

## Dancing the Text: Embodying the Sacred Orature in the Alevi *Semah* (Turkey)

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In rural Turkey,<sup>1</sup> as in many places around the world, dance in its most basic and daily expression is performed to the songs sung by the dancers themselves. People will gather after field or housework, grab each other's hand to form a circle, facing and looking at each other, and start dancing to a call-and-response song in binary rhythm based on a rotating leadership—when the first song ends, another singer may take the lead with a new song, as the singers-dancers tap into the local repertoire of dance texts. Verses are simple and may be partly improvised according to the situation and the extent of the humor the singers want to put into them, or the hints they want to drop. Because of this specific relationship to the sung texts, dance in this context can be characterized as a play—as its Turkish name, *oyun*, shows.

Some aspects of this situation can be found in the *semah*, the Alevi ritual dance, but certainly not all of it—there must be something inherent to the rituality of the context. We listen to songs, whose text may also largely determine what is at stake in the dance act. We also see a circle of dancers, but they don't sing, they don't hold hands, they don't look at each other. None of them leads, and what they perform is not meant for amusement. Yet, albeit in a distinct way, the dance is linked to a text, and the vernacular name of the dance suggests, by its very etymology—*semah* derives from the Arabic *samāc* which means “audition”—the existence of an intrinsic relation between what is said and sung and the dance.

### Dance as an Expression of Orature

Despite the physical disjunction between the singing voice and the dancing bodies in the latter performance, in both situations the performers find themselves dancing a text. However, in the Alevi ritual context, the different relationship between the sung text and the dancers themselves—vocal and instrumental music being performed by others—and the way the *semah* is performed confer a special meaning and purpose to the whole dance act. As anthropologist

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<sup>1</sup>The situation presented here belongs mostly to the pre-electrification era. To put it shortly, microphones, amplification, modern mass media, and urban migration have largely disrupted this relationship to dance. But much remains of it, especially when urbanized rural people go back to their family village for the summer. Hysteresis makes it worth explaining this more or less extinct and/or transformed way of life, that we chose to describe here using the present tense.

Michael Houseman put it, following Gregory Bateson, rituals “enact particular realities” and these “particular realities people enact when they participate in rituals are relationships” (Houseman 2006:2)—indeed, one can “approach ritual actions as the shaping and enactment of a network of relationships, both between participants and with non-human entities (spirits, ancestors, objects, images, words, places, etc.)” (2012:15).<sup>2</sup>

The study of dance as the physical medium for a text to be expressed has been largely neglected. Dance in mainstream research seems seldom envisaged as a global act encompassing verse, song, and collective body movements—a common feature in traditional societies. Indeed, research into the anthropology of dance has been strongly oriented towards the separate study of these traditional components of dance, to finally focus on the physical movements alone (Grau and Wierre-Gore 2005b). Yet others have argued that “[traditional dance] is not ‘gestures accompanied by music,’ but a ‘total act,’ at once narration, poem, melody, and song, experienced communally through the tireless repetition . . . of the same step that everyone does at the same time” (Guilcher 1998:52). As such, the performing, as a single act, of singing a text and dancing to it, can be seen as a particular expression of *orature*<sup>3</sup>—the latter being defined as “the heritage being transmitted by word of mouth without using the written word” (Dor 2006)—what is generally, and wrongly, called “oral literature.”

Almost all of the Alevis’ religious practice is based on orature (or the contiguous realm of literary orature, which embraces “the written extensions of oral works” (Dor 1995:31)). Alevi bards and religious guides, who are sometimes the same person, have memorized hundreds of dedicated words and songs passed down through the generations—the *deyiş*, etymologically “mutually told” poems. They sing them to the lute (called *saz* or *bağlama*),<sup>4</sup> singing and playing being inextricably linked;<sup>5</sup> moreover, the two “voices,” that of the singer and that of the lute, are in homophony, the same notes being sung and played by the bard on the chordophone in unison. Though the bardic tradition is common to the whole population, it plays a prominent role in Alevi culture. And the rituals of the Alevis, of which the sacred chants are an intrinsic part, are specific to them, one of their specific aspects being that they include the *semah* dance.

Much has been written since the beginning of Islam on the question of *samâc*—the

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<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise specified, all translations from French and Turkish in this paper are by the present author.

<sup>3</sup> A terminology first put forward by Rémy Dor (1976). His logical argument was as follows: “The term ‘oral literature,’ commonly used to describe this vast cultural heritage that is transmitted by word of mouth over generations, is not satisfactory. It amalgamates two distinct notions, thus creating confusion: if one sticks to the etymon, *litteratura* refers to writing, which cannot logically be oral” (1982:9). In his definition the term “oral literature” covers “written works designed to be said aloud” (1995:31).

<sup>4</sup> Widely played all over Turkey, the *bağlama* or *saz* is a pear-shaped long-necked lute, generally with six strings in three double courses. *Bağlama* (from the Turkish *bağ*, “link”) refers to the fretted neck of the instrument; *saz* is a Persian noun with two meanings, “reed” and “instrument,” the latter having evolved in Turkish to cover the folk music lute.

