolewski discusses the traditional role of the song in Alevi ritual and its transition in modern times, pointing out the influence of Alevi social inconvenience.¹ Sağlam focuses on the religiosity

1 Janina Karolewski, "Ritual Text and Music in Turkish Alevism: Dimensions of Transmission and Bearers of Knowledge", in *Musical Text as Ritual Object*, eds. Hendrik Schulze, (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2015), 91-110.

and regionality of the *âşık* (minstrel) as an important provider of music in Turkey, and analyses the characteristics of the Sunni *âşık* and Alevi *âşık* in terms of their activities in Sivas Province and musical ant poetic content of their repertoire.² Özdemir, who is an Alevi *saz* (long-necked lute) performer, discusses Alevi's ritual musical practices in urbanization from his own experience of participating in *cem* (Alevi ritual) and from interviews with the faithfuls, focusing on the *zâkir* (musician in *cem*) in the rituals conducted in Istanbul.³

These studies are quite informative in that they examine Alevi music from both musicological and sociological perspectives. In this study, I will also investigate one of Alevi's musical practices, the *deyiş*, and I will focus in particular on the element of the 'saint' in the lyrics. I consider that it is possible to deepen our understanding of Alevi music as essentially religious practice not just social phenomenon. As mentioned above, this study will focus on Imam Hüseyin among the saints, because of my fieldwork experience. In my observation of *cem*, I found that the faithfuls extremely feel emotionally overwrought, when the songs about Imam Hüseyin are performed. In order to understand the importance of Alevi music in religious practice, it is necessary to consider the religious connotations of the lyrics and the melodies devised by the ritual musicians. By analysing the lyrics and melodies of the songs, I will clarify why the songs arouse emotions, how they achieve their effects, what the music and effects mean, and what makes them different from other types of music.

2 Hande Sağlam, "Musical and Textual Characteristic of Alevi and Sunni Âşık", in *A Diversity and Contact among Singer-Poet Traditions in Eastern Anatolia*, eds. Ulaş Özdemir et al. (Baden-Baden: Ergon Verlag, 2019), 131-128.

3 Ulaş Özdemir, *Kimlik, Ritüel, Müzik İcrası: İstanbul Cemevlerinde Zakirlik Hizmeti*, (İstanbul: Kolektifkitap, 2016).

1. THE ALEVIS

1.1. The Inhabited Area and Social Situation

The Alevi are a religious minority group in Turkey's Sunni-majority society. The name 'Alevi' comes from 'followers of Ali'.⁴ The Alevi faith has traditionally been prevalent among farmers living in the regions of Central and Eastern Anatolia, such as Sivas, Erzincan, Tunceli, Bingöl, Varto, Malatya, Adıyaman, Antep, Tokat, Amasya, Yozgat, Kırşehir, Nevşehir, and Kayseri.⁵

The Alevi have suffered from oppression as the minority. They are not recognised as a religious group by the Republic of Turkey, and therefore, their population is difficult to estimate from government statistics. According to David Shankland, they make up about 15–20% of Turkey's total population, although some researchers have suggested that the figure is more than 30%.⁶ Due to economic and social issues, such as unemployment, caused by the mechanisation of agriculture since the 1950s, a large population of farmers, including the Alevi people, migrated to large cities to work. Today, Alevi faithfuls reside in Istanbul and Ankara, as well as in foreign countries such as Germany and Austria.⁷ The migration of Alevis from their traditionally inhabited areas to urban areas and the political insecurity in Turkey have led to significant social activity by Alevis. In

4 *Mezhepler ve Tarikatlar Ansiklopedisi*, ed. Ethem Ruhi Fiğlalı, (İstanbul: Tercüman, 1987), 19.

5 Cemal Şener, *Türkiye'de Yaşayan Etnik ve Dinsel Gruplar*, (İstanbul: Etik Yayınlar, 2006), 73.

6 David Shankland, *The Alevis in Turkey: The Emergence of a Secular Islamic Tradition*, (New York: Routledge, 2003), 20-21.

7 For details about Alevi migration see: *Alevis in Europe: Voice of migration, Culture and identity*, ed. Tözün İssa, (New York: Routledge, 2017), and *Migration und Ritualtransfer/Religiöse Praxis der Aleviten, Jesiden und Nusairier zwischen Vorderem Orient und Westeuropa*, eds. Robert Langer et al., (Bern: Peter Lang Publishing, 2005).

particular, the 'Alevi Revival', which began in the late 1980s and 1990s, gave an impetus to activities such as publishing books, newspapers, and magazines; entering the media; asserting 'Alevi Identity' at festivals and cultural conferences, discussing Alevi beliefs and precepts in public debates.⁸ On the other hand, to this day, the problems that indicate the difficulty of its position, such as the absence of framework for Alevi in the religious class in school education and the pressure of 'Sunnization' have not yet been solved. The fact that in public they have to show *takiyye* (also known as *takiyya* or *taqiya* [hiding faith and beliefs by necessity]) gives us an idea of the oppression they face. The fact that the association, which is the centre of the Alevi community, has not been able to put the name 'Alevi' on their signboards is also one form of *takiyye*. In addition, the recent construction of *camii*s (mosques) in various places in Istanbul, especially in the vicinity of large Alevi associations, has been perceived by the Alevis as pressure for Sunnization. Similarly, the *türbes* (tombs) of saints worshipped by the Alevis have been 'mosque-nized' by adding *minarets* (tower of mosque).

1.2. Characteristics of Beliefs

The Alevi faith is a complex combination of components taken from different religions. According to Zarccone, a notable characteristic of Alevism is that it blends antinomian Sufism and extremist Shi'ism (*Ghuluvv*) with shamanic, Manichean, Zoroastrian, and Christian elements.⁹ For example, Zarccone

8 Rıza Yıldırım, "A Genealogy of Modern Alevism, 1950-2000: Elements of Continuity and Discontinuity", *Alevis in Europe: Voice of Migration, Culture and Identity*, ed. Tözün İssa, (New York: Routledge, 2017), 96, 114 and 107-108.

9 *Shamanism and Islam: Sufism, Healing Rituals and Spirits in the Muslim World*, ed. Thierry Zarccone et al., (London, New York: I. B. Tauris, 2013), 203.

points out that the influence of shamanism is visible in symbols such as cranes in the circling motion *semah* that they perform during rituals.¹⁰ Regarding the Sufi component of Alevism, it is greatly influenced by the *Bektaşî* order (*Bektaşîlik*).¹¹ It is said that Alevism originated when Hacı Bektaş Veli (1209-1271), the eponym of the *Bektaşî* order, spread his teachings among the villagers, and he is especially respected as a saint by Alevi people. The Alevi *cem* ritual is derived from a *Bektaşî* tradition.¹² Because of the Alevi's close association with the *Bektaşî* order, they are also referred to as *Alevi-Bektaşî*.