<sup>5</sup> “To say that the Achik [bard] is accompanied on the *saz* is insufficient. . . . It should rather be said that the voice of the instrument and the human voice played in duet” (Gheerbrant 1985, first record).

movements in response to the mystical or “spiritual concert”<sup>6</sup> of the Sufis—and my purpose here is not to exhaustively add my voice to the countless others who have addressed this vast and complex subject. Instead, I will confine myself to one particular area, the Alevi *semah*, even limiting my remarks to an archetypal sample, the “*Semah* of the Cranes” danced in Divriği, in the Sivas province of Turkey, analyzed in its textual, musical, and choreographic elements. Through this archetypal example, my purpose in this paper is to show how “special relationships” inherent to rituality are enacted between the *semah*’s poetic text, the vocal-instrumental music, and the dance movements, so as to physically embody the sacred orature—thus ensuring the success of the *semah*, and consequently, that of the entire ritual.

### The *Cem*: Gathering, Listening, Reacting

With historical roots that go back to the thirteenth century and the figure of a saint, Hacı Bektaş-ı Veli, the Alevis today, being estimated to number over twelve million,<sup>7</sup> still form an important part of Turkey’s population. Before the days of urban migration they were living in most parts of the country, both Turkish- and Kurdish- (Kurmanji and Zaza) speaking (with concentrations in the Dersim-Tunceli, Sivas, Erzincan, Malatya, and Maraş provinces, broadly in the middle of the country); however, Turkish may be seen as their historical and largely dominant ritual language, as is shown by a recent compilation of thousands of their age-old poetic texts.<sup>8</sup> The Alevi way of practicing Islam differs from that of the Sunni rest of the population, combining mystical and Shi’ite elements of faith infused with beliefs linked to their once pastoral way of life. They do not perform most of the usual Islamic duties, such as praying five times a day and going to the mosque on Fridays, fasting on Ramadan, and performing the pilgrimage to Mecca. Instead, Alevi villagers, both men and women, will gather and sit in a circle throughout certain nights at a private house to attend the *cem*,<sup>9</sup> a plenary ritual meant to recollect, commemorate, and reproduce an assembly of saints, under the guidance of a leader, the “ancestor” or *dede*. The *dede* was—and still is—supported in his task by a group of assistants, among whom the bards act as reciters (*zâkir*) on the lute (*saz*).

A well defined series of actions are performed during the *cem*, beginning with the settling down in a circle of all the attendants, “face to face,”<sup>10</sup> and ending with a meal made up of bread, the boiled meat of sacrificed sheep, and fruits or sweets. In between, twelve “services” (*hizmet*)

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<sup>6</sup> “Sūfī tradition of the spiritual concert in a more or less ritualized form . . . . These manifestations are often accompanied by movements, agitation or dance, codified or not, individual or collective” (During 1993:1092).

<sup>7</sup> European Commission 2004 estimate (Massicard 2005:3).

<sup>8</sup> We have an approximate idea of this with Özmen’s *Anthology* (Özmen 1995), the only comprehensive anthology of Alevi poetry: going from the thirteenth to the twentieth century, it lists 480 poets and gathers more than 2,500 pages of rhymed text, all of them in Turkish. The main poets, such as Pir Sultan Abdal, are all Turkish-speaking.

<sup>9</sup> The full name of the Alevis’ main ritual is “*ay(i)n-i cem*,” an expression of Perso-Arabic origin meaning “ceremony of gathering.”

<sup>10</sup> In Turkish, *cemal cemale*. *Cemal* (Arabic) expresses the face’s beauty.

are performed simultaneously or one after another by twelve persons or groups of persons. These are: announcing the meeting, leading the ritual, keeping the door, controlling the participants, lighting candles, sweeping the floor, spreading a carpet, washing hands, playing-singing, dancing, pouring water, and cooking the sacrificed meat for the concluding meal. Each completed task is punctuated by the *dede*'s blessing of the performers, who are placed in front of him in a definite position: standing tightly side by side, bust bent, one large toe on top of the other.

As soon as the participants approach the meeting place (which used to be a normal house with a large guest room), everything is made special by means of a series of actions. Everyone must show reverence (*niyâz*) to the—thus ritualized—space, people, and objects, by pressing successively the lips and the brow on the doorjamb before entering the place, then the cushion where one is going to sit, the lute one is going to play, the hand of the *dede*, and so forth. Similarly, when the name of a holy person is mentioned in a song or a ritual speech, people will press the forefinger of their right hand on their lips, then press the palm of the same hand on their chest.

In a culture where orature was the predominant medium, men and women would sit down together and listen to different memorized texts marking the different steps of the *cem*, some of them uttered without music by the *dede*, but most sung and played by the *zâkirs*. During the six or more hours the ritual is performed, the attention and participation of the faithful is ensured by a variety of means. One is the use, on the part of the main officiants, of various types of speech—direct communication, benedictions, sacred songs with different functions. While they listen to this variety of speech, people sit or stand without much moving, controlled by the *gözcü* (“watcher”), a man waiting in the middle of the crowd and holding a thin stick, which he uses to call back to order anyone whose attention is waning, or to quell any chatter. At times, the faithful react to the texts with exclamations (“Allah Allah!”) or even with tears, thus formally expressing and showing that they are moved by what they hear. At times they also sing choruses. And they collectively mimic certain episodes of the ritual.

Coupled to the variety of speech during the *cem* is the alternated use of various musical rhythms, both used to keep the attention of the participants and to bring them gradually to a certain state of mind. These rhythms can be binary (a regular one-two rhythm), or of the so called *aksak* (“limping”) type, meaning a combination of “long” and “short” beats, conventionally<sup>11</sup> written 3 and 2 respectively, such as 7/8 (2 + 2 + 3 or 3 + 2 + 2)—a rhythm largely present in Turkish bard music in general—or 9/8 (mainly 2 + 2 + 2 + 3 or 3 + 2 + 2 + 2)—which is generally associated with dance music in many areas of Turkey.

### Preparing for the Dance—*Mise en abyme* and Mimicking

The Alevis perform the *cem* to recall and reproduce an assembly of Forty Saints (*Kırklar*) that took place outside time and space, in the “invisible world” (*gaib*). The identity of these Forty

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<sup>11</sup> Here I used the conventional notation of musical rhythms, without entering into the debate on the *aksak* rhythm (for any details, see, among others, Cler 1994).

Saints is left partly undisclosed, but among them are said to stand the most sacred Five (*Pençe-i Âl-i Abâ*) of Shi'a Islam, Muhammed, Ali, Fatma, Hüseyin, Hasan, as well as their faithful follower Selman. They are physically represented by the sheepskins on which the *dede* and his officiants sit, and the *hizmet*s performed are also linked to them. But they are mostly made present by verbal means. Most of the words being spoken during the *cem*, be it in the form of songs (*nefes*) with specific functions—*tevhid*, *duaz-ı imam*, *mersiye*—or in the form of benedictions (*gülbenk*) pronounced by the *dede* at the close of each service, are invocations, and convocations of holy persons, starting with the supreme divinity, most frequently called *Hak* (The True One) or *Şah* (King), continuing with the Twelve Imams, the founding saint Hacı Bektaş-ı Veli, down to the sacred poets themselves, whose name as *mahlas*, or “signature device” (Koerbin 2011:209), is always mentioned in the last stanza of the poems sung.

The danced part of the *cem*, the *semah*, can be seen as the climax of the ritual, as it is performed towards its conclusion, after the singing of the *miraçlama*—the narration of the Prophet's Ascension into heaven (*mirac*) according to the Alevi tradition. This account, which is also partly acted out by the participants, involves a *mise en abyme* of the ritual itself. A brief summary has to be given here. Summoned by the angel Gabriel, Muhammed ascends into the heavens to visit God, then takes the road back, and sees an intriguing dome in the distance. It is that of a convent (*dergâh*). He knocks on the door. After a brief trial, he is invited to enter and sit among Forty Saints. But the Forty, as they tell him, are One. One of them comes back from begging, returning with a grape, which a hand from the invisible appears to press. To share this grape among all, it is enough for one of them to consume it. Muhammed having drunk the pressed grape juice, all those present are intoxicated. They stand up, shouting “Allah Allah,” and together with Muhammed they form the round of the *semah*.

At this point in the narration, the music changes and accelerates and some of the faithful get up quickly and mimic the dance to an accelerated rhythm. Other episodes of the sung narration were mimed before; they deal with the movements of the Prophet on his way (standing up, sitting down) and with his devotions (kissing one's hand and laying it on one's chest, bowing down) during his Ascension—these are symbolically acted simultaneously by the whole audience, including the musicians. All these mimed actions anticipate the physical experience of the *semah*, which will be shared by all the participants, both as performers and spectators.

It is the leader, the *dede*, who designates, one after the other, those who are called upon to “turn”<sup>12</sup> barefoot in the center of the room, where a carpet has been unrolled for this purpose until everybody has performed the *semah*. Each woman chooses a male partner, and both start by showing each other respective reverence (*niyâz*).<sup>13</sup> Then all the dancers stand in a circle without touching, one behind the other with their bodies facing to the right, waiting for the music and singing to begin to dance, the musicians and *dede* being seated outside the circle and facing the dancers.

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<sup>12</sup> To distinguish the sacred *semah* from the secular *oyun* (see the introduction), the derived verb “*oynamak*” is generally not used to describe the act of dancing in the *cem*; the dancers are said to turn, “*dönmek*.”

<sup>13</sup> Depending on the local rules, the woman may kneel down in front of the man and kiss his hand or foot, the latter carrying the forefinger of his right hand to his lips in return; or each partner may kiss the other's shoulder.