The relationship between Shi'i Islam and Alevi is quite a complicated subject. According to Rıza Yıldırım, in terms of sectarian position, common wisdom deems Alevism to lie within the fold of Shi'i Islam.¹³ Given the central place of Ali bin Ebu Tālip (598-661) (Imam Ali), the *ahl al-bayt* (People of the house or household of the Prophet Muhammed), the twelve imams, and the offspring of the prophet in their theology and religious praxis, a strong pro-'Alid position is obvious. In particular, the dominance of the twelve imams and ritual forms is the hallmark of Alevism. On the other hand, however, Yıldırım also notices that one should not confuse Alevism with Twelver Shi'ism, for they have certain differences both in terms of creed and socio-religious structure. Close scrutiny reveals that although convergence towards a Shi'i mode

of theology is apparent, a recognisably distinct flavour shows through in Alevi theology and religiosity.¹⁴ In fact, I have never heard of the Alevis considering themselves part of Shi'i Islam in my field research. Rather, they try to distance themselves as a liberal group as opposed to the extremist Shi'i group. Karakaya-Stump pushes against its treatment as a reincarnation of what is called *Ghulāt* Shi'ism that is associated with the initial party of 'Ali prior to the solidification of the imamate after Ja'far al-Sadiq. She said, surely one could identify several cogent parallels and overlaps between various early Shi'i ideas subsumed under *ghulūw* and a number of Alevi beliefs, starting with the centrality of 'Ali in Alevi religious culture and devotional life. These would, however, be insufficient to make a case for historical continuity without verifiable venues of transmission or direct borrowing, such as the one shown by other scholars in the case of the Nusayri-Alawites, for example. Furthermore, most Shi'i elements within Alevism, infused as they are with thoroughly esoteric system of beliefs, appear to have been mediated in large measure through Sufism.¹⁵

Thus, although it is difficult to clarify the relationship between the Alevi and the Shi'i Islam, the importance of the Twelve Imams in the Alevi religious practice is commonly pointed out. Imam Hüseyin, in particular, is given an important role in the rituals.

1.3. Saints in the Alevi Faith

In this section, we try to understand the types of saints within the Alevi faith. Alevi saint veneration is similar to that in Sufism and

10 Ibid. 203-213.

11 Irene Mélikoff, "Bektashi/Kızılbaş: Historical Bifurcation and Its Consequences", in *Alevi Identity: Cultural, Religious and Social Perspectives*, eds. Tord Olsson, Elisabeth Özdalga, Catharina Raudvere, (New York: Routledge, 1998), 1-7.

12 Özdemir, *Kimlik, Ritüel, Müzik İcrası*, 2016, 53-54.

13 Rıza Yıldırım, "Red Sulphur, the Great Remedy and the Supreme Name: Faith in the Twelve Imams and Shii Aspects of Alevi-Bektashi Piety", in *Shi'i Islam and Sufism: Classical Views and Modern Perspectives*, ed. Denis Hermann et al., (London : I. B. Tauris, 2020), 255.

14 Ibid. 255.

15 Ayfer Karakaya-Stump, *The Kizilbash/Alevis in Ottoman Anatolia: Sufism, Politics and Community*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 323.

Islamic culture. Tonaga¹⁶ points out that saints in Islam are classified as follows:

- (1) Founder of *tarikāt* and Sufis
- (2) People of the Prophet's lineage, including *the ahl al-bayt* and the Prophet himself
- (3) People who are considered great persons in Islamic history, such as the Prophet's companions, great scholars, and great historical figures
- (4) Pre-Islamic Prophets
- (5) *Majnūn* (a person who is immersed in the love of God), saints from other ancient religious faiths, and old heroes.

According to me, all these categories, especially the first and second, can apply to the saints who are mentioned in the Alevi rituals and commemorated during festivals. The first category includes Hacı Bektaş Veli, the eponym of the Bektāşi order and Abdal Musa (ca.1200-ca.1300), who was a disciple of Hacı Bektaş and played an important role in restructuring the knowledge and prayer ritual of the Alevis. Alevis carry out special *cems* and other events on days marking the death of important religious figures. For example, Hacıbektaş, the town of Nevşehir Province in the Central Anatolia, is said to be where Hacı Bektaş disappeared. Hence, many Alevis visit the town for pilgrimage and for the *anma törenleri* (memorial ceremony for death) conducted every August. In addition, the facilities of Alevi community are often built around tombs of great Sufis (FIGURE 1 and 2).



FIGURE 1



FIGURE 2

Tombs of great Sufi saint in Alevi lodge.
(Photo: Manami Suzuki, 2019, Istanbul)

16 Yasushi Tonaga, *イスラームとスーフィズム-神秘主義・聖者信仰・道徳*. 名古屋大学出版会, 2013, 164.

As for the second category, after Allah and Prophet Muhammed, Ali, after whom Alevism is named, is important in Alevism. In rituals, Ali's name is often called alongside Allah and Muhammed, such as 'Ya Allah, Ya Muhammed, and Ya Ali'. Additionally, the *Shahada* (profession of faith) in Alevi also mentions Ali as follows:

Eşhedü en lâ ilâhe illallah ve eşhedü enne Muhammeden abdühü ve resûlühü, Ali 'yyün veliyullah (I bear witness that Allah is the only God, I bear witness that Muhammed is the messenger of God, and I bear witness that Ali is the vicegerent of God.)

The Twelve Imams are emphasised in Alevi faith. In particular, Imam Hüseyin, al-Ḥusayn ibn 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib (626-680), grandson of the prophet Muhammed and son of Ali ibn Abī Ṭālib and Muhammed's daughter Fatma, is given more importance. He was the central figure of the Battle of Karbala, which took place in Karbala (Kerbela), currently in Iraq, between Hüseyin and Caliph Yezid I (Yazīd ibn Mu'āwiya ibn 'Abī Sufyān, 646-683) of Umayya in the year 680. This horrific event, including the pain of the relentless bloodshed Hüseyin and his family experienced, the agony of thirst due to the cut-off of the route to the river, and the pathetic end of the family as prisoners of war, has been transmitted to this day as 'the Tragedy of Karbala'. As will be described in a later chapter, Hüseyin and his tragic story hold an important place in Alevi customs and we can find the importance in Alevi songs.

The reverence for these saints is expressed in the prayers and actions Alevi recite in their daily lives, and in the poems and songs they write. The expression of reverence is also consolidated in their own ritual *cems*. This paper will focus on how the Prophet's lineage, especially the Twelve Imams, who fall into the second of these categories, are represented in the music played at the *cem* ritual.

1.4. Cem

The most important and distinct feature of Alevism is the religious ritual called *cem*. The name 'cem' is derived from the Arabic word 'gathering' and is carried out by a group of Alevi faithfuls and never performed alone, as the name suggests. The ritual is carried out in a room called *cemevi* (*cem* house) rather than in *camii* (mosque). It is said that *cem* has its roots in *Kırklar Meclisi* (assembly of forty saints).¹⁷ This is the episode that accompanies the Prophet Muhammed's ascension to the Kingdom of Heaven as recorded in the 17th chapter of the Qur'an, *al-isrā'* (The night journey). According to the episode, when Muhammed returned from heaven, he knocked at the gate of the meeting place where his followers, including his family such as his daughter Fatma and her husband Ali, were gathered. *Kırklar Meclisi* refers to both the gathering place and the episode itself. Additionally, the fact that Fatma was there is the reason why women can participate in *cem*.¹⁸

In *cem*, the 12 roles, called *On iki Hizmet* (12 services), are distributed among the faithful.¹⁹ These roles are as follows: *dede*, *rehber*, *gözcü*, *çerağcı*, *zakir*, *süpürgeci*, *sakkacı*, *lokmacı* (*kurbancı*), *kapıcı*, *meydancı*, *peyikçi*, and *semağçı* (*pervane*).²⁰ The individuals who are assigned these roles perform various actions according to the respective service (*hizmet*) during the ritual, such as lighting and extinguishing three candles (*çerağcı*), sweeping the floor with a broom (*süpürgeci*), and spreading a carpet (*meydancı*).

The procedure of *cem* is as follows:²¹

17 Özdemir, *Kimlik, Ritüel, Müzik İcrası*, 2016, 69-72.

18 Mehmet Yaman, *Alevilik: İnanç-Edep-Erkan*, (İstanbul: Demos Yayınları, 2013), 158.

19 Except for the *dede*. A person who is born in a special family called *ocak* can be in charge of the *dede*.

20 Yaman, *Alevilik: İnanç-Edep-Erkan*, 2013, 171-172.

21 I made this procedure list based on the references and observations in Istanbul, 2016-2019. The details

Note: Underline shows first appearance *On iki Hizmet* and shaded text shows music part

1. *Dede, rehber, zakir* enter the cemevi by kissing the door and floor three times. *Kapıcı* stands by the door and *gözcü* watches the faithfuls to maintain quiet.

2. Sermon by *Dede*

3. The appointment of Hizmet is accompanied with '*On iki hizmet deyişi*' by *zakir*.

4. *Meydancı* spreads the Meydan Postu (holy carpet) while chanting '*Ya Allah, Ya Muhammed, Ya Ali*' and defines the central place of *cem*.

5. *Çerağcı* lights three candles while chanting '*Ya Allah*', '*Ya Mohammed*' and '*Ya Ali*', three times each.

6. *Süpürgeci* sweeps the floor with a broom three times while chanting '*Ya Allah, Ya Muhammed, Ya Ali*'.

7. A pair of *ibrikçi* wash their hands three times and kiss each other three times while chanting '*Ya Allah, Ya Muhammed, Ya Ali*' using the water blessed by the *dede*.

8. *Zakir* sings '*düvaz imam*'

9. *Zakir* sings '*tevhid*'

10. *Zakir* sings '*miraçlama*'

11. *Zakir* sings '*semah*' and *semahçı* whirl '*Kırklar semahi*' or '*giriş semahi*'

12. *Zakir* sings '*semah*' and *semahçı* whirl other *semahs*

of the *cem*s vary from community to community and region to region. In particular, the content is very different in urban areas such as Istanbul and countryside such as the central and eastern part of Turkey, which is the traditional home of the Alevi. In addition to such regional variations, the standardization of Alevi rituals in the 'Alevi revival' social movement of the late 1980s-1990s, brought about significant changes in the *cem*. Please note that the *cem* procedure I have presented in this paper is based on my observations, mainly in Istanbul, and is only a case study.

13. *Sakkacı* mournfully intone *dua* (phrase of prayer) for Hüseyin

14. *Sakkacı* distributes *Sakka Suyu* (holy water) among the faithfuls (sometimes sprinkled on them)

15. *Zakir* sings '*Mersiye*'

16. *Süpürgeci* again sweeps the floor with a broom three times while chanting '*Ya Allah*', '*Ya Muhammed*', and '*Ya Ali*'.

16. *Çerağcı* puts out three candles while chanting '*Ya Allah*', '*Ya Mohammed*' and '*Ya Ali*', three times each.

17. *Meydancı* folds the Meydan Postu (holy carpet) while chanting '*Ya Allah, Ya Muhammed, Ya Ali*'.

18. *Lokmacı* (or *Kurbancı*) distributes *Lokma* (sacred meal) and *Kurban* (sacrificial animal) among the faithfuls.

The musical parts of the *cem* are more memorable. Some rituals are accompanied by the sound of instruments and songs. The role of music in these rituals goes beyond creating an atmosphere of worship. The songs fulfil a meaningful function by honouring the great achievements of the saints, highlighting their importance, and mourning their deaths.

2. SAINTS IN ALEVI RITUAL MUSIC

In this section, I will discuss how Muhammed and *ahl al-bayt* as saints are represented in the musical elements of *cem*, that is, in the instrumental music and songs.

2.1. Religious Symbol Embodied as Musical Instrument

First, I will discuss the special instrument of Alevi. Generally, the music in *cem* is performed with *saz*, a long-necked lute (Figure 3).²² The *saz* is a folk instrument generally

²² In my research to date, I have never found any instruments other than *saz* used in *cem*s. However, at

played in Anatolia and the Balkan Peninsula. It is also regarded by the Alevi as a religious symbol.²³ Ayhan Erol said, *saz* is an ‘icon’ of the Alevi identity.²⁴



FIGURE 3: Saz or baglama.

(Photo: Manami Suzuki, 2016)

Not only is it of great importance, but *saz* is also treated as a holy object that directly embodies the saint. One belief is that the *saz* physically symbolises the Muhammed – the body of the instrument represents his body, the plate represents his chest, the neck represents his arm, the pegbox represents his head, and the spool represents his ears.²⁵ Other lore state that the *saz* represents the body of Ali and his sword *zulfikar*.²⁶ Currently, the *saz* is composed of three courses and uses around seven strings, but this is different from the historical *saz*. It was changed due to technical developments such as volume and playing technique. Originally, the *saz* contained three strings. These three strings symbolically stand for Allah, Muhammed, and Ali.

Another example of a type of *saz* is called the *dede sazı*, which has a pyramidal body, while the common *saz* has an egg-shaped body (FIGURE 4 and 5). The *dede sazı* has 12 frets, instead of the usual 19 to 23 strings. The pyramidal body is associated with Allah,

concerts and other non-ritual occasions, instruments other than *saz* occasionally are added as ensemble, or an electric *saz* is used instead of the traditional one.

23 Özdemir, *Kimlik, Ritüel, Müzik İcrası*, 2016, 93-95.

24 Ayhan Erol, *Müzik Üzerine Düşünmek*, (Istanbul: Bağlam Yayıncılık, 2009), 117.

25 From interviews with Erdal Erzincan (August 2012, Istanbul).

26 Irene Markoff, “The Role of Expressive Culture in the Demystification of a Secret Sect of Islam: The Case of the Alevis of in Turkey”, *The World of Music* 28, 3 (1986), 42-43.

Muhammed, and Ali, and the 12 frets are associated with the Twelve Imams. I have noticed that the numbers three and twelve are important for the Alevis - it occurs in the *cem* as well as in daily customs, for example, 3 kisses while greeting, 12 pillars constructed in buildings of the Alevis, and so on.



FIGURE 4: Dede sazı.



FIGURE 5: The bottom side of dede sazı (left) and common saz(right).

In addition, Alevi musicians often refer to the *saz* as *telli Kur’an* (the Qur’an with strings)²⁷ and this phrase is also found in the literature about Alevi.²⁸ Zakir, the *saz* performer in *cem*, is referred to as *konuşan Kur’an* (the speaking Qur’an).²⁹ Although Alevi beliefs differ from those of other Islamic groups in many aspects, they are still based around the

27 From interviews with Erdal Erzincan (August 2012, Istanbul) and Mansur Bildik (July 2017, Vienna).

28 for example, Ulaş Özdemir, “Between Debate and Sources - Defining Alevi Music”, in *Alevism between Standardisation and Plurality*, ed. Benjamin Weineck et al., (Bern: Peret Lang, 2018), 172.

29 Banu Mustan Dönmez, *Alevi Müzik Uyanışı*, (Ankara: Gece Kitaplığı, 2015), 69.

words and deeds of Allah, Muhammed, and Ali as found in the Qur'an and Hadith. We find the idea that the Alevi identifies the *saz* with the Qur'an, which is the most important scripture in Islam. It follows that the *saz* is treated by the Alevi as an object to be revered for guiding them, just like the Qur'an. Thus, the *saz* is important not only for its practical use but also as an embodiment of the saint and the holy book.

2.2. Saints in Alevi Songs

This section considers how saints are described in Alevi ritual songs. Alevi songs are divided into several categories according to the content of their verses, and almost all of them contain the names of Allah or saints, however, here I will focus on the songs with verses about saints. First, I will discuss the songs about the Twelve Imams and Muhammed, and then I will give a detailed analysis of the songs about Hüseyin, which is the main subject of this paper.