**“*Turnalar semahı*,” an Emblematic *Semah* of the Sivas Province**

To the ethnochoreologist, the Alevi *semah* appears morphologically different from the *samâ*’ or *semâ* of the Mevlevi Order—the so called “whirling dervishes”—which presents itself as a continuous rotation of the body around the right foot, albeit to music. The Alevi *semah* has more of the characteristics of a “dance” as commonly defined—“a series of rhythmic and patterned bodily movements usually performed to music” (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary*). Indeed, in some areas, its form is identical to that of the local secular dance; in other areas, it may also be danced out of context at family gatherings. Moreover, it displays different morphologies across regions.<sup>14</sup> But all these local forms have common characteristics: voice and *saz* accompaniment; general anti-solar round movement; isolated bodies; and symmetrical and upward arm movements.

Because of the abundance of forms and regions and microregions, and the size of the population under consideration, I chose to start focusing on a single *semah*, following the example of the French ethnomusicologist Monique Brandily, who dedicated an eighty-page study to a five-minute Tibesti saddle song (1976). One *semah* in particular—*Turnalar Semahı*, the “*Semah* of the Cranes”—was considered as emblematic by the Turkish folklorist Nida Tüfekçi when he collected it among the Alevis of Sivas at the end of the 1960s. Sivas, in north-central Anatolia, is one of the provinces with the highest population of Alevis (Massicard 2005:7), both Turkish and Kurdish speakers, and it has also been hailed for centuries as “the bards’ homeland.” Time had passed since, but I decided to re-collect it myself in the same village<sup>15</sup> in a ritual context to give a fresh look at what was happening there.

In this geographical area—belonging to the largest and most densely populated among the various typological Alevi *semah* areas—the *semah* movements look rather simple. The dance figures vary according to the three melodic lines of the music, but can be described as three variants of the same movement. It roughly consists in taking three steps, starting with the right foot and ending on the same foot (on a quick-quick-slow rhythm), then the same steps symmetrically starting with the left foot and ending on it; hands are alternately raised in conjunction with the feet (right hand raised as the right foot starts the step, left hand raised as the left foot starts the step) and lowered in a round outward movement on the last of each three-step sequence.

The dance starts with the music, and the figure is first slowly outlined by the dancers on the spot, as if they were finding their feet—by shifting their body weight laterally from one foot to the other and raising their arms, with their tight fingertips quickly stretched out to underscore

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<sup>14</sup> A typology can be drawn up with roughly three main areas according to the relationship between men and women: dancing always alike in a round (Central, Eastern, and Southeastern Anatolia), dancing partly alike in a round (north-central Anatolia), round square dance in mirror (European Turkey, West and Southwest Anatolia) (cf. Arnaud-Demir 2002:46-48).

<sup>15</sup> The analyzed *semah* was recorded and filmed while the locals danced under the supervision of *dede* Hüseyin Gazi Metin (1939-) from Şahin village (the place where it was originally collected), who organized it in the nearby village of Başören (Divriği, Sivas province) and who also played and sang, in October 2011. The video and sound recordings were the basis for a thorough analysis based on written description and music and text notation (Arnaud-Demir 2012).

the last strong beat of each melodic phrase with a flick in the air. The second variant is similar to what was described above as the general form, but instead of going forward, the step is performed on the spot, laterally: the right foot to the right, the left foot to the left, the only difference being that the dancer is not moving forward. The third variant is the one described above, namely a forward progression of all dancers.

One more rule is that, as the circle progresses from right to left in an anti-solar movement during the third variant, the dancers must not turn their back on the *dede* when passing him. To do this, they make a turn to the right when they come near him, while continuing to move in the circle.

Though it looks rather simple from a choreographic point of view, mastering these three variants, added to the need to rotate at a precise point in the circle, all this without colliding with each other and without getting off on the wrong foot, represents a significant difficulty, something like a trial. It is a ritual context, everyone is watching, the dancers are not here to have fun. That is why, before the dance, the musician-*dede* strictly warned the dancers: “If you see that you can’t adjust your steps to the music, go back to your seats!”

In warning the performers, the *dede* alluded to the complexity of the music that he was going to sing and play on the *saz*. Three parameters are to be considered here: 1. rhythm; 2. tempo; 3. melody—the specificity of this *semah* music being *a continuous variation* of these three parameters during the recorded performance. Nothing of the kind can be seen in leisure dances, which are based on a single rhythmic cycle and keep a more or less stable speed—here the play of variations is permanent, between the different rhythmic patterns, the different tempi (slow or fast) and the different melodies, as shown on the following synoptic table, which has been drawn from the careful analysis of the sheet notation.

Section	1	2		3		4	5
Subsection		2a	2b	3a	3b		
Rhythmic cycle	9/8 2232	9/8 2322		2/4		9/8 2322	2/4
Tempo	slow	quick	quicker	slow	slightly accelerating	quick	interruption
Melodic outline	7 notes up and down	3 notes downward	3 notes upward	3 notes downward	3 notes upward	3 notes upward	3 notes downward
Steps variant	1	2	3	2	3	3	2
Movement	on the spot	on the spot	forward	on the spot	forward	forward	on the spot
Duration	1’16”	0’43”	0’30”	0’45”	0’19”	0’37”	0’05”

Table 1. Synoptic view of the Sivas *Semah of the Cranes’* music (vocal and instrumental emission as one) and dance movements.