Alevi songs are known as *deyiş* (or *nefes*) and are generally sung to the accompaniment of the *saz*. Its musical characteristics, including the use of the *saz* as a folk instrument, are similar to the common Turkish folk song (*türkü*), and the line between the two types of music is ambiguous. When *deyiş* is sung outside of the ritual place, it is sometimes confused with *türkü*. On the other hand, just as the whirling *semah*, which is performed in *cem* and involves dance-like movements, is always described as *dönmek* (to wheel) rather than *oyynamak* (to dance), therefore the *deyiş* is clearly distinguished from folk songs. According to Dönmez, *deyiş* is *okunur* (readable) things, and just like the Sufi orders that Alevism was influenced by treated their songs as *nefes* (soul, breath), the practice in *cem* is not considered to be music.³⁰

30 Ibid. 70-71.

Some of the *deyiş* poems are newly written in modern times, but many originate in the minstrels of the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries, and are sung to melodies self-composed or passed down by the performers. In particular, the poems written by the *Yedi (Ulu) Ozanlar* (the seven [great] minstrels), Nesîmî (14th century), Şah Hatâyî (Şah İsmail) (1487-1524), Yemînî (15th century), Fuzûlî (ca.1494–1556), Virânî (16th century), Pir Sultan Abdal (16th century), and Kul Himmet (16th century) are still widely regarded as masterpieces. *Ozan*, also *âşık*, refers to minstrels active in Anatolia; *yedi ozanlar* are listed as honorable minstrel representatives of Anatolia. They are respected by Alevi as saints who brought faith to Alevi in the form of poetry.

The *deyiş* is divided into the following categories according to the content of the poems and each place in the *cem* where each song is sung is generally fixed. Here I have indicated the placement of the songs sung during the *cem*, as well as the characteristics of the lyrics (see the procedure table in 1.3 *Cem*).

-*Oniki hizmet deyişi*: A song for appointing *hizmet*s; *hizmet*'s name and role are explained in the lyrics (see 3rd of procedure of *cem*).

-*Düvaz imam*: A song listing the names of the Twelve Imams (see 8th of procedure of *cem*).

-*Tevhid*: The lyrics are composed of repeated short phrases such as 'La İlahe İllAllah'. (see 9th of procedure of *cem*).

-*Mersiye*: A lament for the martyrdom of Imam Hüseyin in Karbala (see 15th of procedure of *cem*).

-*Miraçlama*: Epic lyrics of the episode of Prophet Muhammed's ascension (see 10th of procedure of *cem*).

-*Semah*: A song that accompanies a religious whirling *semah* (see 11th and 13th of procedure of *cem*).

In particular, three of these—*düvaz imam*, *mersiye*, and *miraçlama*—focus on saints. How are the saints represented and how are their actions depicted in the *deyiş* poems?

2.2.1. *Deyiş* as School Textbook —*Düvaz imam* and *Miraçlama*

I will first consider *düvaz imam* and *miraçlama*. These two types of *deyiş* have similar functions. Although these two *deyişs* are not the main subject of this paper, they are songs about saints, like *mersiye*. By comparing their analyses, I aim to make clear the characteristics of the *mersiye*.

Düvaz imam

The *düvaz imam* refers to the ‘Twelve Imams’ in Persian *Davâzdah Emâm*. The Twelve Imams are the spiritual and political successors to the Prophet Muhammed in the Twelver Shi’ism; however, they are also emphasised in Alevism. In *düvaz imam*, their names are enumerated in the lyrics. Below is an example of the lyrics of one of the most famous *düvaz imam* by Kul Himmet, who was one of *Yedi Ozanlar*. Numbers 1–12 are parts of the Imams’ names.

*Medet Allah Ya Muhammet Ya Ali[1]
Yusuf Kuyusunda Zindana Düştüm
Gülbengi Çekilen Bektaş-ı Veli
Gayretiniz Yok Mu Ummana Düştüm*

*Fatime Ananın Eteğın Tuttum
Server Muhammed’e Göz Gönül Kattım
İmam Hasan[2] İle Çok Metah Sattım
Şah Hüseyin[3] İle Dükkana Düştüm*

*Haydar Haydar Haydar Dükkana
Düştüm*

*İmam-ı Zeynel’e[4] Can Kuban Eттіm
Muhammed Bakır’la[5] Musayıb Tuttum
Cafer-i Sadık’a[6] Göz Gönül Kattım
Naci Deryasında Ummana Düştüm*

*Musa Kazım[7] Şah Rıza’ya[8] Kavuş-
tum*

*Kerbela Çölünde Cenge Giriştim
Yezit Ordusuyla Hayli Vuruştum
Yaralandı Sinem Al Kana Düştüm*

*Taki[9] Naki[10] Askeri’dir[11] Nurumuz
Mehdi [12] Mağarada Gizli Sırrımız
Cebrail Önümüz, Cerrah Berimiz
Kırklar’ın Cem’inde Erkana Düştüm*

*Oniki İmam Dergahı’nda Ölüm Var
Gece Gündüz Sohbetim Var Demim Var
Çok Günahım Varsa Neden Gamım Var
Ali Gibi Şah-ı Merdan’a Düştüm*

*Haydar Haydar Haydar Merdan’a
Düştüm*

*Kul Himmet Üstadım Bu Nasıl Yazı
Lezzet Verir Şirin Muhabbet Tuzu
Ali’nin Alnında Zöhre Yıldızı
Meyli Muhabbeti Selmana Düştüm*

Help me Allah, Oh Muhammed, Oh Ali
I’ve fallen into your dungeon in the Yu-
suf’s Well
Bektaş-ı Veli whose Gülbengs are
prayed
Is there not your endeavour? I have fall-
en into ocean.

I’ve joined the tariqa of Mother Fatma
I’ve lost my heart to the Lord Mu-
hammed
I’ve sold many goods with Imam Hasan
I’ve fallen into a store with Shah Hüseyin
Haydar(Ali’s nickname) Haydar Haydar.
I’ve fallen into a store.

I’ve lost my soul to the Imam Zeyn-al
Abidin
I’ve become blood brothers with Mu-
hammed al-Bakir
I’ve lost my heart to the Cafer al-Sadik
I’ve fallen into the sea in the ocean of
impeccable prophets

I've come together with Musa al-Kadhim Shah Rıza

I've gone to war in the Desert Karbala
I've fought a war with army of Yezid
My chest has got wounded, I've fallen
into red blood

Taki Naki and Askeri are our splendour
Mehdi is our secret in the cave
Gabriel is our guide, Cerrah is our onward
I've fallen into way in the cem of Forties

There is death in the convent of twelve
Imams

There is fondness and complacency day
and night

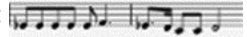
Why do I grieve if I have so many sins
I have fallen into Şah-ı Merdan (King'
warriors) like Ali

Haydar Haydar Haydar. I've fallen into
Şah-ı Merdan

Kul Himmet my Master, what's this fate?
The pleasant salt of the fondness enriches
The Venus is on the forehead of Ali
I've lost my heart to the Salman

In the lyrics, the names of the Twelve Imams are read in turn, beginning with Ali, the first Imam, followed by his sons Hasan (Al-Hasan ibn 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, 625-670), and Hüseyin, and then Hüseyin's son Zeynel (Ali ibn Hüseyin Zayn al-Abidin ca.659-ca.713). The names of Prophet Muhammed, the Prophet's daughter and Ali's wife Fatma, and even often the names of those who are not ahl al-bayt, such as Hacı Bektaş-ı Veli, are included. The lyrics are stanza by stanza or line by line, independent, and fragmentary, with no overarching meaning. In other words, the lyrics focus on representing the names of the Twelve Imams through a clear rhythm of sounds.

The melody of *düvaz imam* often consists of a simple and short rhythmic and melodic repetition. The melodic example for *Medet Allah Ya Muhammet Ya Ali* as follows;

Basic melody pattern: 

variation 1: 

variation 2: 

According to Elçi's research, many *düvaz imam* consist of such two to four-bar motifs diversified by small changes in sound and rhythm.³¹

The singer also sings in a monotonous manner without excessive inflection. Because of the simplicity of the melody, the listener sometimes joins in the singing. The structure of the song suggests that the sole aim is to chant the names of the Imams by singing together, rather than to exhibit artistry or convey emotion.