What is astonishing here is the number and the speed of the transitions that the listeners-dancers have to negotiate in a very short period of time. In no time at all, here they are, depending on the music, forced, one after the other, to initiate a movement, to somewhat change their steps on the spot, to start moving forward, and then suddenly to slow down in order to

perform the steps again on the spot, once more to advance, suddenly to accelerate the movement, and then to interrupt their dance abruptly because the music stops. The changes appear in every music parameter.<sup>16</sup>

Most notably, the changes in rhythm alternate between *aksak* and binary rhythms, two times during the short four-minute piece, and at the beginning, two types of *aksak* 9/8 rhythms are played consecutively. The tempi also are always different, alternating between slow courses, accelerations, and sudden decelerations. As is shown in the video recording, the sudden decelerations pose the greatest problems for the dancers, suddenly breaking their momentum between sections 2 and 3, as well as between sections 4 and 5 at the end of the *semah*.

What has to be stressed here is the musician's control over the unfolding of the musical element and thus of the danced course. As will be shown later, the dance performance—the success of the designated dancers in performing the *semah*—is entirely dependent on the way he plays—the length of each section, liveliness of the transitions, vocal highlighting of key moments. His expertise and prerogatives allow him not only to master the text and the music, but to underline or repeat verses, add or subtract stanzas, and shorten or lengthen the instrumental parts inserted between each of them. Nevertheless, the music structure he applies is consistent. If the changes are introduced frankly and at a brisk pace, they are also coupled with clear instructions: the dancing on the spot always corresponds to the descending melody, the steps forward to the rising one. Still, changes are introduced all the time. This forces the dancers to pay extreme attention to the music. And this links them intimately to what is being said, to the text of the *semah*.

### Applying the Bards' Orature to Dancing

As noted before, the words that are uttered as part of the *semah* belong to the bards' orature, the *deyiş*; they clearly pertain to the *koşma* poetic genre—verses of eleven syllables, quatrains with rhymes of the abab, ccb, ddb, etc., type, *mahlas* signature in the last quatrain. This genre is widely used in Anatolian Turkish orature to express love (including the love for God), homesickness, blame, heroism, or mourning. The pieces are performed during formal or informal social meetings—the bards (*aşık*) used to travel through the country, being invited to houses to play. But, perhaps with a few minor exceptions (generally in Alevi context), no signed bard's poem is used for a dance in Turkey, except *semah*. This is due to the ritual character of the *semah*, and to the fact that only the words of renowned Alevi poets will be pronounced during the *cem*.<sup>17</sup>

Two institutions have played a considerable role in shaping this expression of traditional orature, that of the bard (*aşık*) and that of the religious leader (*dede*). And while bards specialize in the role of the reciter (*zâkir*) in the *cem*, it is common for the *dedes* to be bards as well—that

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<sup>16</sup> These changes were emphatically pointed out in 1970 by the collector, Nida Tüfekçi (Erdal 1998:136), and more recently as a general feature of the *semah* by Markoff (1993:103).

<sup>17</sup> And, in Koerbin's view, the *cem* is in turn "the foundational and referential context of the performance" of the *deyiş* of prominent Alevi bards (2011:206).



is, they have memorized the orature poetry interpreted on the *saz* and compose verses themselves. This is the case of Hüseyin Gazi Metin, heir to a long poetic tradition in his village, area, and province, from whom the version of *Semah of the Cranes* that is studied here was collected.

I listed above three types of poems that are sung during the *cem*: the *tevhit* (glorification of Ali, with the uniqueness of God proclaimed in the chorus), the *duaz-ı imam* (invocation of the Twelve Imams), and the *mersiye* (lamenting the tragic death of Imam Hüseyin<sup>18</sup>). The *semah* songs can form a fourth category, with three specific features: 1. two or more poems are sung continuously; 2. extra text is included in the form of extra verses, repetitions, and calls; 3. a dialogue with crane birds appears as an insistent theme. Let us now look at the content of the text of the *Semah of the Cranes* as it was sung during my visit to Sivas.<sup>19</sup>