Miraçlama

The *miraçlama* is derived from the Arabic word *Mi'rāj* which refers to Muhammed's ascension. It is an epic poem narrating the story of Muhammed's ascension found in the 17th chapter of the Qur'an, *al-isrā'* (The night journey). One night, Muhammed rides a feathered horse named Burāq, and is guided by the angel Cebrail (Jibrā'īl, Gabriel) on a journey from Mecca to the mosque in Jerusalem, and from there further into the heavenly world. On his journey, Muhammed met with the prophets before him and finally had an audience with Allah in the uppermost stratum of heaven. He promises Allah that humans will pray five times a day and then return to Earth. With the advent of Islam, this story was transmitted to various parts of the Islamic world, told in various languages, and retold in many manuscripts. In some cases, it has also been commemorated through rituals.

As I mentioned above, the ascension episode is one of the foundations of Alevi beliefs,

31 Armağan Coşkun Elçi, "Duvazlar/Duvazimamlar Üzerine Müzikal Bir Çerçeve", *Türk Kültürü ve Hacı Bektaş Veli Araştırma Dergisi*, 57 (2011): 148-149.

as it leads to the episode of *Kırklar Meclisi*, which is associated with the establishment of the Alevi ritual *cem*. Moreover, the origin of their emblematic religious practice, the dance-like whirling *semah*, also lies in this episode. After Muhammed joined the *Kırklar* (Muhammed's forty disciples), he crushed the grapes offered by Ali and drank them as *şerbet*. According to tradition, he called out the name of Allah and danced with the *Kırklar*.³² These episodes are described in the following lyrics.

*Geldi çağırıldı Cebrail
Hak Muhammed Mustafa'ya
Hak seni Mirac'a okur
Dâvete Kadir Hüda'ya.
(...)*

*Kudretten üç hon geldi
Sütü elma baldan aldı
Muhammed destini sundu
Nuş etti azametullaha.*

*Doksan bin kelâm danıştı
İki cihan dostu dostuna
Tevhidi armağan verdi
Yeryüzündeki insana.
(...)*

*Ol şerbetten biri içti
Cümlesi de oldu hayran
Mümin müslüm üryan büryan
Hep girdiler semaha.*

*Cümlesi de el çırpıben
Dediler ki Allah Allah
Muhammed bile girdi
Kırklar ile semaha.*

The archangel Jibreel came down,
To the righteous Muhammed.
(Cebrail said), Allah has invited you.
The Almighty Allah has called you.

32 Neşe Ayışit Onatça, *Alevi-Bektaşî Kültüründe Kırklar Semahı Müzikal Analiz Çalışması*, (Ankara: BağlamYayınçılık, 2007), 60-67, 72-74.

Three trays came down from the sky,
Each tray had milk, apples, and honey,
Muhammed took some of them,
And he was intoxicated with the great
Allah.

Muhammed, the friend of two worlds,
exchanged 90,000 secret words with
God.
The Prophet delivered the Tevhid,
To the people of the earth.

When one of the them drank the şerbet,
they all went into ecstasy.
Those who believed and obeyed Allah,
began to whirl semah.

They all flapped their hands
and said, 'Allah! Allah!'
Muhammed joined
semah with Kırklar

In addition to these lyrics based on Muhammed's mystical experiences, *miraçlama* consists of theatrical movements that accompany the lyrics, such as standing, sitting, and rolling the sash around the waist. Then, Alevis begin to whirl *semah* at the end of the song, while singing the words '*Kırklar ile semaha*'. It is assumed to have a role in confirming and sharing important episodes related to the origins of Alevi customs by narrating the mystical experiences of Muhammed in the form of an epic poem.



FIGURE 6: Alevi faithful make a movement like a sash around the waist.
(Photo: Manami Suzuki, 2019, Istanbul)



Ge-ldi çağır-dı Ce-b-ra-il hu yu hu yu hu Hak Mu-ham-med Mus-ta-fa'-ya.

Basic melody pattern for *Geldi Çağırdı Cebrail*: one melody per two lines, repeated twice in one stanza. Almost the same melody is repeated with small variations until the end of the poem.

The melody, like that of the *düvaz imam*, is composed of repeated short phrases. I assume that this musical composition also aims to convey the epic event to the congregation by emphasizing simplicity rather than artistry. Furthermore, the movements that accompany the words are designed to help the congregation relive the characters in the episode and more effectively learn about this important episode that led to the birth of Alevism.

These two types of *deyiş* have played an important role in Alevi culture, not only as an accompaniment to *cem* and *semah*. It is assumed that these *deyiş* songs and the repetitions they contain help followers grasp and remember important facts related to specially positioned saints and the origins of Alevism's religious structure. Understandably, the use of short, simple melodies that are easy for people to learn and the use of movements mimicking the actions in the stories help listeners memorize important episodes in the lives of saints.

According to Sağlam, for centuries, the Alevis were not allowed to practice their religion in public and were not allowed to pass on their religion in written form to the next generation. Therefore, music was the ideal element for teaching the philosophy of religion to their younger generations. For Alevis, there is no such thing as a religious ceremony without music.³³ Furthermore,

33 Sağlam, "Musical and Textual Characteristic of Alevi and Sunni Âşik", 2019, 131-132.

according to Karolewski, Alevi music transmits excerpts of Alevi knowledge; thus, by being performed at special occasions, the music also serves as a means to teach, repeat, and interpret textual knowledge and religious beliefs.³⁴ That is to say, *düvaz imam* and *miraçlama* clearly function like textbooks on the saints.

3. THE MUSIC OF GRIEF - *MERSIYE*

In this section, we will examine the *mersiye*. *Mersiye* is one type of the *deyiş* that are sung in *cem*, however, it is slightly different from the two types of *deyiş* discussed in the previous section. What is particularly remarkable is the strong emotion, especially the expression of sorrow in *mersiye* for a saint. I consider that this expression of sorrow gives the *mersiye* a different function in addition to that of textbooks on saints.

Mersiye is not only an Alevi tradition, but an important Islamic tradition, especially in Shi'i Islam. The word *mersiye* is Turkish; in Arabic it is *marthiya*, and in Persian it is *marsiye*, which differs in pronunciation from Turkish in some details. In the original Arabic word means 'mourning', but today it is also used to refer to 'dirge', due to the ways in which they express the mourning. Originally, it was used to mourn the death of a family member, a friend, a hero, a protector, or a person of great religious or

34 Karolewski, "Ritual Text and Music in Turkish Alevism", 2015, 93.

political importance; to praise the deceased's achievements and virtues; and to provide comfort to the loved ones of the deceased. In Shi'i Islam, one of the most important occasions for the practice of *mersiye* is *ta'ziye*, the remembrance event for Imam. The role of the *mersiye* is particularly important in the *ta'ziye* held on the tenth day of Muharram (the day of *Āshūrā*), the day of Imam Hüseyin's martyrdom.

In the year 680, a conflict broke out in Karbala (Kerbela), currently in Iraq, between Hüseyin, the grandson of Muhammed, the son of Ali and Fatma, and Caliph Yezid I of Umayya. It is called the Battle of Karbala, but actually it was a one-sided slaughter in which 70 men on Hüseyin's side faced 4000 of Yezid's soldiers. This horrific event, including the pain of the relentless bloodshed Hussain and his family experienced, the agony of thirst due to the cut-off of the supply route to the river, and the pathetic end of the family as prisoners of war, has been transmitted to this day also as the Tragedy of Karbala. The *ta'ziye* of *Āshūrā* day is remembrance for this episode. All the rituals commemorate the epic tragedy and the death of Hüseyin and his family. They recount this epic down to its smallest detail so as to enhance its emotional impact on the believers, who cry and lament the misfortunes of the *ahl al-bayt* and the atrocities perpetrated by their enemies.³⁵ The *marsiye/marathiya*, is sung as a dirge or recited in verse as poem.