A1	<i>Yine dertli dertli iniliyorsun Sarı turnam sinen yaralandı mı Hemen el değmeden siniliyorsun Telli turnam sinen yaralandı mı</i>	Once again, dolefully, you moan My yellow crane, is your breast bruised? Suddenly, without being touched, you whine My aigrette-headed crane, is your breast bruised?
D1	<i>Has gülüm gülüm, dost gülüm gülüm Has nenni nenni, dost nenni nenni</i>	Elected one, o dear, my dear, friend, o dear, my dear Elected one, bye, bye, friend, bye, bye
D2	<i>Sarı turnam, allı turnam, sinen yaralandı mı</i>	My yellow crane, my red-headed crane, is your breast bruised?
A2	<i>Baş perdeden çalınıyor bağlama Dertli ötüp şu sinemi dağlama Yine bulam üstadını ağlama Allı turnam telli turnam sinen yaralandı mı</i>	The <i>bağlama</i> is played on the main fret Don't sear my heart with your sad cry I'll find your master, please stop crying My red-headed crane, my aigrette-headed crane, is your breast bruised?
D3	<i>Hay hay, hay hay!</i>	<i>Hay hay, hay hay!</i>
A3	<i>Yas mı tuttun giyinmişsin karalar Senin derdin şu sinemi yaralar ESİRİ der nedir derde çareler Allı turnam telli turnam sinen yaralandı mı</i>	Are you in mourning, because you wear black? Your pain is hurting my heart ESİRİ says: what remedies are there for the pain? My red-headed crane, my aigrette-headed crane, is your breast bruised?

<sup>18</sup> Son of Ali (cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet), grandson of Muhammed. Fighting to regain his place as Caliph, Hüseyin died a martyr's death at Kerbela (Iraq) in 680, as well as all those who accompanied and supported him, like Hür b. Yezid.

<sup>19</sup> Two more versions have already been published, the first collected text, according to its source, having been partly modified because it didn't look politically correct at the time of the collection (see Koerbin 2011:206).

D4	<i>Allı turnam, telli turnam, sinen yaralandı mı</i>	My red-headed crane, my aigrette-headed crane, is your breast bruised?
D5	<i>Allı turnam, telli turnam, sinen yaralandı mı</i>	My red-headed crane, my aigrette-headed crane, is your breast bruised?
B1	<i>Devredip gezersin dar-ı fenâyı Bağdat diyarına vardın mı turnam Medine şehrinde Fatma anayı Makamı ordadır gördün mü turnam</i>	You roam around this ephemeral world Have you been to the land of Baghdad, my crane? In the city of Medina, mother Fatima <sup>20</sup> Has her place there, have you seen it, my crane?
D6	<i>Ay hay, ay hay!</i>	<i>Ay hay, ay hay!</i>
B2	<i>Biz de « beli » dedik nice uluya İkrar aldık iman verdik Veli'ye Necef deryasında pirim Ali'ye O deryaya yüzler sürdün mü turnam</i>	We, too, have said “yes” to so many high beings We swore an oath and put our faith in the Veli <sup>21</sup> In the ocean of Necef, <sup>22</sup> to my guide Ali Have you bowed down before that ocean, <sup>23</sup> my crane?
B3	<i>Hür Şehit de Kerbelâ'da çürümez Halktan emir vardır kalkıp yürümez İmam Hüseyin'in kanı kurumaz Şehitler serdarın gördün mü turnam</i>	Hür the Martyr <sup>24</sup> cannot putrefy in Kerbelâ <sup>25</sup> It's the people's decision, he can't be resurrected Imam Hüseyin's blood cannot dry up This leader of martyrs, have you seen him, my crane?
B4	<i>GENÇ ABDAL'IM der ki Şah'a varalım Varıp Şah'ın divanına duralım Can baş feda edip Şah'ı görelim Sen de o Şah'ımı gördün mü turnam</i>	GENÇ ABDAL declares: Let us go to the King Let us go and stand humble before the King Let us offer our lives, and see the King And you, my crane, have you seen him, this King?

Before addressing the semantic content of this text, let us look at it from a morphological point of view. First, the two poets' signature—their pseudonyms—written here in capital letters (Esiri and Genç Abdal, two locally important historical bards) shows that we have two different poems here, of three and four stanzas respectively (noted A and B), with quatrains made of

<sup>20</sup> Prophet Muhammed's daughter and the Imam Ali's wife.

<sup>21</sup> *Veli*, the “Friend,” meaning here the Imam Ali.

<sup>22</sup> City of Iraq where Ali's tomb is located.

<sup>23</sup> The image of the ocean is widely used in Sufism to convey the concept of infiniteness.

<sup>24</sup> Supporter of Hüseyin who died in Kerbelâ (see note 18). Legend has it that when his grave was opened in the sixteenth century, the blood dripping from his wounds had not yet dried.

<sup>25</sup> See note 18.

eleven-syllable verses of the *koşma* type of rhyme. What is special here is that they are sung consecutively. In all circumstances, including the *cem* ritual, poems are usually sung separately, with the *mahlas* always indicating the end of a text, dutifully closing it just as the abab rhyme structure indicates its start. Thus, linking two poems as one looks unusual.

Musically speaking, also, they are not sung as they would be in a non-*semah* context, following a regular pattern consisting of singing each verse in a single breath and separating the stanzas by instrumental phrases. Here the singer generally breaks the verses in two. But this caesura is not of the same length everywhere, and there is a point where it is not made (see Table 2). The way the poems are sung is specific to the dance context, and to what the *dede* wants the dancers to experience on this particular occasion.