The Alevi *mersiye* is, as mentioned above, a part of the religious musical repertoire, the *deyiş*, which is so important that it is included as one of the ritual procedures. In the *cem* procedure (see Section 1.3. *Cem*), *mersiye*

is performed in the 15th step and combined with the 13th and 14th steps about *Sakka Suyu* (Holy Water). This is because the procedure of *sakka suyu*, as well as *mersiye*, is conducted to share and comfort the severe thirst that Hüseyin and his family experienced in the battle. In the *sakka suyu* procedure, the *dua* (prayer) is chanted for Hüseyin's thirst and suffering. This *dua* is chanted with sorrowful wailing. The example of the *dua* for *sakka suyu* is as follows:

*Geçmişiz biz can-ü baştan Hak erenler
aşkına
Can gözü dem-be-dem Hakk'ı görenler
aşkına
Kerbela'da su içmeden can verenler
aşkına
Gözüm yaşın sebil ettim, için İmam Hü-
seyin aşkına
Aşk olsun içenlere, rahmet göçenlere,
lanet olsun Yezid'e
Allah ey Allah...*

(For the saints to whom we give our hearts
For people who see the saints with the eyes of their heart
For the people who died in Karbala without drinking water
For Imam Hüseyin, I offer you my tears.
Give love to them who (water) drinker, mercy to them who died, and curse to Yezid
Allah ey Allah...)

From the next, I show the characteristics of the *mersiye* poem and melody by analysing their similarities to the three *mersiye*, '*Bugün matem günü geldi*' ('Today the mourning day has come' written by Şah Hatâyî), '*Kerbela Çölü'nden bir koyun geldi*' ('A sheep came from the desert of Karbala' by Pir Sultan Abdal), and '*Çekelim aşkın yayın*' ('Let us draw a bow of love' by Kul Himmet).

35 Sabrina Mervin, "'Āshūrā' Rituals, Identity and Politics: A Comparative Approach (Lebanon and India)", in *The Study of Shi'i Islam: History, Theology and Law*, eds. Farhad Daftary et al., (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014), 511.

3.1. Mersiye as Poem

Example 1: *Bugün Matem Günü Geldi* (Today the Mourning Day Has Come)

*Bugün matem günü geldi
Ah Hüseyinim vah Hüseyinim
Senin derdin bağrım deldi
Ah Hüseyinim vah Hüseyinim*

*Şehit düşmüş Şah-ı Merdan
Şah Hüseyinim, canım(vah) Hüseyinim*

*Bizimle gelenler gelsin
Serini meydana koysun
Hüseyin ile şehit olsun
Ah Hüseyinim vah Hüseyinim*

*Şehit düşmüş Şah-ı Merdan
Şah Hüseyinim, canım(vah) Hüseyinim*

*Kerbela'nın yazıları
Şehid düştü gazileri
Fatma Ana kuzuları
Ah Hasanım vah Hüseyinim*

*Şehit düşmüş Şah-ı Merdan
Şah Hüseyinim canım(vah) Hüseyinim*

*Kerbelanın önü düzdür
Geceler bana gündüzdür
Şah Kerbela'da yalnızdır
Ah Hüseyinim vah Hüseyinim*

Today the mourning day has come
Ah my Hüseyin oh my Hüseyin
Your suffer pierced through my heart
Ah Hüseyinim vah Hüseyinim

The King of valiant men has martyred
King my Hüseyin, my dear Hüseyin
Come, those who are with us
Let them lay their heads in meydan
Let them be martyred with Hüseyin
Ah my Hüseyin Oh my Hüseyin

The King of valiant men has martyred
King my Hüseyin, my dear Hüseyin
Karbala's writings
Martyred gazis(warriors for the faith)

The lambs of Mother Fatma,
Ah my Hasan Oh my Hüseyin
The King of valiant men has martyred
King my Hüseyin, my dear Hüseyin
The road of Karbala is straight
Nights have become days for me
King is alone in Karbala
Ah my Hüseyin Oh my Hüseyin

Poem: Written by Manami Suzuki, performed by dede in Karacaahmet lodge of Istanbul, 2019.

This poem was written by Şah Hatâyî (Şah İsmail), one of *Yedi (Ulu) Ozanlar*. This *mersiye* '*Bugün matem günü geldi*' is also frequently performed in *cem*.

Firstly, what we see in this poem is the expression of the pain felt by 'I', that is, the Alevi faithful as a singer or listener. For example, we have the following phrases: *Senin derdin bağrım deldi* ('Your suffer pierced through my heart').

The next stanza seems to suggest martyrdom; however, while the Alevi have similar characteristics to Shi'i Islam, including the object of their faith, they tend to distance themselves from an extremist view of Islam and preference being a 'liberal religious group'.

*Bizimle gelenler gelsin
Serini meydana koysun
Hüseyin ile şehit olsun
Ah Hüseyinim vah Hüseyinim*

Come, those who are with us
Let them lay their heads in meydan
Let them be martyred with Hüseyin
Ah my Hüseyin Oh my Hüseyin

That is, it should be seen as a device to emphasize the community sense of the Alevi as those who stand beside Hüseyin as 'his comrades who share his suffering', and at the same time, as the remnant of *mersiye* tradition inherited from other regions.

In the poem, the pain of losing Hüseyin is expressed in various words such as following phrase: *Geceler bana gündüzdür (Nights have become days for me)* The despair of the loss is symbolically expressed by saying that the morning, which should have been bright, has become night, a world without light.

The stanza of this poem consists of four lines, and for each stanza in this melody, the following two lines were added by later *zahir*.

*Şehit düşmüş Şah-ı Merdan
Şah Hüseyinim, canım(vah) Hüseyinim*

Elçi said that the refrain added at the end of the stanza provides emphasis and intonation, and facilitates the sharing of the pain of the martyrs of Karbala by stimulating listeners emotionally.³⁶

According to Yazıcı, dramatic and romantic work is effectively formed by emphasizing the emotional elements of what is considered 'good' for Hüseyin and his compatriots.³⁷ For instance, Fatma (Fāṭimah bint Muḥammad, 605-632), the wife of Ali and the mother of Hüseyin, is often described as a mother who mourns the death of her son, while Zeyneb (Zaynab bint 'Alī, 626-682), the sister who defended Hüseyin's son Ali (Ali ibn Husayn Zayn al-Abidin) after Hüseyin's death, is represented in the *mersiye* sung by women as a person who mourns the death of her brother and impeaches Yezid. The phrase 'Fatma Ana kuzuları' (The lambs of Mother Fatma) mentions to his mother Fatma, 'the one who is good for Hüseyin and his family'. Also, a sheep is a familiar animal in Anatolia, and at the same time it is offered as a *kurban* (sacrifice) in Islamic culture, including Alevism. The word 'lamb' implies pity for the animal

that is to be slaughtered, and in *mersiye*, it is represented as the sacrifice of Hüseyin and his family in the battle. In this poem, the lamb is plural as *kuzuları* (lambs), so they represent Hüseyin and his old brother Hasan. Even in the phrase in that line, Hasan's name is called in the part where Hüseyin's name has been called before, *Ah Hasanım vah Hüseyinim* (Ah my Hasan Oh my Hüseyin).

Example 2: Kerbela Çölü'nden Bir Koyun Geldi (A Sheep Came from the Desert of Karbala)

This poem was written by Pir Sultan Abdal, also one of *Yedi (Ulu) Ozanlar*.

*Kerbela Çölü'nden bir koyun geldi,
Kuzum diye meleyüben ağladı.
Koyunun sadası bağırimi deldi,
Yürekteki yaralarım dağladı.*

*Koyun yere koydu nazlı dizlerin,
Dinleyeyim şeker gibi sözlerin,
Kibleye döndürmüş kara gözlerin,
Koyun sesi yüreğim dağladı.*

*Muhammed koyunun aslını sordu,
Koyun dara geçip hoş zarı kıldı.
Kuzu kurban olmaz, ya niçin oldu?
Fatma Ana'nın gözyaşları çağladı.*

*Koyun eydür benim kuzum aldılar,
Beni hasret ateşine saldılar.
Cebrail, Mikail bile geldiler,
Selman İmam'ların belin bağladı.*

*Muhammed koyunun aslın aradı,
Kuzum dedi koyun ayak diredi.
Naci derler bir güruhtur türedi,
Zülfikar kınından çıktı zağladı.*

*Koyun eydür kuzum hasların hası,
Nüh felekten öte gelirdi sesi.
Yarın mahşer günü kılam davası,
Deyince Muhammed Ali ağladı.*

*Pir Sultan'im, firkat bağırimi deldi,
Ali, Fatma, Düldül, Zülfikar geldi.*

36 Elçi, "Duvazlar/Duvazımamlar Üzerine Müzikal Bir Çerçeve", 2011, 136-137.

37 Mehmet Yazıcı, *Alevi Değişlerinin ve Gülbanglarının Sosyolojik Analizi*, (İstanbul: Çıra Yayınları, 2011), 213-214.

*Kuzu kurban olmaz, ya niçin oldu?
Kırklar da Hü deyip özün birledi.*

A sheep came from the Karbala desert
It bleated and cried, ‘my child’
The sheep’s voice pierced my heart
It cauterized the wounds in my heart

The sheep put her pretty knees on the floor
Let’s hear its sweet words
Your black (lovely) eyes are turned to the Qibla
The sheep’s voice cauterized my heart
Muhammed questioned the origin of the sheep.
The sheep entered the house and was greatly grieved.
The lamb should not have been sacrificed, but why was it?
The mother Fatma’s tears overflowed

The sheep say, they have taken away my lamb
And threw me into the flames of separation
Even Cebrail and Mikail both came
And tied (the sash) around the waist of the Selman Imams

Muhammed looked for the origin of the sheep
The sheep resisted, while saying ‘my child’
The people known as the Naci were established in such a way
He took the Zülfikar out of its sheath and sharpened it

The sheep said, my child is the best of the best.
A voice came from beyond the seven heavens:
When Muhammad said ‘I will complain on the Day of Judgment’, Ali wept.

I am Pir Sultan, the separation pierced through my heart.

Ali, Fatma, Döldül, and Zülfikar have come.

The lamb should not have been sacrificed, but why was it?

The Kırklar says Hü that Allah is only one

Poem: Written by Manami Suzuki, performed by *zakir* in Garip dede lodge of Istanbul, 2019.

This poem is unique in that it focuses on sheep that have lost her child. The sheep complains to Muhammad about the unjust deprivation of her child (lamb), and laments with strong words of grief such as *Beni hasret ateşine saldılar* (They threw me into the flames of separation) and *Kuzum diye meleyüben ağladı* (It bleated and cried, ‘my child’). The weeping sheep, that tearfully searches for the lamb that has been taken away, symbolizes the Mother Fatma, who has lost her child Hüseyin. The tears of the sad sheep show us the tragedy of the separation and convey a deeper sense of the grief experienced by Mother Fatma due to the martyrdom of Hüseyin.

It is not only the grief of the loss of Hüseyin that the poem narrates. In the latter part of the poem, the justification for fighting against Yezid, the cause of the tragedy, is shown in the description of Muhammed and Ali crying over Hüseyin’s death and standing up with his swords (*Zülfikar*) and his horse (*Döldül*). It is assumed that the poem not only comforts the Alevi for the disadvantages they face as a minority, but also brings about a sense of unity as Ali’s campaign.

3.2. Melody for *Mersiye*

The above is an example of melody based on a poem *Bugün matem günü geldi*. The *deyiş*’s melody to the poem is created and performed by *zakir* (musicians in *cem*) at their discretion; however, some poems have

Çe - ke - lim aş - kın ya - yı - n Ce - me gir - me - sin ha - yı - n

5 Tev - hid kara rın bul - du Yol er - kân ye - rin al - dı Mü - min - ler ah çeki - p a - ğ - la - dı

6 Ah Hü - se - y - nim, vah Hü - se - y - n, şah Hü - se - y - n

10 Ev - ve - li Hü di - ye - li - m, A - hı - rı Hü di - ye - li - m

14 La - net yezidin ca - nı - na Ger - çe - ge di ye de - mi - ne

15 Ge - r - çe - ge Hü - ü - Al - lah Hü ü - ü - ü - ü -

Score: Written by Manami Suzuki, performed by *dede* in Karacaahmet lodge of Istanbul, 2019.

a certain established melody that is shared among the musicians. This melody is a typical example of a shared melody set to *Bugün matem günü geldi*, which I have heard in several *cems* and on musical media such as CDs and YouTube.

This melody starts on a low note and gradually rises, reaching the highest note in the third bar of the second section. After that, it descends gradually, calling out Hüseyin's name. Elizabeth Tolbert refers to this kind of descending melodic shape in laments as 'iconic for a sigh', which is common to laments in many regions.³⁸ In a quatrain, the poetic accent is placed, especially at the final line, and is emphasised by repetition.³⁹ It often bears the name Hüseyin.

38 Elizabeth Tolbert, "Women Cry with Words: Symbolization of Affect in the Karelian Lament", in *ICTM Yearbook for Traditional Music* 22, ed. Dieter Christensen, 1990, 87.

39 Elçi, "Duvazlar/Duvazımlar Üzerine Müzikal Bir Çerçeve", 2011, 136.

Looking at the melody, Hüseyin's name in the third system is stretched out for a long length as if lamenting, and then aimlessly wonders and downwards to reach the lowest note. The singer also gradually lowers the volume toward the end, as if he/she is grieving Hüseyin's death with a sigh. In other words, the refrain from the poem and *zakir*'s singing technique assist in 'sharing the pain', and the 'sharing' is pointed out as one of the purposes of singing *mersiye*.

The melody, which corresponds to part B of the poem, is represented here as a musical notation; however, the rhythm of each note is even more non-isotonic. The melodic line is vocalised over a narrow range of pitches, more like a 'narrative' than a 'song'. This can be seen as a stylisation of the spoken word or crying voice that Estelle Amy del la Bretéque called 'melodized speech'.⁴⁰ The melody

40 Estelle Amy de la Bretéque, "Voices of Sorrow: Melodized Speech, Laments and Heroic Narratives

mp

Bu-gün ma-tem gü - nü gel-di - i Ah Hü-sey-nim vah Hü - sey-ni - m

allarg.-----rfz

Se- nin de - r din ba - ğ rı - m de - l - di Se-nin de- r-din ba - ğ - rı - m de - l - di

f

Ah Hü - se - ey - ni - m vah Hü - se - y - ni - m

mf dim.-----

Score: Written by Manami Suzuki, performed by *zakir* in Garip Dede lodge of Istanbul, 2019

gradually increases in pitch throughout part A, reaching the highest note at the beginning of part B. The highest notes are marked with the words *Tevhid* (Oneness) and *Lanet* (Curse). The former, of course, indicates the absoluteness of Allah in whom one should put faith. The latter is the word that makes up the phrase *Lanet yezidin canına* (Curse on Yezid's life) or *Yezide lanet olsun* (Curse on Yezid). The phrase is a direct expression of resentment against the 'nefarious Yezid' who was a cause of Hüseyin's martyrdom, and is included in many *mersiye* repertoire, as well as in the *dua* (prayer) chanted for Hüseyin's thirst and suffering in the *sakka suyu* procedure before singing *mersiye*.⁴¹ This *dua* is also chanted with the same emotionally sorrowful, wailing manner as *mersiye*. The example of the *dua* for *sakka suyu* is as mentioned above.