A second unusual text feature concerns the verse reiterations, although this is not uncommon in the normal, non-*cem* performance—it may happen that the bard repeats the last verse of a stanza twice, and he then will do it regularly at the end of each stanza. Here, however, the repetitions of the last verse of some stanzas (poem A) are irregular. As shown by the musical analysis, they act as directions (noted D) to the dancers: D2 marks the start of dance variant 2 and links the first stanza to the second; D4 is a true reiteration of A3's last verse, with the same melody, whereas D5 shows the way back to dance variant 2 again, with a slowing down from variant 3. As for the extra text added, this is of two types. The first “direction” given (D1) is a small hypocoristic and soothing text, added to the bards' poem by the musician; it closes the first section of the *semah*. The second text added is a series of cheers or cries, *hay hay!* or *ay hay!*, that give rise to the accelerated dance variant 3—the two points where the dancers move on in the circle.

By its morphology, because of this unexpected threading of the seven quatrains of two linked poems, intertwined with versified or non-versified dance directions, the *semah* song can thus be seen as guiding the dancers through a textual story that they are made to perform. Indeed, when analyzed in relation to its sung structure, this text takes on an unexpected meaning that sheds light on the function of the *semah* within the Alevi ritual, on the relationship it establishes between the text and the faithful dancers, as well as what they are supposed to experience and realize while performing the dance.

### Questioning the Flying Cranes

When starting to analyze the content of the poetic text, one's attention is immediately attracted by the fact that it addresses a bird, precisely two species of cranes. The call to cranes is a common feature of numerous Alevi *semah* songs, which has been my research focus for many years (Arnaud-Demir 2002, 2012, and 2014). Cranes are large migratory birds which, on their way between Northern Europe and the Arabian Peninsula or Africa, cross Turkey's skies and stop over in this country two times a year, more conspicuously in autumn (from north to south), when the birds migrate with their newly born chicks. As they pass, they trumpet strong and distinctive “kru kru” calls that can be heard for miles, and form spectacular V-shapes that can comprise hundreds of individuals—these migrations have been observed in Anatolia for centuries, as evidenced by ancient bas-reliefs. Cranes are revered all over the world by people for whom they

are a precious indication of the change of season—of the dreaded arrival of winter and the expected return of spring.<sup>26</sup> And they are also chosen as the messengers for all those who are separated, whether from the beloved or from the homeland.

In the Sivas *semah* song, consistent with the history of crane migration in Turkey, two species are invoked: the “red-headed”<sup>27</sup> or Common Crane (*Grus Grus*) and the “aigrette-headed”<sup>28</sup> or Demoiselle Crane (*Grus Virgo*).<sup>29</sup> The whole text is based on the questioning of the cranes, but this questioning focuses on a totally different matter in each of the two poems. The first poem is a reaction to the call of the passing cranes, a call that is perceived as a cry of deep and unbearable pain, provoking the compassion and empathy of the speaker expressing himself in first person:

Suddenly, without being touched, you whine  
 My aigrette-headed crane, is your breast bruised? . . .  
 Don't sear my heart with your sad cry . . . .  
 Are you in mourning because you wear black?  
 Your pain is hurting my heart  
 Esiri says: what remedies are there for the pain?

In this first part, there is no mention of religious concerns; the *semah* simply begins with this plaint and the painful questioning it raises.

In the second poem, on the other hand, the crane makes no sound—the text is no longer about pain. The focus is no longer on hearing, but on sight, with a similar interest in and emphasis on what has been happening in this regard. The questions continue without answer, and this time the crane is questioned about devotions that have to be made at holy places:

Have you been to the land of Baghdad, my crane?  
 In the city of Medina, mother Fatima  
 Has her place there, have you seen it, my crane? . . .  
 In the ocean of Nejed, to my guide Ali  
 Have you bowed down before that ocean, my crane? . . .  
 This leader of martyrs, have you seen him, my crane? . . .  
  
 Let us offer our lives, and see the King  
 And you, my crane, have you seen him, this King?

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<sup>26</sup> General examples are given in Treuenfels 2007.

<sup>27</sup> “Red crane” is the popular term in Turkey, because of the bare red crown on its head.

<sup>28</sup> “Aigrette-headed” is a popular term in Turkey because of the white aigrettes springing out behind the eyes on the crane’s black head.

<sup>29</sup> The “yellow crane” in the first stanza refers, inter alia, to the color of the *bağlama*’s body.

This semantic opposition between the two poems, coupled with the information afforded by rhythm, tempo, and melody, gives the key to the performance, as shown by the comparison of textual and musical elements.

General theme							
Audition: questions about a painful cry							
Vision: questions about a devotional journey							
Text elements	A1-D1	D2-A2	D3-A3-D4	D5-B1	D5-B2 (except last verse)	B2 (last verse)- B3-B4	Last verse of B4
Caesura in stanza verses	6 + 5	4 + 7	4 + 7	No caesura	4 + 7	4 + 7	4 + 7
Notable music features: Instrumental prelude and instrumental phrases inserted in verses			Instrumental interlude before second poem				
Rhythmic cycle	9/8 2232	9/8 2322		2/4		9/8 2322	2/4
Tempo	slow	quicker and accelerating		slow		quick and accelerated	interruption
Melodic outline	up and down	downward	upward	downward	upward	upward	downward
Movement	on the spot	on the spot	forward	on the spot	forward	forward	on the spot

Table 2. Synoptic comparison of the text, music, and dance elements in the Sivas *Semah of the Cranes*.

To make sense of this *semah* event, a subtle element needs to be underscored in the middle of the table above: the performing of a lengthy instrumental interlude—almost as long as the time needed for uttering a whole stanza—located at the junction between the two poems (which look in fact separated as they traditionally should be). In other words, at the point where one moves on from hearing about an unexplained pain to inquiring about the accomplishment of a pilgrimage to Iraq and the Arabian Peninsula, and where the sense of sight is highlighted as the conclusive element and the purpose of the journey—see God, see the King. This long interlude without text (and emphasis on text) starts the dancers on a binary rhythm—the rhythm of walking—while they perform the basic step *on the spot*, like a mimic. This stationary walk recalls for us the actions mimed before and during the *miraçlama*. It is an indication that, at this point of the *semah*, the dancers represent a story of displacement. Symbolically, they enact the

“pilgrimage” of the cranes, under the guidance of the *dede* who never stops watching the dancers as he plays and sings to the crying and flying birds. Consequently, the changes of rhythm, the generally abrupt (but at the same time announced) transitions between movements on the spot and forward movements, take on their full meaning: they recall and enact the stages of a devotional journey.

The interlude also bridges the gap between the first and the second poem. Traditionally, people pay a visit to the tombs of saints when they are in trouble—they seek a remedy for disease or infertility. Here, the cranes are represented as performing the devotional journey because they are in pain, although the mystery of its cause remains.

### **Embodying a Pilgrimage, Realized or Unrealized**

Through the interplay of changes in rhythm, tempo, and melody, the musician-singer-*dede* sends and guides the dancers on an itinerary strewn with pitfalls. By complicating their progression, he forces them to listen carefully, thus putting them in direct contact with the text, which tells them about what they are performing. Though they are not the singers of their dance, in this way they embody the sacred orature as they dance it. Through the revered figure of a migrating bird, a familiar guest at the tombs of the saints, they accomplish a virtual pilgrimage. Moreover, they symbolically realize the goal of every mystic, which is to offer his life to be able to contemplate God: “Let us go and stand humble before the King / Let us offer our lives, and see the King.”

But there is more, because this is a ritual of the Alevis, who share with the Shi’ites the mourning of Imam Hüseyin, and the feeling of an injustice, of a drama whose wound has never closed. They themselves have suffered pogroms and repression since the sixteenth century—and they suffered it again in their flesh on July 2, 1993, when an attack on an Alevi festival in Sivas by a mob of fundamentalists resulted in the death of thirty-three Alevis, including prominent personalities. The saints who are mentioned here, in unanswered questions, are Ali, considered the true heir of the Prophet, and his wife Fatima, Hüseyin’s mother. The wound remains open, the dead body fails to putrefy, and the blood of the Imam continues to flow (second poem, third stanza). Yet, like the others, “we said ‘yes’” (second poem, second stanza). This “yes” (*beli*) is the answer that as yet uncreated human beings gave when Allah asked them: “Am I not your Lord?” (*Alastu bi-Rabbikum*, Qur’an, 7.172), thus accepting to bear the burden of existence and to submit to the will of God.

Dancing the *Semah of the Cranes* in the Divriği area of Sivas is therefore a strange experience, which enacts the “special relationships” specific to ritual contexts between many elements: the singer and his instrument, the traditional orature of the bards and the dance song, the religious leader and the performers of the dance (and those who sit watching them, and whose turn to dance will come), between the faithful and the saints and divinity they have come to visit, and between the invoked cranes and the convoked dancers—both men and women, as a true representation of society. Through the *semah*, the *cem* is supposed to help achieve a goal—the theophany or the apparition of the divinity—by giving the dancers the means to dance the evocation of this theophany. But at the same time this goal remains unrealized, for the questions

remain unanswered, and the arduous itinerary can go on forever at the will of the guide: that is the inherent condition of rituality. Although the *semah* is familiar to the dancers who are not performing it for the first time, its regular reiteration in the living culture of the Alevi *cem* ritual gives it a new dimension and a new meaning each time. The transmission of the ritual orature does indeed take place in this ever renewed reiteration among the musicians and religious leaders who are its bearers, appealing to and nourishing their memory, but it also occurs among the faithful through the dance, in their astonishing embodiment of the text.

The thorough exploration and analysis of the intertwining of the various textual, musical, and choreographic elements of the Alevi *semah* through an archetypal sample, which I have presented here only in broad outline, thus offers new perspectives for the analysis of dance as a branch of orature when coupled with song. And conversely, analyzing the dancing of a text also opens new avenues of research on the traditions of oral-poetic expression.

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