After reaching the highest note, which represents the important word, the melody main-

tains its energy and enters into a sorrowful narrative. At this point, the melody slips downward and occasionally wavers, indicating the instability caused by grief.

- (A) Çekelim aşkın yayın
- (A) Ceme girmesin hayın
- (B) Tevhid kararını buldu
- (B) Yol erkân yerini aldı
- (B) Müminler ah çekip ağladı
- (C) Ah Hasan'ım, vah Hüseyin, şah Hüseyin
- (A) Evveli Hü diyelim
- (A) Ahır Hü diyelim
- (B) Lanet yezidin canına
- (B) Gerçeğe diye demine
- (C) Gerçeğe Hü, Allah Hü

As shown above, in the poem, the stanza consisting of AABB (B) is added with a verse that calls out with sorrow to Hasan, Hüseyin, and Allah. This part is a direct mournful cry expressed through words and melody. I have observed that when this part is sung, the faithfuls listening to this *mersiye*, as if in response to the phrase, eject cries of lamentation such as 'vah Hüseyin!' 'Ya allah!' 'Ya Ali Hü!'

Among Yezidis of Armenia", in *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 44, ed. Don Niles, 2012: 129-148; de la Bretèque, "Self-Sacrifice, Womanhood, and Melodized Speech: Three Case Studies from the Caucasus and Anatolia", *Asian Music* 47, 1 (2016): 29-63.

41 About procedure of *cem*, see 1.2. The procedure of Alevi's ritual *cem* and the music.

In other words, this part is a refrain to bring more synergy to the dramatic sorrow through the rhythmic ‘lamenting voices’ of the singers and the listeners.

The grief for Hüseyin is also expressed through physical actions. For example, when the *mersiye* is sung, Alevis hold hands with each other, sway their bodies, and sometimes pound on their own chests with fists. (FIGURE 7)



FIGURE 7: Alevi faithfuls, who hold each other’s hands and share the grief for Hüseyin.

(Photo: Manami Suzuki, 2019, Istanbul)

In addition, before each of these *mersiyes* is sung, a stirring *saz* is improvised as a prelude to the song. This serves as a ‘harbinger of tragedy’ and prepares the listeners for the tragedy. This is also one of the devices that make *mersiye* effective.

The common denominator in these poems is the presence of the ‘I’ who feels the death of Hüseyin and his followers as pain. The ‘I’ refers to the one who shares the pain with Hüseyin, that is, it is the faithfuls who sing and listen. By including the congregation as the ‘I’ in the poem’s description of the tragedy, the poem immerses them in its world. This device has the effect of giving a sense of unity to the faithful as ‘we’ surrounding the oppressed Hüseyin. In addition, the melody with its descending movements and fine curving gives the impression of instability, as if agitated by grief, and adds a more dra-

matic effect to remembrance of the tragedy of the martyrdom in Karbala. Also, Hüseyin’s name is expressed in long and high notes; that is, the sorrowful voices are stylized as a musical tone.

As mentioned above, even though the other poems also talk about saints, the *düvaz imam* and *miraçlama* are simple light melodies that do not involve intense emotional expression. This contrast indicates that the *mersiye*, as an epic poem, not only conveys the Alevi’s religious traditions, but also emphasizes the importance of touching the emotions of the faithfuls.

4. THE SOCIAL ROLES OF IMAM HÜSEYİN IN *MERSIYE* FOR ALEVI COMMUNITY

Finally, I would like to consider the effects of *mersiye* on the Alevi community. For Alevi, *mersiye* is not only a part of the ritual procedure and a communication tool to share the tragedy of Hüseyin, but it has also had an influence on their social formation. This is due to the social position in which they find themselves.

As I pointed out in the overview, the Alevi are a religious minority in Turkey’s Sunni-majority society. They have a history of being subjected to inconvenience and oppression because of their social position. In this context, *mersiye* has played a role in validating the position of Alevis as innocent people who have to resist various hardships, and in confirming and strengthening the links between Alevi faithfuls. In the first place, it represents an episode in which in the name of ‘justice’ Hüseyin and his family were subjected to ‘unjust’ death and suffering through the machinations and the enormous forces of Yezid. The lyrics are not only sorrowful, but also demand justice for the Alevi as the oppressed ‘we’. By identifying Yezid as a

‘powerful enemy’ symbolizing the majority or the government that exerts political pressure on Alevis, and symbolizing the Alevis through the unjustly suffering Hüseyin and his family, the *mersiyes* have played a role in consolidating the unity of the Alevi community based on the ‘tragedy of Karbala’.

This strengthening effect on the community’s solidarity through the Battle of Karbala and the projection of the relationship between Yezid and Hüseyin has been pointed out by researchers as the ‘Karbala paradigm’.⁴² This term refers in particular to the social phenomenon that took place in Iran during the revolution of 1978-79. The revolutionaries identified themselves with Hüseyin, who represented goodness, justice and self-sacrifice, and the monarchy with Yezid, who represented evil, arrogance and cruelty. It is said that this was one of the reasons for the success of the Iranian revolution, as it justified the revolution and rebellion against the monarchy, and the people’s consciousness moved towards the overthrow of the monarchy. In that period, the suffering and resistance of the people was overlapped on the story of the battle and martyrdom of Hüseyin and his family at Karbala. With the slogan ‘Here is Karbala’ and the recitation of the *mersiye*, the supporters of the revolution shared the sense of being ‘warriors Hüseyin’s side’ and rose up against the monarchy representing Yezid.

A similar psychological mechanism is at work when *mersiye* is sung in and out of the Alevi rituals. The shared state of mind and the act of ‘mourning Hüseyin’s martyrdom’ brought about by *mersiye*, through music and the ritualistic acts of *sakka suyu* and *mersiye*, creates a sense of community and oneness while

42 Michael M. J. Fischer, *Iran: From Religious Dispute to Revolution*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980); Kamran Scot Aghaie, *The Martyrs of Karbala: Shi’i Symbols and Rituals in Modern Iran*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004).

mourning Hüseyin’s death with his family and standing up against Yezid, Hüseyin’s enemy. At the same time, Alevi differentiate themselves from other people and societies as ‘we’ against ‘they’ who represent Yezid, who opposed Hüseyin. In this way, I consider that *mersiye* has played a role in increasing the social cohesion of the Alevi, who are a religious minority, and in facilitating the continuation of a stable community.

Although it was pointed out at the beginning of this article that Alevi should not be seen as being closely related to Shi’i Islam, I consider that we can find similarities in the social roles of both groups in terms of the presence of Hüseyin and the efficacy of the *mersiye* in which he is represented.

5. CONCLUSION

Three types of *deyiş*—*düvaz imam*, *mersiye*, and *miraçlama*—fulfil the function of disseminating Alevism’s distinctive religious ideas and knowledge through the portrayal of the saints. In *düvaz imam* and *miraçlama*, the emphasis is solely on knowledge transfer, which explains the simple musical structure. On the other hand, *mersiye*’s intensely emotional lyrics and intricately arranged melodic structure serve to amplify and effectively diffuse the feelings of sorrow contained in the story among the faithful. By facilitating collective emotional expression, the *mersiye* strengthens the unity of the Alevi community. That to, *mersiye* plays an important role not only in conveying traditional Alevi knowledge, but also holding the Alevi society together.

As the CD album *Kızılbaş*⁴³ shows, for the Alevis, their religious music represents their identity, and therefore, since the ‘Alevi Revival’, music has been an important chan-

43 CD 466, Kalan Müzik, 2009.

nel for Alevis for asserting their identity and demanding their rights. In these days of media development, the aural *mersiye* has become one of the most effective tools for presenting the Alevi's position. It is a tradition that has developed and will continue to develop, and thus, should remain a subject of study.

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